



Merrick (The Vampire Chronicles 7)

Author: *Anne Rice*

Category: Paranormal, Vampires, Fantasy, Horror, Fiction

Description: At the center is the beautiful, unconquerable witch, Merrick. She is a descendant of the gens de colors libres, a cast derived from the black mistresses of white men, a society of New Orleans octoroons and quadroons, steeped in the lore and ceremony of voodoo, who reign in the shadowy world where the African and the French - the white and the dark - intermingle. Her ancestors are the Great Mayfair Witches, of whom she knows nothing - and from whom she inherits the power and magical knowledge of a Circe.

Into this exotic New Orleans realm comes David Talbot, hero, storyteller, adventurer, almost mortal vampire, visitor from another dark realm. It is he who recounts Merrick's haunting tale - a tale that takes us from the New Orleans of the past and present to the jungles of Guatemala, from the Mayan ruins of a century ago to ancient civilizations not yet explored.

Anne Rice's richly told novel weaves an irresistible story of two worlds: the witches' world and the vampires' world, where magical powers and otherworldly fascinations are locked together in a dance of seduction, death, and rebirth.

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Proem

MY NAME is David Talbot.

Do any of you remember me as the Superior General of the Talamasca, the Order of psychic detectives whose motto was "We watch and we are always here"?

It has a charm, doesn't it, that motto?

The Talamasca has existed for over a thousand years.

I don't know how the Order began. I don't really know all the secrets of the Order. I do know however that I served it most of my mortal life.

It was in the Talamasca Motherhouse in England that the Vampire Lestat first made himself known to me. He came into my study one winter night and caught me quite unawares.

I learnt very quickly that it was one thing to read and write about the supernatural and quite another to see it with your own eyes.

But that was a long time ago.

I'm in another physical body now.

And that physical body has been transformed by Lestat's powerful vampiric blood.

I'm among the most dangerous of the vampires, and one of the most trusted. Even the wary vampire Armand revealed to me the story of his life. Perhaps you've read the biography of Armand which I released into the world.

When that story ended, Lestat had wakened from a long sleep in New Orleans to listen to some very beautiful and seductive music.

It was music that lulled him back again into unbroken silence as he retreated once more to a convent building to lie upon a dusty marble floor.

There were many vampires then in the city of New Orleans;^avagabonds, rogues, foolish young ones who had come to catch a glimpse of Lestat in his seeming helplessness. They menaced the mortal population. They annoyed the elders among us who wanted invisibility and the right to hunt in peace.

All those invaders are gone now.

Some were destroyed, others merely frightened. And the elders who had come to offer some solace to the sleeping Lestat have gone their separate ways.

As this story begins, only three of us remain in New Orleans. And we three are the sleeping Lestat, and his two faithful fledglings;^aLouis de Pointe du Lac, and I, David Talbot, the author of this tale.

Chapter 1

1

"WHY DO You ask me to do this thing?"

She sat across the marble table from me, her back to the open doors of the caf'.

I struck her as a wonder. But my requests had distracted her. She no longer stared at me, so much as she looked into my eyes.

She was tall, and had kept her darkbrown hair loose and long all her life, save for a leather barrette such as she wore now, which held only her forelocks behind her head to flow down her back. She wore gold hoops dangling from her small earlobes, and her soft white summer clothes had a gypsy flare to them, perhaps because of the red scarf tied around the waist of her full cotton skirt.

"And to do such a thing for such a being?" she asked warmly, not angry with me, no, but so moved that she could not conceal it, even with her smooth compelling voice. "To bring up a spirit that may be filled with anger and a desire for vengeance, to do this, you ask me, for Louis de Pointe du Lac, one who is already beyond life himself?"

"Who else can I ask, Merrick?" I answered. "Who else can do such a thing?" I pronounced her name simply, in the American style, though years ago when we'd first met, she had spelled it Merrique and pronounced it with the slight touch of her old French.

There was a rough sound from the kitchen door, the creak of neglected hinges. A wraith of a waiter in a soiled apron appeared at our side, his feet scratching against the dusty flagstones of the floor.

"Rum," she said. "St. James. Bring a bottle of it. "

He murmured something which even with my vampiric hearing I did not bother to catch. And away he shuffled, leaving us alone again in the dimly lighted room, with all its long doors thrown open to the Rue St. Anne.

It was vintage New Orleans, the little establishment. Overhead fans churned lazily, and the floor had not been cleaned in a hundred years.

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The twilight was softly fading, the air filled with the fragrances of the Quarter and the sweetness of spring. What a kind miracle it was that she had chosen such a place, and that it was so strangely deserted on such a divine evening as this.

Her gaze was steady but never anything but soft.

"Louis de Pointe du Lac would see a ghost now," she said, musing, "as if his suffering isn't enough. "

Not only were her words sympathetic, but also her low and confidential tone. She felt pity for him.

"Oh, yes," she said without allowing me to speak. "I pity him, and I know how badly he wants to see the face of this dead child vampire whom he loved so much. " She raised her eyebrows thoughtfully. "You come with names which are all but legend. You come out of secrecy, you come out of a miracle, and you come close, and with a request. "

"Do it, then, Merrick, if it doesn't harm you," I said. "I'm not here to bring harm to you. God in Heaven help me. Surely you know as much. "

"And what of harm coming to your Louis?" she asked, her words spoken slowly as she pondered. "A ghost can speak dreadful things to those who call it, and this is the ghost of a monster child who died by violence. You ask a potent and terrible thing. "

I nodded. All she said was true.

"Louis is a being obsessed," I said. "It's taken years for his obsession to obliterate all reason. Now he thinks of nothing else. "

"And what if I do bring her up out of the dead? You think there will be a resolution to the pain of either one?"

"I don't hope for that. I don't know. But anything is preferable to the pain Louis suffers now. Of course I have no right to ask this of you, no right to come to you at all.

"Yet we're all entangled; the Talamasca and Louis and I. And the Vampire Lestat as well. It was from the very bosom of the Talamasca that Louis de Pointe du Lac heard a story of the ghost of Claudia. It was to one of our own, a woman named Jesse Reeves; you'll find her in the archives that this ghost of Claudia supposedly first appeared. "

"Yes, I know the story," said Merrick. "It happened in the Rue Royale. You sent Jesse Reeves to investigate the vampires. And Jesse Reeves came back with a handful of treasures that were proof enough that a child named Claudia, an immortal child, had once lived in the flat. "

"Quite right," I answered. "I was wrong to send Jesse. Jesse was too young. Jesse was never a. " It was difficult for me to finish. "Jesse was never quite as clever as you. "

"People read it among Lestat's published tales and think it's fancy," she said, musing, thinking, "all that about a diary, a rosary, wasn't it, and an old doll. And we have those things, don't we? They're in the vault in England. We didn't have a Louisiana Motherhouse in those days. You put them in the vault yourself "

"Can you do it?" I asked. "Will you do it? That's more to the point. I have no doubt that you can. "

She wasn't ready to answer. But we had made a great beginning here, she and I.

Oh, how I had missed her! This was more tantalizing than I'd ever expected, to be locked once more in conversation with her. And with pleasure I doted upon the changes in her: that her French accent was completely gone now and that she sounded almost British, and that from her long years of study overseas. She'd spent some of those years in England with me.

"You know that Louis saw you," I said gently. "You know that he sent me to ask you. You know that he knew of your powers from the warning he caught from your eyes?"

She didn't respond.

"I've seen a true witch," he said when he came to me. 'She wasn't afraid of me. She said she'd call up the dead to defend herself if I didn't leave her alone. '"

She nodded, regarding me with great seriousness.

"Yes, all that's the truth," she answered under her breath. "He crossed my path, you might say. " She was mulling it over. "But I've seen Louis de Pointe du Lac many a time. I was a child when I first saw him, and now you and I speak of this for the first time. "

I was quite amazed. I should have known she would surprise me at once.

I admired her immensely. I couldn't disguise it. I loved the simplicity of her appearance, her white cotton scoop neck blouse with its simple short sleeves and the necklace of black beads around her neck.

Looking into her green eyes, I was suddenly overcome with shame for what I'd done, revealing myself to her. Louis had not forced me to approach her. I had done this of

my own accord. But I don't intend to begin this narrative by dwelling on that shame.

Let me say only that we'd been more than simple companions in the Talamasca together. We'd been mentor and pupil, I and she, and almost lovers, once, for a brief while. Such a brief while.

She'd come as a girl to us, a vagrant descendant of the clan of the Mayfairs, out of an African American branch of that family, coming down from white witches she scarcely knew, an octoroon of exceptional beauty, a barefoot child when she wandered into the Motherhouse in Louisiana, when she said, "I've heard of you people, I need you. I can see things. I can speak with the dead. "

That had been over twenty years ago, it seemed to me now.

I'd been the Superior General of the Order, settled into the life of a gentlemanly administrator, with all the comforts and drawbacks of routine. A telephone call had wakened me in the night. It had been from my friend and fellow scholar, Aaron Lightner.

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"David," he'd said, "you have to come. This is the genuine article. This is a witch of such power I've no words to describe it. David, you must come. . . ."

There was no one in those days whom I respected any more deeply than Aaron Lightner. I've loved three beings in all my years, both as human and vampire. Aaron Lightner was one of them. Another was, and is, the Vampire Lestat. The Vampire Lestat brought me miracles with his love, and broke my mortal life forever. The Vampire Lestat made me immortal and uncommonly strong for it, a nonpareil among the vampires.

As for the third, it was Merrick Mayfair, though Merrick I had tried my damndest to forget.

But we are speaking of Aaron, my old friend Aaron with his wavy white hair, quick gray eyes, and his penchant for southern blueandwhitestriped seersucker suits. We

are speaking of her, of the long ago child Merrick, who seemed as exotic as the lush tropical flora and fauna of her home.

"All right, old fellow, I'm coming, but couldn't this have waited till morning?" I remembered my stodginess and Aaron's goodnatured laughter.

"David, what's happened to you, old man?" he'd responded. "Don't tell me what you're doing now, David. Let me tell you. You fell asleep while reading some nineteenthcentury book on ghosts, something evocative and comforting. Let me guess. The author's Sabine BaringGould. You haven't been out of the Motherhouse in six months, have you? Not even for a luncheon in town. Don't deny it, David, you

live as if your life's finished. "

I had laughed. Aaron spoke with such a gentle voice. It wasn't Sabine BaringGould I'd been reading, but it might have been. I think it had been a supernatural tale by Algernon Blackwood. And Aaron had been right about the length of time since I'd stepped outside of our sanctified walls.

"Where's your passion, David? Where's your commitment?" Aaron had pressed. "David, the child's a witch. Do you think I use such words lightly? Forget the family name for a moment and all we know about them. This is something that would astound even our Mayfairs, though she'll never be known to them if I have my say in matters. David, this child can summon spirits. Open your Bible and turn to the Book of Samuel. This is the Witch of Endor. And you're being as cranky as the spirit of Samuel when the witch raised him from his sleep. Get out of bed and cross the Atlantic. I need you here now. "

The Witch of Endor. I didn't need to consult my Bible. Every member of the Talamasca knew that story only too well.

King Saul, in fear of the might of the Philistines, goes, before the dreaded battle, to "a woman with a familiar spirit" and asks that she raise Samuel the Prophet from the dead. "Why has thou disquieted me, to bring me up?" demands the ghostly prophet, and in short order he predicts that King Saul and both his sons will join him in death on the following day.

The Witch of Endor. And so I had always thought of Merrick, no matter how close to her I'd become later on. She was Merrick Mayfair, the Witch of Endor. At times I'd addressed her as such in semiofficial memos and often in brief notes.

In the beginning, she'd been a tender marvel. I had heeded Aaron's summons, packing, flying to Louisiana, and setting foot for the first time in Oak Haven, the

splendid plantation home which had become our refuge outside of New Orleans, on the old River Road.

What a dreamy event it had been. On the plane I had read my Old Testament: King Saul's sons had been slain in battle. Saul had fallen on his sword. Was I superstitious after all? My life I'd given to the Talamasca, but even before I'd begun my apprenticeship I'd seen and commanded spirits on my own. They weren't ghosts, you understand. They were nameless, never corporeal, and wound up for me with the names and rituals of Brazilian Candomble magic, in which I'd plunged so recklessly in my youth.

But I'd let that power grow cold inside me as scholarship and devotion to others claimed me. I had abandoned the mysteries of Brazil for the equally wondrous world of archives, relics, libraries, organization, and tutelage, lulling others into dusty reverence for our methods and our careful ways. The Talamasca was so vast, so old, so loving in its embrace. Even Aaron had no clue as to my old powers, not in those days, though many a mind was open to his psychic sensibility. I would know the girl for what she was.

It had been raining when we reached the Motherhouse, our car plunging into the long avenue of giant oaks that led from the levee road to the immense double doors. How green had been this world even in darkness, with twisted oak branches dipping into the high grass. I think the long gray streaks of Spanish moss touched the roof of the car.

The electric power had gone out that night with the storm, they told me.

"Rather charming," Aaron had said as he greeted me. He'd been whitehaired already by then, the consummate older gentleman, eternally goodnatured, almost sweet. "Let's you see things as they were in the old days, don't you think?"

Only oil lamps and candles illuminated the large square rooms. I had seen the flicker in the fanlight above the entranceway as we approached. Lanterns swayed in the wind in the deep galleries that wrapped the great square house about on its first and second floors.

Before entering, I had taken my time, rain or no rain, to inspect this marvelous tropical mansion, impressed with its simple pillars. Once there had been sugarcane for miles all around it; out back beyond the flower beds, still vaguely colored in the downpour, were weathered outbuildings where once slaves had lived.

She came down barefoot to meet me, in a lavender dress covered with pink flowers, scarcely the witch at all.

Her eyes couldn't have been more mysterious had she worn the kohl of a Hindu princess to set off the color. One saw the green of the iris, and the dark circle around it, as well as the black pupil within. A marvelous eye, all the more vivid due to her lighttan creamy skin. Her hair had been brushed back from her forehead, and her slender hands merely hung at her sides. How at ease she'd seemed in the first moments.

"David Talbot," she had said to me almost formally. I'd been enchanted by the confidence in her soft voice.

They couldn't break her of the barefoot habit. It had been dreadfully enticing, those bare feet on the wool carpet. She'd grown up in the country, I thought, but no, they said, it was merely in an old tumbledown part of New Orleans where there were no sidewalks anymore and the weatherbeaten houses were neglected and the blossoming and poisonous oleander grew as big as trees.

She had lived there with her godmother, Great Nananne, the witch who'd taught her all the things that she knew. Her mother, a powerful seer, known to me then only by

the mysterious name of Cold Sandra, had been in love with an explorer. There was no father of memory. She'd never gone to a real school.

"Merrick Mayfair," I'd said warmly. I took her in my arms.

She had been tall for her fourteen years, with beautifully shaped breasts quite natural under her simple cotton shift, and her soft dry hair had been loose down her back. She might have been a Spanish beauty to anyone outside of this bizarre part of the Southland, where the history of the slaves and their free descendants was so full of complex alliances and erotic romance. But any New Orleanean could see African blood in her by the lovely café au lait of her skin.

Sure enough, when I poured the cream into the thick chicory coffee that they gave me, I understood those words.

"All my people are colored," she said, with the French in her voice then. "Those that pass for white leave and go north. That's been happening forever. They don't want Great Nananne to visit. They don't want anyone to know. I could pass for white. But what about the family? What about all that's been handed down? I would never leave Great Nananne. I came here 'cause she told me to come. "

She had a temptress's poise as she sat there, small in the great winged chair of oxblood leather, a tiny tantalizing gold chain around her ankle, another with a small diamondstudded cross around her neck.

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"See these pictures?" she said invitingly. She had them in a shoe box which rested in her lap. "There's no witchcraft in them. You can look as you please. "

She laid them out on the table for me, daguerreotypes; stark clear photographs on glass, each one fitted into a crumbling little case of gutter perche, heavily embossed with rings of flowers or grapevines, many of which could be closed and clasped shut like little books.

"They come from the 1840s," she said, "and they're all our people. One of our own took these pictures. He was known for taking portraits. They loved him. He left some stories; I know where they are. They're all written with beautiful handwriting. They're in a box in the attic of Great Nananne's house. "

She had moved to the edge of the chair, her knees poking out from under her skimpy hem. Her hair made a big mass of shadows behind her. Her hairline was clean and her forehead smooth and beautiful. Though the night had been only cool, there was a fire in the fireplace, and the room, with its shelves of books and its

random Grecian sculptures, had been fragrant and comfortable, conducive to a spell.

Aaron had been watching her proudly, yet full of concern.

"See, these are all my people from the old days. " She might have been laying out a deck of cards. The flash of the shadows was lovely on her oval face and the distinct bones of her cheeks. "You see, they kept together. But as I said, the ones that could pass are long gone. Look what they gave up, just think of it, so much history. See this?"

I studied the small picture, glinting in the light of the oil lamp.

"This is Lucy Nancy Marie Mayfair, she was the daughter of a white man, but we never knew much about him. All along there would be white men. Always white men. What these women did for white men. My mother went to South America with a white man. I went with them. I remember the jungles. " Had she hesitated, picking up something from my thoughts, perhaps, or merely my dotting face?

I would never forget my own early years of exploration in the Amazon. I suppose I didn't want to forget, though nothing had made me more painfully conscious of my old age than to think of those adventures with gun and camera, lived on the bottom side of the world. I never dreamt then that I would return to uncharted jungles with her.

I had stared again at the old glass daguerreotypes. Not a one among any of these individuals looked anything but rich; ^atop hats and full taffeta skirts against studio backdrops of drapery and lavish plants. Here was a young woman beautiful as Merrick was now, sitting so prim and upright, in a highbacked Gothic chair. How to explain the remarkably clear evidence of African blood in so many of them? It seemed no more in some than an uncommon brightness of the eye against a darkened Caucasian face, yet it was there.

"Here, this is the oldest," she said, "this is Angelique Marybelle Mayfair. " A stately woman, dark hair parted in the middle, ornate shawl covering her shoulders and full sleeves. In her fingers she clasped a barely visible pair of spectacles and a folded fan.

"She's the oldest and finest picture that I have. She was a secret witch, that's what they told me. There's secret witches and witches people come to. She was the secret kind, but she was smart. They say she was lovers with a white Mayfair who lived in the Garden District, and he was by blood her own nephew. I come down from her and from him. Oncle Julien, that was his name. He let his colored cousins call him Oncle

Julien, instead of Monsieur Julien, the way the other white men might have done. "

Aaron had tensed but sought to hide it. Perhaps he could hide it from her, but not from me.

So he's told her nothing of that dangerous Mayfair family. They haven't spoken of it; ^athe dreadful Garden District Mayfairs, a tribe with supernatural powers, whom he had investigated for years. Our files on the Mayfairs went back for centuries. Members of our Order had died at the hands of the Mayfair Witches, as we were wont to call them. But this child mustn't know about them through us, I had realized quite suddenly, at least not until Aaron had made up his mind that such an intervention would serve the good of both parties, and do no harm.

As it was, such a time never came to pass. Merrick's life was complete and separate from that of the white Mayfairs. There is nothing of their story in these pages that I now write.

But on that long ago evening, Aaron and I had sought rather desperately to make our minds blank for the little witch who sat before us.

I don't remember whether or not Merrick had glanced at us before she went on.

"There are Mayfairs living in that Garden District house even now," she had said matteroffactly, " ^awhite people, who never had much to do with us, except through their lawyers. " How worldly her little laugh had sounded; ^athe way people laugh when they speak of lawyers.

"The lawyers would come back of town with the money," she said with a shake of her head. "And some of those lawyers were Mayfairs; too. The lawyers sent Angelique Marybelle Mayfair north to a fine school, but she came home again to live and die right here. I would never go to those white people. " The remark had been almost

offhanded. She went on.

"But Great Nananne talks about Oncle Julien just as if he was living now, and they all said it when I was growing up, that Oncle Julien was a kind man. Seems he knew all his colored relations, and they said that man could kill his enemies or yours with the look in his eye. He was a houn'gan if there ever was one. I have more to say about him by and by. "

She had glanced quite suddenly at Aaron and I'd seen him glance away from her almost shyly. I wonder if she had seen the future; that the Talamasca File on the Mayfair Witches would swallow Aaron's life, as surely as the Vampire Lestat had swallowed mine.

I wondered what she thought about Aaron's death even now, as we sat at the cafe table, as I spoke softly to the handsome and welldefended woman whom that little girl had become.

The feeble old waiter brought her the fifth of rum she had requested, the St. James from Martinique, dark. I caught the powerful scent of it as he filled her small, heavy octagonal glass. Memories flooded my mind. Not the beginning with her, but other times.

She drank it just the way I knew she would, in the manner I remembered, as if it were nothing but water. The waiter shuffled back to his hiding place. She lifted the bottle before I could do it for her, and she filled the glass again.

I watched her tongue move along the inside of her lip. I watched her large searching eyes look up again into my face.

"Remember drinking rum with me?" she asked, almost smiling, but not quite. She was far too tense, too alert for that just yet. "You remember," she said. "I'm talking

about those brief nights in the jungle. Oh, you are so right when you say that the vampire is a human monster. You're still so very human. I can see it in your expression. I can see it in your gestures. As for your body, it's totally human. There isn't a clue. . . "

"There are clues," I said, contradicting her. "And as time passes you'll see them. You'll become uneasy, and then fearful and, finally, accustomed. Believe me, I know."
"

She raised her eyebrows, then accepted this. She took another sip and I imagined how delicious it was for her. I knew that she did not drink every day of her life, and when she did drink she enjoyed it very much.

"So many memories, beautiful Merrick," I whispered. It seemed paramount that I not give in to them, that I concentrate on those memories which most certainly enshrined her innocence and reminded me of a sacred trust.

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To the end of Aaron's life, he had been devoted to her, though he seldom spoke of it to me. What had she learnt of the tragic hitandrun accident that had caught Aaron unawares? I had been already gone out of the Talamasca, out of Aaron's care, and out of life.

And to think we had lived such long mortal lives as scholars, Aaron and I. We should have been past all mishap. Who would have dreamt that our research would ensnare us and turn our destiny so dramatically from the dedication of those long loyal years? But hadn't the same thing happened to another loyal member of the Talamasca, my beloved student Jesse Reeves?

Back then, when Merrick had been the sultry child and I the amazed Superior General, I had not thought my few remaining years held any great surprise.

Why had I not learnt from the story of Jesse? Jesse Reeves had been my student even more surely than Merrick ever became, and the vampires had swallowed Jesse whole and complete.

With great devotion Jesse had sent me one last letter, thick with euphemisms, and of no real value to anyone else, letting me know that she would never see me again. I had not taken Jesse's fate as a caution. I had thought only that for the intense study of the vampire, Jesse Reeves had been too young.

It was all past. Nothing remained of that heartbreak. Nothing remained of those mistakes. My mortal life had been shattered, my soul soaring and then fallen, my vampire life erasing all the small accomplishments and consolations of the man I'd once been. Jesse was among us and I knew her secrets, and that she'd always be quite

faraway from me.

What mattered now was the ghost that Jesse had only glimpsed during her investigations, and

the ghost story that haunted Louis, and the bizarre request which I now made to my beloved Merrick that she call the ghost of Claudia with all her uncommon skill.

Chapter 2

2

IN THE STILL CAFE, I watched Merrick take another deep drink of the rum. I treasured the interval in which she let her eyes pass slowly over the dusty room.

I let my mind return to that long ago night at Oak Haven, as the rain struck the windowpanes. The air had been warm and heavy with the scent of the oil lamps and the busy fire on the hearth. Spring was upon us but the storm had cooled the air. She'd been speaking of the white family named Mayfair of whom she knew so little, she said.

"None of us with any sense would do that," she continued, "go to those white cousins, expecting anything from any of them on account of a name. " She had brushed it all aside. "I'm not going to white people and try to tell them that I'm their own. "

Aaron had looked at me, his quick gray eyes concealing even his tenderest emotions, but I knew that he wanted me to respond.

"There's no need, child," I had said. "You are ours now, if you choose to be. We are your own. Why, it's already understood. This is your home forever. Only you can change things, if you wish. "

A chill had come over me, of something momentous and meaningful, when I'd spoken those words to her. I had indulged the pleasure. "We'll always take care of you. " I had underscored it, and I might have kissed her had she not been so ripe and pretty, with her bare feet on the flowered carpet and her breasts naked beneath her shift.

She had not replied.

"All gentlemen and ladies, it seems," Aaron had said, perusing the daguerreotypes. "And in such excellent condition, these little portraits. " He had sighed. "Ah, what a wonder it must have been in the 1840s when they learnt to take these pictures. "

"Oh, yes, my greatgreat uncle wrote all about it," she had said. "I don't know if anyone can read those pages anymore. They were crumbling to bits when Great Nananne first showed them to me. But as I was saying, these are all his pictures. Here, the tintypes, he did those too. " She had a woman's weariness in her sigh, as though she'd lived it all. "He died very old, they say, with a house full of pictures, before his white nephews came and actually broke them up;^abut I'll come to that. "

I had been shocked and bruised by such a revelation, unable to excuse it. Broken daguerreotypes. Faces lost forever. She had gone on, lifting the small rectangles of tin, many unframed yet clear, from her cardboard treasure chest.

"I open boxes sometimes from Great Nananne's rooms, and the paper is all little bits and pieces. I think the rats come and they eat the paper. Great Nananne says rats will eat your money and that's why you have to keep it in an iron box. Iron's magical, you know that. The sisters;^aI mean the nuns;^athey don't know that. That's why in the Bible you couldn't build with an iron shovel, because iron was mighty and you couldn't put the iron shovel above the bricks of the Lord's temple, not then, and not now. "

It seemed a bizarre intelligence, though she had been most technically correct.

She'd let her words wander. "Iron and shovels. It goes way back. The King of Babylon held a shovel in his hand with which he laid the bricks of the temple. And the Masons, now they keep that idea in their Order, and on the onedollar bill you see that broken pyramid of bricks. "

It had amazed me, the ease with which she touched on these complex concepts. What had she known in her life, I wondered. What sort of woman would she prove to be?

I remember that she'd been looking at me, as she'd said those words, gauging my reaction, perhaps, and it had only then become clear to me how much she needed to talk of the things she'd been taught, of the things she thought, of the things she'd heard.

"But why are you so good?" she had asked, searching my face rather politely. "I know with priests and nuns why they're good to us. They come and bring food and clothes to us. But you, why are you good? Why did you let me in and give me a room here? Why do you let me do what I want? All day Saturday I looked at magazines and listened to the radio. Why do you feed me and try to get me to wear shoes?"

"Child," Aaron had interjected. "We're almost as old as the Church of Rome. We're as old as the orders of the sisters and the priests who've visited you. Yes, older, I would say, than almost all. "

Still she had looked to me for an explanation.

"We have our beliefs and our traditions," I had said. "It's common to be bad, to be greedy, to be corrupt and selfseeking. It's a rare thing to love. We love. "

Again, I had enjoyed our sense of purpose, our commitment; that we were the inviolate Talamasca, that we cared for the outcast, that we harbored the sorcerer and the seer, that we had saved witches from the stake and reached out even to the

wandering spirits, yes, even to the shades whom others fear. We had done it for well over a thousand years.

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"But these little treasures;^a your family, your heritage," I'd hastened to explain. "They matter to us because they matter to you. And they will always be yours. "

She'd nodded. I had got it right.

"Witchcraft's my calling card, Mr. Talbot," she'd said shrewdly, "but all this comes with me too. "

I had enjoyed the. fleeting enthusiasm which had illuminated her face.

And now, some twenty years after, what had I done, seeking her out, finding her old house in New Orleans deserted, and spying upon her at Oak Haven, walking the broad upstairs galleries of Oak Haven like an old Penny Dreadful Vampire, looking into her very bedroom until she sat up and spoke my name in the darkness.

I had done her evil, I knew it, and it was exciting, and I needed her, and I was selfish, and I missed her, and it was as plain as that.

It had been only a week ago that I wrote to her.

Alone in the town house in the Rue Royale, I'd written by hand in a style that hadn't changed with my fortunes:

Dear Merrick,

Yes, it was I whom you saw on the porch outside your room.

It was not my intention to frighten you but merely to solace myself by looking at you, playing the guardian angel, I must confess, if you will forgive me, as I hovered outside the window for the better part of the night.

I have a request for you, which I make from my soul to yours. I cannot tell you what it is in this letter. I ask that you meet me in some place that is public, where you will feel safe from me, a place that you yourself choose. Answer at this post box, and I'll be prompt in replying. Merrick, forgive me. If you advise the Elders or the Superior General of this contact, they will in all likelihood forbid you to meet with me. Please give me this little while to speak with you before you take such a step.

Yours in the Talamasca forever,

David Talbot.

What audacity and egoism to have written such a note and delivered it into the iron mailbox at the end of the drive in the hours before dawn.

She'd written back, a note rather tantalizing in its details, full of undeserved affection.

I cannot wait to talk with you. Be assured, whatever shocks this meeting will hold in store for me, I seek you inside the mystery David, whom I have always loved. You were my Father when I needed you, and my friend ever after. And I have glimpsed you since your metamorphosis, perhaps more often than you know.

I know what happened to you. I know of those with whom you live. The Café of the Lion. Rue St. Anne. Do you remember it? Years ago, before we ever went to Central America, we ate a quick lunch there. You were so wary of us setting out for those jungles. Do you remember how you argued? I think I used a witch's charms to persuade you. I always thought you knew. I'll come early each evening for several nights in hopes that you'll be there.

She had signed the note exactly as I had signed my own:

"Yours in the Talamasca forever. "

I had put myself before my love of her, and my duty to her. I was relieved that the deed was done.

Back then, when she'd been the orphan in the storm, such a thing had been unthinkable. She was my duty, this little wanderer who had come so surprisingly, on her own, one evening to knock on our door.

"Our motives are the same as your motiv

es," Aaron had said to her most directly on that long ago night at Oak Haven. He'd reached out and lifted her soft brown hair back from her shoulder, as if he were her elder brother. "We want to preserve knowledge. We want to save history. We want to study and we hope to understand. "

He had made another soft sigh, so unlike him.

"Ah, those white cousins, the Garden District Mayfairs, as you called them, and most correctly, yes, we know of them," he had admitted, surprising me, "but we keep our secrets unless prompted by duty to reveal them. What is their long history to you just now? Their lives are interconnected like thorny vines forever circling and recircling the same tree. Your life might have nothing to do with that bitter struggle. What concerns us here now is what we can do for you. I don't speak idle words when I tell you that you may rely upon us forever. You are, as David has said, our own. "

She had reflected. It had not been simple for her to accept all of this, she was too used to being alone with Great Nananne; yet something strong had impelled her to trust us before she'd ever come.

"Great Nananne trusts you," she had said, as if I'd asked her. "Great Nananne said that I was to come to you. Great Nananne had one of her many dreams and woke up before daylight and rang her bell for me to come. I was sleeping on the screen porch and I came in and found her standing up in her white flannel gown. She's cold all the time, you know; she always wears flannel, even on the hottest night. She said for me to come sit down and listen to what she had dreamed. "

"Tell me about it, child," Aaron had asked. Had they not spoken of this completely before I'd come?

"She dreamed of Mr. Lightner, of you," she'd said, looking to Aaron, "and in the dream you came to her with Oncle Julien, white Oncle Julien from the clan uptown. And the two of you sat by her bed.

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"Oncle Julien told her jokes and stories and said he was happy to be in her dream. She said that. Oncle Julien said that I was to go to you, you here, Mr. Lightner, and that Mr. Talbot would come. Oncle Julien spoke French and you yourself were sitting in the canebacked chair and smiling and nodding to her, and you brought her in a cup of coffee and cream the way she likes it, with half a cup of sugar and one of her favorite silver spoons. In and out of her dreams, Great Nananne has a thousand silver spoons. " The dream continued:

"You sat on her bed, finally, on her best quilt beside her, and you took her hand, and she had all her best rings on her hand, which she doesn't wear anymore, you know, and you said in the dream, 'You send me little Merrick,' and you said you'd take care of me, and you told her that she was going to die. "

Aaron had not heard this strange recounting, and he'd seemed quite taken, amazed. Lovingly, he'd answered:

"It must have been Oncle Julien who said such a thing in the dream. How could I have known such a secret?"

I'd never forgotten his protest, because it had been very unlike him to commit himself even to ignorance, and to press so hard upon such a point.

"No, no, you told her," the fairy child had said. "You told her the day of the week and the hour of the clock, and it's yet to come. " She had looked thoughtfully once more at her pictures. "Don't worry about it. I know when it's going to happen. " Her face had been suddenly full of sadness. "I can't keep her forever. Les mystères will not wait. "

Les mystères. Did she mean the ancestors, the Voodoo gods, or merely the secrets of fate? I'd been unable to penetrate her thoughts to any degree whatsoever.

"St. Peter will be waiting," she'd murmured as the visible sadness had slowly receded behind her veil of calm.

Quite suddenly, she'd flashed her glance on me and murmured something in French. Papa Legba, god of the crossroads in Voodoo, for whom a statue of St. Peter with his keys to Heaven might do quite well.

I had noted that Aaron could not bring himself to question her further on the matter of his role in the dream, the date of Great Nananne's imminent death. He had nodded, however, and once again, with both hands he'd lifted her hair back from her damp neck where a few errant tendrils had clung to her soft creamy skin.

Aaron had regarded her with honest wonder as she had gone on with her tale.

"First thing I knew after that dream, there was an old colored man and a truck ready to take me, and he said, 'You don't need your bag, you just come as you are,' and I climbed up into the truck with him, and he drove me all the way out here, not even talking to me, just listening to some old Blues radio station and smoking cigarettes the whole way. Great Nananne knew it was Oak Haven because Mr. Lightner told her in the dream. . . .

"Great Nananne knew of Oak Haven of the old days, when it was a different kind of house with a different name. Uncle Julien told her lots of other things, but she didn't tell me what they were. She said, 'Go to them, The Talamasca; they'll take care of you, and it will be the way for you and all the things that you can do. ' "

It had chilled: all the things that you can do. I remember Aaron's sad expression. He had only given a little shake of his head. Don't worry her now, I'd thought a bit

crossly, but the child had not been perturbed.

Uncle Julien of Mayfair fame was no stranger to my memory; I had read many chapters on the career of this powerful witch and seer, the one male in his bizarre family to go against the goad of a male spirit and his female witches over many hundreds of years. Uncle Julien;^amentor, madman, cocksman, legend, father of witches;^aand the child had said that she had come down from him.

It had to be powerful magic, but Uncle Julien had been Aaron's field, not mine.

She had watched me carefully as she spoke.

"I'm not used to people believing me," she'd said, "but I am used to making people afraid. "

"How so, child?" I had asked. But she had frightened me quite enough with her remarkable poise and the penetration of her gaze. What could she do? Would I ever know? It had been worth pondering on that first evening, for it was not our way to encourage our orphans to give full vent to their dangerous powers; we had been devoutly passive in all such respects.

I had banished my unseemly curiosity and set to memorizing her appearance, as was my custom in those days, by looking very carefully at every aspect of her visage and form.

Her limbs had been beautifully molded; her breasts were already too fetching, and the features of her face were large, all of them;^awith no unique hint of the Africanlarge her wellshaped mouth, and large her almond eyes and long nose; her neck had been long and uncommonly graceful, and there had been a harmony to her face, even when she had fallen into the deepest thought.

"Keep your secrets of those white Mayfairs," she had said. "Maybe someday we can swap secrets, you and me. They don't even know in these times that we are here. Great Nananne said that Oncle Julien died before she was born. In the dream, he didn't say a word about those white Mayfairs. He said for me to come here. " She had gestured to the old glass photographs. "These are my people. If I'd been meant to go to those white Mayfairs, Great Nananne would have seen it long before now. " She'd paused, thoughtfully. "Let's us just talk of those old times. "

She'd spaced the daguerreotypes lovingly on the mahogany table. She made a neat row, wiping away the crumbly fragments with her hand. And at some moment, I'd noted that all the little figures were upside down from her point of view, and right side up for Aaron and for me.

"There've been white people kin to me that have come down here and tried to destroy records," she said, "You know, tear the page right out of the church register that says their greatgrandmother was colored. Femme de couleur fibre, that's what some old records say in French.

"Imagine tearing up that much history, the page right out of the church register with all those births and deaths and marriages, and not wanting to know. Imagine going into my greatgreat oncle's house and breaking up those pictures, pictures that ought to be someplace safe for lots of people to see. "

She had sighed, rather like a weary woman, gazing down into the worn shoe box and its trophies.

"Now I have these pictures. I

have everything, and I'm with you, and they can't find me, and they can't throw all these things away. "

She had dipped her hand into the shoe box again and taken out the cartes de visite;^a old photographs on cardboard from the last decades of the old century. I could see the high slanted letters in faded purple on the backs of these latest pictures as she turned them this way and that.

"See, this here is Oncle Vervain," she said. I had looked at the thin, handsome blackhaired young man with the dark skin and light eyes like her own. It was rather a romantic portrait. In a finely tailored threepiece suit, he stood with his arm on a Greek column before a painted sky. The picture was in rich sepia. The African blood was plainly present in the man's handsome nose and mouth.

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"Now, this is dated 1920. " She turned it over once, then back again, and laid it down for us to see. "Oncle Vervain was a Voodoo Doctor," she said, "and I knew him well before he died. I was little, but I'll never forget him. He could dance and spit the rum from between his teeth at the altar, and he had everybody scared, I can tell you. "

She took her time, then found what she wanted. Next picture.

"And you see here, this one?" She had laid down another old photograph, this time of an elderly grayhaired man of color in a stately wooden chair. "The Old Man is what they always called him. I don't even know him by any other name. He went back to Haiti to study the magic, and he taught Oncle Vervain all he knew. Sometimes I feel Oncle Vervain is talking to me. Sometimes I feel he's outside our house watching over Great Nananne. I saw the Old Man once in a dream. "

I had wanted so badly to ask questions, but this had not been the time.

"See here, this is Pretty Justine," she had said, laying down perhaps the most impressive portrait of all; a studio picture on thick cardboard inside a sepia cardboard frame. "Pretty Justine had everybody afraid of her. " The young woman was indeed pretty, her breasts flat in the style of the 1920s her hair in a bob, her dark skin quite beautiful, her eyes and mouth slightly expressionless, or perhaps evincing a certain pain.

Now came the modern snapshots, thin and curling, the work of common enough handheld cameras of the present time.

"They were the worst; his sons," she had said as she pointed to the curling

blackandwhite picture. "They were Pretty Justine's grandchildren, all white and living in New York. They wanted to get their hands on anything that said they were colored and tear it up. Great Nananne knew what they wanted. She didn't fall for their soft manners and the way they took me downtown and bought me pretty clothes. I still have those clothes. Little dresses nobody ever wore and little shoes with clean soles. They didn't leave us an address when they left. See, look at them in the picture. Look how anxious they are. But I did bad things to them. "

Aaron had shaken his head, studying the strange tense faces. As the pictures had disquieted me, I had kept my eyes on the womanish child.

"What did you do, Merrick?" I had asked without biting my tongue wisely.

"Oh, you know, read their secrets in their palms and told them bad things they'd always tried to cover up. It wasn't kind to do that, but I did it, just to make them go away. I told them our house was full of spirits. I made the spirits come. No, I didn't make them come. I called them and they came as I asked. Great Nananne thought it was funny. They said, 'Make her stop,' and Great Nananne said, 'What makes you think I can do that?' as if I was some wild creature that she couldn't control. "

Again there had come that little sigh.

"Great Nananne's really dying," she said looking up at me, her green eyes never wavering. "She says there is no one now, and I have to keep these things;^aher books, her clippings. See, look here, at these clippings. The old newspaper is so brittle it's falling apart. Mr. Lightner's going to help me save these things. " She glanced at Aaron. "Why are you so afraid for me, Mr. Talbot? Aren't you strong enough? You don't think it's so bad to be colored, do you? You're not from here, you're from away. "

Afraid. Was I really feeling it so strongly? She'd spoken with authority, and I'd

searched for the truth in it, but come quick to my own defense and perhaps to hers as well.

"Read my heart, child," I said. "I think nothing of the sort about being colored, though maybe there were times when I've thought that it might have been bad luck in a particular case. " She'd raised her eyebrows slightly, thoughtfully. I'd continued, anxious, perhaps, but not afraid. "I'm sad because you say you have no one, and I'm glad because I know that you have us. "

"That's what Great Nananne says, more or less," she answered. And for the first time, her long full mouth made a true smile.

My mind had drifted, remembering the incomparable darkskinned women I'd seen in India, though she was a marvel of different tones, the rich mahogany hair and the pale eyes so visible and so meaningful. I'd thought again that to many she must have looked exotic, this barefoot girl in the flowered shift.

Then had come a moment of pure feeling, which had made its indelible and irrational impression. I'd perused the many faces laid out upon the table, and it had seemed they were all gazing at me. It was a marked impression. The little pictures had been alive all along.

It must be the firelight and the oil lamps, I'd thought dreamily, but I'd been unable to shake the feeling; the little people had been laid out to look at Aaron and to look at me. Even their placement seemed deliberate and sly, or wondrously meaningful, I'd conjectured, as I went smoothly from suspicion to a lulled and tranquil feeling that I was in an audience with a host of the dead.

"They do seem to be looking," Aaron had murmured, I remember, though I'm sure I hadn't spoken. The clock had stopped ticking and I'd turned to look at it, uncertain where it was. On the mantle, yes, and its hands had been frozen, and the

windowpanes had given that muffled rattle that they do when the wind nudges them, and the house had wrapped me securely in its own atmosphere of warmth and secrets, of safety and sanctity, of dreaminess and communal might.

It seemed a long interval had transpired in which none of us had spoken, and Merrick had stared at me, and then at Aaron, her hands idle, her face glistening in the light.

I'd awakened sharply to realize nothing had changed in the room. Had I fallen asleep? Unforgivable rudeness. Aaron had been beside me as before. And the pictures had become once more inert and sorrowful, ceremonial testimony to mortality as surely as if she'd laid out a skull for my perusal from a graveyard fallen to ruin. But the uneasiness I'd experienced then stayed with me long after we'd all gone up to our respective rooms.

Nowⁱafter twenty years and many other strange momentsⁱshe sat across from me at this cafe table in the Rue St. Anne, a beauty gazing at a vampire, and we talked over the flickering candle, and the light was too much like the light of that long ago evening at Oak Haven, though tonight the late spring evening was only moist, not wet with a coming storm.

She sipped the rum, rolling it around a bit before she swallowed it. But she didn't fool me. She'd soon start drinking it fast again. She set the glass aside and let her fingers spread wide apart on the soiled marble. Rings. Those were Great Nananne's many rings, beautiful gold filigree with various wondrous stones. She'd worn them even in the jungles, when I'd thought it so unwise. She'd never been prone to fear of any sort.

I thought of her in those hot tropical nights. I thought of her during those steamy hours under the high canopy of green. I thought of the trek through the darkness of the ancient temple. I thought of her climbing ahead of me, in the steam and roar of the waterfall up the gentle slope.

I'd been far too old for it, our great and secret adventure. I thought of precious objects made of jade as green as her eyes.

Her voice brought me out of my selfish reverie:

"Why are you asking me to do this magic?" She put the question to me again. "I sit here and I look at you, David, and with every passing second, I become more aware of what you are and what's happened to you. I put all kinds of pieces together from your open mind;^a and your mind's as open as i

t ever was, David, you know that, don't you?"

How resolute was her voice. Yes, the French was utterly gone. Ten years ago it had been gone. But now there was a clipped quality to her words, no matter how soft and low they came.

Her large eyes widened easily with her expressive verbal rhythms.

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"You couldn't even be quiet of mind on the porch the other night," she scolded. "You woke me. I heard you, just as if you'd been tapping on the panes. You said, 'Merrick, can you do it? Can you bring up the dead for Louis de Pointe du Lac?' And do you know what I heard underneath it? I heard 'Merrick, I need you. I need to talk to you. Merrick, my destiny is shattered. Merrick, I reach for understanding. Don't turn me aside. '"

I felt an acute pain in my heart.

"It's true what you're saying," I confessed.

She drank another big swallow of the rum, and the heat danced in her cheeks.

"But you want this thing for Louis," she said. "You want it enough to overcome your own scruples and come to my window. Why? You, I understand. Of him, I know other people's stories and just the little I've seen with my own eyes. He's a dashing young man, that one, isn't he?"

I was too confused to answer, too confused to will courtesy to build a temporary bridge of polite lies.

"David, give me your hand, please," she asked suddenly. "I have to touch you. I have to feel this strange skin. "

"Oh, darling, if only you could forego that," I murmured.

Her large golden earrings moved against the nest of her black hair and the long line of

her beautiful neck. All the promise of the child had been fulfilled in her. Men admired her enormously. I had known that a long time ago.

She reached out to me gracefully. Boldly, hopelessly, I gave her my hand.

I wanted the contact. I wanted the intimacy. I was powerfully stimulated. And treasuring the sensation, I let her fingers linger as she looked into my palm.

"Why read this palm, Merrick?" I asked. "What can it tell you? This body belonged to another man. Do you want to read the map of his broken fate? Can you see there that he was murdered and the body stolen? Can you see there my own selfish invasion of a body that ought to have died?"

"I know the story, David," she answered. "I found it all in Aaron's papers. Body switching. Highly theoretical as regards the official position of the Order. But you were a grand success. "

Her fingers sent the thrills up my spine and through the roots of my hair.

"After Aaron's death, I read the whole thing," she said, as she moved her fingertips across the pattern of deeply etched lines. She recited it:

"David Talbot is no longer in his body. During an illfated experiment with astral projection he was ousted from his own form by a practiced Body Thief and forced to claim the youthful trophy of his opponent, a body stolen from a shattered soul which has, as far as we can know, moved on. '"

I winced at the old familiar Talamasca style.

"I wasn't meant to find those papers," she continued, her eyes still fixed on my palm. "But Aaron died here, in New Orleans, and I had them in my hands before anyone

else. They're still in my possession, David; they have never been filed with the Elders and maybe they never will be filed. I don't know. "

I was amazed at her audacity, to have held back such secrets from the Order to which she still devoted her life. When had I ever had such independence, except perhaps at the very end?

Her eyes moved quickly back and forth as she examined my palm. She pressed her thumb softly against my flesh. The chills were unbearably enticing. I wanted to take her in my arms, not feed from her, no, not harm her, only kiss her, only sink my fangs a very little, only taste her blood and her secrets, but this was dreadful and I wouldn't let it go on.

I withdrew my outstretched hand.

"What did you see, Merrick?" I asked quickly, swallowing the hunger of body and mind.

"Disasters large and small, my friend, a life line that goes on as long as any, stars of strength, and a brood of offspring. "

"Stop it, I don't accept it. The hand's not mine. "

"You have no other body now," she countered. "Don't you think the body will conform to its new soul? The palm of a hand changes over time. But I don't want to make you angry. I didn't come here to study you. I didn't come here to stare in cold fascination at a vampire. I've glimpsed vampires. I've even been close to them, in these very streets. I came because you asked me and because I wanted . . . to be with you. "

I nodded, overcome and unable for the moment to speak. With quick gestures I

pleaded for her silence.

She waited.

Then at last:

"Did you ask permission of the Elders for this meeting?"

She laughed but it wasn't cruel. "Of course I did not. "

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"Then know this," I said. "It started the same way with me and the Vampire Lestat. I didn't tell the Elders. I didn't let them know how often I saw him, that I brought him into my house, that I conversed with him, traveled with him, taught him how to reclaim his preternatural body when the Body Thief tricked him out of it. "

She tried to interrupt me but I would have none of it.

"And do you realize what's happened to me?" I demanded. "I thought I was too clever for Lestat ever to seduce me. I thought I was too wise in old age for the seduction of immortality. I thought I was morally superior, Merrick, and now you see what I am. "

"Aren't you going to swear to me that you'll never hurt me?" she asked, her face beautifully flushed. "Aren't you going to assure me that Louis de Pointe du Lac would never bring me harm?"

"Of course I am. But there's a bit of decency left in me, and that decency compels me to remind you that I'm a creature of supernatural appetite. "

Again she tried to interject, but I wouldn't allow it.

"My very presence, with all its signals of power, can erode your own tolerance for living, Merrick; it can eat away your faith in a moral order, it can hurt your willingness to die an ordinary death. "

"Ah, David," she said, chiding me for my official tone. "Speak plainly. What's in your heart? " She sat up straight in the chair, her eyes looking me up and down. "You look boyish and wise in this young body. Your skin's darkened like mine! Even your

features have the stamp of Asia. But you're more David than you ever were!"

I said nothing.

I watched through dazed eyes as she drank more of the rum. The sky darkened behind her, but bright, warm electric lights filled up the outside night. Only the café itself was veiled in dreary shadow, what with its few dusty bulbs behind the bar.

Her cool confidence chilled me. It chilled me that she had so fearlessly touched me, that nothing in my vampire nature repelled her, but then I could well remember how Lestat in all his subdued glory had attracted me. Was she attracted? Had the fatal fascination begun?

She kept her thoughts half concealed as she always had.

I thought of Louis. I thought of his request. He wanted desperately for her to work her magic. But she was right. I needed her. I needed her witness and her understanding.

When I spoke, my words were full of heartbreak and wonder, even to myself.

"It's been magnificent," I said. "And unendurable. I am most truly out of life and can't escape from it. I have no one to whom I can give what I learn. "

She didn't argue with me or question me. Her eyes seemed suddenly to be full of sympathy, her mask of composure to be gone. I'd seen such sharp changes in her many times. She concealed her emotions except for such silent and eloquent moments.

"Do you think," she asked, "that if you hadn't taken up life in the young body, that Lestat would have forced you as he did? If you'd still been old;^aour David, our blessed David, aged seventyfour, wasn't it?ⁱ^ado you think if you'd still been our

honorable Superior General that Lestat would have brought you over?"

"I don't know," I said shortly, but not without feeling. "I've often asked myself the same question. I honestly don't know. These vampires . . . ah, I mean, we . . . we vampires, we

love beauty, we feed on it. Our definition of beauty expands enormously, you can't quite imagine how much. I don't care how loving your soul, you can't know how much we find beautiful that mortals don't find beautiful, but we do propagate by beauty, and this body has beauty which I've used to evil advantage countless times. "

She lifted her glass in a small salute. She drank deeply.

"If you'd come up to me with no preamble," she said, "whispering in a crowd as you touched me; I would have known you, known who you were. " A shadow fell over her face for a moment, and then her expression became serene. "I love you, old friend," she said.

"You think so, my darling?" I asked. "I have done many things to feed this body; not so very lovely to think about that at all. "

She finished the glass, set it down, and, before I could do it for her, she reached for the bottle again.

"Do you want Aaron's papers?" she asked.

I was completely taken aback.

"You mean you're willing to give them to me?"

"David, I'm loyal to the Talamasca. What would I be if it weren't for the Order?" She

hesitated, then: "But I'm also deeply loyal to you. " For a few seconds she was musing. "You were the Order for me, David. Can you imagine what I felt when they told me you were dead?"

I sighed. What could I say in answer?

"Did Aaron tell you how we grieved for you, all those of us who weren't entrusted with a speck of the truth?"

"From my soul, I'm sorry, Merrick. We felt we kept a dangerous secret. What more can I say?"

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"You died here in the States, in Miami Beach, that was the story. And they'd flown the remains back to England before they even called to tell me you were gone. You know what I did, David? I made them hold the casket for me. It was sealed shut when I got to London but I made them open it. I made them do it. I screamed and carried on until they gave in to me. Then I sent them out of the room and I stayed alone with that body, David, that body all powdered and prettied up and nestled in its satin. I stayed there for an hour perhaps. They were knocking on the door. Then finally I told them to proceed. "

There was no anger in her face, only a faint wondering expression.

"I couldn't let Aaron tell you," I said, "not just then, not when I didn't know whether I'd survive in the new body, not when I didn't understand what life held for me. I couldn't. And then, then it was too late. "

She raised her eyebrows and made a little doubting gesture with her head. She sipped the rum.

"I understand," she said.

"Thank God," I answered. "In time, Aaron would have told you about the body switching," I insisted. "I know he would have. The story of my death was never meant for you. "

She nodded, holding back the first response that came to her tongue.

"I think you have to file those papers of Aaron's," I said. "You have to file them

directly with the Elders and no one else. Forget the Superior General of the moment.
"

"Stop it, David," she responded. "You know it is much easier to argue with you now that you are in the body of a very young man. "

"You never had difficulty arguing with me, Merrick," I retorted. "Don't you think Aaron would have filed the papers, had he lived?"

"Maybe," she said, "and maybe not. Maybe Aaron would have wanted more that you be left to your destiny. Maybe Aaron wanted more that whatever you had become, you'd be left alone. "

I wasn't sure what she was saying. The Talamasca was so passive, so reticent, so downright unwilling in interfere in anyone's destiny, I couldn't figure what she meant.

She shrugged, took another sip of ram, and rolled the rim of the glass against her lower lip.

"Maybe it doesn't matter," she said. "I only know that Aaron never filed the pages himself. " She went on speaking:

"The night after he was killed I went down to his house on Esplanade Avenue. You know he married a white Mayfair, not a witch by the way, but a resilient and generous woman;^aBeatrice Mayfair is her name, she's still living;^aand at her invitation I took the papers marked 'Talamasca. ' She didn't even know what they contained.

"She told me Aaron had once given her my name. If anything happened, she was to call me, and so she'd done her duty. Besides, she couldn't read the documents. They were all in Latin, you know, Talamasca old style.

"There were several files, and my name and number were written on the front of each, in Aaron's hand. One file was entirely devoted to you, though only the initial, D, was used throughout. The papers on you, I translated into English. No one's ever seen them. No one," she said with emphasis. "But I know them almost word for word. "

It seemed a comfort suddenly to hear her speaking of these things, these secret Talamasca things, which had once been our stock in trade. Yes, a comfort, as if the warm presence of Aaron were actually with us again.

She stopped for another sip of the rum.

"I feel you ought to know these things," she said. "We never kept anything from each other, you and I. Not that I knew of, but then of course my work was in the study of magic, and I did roam far and wide. "

"How much did Aaron know?" I asked. I thought my eyes were tearing. I was humiliated. But I wanted her to go on. "I never saw Aaron after the vampiric metamorphosis," I confessed dully. "I couldn't bring myself to do it. Can you guess why?" I felt a sharp increase in mental pain and confusion. My grief for Aaron would never go away, and I'd endured it for years without a word to either of my vampire companions, Louis or Lestat.

"No," she said. "I can't guess why. I can tell you. . . , " and here she hesitated politely so that I might stop her, but I did not. "I can tell you that he was disappointed and forgiving to the end. "

I bowed my head. I pressed my forehead into my cold hand.

"By his own account he prayed each day that you would come to him," she explained slowly, "that he'd have a chance for one last conversation with you,^a about all you'd

endured together and what had finally occurred to drive you apart. "

I must have winced. I deserved the misery, however, deserved it more than she could know. It had been indecent not to have written to him! Lord God, even Jesse, when she'd vanished out of the Talamasca, had written to me!

Merrick went on speaking. If she read my mind at all, she gave no clue.

"Of course Aaron wrote all about your Faustian Body Switching, as he called it. He described you in the young body and made many references to some investigation of the body, something you'd engaged in together, asserting that the soul had certainly gone on. You experimented, didn't you, you and Aaron, with trying to reach the rightful soul, even at the risk of your own death?"

I nodded, unable to speak, feeling desperate and ashamed.

"As for the wretched Body Thief, the little devil Raglan James who'd started the whole supernatural spectacle, Aaron was convinced his soul was gone into eternity, as he put it, quite utterly beyond reach. "

"That's true," I concurred. "The file on him is closed, I'm quite convinced of it, whether it's incomplete or not. "

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A darkness crept into her sad respectful expression. Some raw feeling had come to the surface, and for the moment she broke off.

"What else did Aaron write?" I asked her.

"He referred to the Talamasca having unofficially helped 'the new David' reclaim his substantial investments and property," she answered. "He felt strongly that no File on David's Second Youth must ever be created or committed to the archives in London or in Rome. "

"Why didn't he want the switch to be studied?" I asked. "We had done everything we could for the other souls. "

"Aaron wrote that the whole question of switching was too dangerous, too enticing; he was afraid the material would fall into the wrong hands. "

"Of course," I answered, "though in the old days we never had such doubts. "

"But the file was unfinished," she continued. "Aaron felt certain he would see you again. He thought that at times he could sense your presence in New Orleans. He found himself searching crowds for your new f

ace. "

"God forgive me," I whispered. I almost turned away. I bowed my head and shielded my eyes for a long moment. My old friend, my beloved old friend. How could I have abandoned him so coldly? Why does shame and selfloathing become cruelty to the

innocent? How is that so often the case?

"Go on, please," I said, recovering. "I want you to tell me all these things. "

"Do you want to read them for yourself?"

"Soon," I answered.

She continued, her tongue somewhat loosened by the rum, and her voice more melodic, with just a little of the old New Orleans French accent coming back.

"Aaron had seen the Vampire Lestat in your company once. He described the experience as harrowing, a word that Aaron rather loved but seldom used. He said it was the night he came to identify the old body of David Talbot and to see that it was properly buried. There you were, the young man, and the vampire stood beside you. He'd known you were on intimate terms with one another, you and this creature. He had been afraid for you as much then as ever in his life. "

"What more?" I asked.

"Later on," she said, her voice low and respectful, "when you disappeared quite completely, Aaron was certain that you'd been forcibly changed by Lestat. Nothing short of that could explain your sudden break in communication, coupled with the clear intelligence from your banks and agents that you were most definitely still alive. Aaron missed you desperately. His life had been consumed with the problems of the white Mayfairs, the Mayfair Witches. He needed your advice. He wrote many times in many ways that he was certain you never asked for the vampiric blood. "

For a long time I couldn't speak to answer her. I didn't weep because I don't. I looked off, eyes roaming the empty cafe until they saw nothing, except perhaps the blur of the tourists as they crowded the street outside on their way to Jackson Square. I knew

perfectly well how to be alone in the midst of a terrible moment, no matter where it actually occurred. I was alone now.

Then I let my mind drift back to him, my friend Aaron, my colleague, my companion. I seized on memories far larger than any one incident. I envisioned him, his genial face and clever gray eyes. I saw him strolling along the brightly lit Ocean Avenue in Miami Beach, looking wonderfully out of place and richly like a splendid ornament to the bizarre scenery, in his threepiece cotton pinstripe suit.

I let the pain have me. Murdered for the secrets of the Mayfair Witches. Murdered by renegade beings in the Talamasca. Of course he had not given up to the Order his report on me. It had been a time of troubles, hadn't it, and he had ultimately been betrayed by the Order; and so my story would, within the fabled archives, remain forever incomplete.

"Was there more?" I asked Merrick finally.

"No. Only the same song with different rhythms. That was all. " She took another drink. "He was terribly happy at the end, you know. "

"Tell me. "

"Beatrice Mayfair, he loved her. He never expected to be happily married, but it had happened. She was a beautiful highly social woman, rather like three or four people rolled into one. He told me he'd never had so much fun in his life as he had with Beatrice, and she wasn't a witch, of course. "

"I'm so very glad to hear it," I said, my voice tremulous. "So Aaron became one of them, you might say. "

"Yes," she answered. "In all respects. "

She shrugged, the empty glass in her hand. Why she waited to take more, I wasn't certain; perhaps to impress me that she wasn't the famous drunk that I knew her to be.

"But I don't know anything about those white Mayfairs," she said finally. "Aaron always kept me away from them. My work for the last few years had been in Voodoo. I've made trips to Haiti. I've written pages. You know I'm one of the few members of the Order who is studying her own psychic power, with a license from the Elders to use the damnable magic, as the Superior General calls it now. "

I hadn't known this. It had never even occurred to me that she'd returned to Voodoo, which had cast its generous shadow over her youth. We had never in my time encouraged a witch to practice magic. Only the vampire in me could tolerate such a thought.

"Look," she said, "it doesn't matter that you didn't write to Aaron. "

"Oh, doesn't it?" I asked in a sharp whisper. But then I explained: "I simply couldn't write to him. I simply couldn't speak on the phone. As for seeing him, or letting him see me, it was out of the question!" I whispered.

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"And it took five years," she said, "for you to finally come to me. "

"Oh, right to the point!" I responded. "Five years or more to do it. And had Aaron lived on, who knows what I would have done? But the crucial factor was this: Aaron was old, Merrick. He was old and he might have asked me for the blood. When you're old and you're afraid, when you're weary and you're sick, when you've begun to suspect that your life means nothing . . . Well, that's when you dream of vampiric bargains. That's when you think that somehow the vampiric curse can't be so very dreadful, no, not in exchange for immortality; that's when you think that if only you had the chance, you could become some premier witness to the evolution of the world around you. You cloak your selfish desires in the grandiose. "

"And you think I never will think such thoughts?" She raised her eyebrows, her green eyes large and full of light.

"You're young and beautiful," I said, "you were born and bred on courage. Your organs and limbs are as sound as your mind. You've never been defeated, not by anything, and you're in perfect health. "

I was trembling all over. I couldn't endure much more of this. I'd dreamt of solace and intimacy, and this was intimacy, but at a terrible price.

How much easier it was to spend hours in the company of Lestat, who never spoke anymore, who lay still in a half sleep, listening to music, having been waked by it and now lulled by it, a vampire who craved nothing more?

How much easier to roam the city in the company of Louis, my weaker and ever

charming companion, seeking out victims and perfecting the "little drink" so that we left our prey dazzled and unharmed? How much easier to remain within the sanctuary of the French Quarter town house, reading with a vampire's speed all the volumes of history or art history over which I'd labored so slowly when a mortal man?

Merrick merely looked at me with obvious sympathy, and then she reached out for my hand.

I avoided her touch because I wanted it so much.

"Don't back away from me, old friend," she said.

I was too confused to speak.

"What you want me to know," she said, "is that neither you nor Louis de Pointe du Lac will ever give me the blood, not even if I beg you for it; that it can't be part of any bargain between us. "

"Bargain. It would be no bargain!" I whispered.

She took another drink. "And you'll never take my life," she said. "That's what makes it a bargain, I suppose. You won't ever hurt me as you might some other mortal woman who crossed your path. "

The question of those who crossed my path was too troubling to me for any good response. For the first time since we had come together, I truly tried to divine her thoughts, but I could read nothing. As a vampire, I had great power in this respect. Louis had almost none. Lestat was the master.

I watched her drink the rum mote slowly, and I saw her eyes become glazed with the pleasure of it, and her face soften wonderfully as the rum worked in her veins. Her

cheeks were reddening slightly. Her complexion looked perfect.

Chills ran through me again, through my arms and shoulders and up the side of my face.

I had fed before I'd come here, or else the fragrance of her blood would have clouded my judgment even more than the excitement of this intimacy clouded it. I had not taken life, no, it was too simple to feed without doing it, attractive though it was. I prided myself on that. I felt clean for her, though it was becoming increasingly simple for me to "seek the evildoer," as Lestat had once instructed to find some unwholesome and cruel individual whom I could fancy to be worse than myself.

"Oh, I wept so many tears for you,"

she said, her voice more heated.

"And then for Aaron, for all of your generation, leaving us suddenly and too soon, one after another. " She suddenly hunched her shoulders and leant forward as though she were in pain.

"The young ones in the Talamasca don't know me, David," she said quickly. "And you don't come to me just because Louis de Pointe du Lac asked you to do it. You don't come to me just to raise the child vampire's ghost. You want me, David, you want my witness, David, and I want yours. "

"You're right on all counts, Merrick," I confessed. The words spilled from me. "I love you, Merrick, I love you the way I loved Aaron, and the way I love Louis and Lestat. "

I saw the flash of acute suffering in her face, as though it were the flash of a light from within.

"Don't be sorry you came to me," she said as I reached out to take hold of her. She caught my hands and held them in her own, her clasp moist and warm. "Don't be sorry. I'm not. Only promise me you won't lose heart and leave me without explanation. Don't break away from me hurriedly. Don't give in to some skewed sense of honor. If you did, my sanity might actually break. "

"You mean I mustn't leave you the way I left Aaron," I said thickly. "No, I promise you, my precious darling. I won't do it. It's already much too late for such a thing. "

"Then, I love you," she announced in a whisper. "I love you as I always have. No, more than that, I think, because you bring this miracle with you. But what of the spirit that lives within?"

"What spirit?" I asked her.

But she'd already gone deep into her own thoughts. She drank another swallow directly from the bottle.

I couldn't bear the table between us. I stood slowly, lifting her hands until she stood beside me, and then I took her warmly into my arms. I kissed her lips, her old familiar perfume rising to my nostrils, and I kissed her forehead, and then I held her head tightly against my beating heart.

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"You hear it?" I whispered. "What spirit could there be except my spirit? My body is changed, and no more. "

I was overcome with desire for her, the desire to know her utterly through the blood. Her perfume maddened me. But there wasn't the slightest chance that I'd give in to my desire.

But I kissed her again. And it wasn't chaste.

For several long moments we remained locked together, and I think I covered her hair with small sacred kisses, her perfume crucifying me with memories. I wanted to endow her with protection against all things as sordid as myself.

She backed away from me, finally, as if she had to do it, and she was a little unsteady on her feet.

"Never in all those years did you ever touch me in this way," she said under her breath. "And I wanted you so badly. Do you remember? Do you remember that night in the jungle when I finally got my wish? Do you remember how drunk you were, and how splendid? Oh, it was over way too soon. "

"I was a fool, but all such things are past remembering," I whispered. "Now, don't let's spoil what's happened. Come, I've gotten a hotel room for you, and I'll see that you're safely there for the night. "

"Why on earth? Oak Haven is exactly where it's always been," she said dreamily. She shook her head to clear her vision. "I'm going home. "

"No, you're not. You drank even more rum than I predicted. Look, you drank over half the bottle. And I know you'll drink the rest of the bottle as soon as you get in the car. "

She laughed a small scornful laugh. "Still the consummate gentleman," she said. "And the Superior General. You can escort me to my old house here in town. You know perfectly well where it is. "

"That neighborhood, even at this hour? Absolutely not. Besides, your friendly old caretaker there is an incompetent idiot. My precious darling, I'm taking you to the hotel. "

"Foolish," she said as she half stumbled. "I don't need a caretaker. I'd rather go to my house. You're being a nuisance. You always were. "

"You're a witch and a drunk," I said politely. "Here, we'll just cap this bottle. " I did it. "And we'll put it in this canvas purse of yours and I'll walk with you to the hotel. Take my arm. "

For a small second she looked playful and defiant, but then she made a languid shrug, smiling faintly, and gave up her purse to my insistence and wrapped her arm around mine.

Chapter 3

3

WE HAD NO SOONER begun our walk than we gave in to rather frequent and fervent embraces. Merrick's old favorite Chanel perfume enchanted me, carrying me back years again; but the blood scent from her living veins was the strongest goad of all.

My desires were commingled in a torment. By the time we reached the Rue Decateur, scarcely a block and a half from the café, I knew we needed a taxi. And once inside of the car, I gave myself up to kissing Merrick all over her face and her throat, luxuriating in the fragrance of the blood inside her and the heat coming from her breasts.

She herself was rather past the point of return, and pressed me in confidential whispers as to whether or not I could still make love in the manner of an ordinary man. I told her it wouldn't do for me, that she had to remember, drunk or sober, that I was, by nature, a predator and nothing more.

"Nothing more?" she said, stopping this glorified love play to take another deep drink from her bottle of rum. "And what happened in the jungles of Guatemala? Answer me. You haven't forgotten. The tent, the village, you remember. Don't lie to me, David. I know what's inside you. I want to know what you've become. "

"Hush, Merrick," I said, but I couldn't restrain myself. I let my teeth touch her flesh with each kiss. "What happened in the jungles of Guatemala," I struggled to say, "was a mortal sin. "

I covered her mouth, kissing her and devouring her tongue but not letting my evil teeth harm her. I felt her wipe my brow with a soft cloth, possibly her scarf or a handkerchief, but I pushed it away.

"Don't do that," I told her. I feared that a few beads of blood sweat might have appeared. She went back to kissing me and whispering her words of Come Hither against my skin.

I was miserable. I wanted her. I knew that even the smallest drink of her blood would prove too risky for me utterly; I'd feel I possessed her after that, and she, in spite of all her seeming innocence on the matter, might well find herself my slave.

Elder vampires had warned me on just about every aspect of what could happen to me. And Armand and Lestat had both been adamant that the "little drink" must not be conceived of as harmless. I was furious suddenly.

I reached to the back of her head and ripped the leather barrette out of her thick brown hair, letting the barrette and its crosspin fall carelessly, and I ran my fingers deep against her scalp and kissed her lips again. Her eyes were closed.

I was immensely relieved when we reached the spacious entrance of the Windsor Court Hotel. She took another drink of her rum before the doorman helped her out of the cab, and in the manner of most experienced drinkers seemed sober on her feet when in fact she was not sober at all.

Having obtained the suite for her earlier, I took her directly to it, unlocked the door, and set her down on the bed.

The suite was quite fine, perhaps the finest in town, with its tasteful traditional furnishings and muted lights. And I had ordered bountiful vases of flowers for her.

It was nothing, however, that a member of the Talamasca wouldn't expect. We were never known for economy with our traveling members. And all my many memories of her encircled me like vapor, and wouldn't let me loose.

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She appeared to notice nothing. She drank the rest of the rum without ceremony and settled back against the pillows, her bright green eyes closing almost at once.

For a long time I merely looked at her. She appeared to have been tossed on the thick velvet counterpane and its nest of cushions, her white cotton clothes thin and friable, her long slender ankles and leathersandaled feet rather Biblical, her face with its high cheekbones and soft jawline exquisite in sleep.

I could not be sorry that I had made this friendship. I could not. But I reiterated my vow: David Talbot, you will not harm this creature. Somehow Merrick will be better for all this; somehow knowledge will enhance Merrick; somehow Merrick's soul will triumph no matter how badly Louis and I fail.

Then, seeing further to the suite;^athat the flowers ordered had indeed been properly set out on the coffee table before the parlor sofa, on the desk, on her dressing table; that the bath held abundant cosmetics for her comfort; that a great thick terry cloth robe and slippers were in their proper place in the closet; and that a full bar of small bottles awaited her, along with a fifth of her rum which I had provided;^aI kissed her, left a set of keys on the night table, and went out.

A brief stop at the concierge's desk, with the requisite offering, assured she'd be undisturbed for as long as she wished to stay at the hotel and that she might have anything that she liked.

I then made up my mind to walk to our flat in the Rue Royale.

However, before I left the beautifully lighted and somewhat busy lobby of the hotel a

faint dizziness surprised me and I was assaulted by the peculiar sensation that everyone in the place was taking notice of me, and that their notice was not kind.

I stopped immediately, fishing in my pocket as though I were a man about to step aside for a cigarette, and glanced about.

There was nothing unusual about the lobby or about the crowd. Nevertheless, as I went outside the sensation overcame me again;^a that those in the driveway were looking at me, that they had penetrated my mortal disguise, which was by no means easy, and that they knew what I was and what evil things I might be about.

Again, I checked. Nothing of the sort was happening. Indeed, the bell boys gave me rather cordial smiles when our eyes met.

On I went towards the Rue Royale.

Once more, the sensation occurred. In fact, it seemed to me that not only were people everywhere taking notice of me, but that they had come to the doors and windows of the shops and restaurants especially for the purpose; and the dizziness which I seldom, if ever, felt as a vampire increased.

I was most uncomfortable. I wondered if this was the result of intimacy with a mortal being, because I'd never felt so exposed before. In fact, due to my bronze skin I could move about the mortal world with total impunity. All my supernatural attributes were veiled by the dark complexion, and my eyes, though too bright, were black.

Nevertheless, it seemed people stared at me surreptitiously all along the route which I took towards home.

Finally, when I was about three blocks from the flat I shared with Louis and Lestat, I stopped and leant against a black iron lamppost, much as I had seen Lestat do in the

old nights when he still moved about. Scanning the passersby I was reassured again.

But then something startled me so that I began to tremble violently in spite of myself. There stood Merrick in a shop door with her arms folded. She looked quite steadily and reprovingly at me, and then disappeared.

Of course it wasn't really Merrick at all, but the solidity of the apparition was horrifying.

A shadow moved behind me. I turned awkwardly. There again went Merrick, clothed in white, casting her long dark glance at me, and the figure appeared to melt into the shadows of a shop door.

I was dumbfounded. It was witchcraft obviously, but how could it assault the senses of a vampire? And I was not only a vampire, I was David Talbot who had been a Candomble priest in his youth. Now, as a vampire, I have seen ghosts and spirits and I knew the spirits and the tricks they could play, and I knew a great deal about Merrick, but never had I witnessed or experienced a spell just like this.

In a cab which crossed the Rue Royale, there was Merrick once again, looking up at me from the open window, her hair loosened as I had left it. And when I turned around, quite certain she was behind me, I saw her unmistakable figure on a balcony above.

The posture of the figure was sinister. I was trembling. I disliked this. I felt a fool.

I kept my eyes on the figure. In fact nothing could have moved me. The figure faded and was gone. All around me the Quarter suddenly seemed quite desolate, though in fact there were tourists everywhere in great numbers, and I could hear the music from the Rue Bourbon. Never had I seen so many flowerpots spilling their blooms over the iron lace railings. Never had

so many pretty vines climbed the weathered facades and the old stuccoed walls.

Intrigued and slightly angry, I went into the Rue Ste. Anne to see the café in which we'd met, and as I suspected it was full to overflowing with diners and drinkers, and the wraith of a waiter seemed overwhelmed.

There sat Merrick in the very middle of it, full white skirt flaring, stiff, as though she'd been cut from cardboard; then of course the apparition melted, as the others had done.

But the point was the café was now crowded, as it should have been when we'd been there! How had she kept people away during our meeting? And what was she doing now?

I turned around. The sky above was blue, as the southern sky is so often in the evening, sprinkled with faint stars. There was gay conversation and happy laughter all about. This was the reality of things, a mellow spring night in New Orleans, when the flagstone sidewalks seem soft to the step of your foot, and the sounds sweet to your ears.

Yet there again came the sensation that everyone nearby was watching me. The couple crossing at the corner made a point of it. And then I saw Merrick quite some distance down the street, and this time the expression on her face was distinctly unpleasant, as though she were enjoying my discomfort.

I drew in my breath as the apparition melted away.

"How could she be doing this, that's the question!" I muttered aloud. "And why is she doing it?"

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I walked fast, heading for the town house, not certain as to whether I would go into it, with this manner of curse all around me, but as I approached our carriageway, a large arched gate fitted into a frame of brickwork. I then saw the most frightening image of all.

Behind the bars of the gate stood the child Merrick of many years ago, in her same skimpy lavender shift, her head slightly to the side as she nodded to confidences whispered in her ear by an elderly woman whom I knew for a certainty to be her longdead grandmother Great Nananne.

Great Nananne's thin mouth was smiling faintly and she nodded as she spoke.

At once the presence of Great Nananne deluged me with memories and remembered sensations. I was terrified, then angry. I was all but disoriented, and had to pull myself up.

"Don't you vanish, don't you go!" I cried out, darting towards the gate, but the figures melted as if my eyes had lost focus, as if my vision had been flawed.

I was past all patience. There were lights in our home above, and there came the enchanting sound of harpsichord music, Mozart, if I was not mistaken, no doubt from Lestat's small disc player beside his fourposter bed. This meant he had graced us with a visit this evening, though all he would do would be to lie on his bed and listen to recordings till shortly before dawn.

I wanted desperately to go up, to be in our home, to let the music soothe my nerves, to see Lestat and see to him, and to find Louis and tell him all that had occurred.

Nothing would do, however, except that I go back to the hotel at once. I could not enter our flat while under this "spell," and must stop it at the source.

I hurried to the Rue Decateur, found a cab, and vowed to look at nothing and no one until I had faced Merrick herself I was becoming more and more cross.

Deep in my thoughts, I found myself mumbling protective charms, calling upon the spirits to protect me rather than to injure me, but I had little faith in these old formulae. What I did believe in were the powers of Merrick, which I'd long ago witnessed and would never forget.

Hurrying up the stairs to Merrick's suite, I put my key into the lock of her door.

As soon as I stepped into the parlor, I saw the flicker of candlelight and smelled another very pleasant smell which I had connected with Merrick in years past. It was the scent of Florida water, redolent of fresh cut oranges; a scent loved by the Voodoo goddess Ezili, and by the Candomble goddess of a similar name.

As for the candle, I saw it atop a handsome bombe chest just opposite the door.

It was a votive light, sunk deep and safe inside a water glass, and behind it, looking down upon it, was a fine plaster statue of St. Peter with his golden keys to Heaven, a figure about a foot and a half in height. The complexion of the statue was dark, and it had pale amber glass eyes.

It was clothed in a soft green tunic etched with gold, and a cloak of purple on which the gold was fancier still. He held not only the proverbial keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, but also, in the right hand, a large book.

I was shocked all over. The hair came up on the back of my neck.

Of course I knew it was not only St. Peter, this statue, it was Papa Legba in Voodoo, the god of the crossroads, the god who must unlock the spiritual realms if you are to obtain anything with your magic.

Before you begin a spell, a prayer, or a sacrifice you honor Papa Legba first. And whoever had made this statue realized these things.

How else explain the deliberately darkened complexion of the saint who appeared now to be a man of color, or the mysterious book?

He had his complement in Candomble, whom I had so often saluted. This was the orisha, or god, by the name of Exu. And any Candomble temple would have begun its ceremonies by first saluting him.

As I stared at the statue and the candle, the very scents of those Brazilian temples with their hardpacked dirt floors came back to me. I heard the drums. I smelled the cooked foods laid out in offerings. Indeed, I let the sensations come.

There came back other memories, memories of Merrick, as well.

"Papa Legba," I whispered aloud. I'm certain that I bowed my head ever so slightly and felt a rush of blood to my face. "Exu," I whispered. "Don't be offended by anything that I do here. "

I uttered a small prayer, more formulaic in the Portuguese that I had long ago learnt, asking that whatever realm he had just opened, he not deny me entrance, as my respect was as strong as that of Merrick.

The statue of course remained motionless, its pale glass eyes staring quite directly into mine, but I had seldom beheld something which seemed so animate in a sly and unexplainable way.

"I'm going slightly mad," I thought. But then I had come to Merrick to work magic, had I not? And I knew Merrick, didn't I? But then, I had never expected these tricks!

I beheld in my mind the temple in Brazil once more, where I had trained for months learning the proper leaves for offering, learning the myths of the gods, learning finally, after months and months of struggle, to dance clockwise with the others, saluting each deity with our gestures and dance steps, until a frenzy was reached, until I myself felt the deity enter into me, possess me . . . and then there was the waking after, remembering nothing, being told I had been mightily possessed, the sublime exhaustion.

Of course . . . What had I thought we were doing here if not inviting those old powers? And Merrick knew my old strengths and weaknesses if anybody did. I could scarcely tear my gaze off the face of the statue of St. Peter. But I finally managed it.

I backed away as anyone might do when leaving a shrine, and darted silently into the bedroom.

Again, I breathed in the bright citrus fragrance of the Florida water, and also the scent of rum.

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Where was her favorite perfume, the Chanel No. 22? Had she ceased to wear it? The Florida water was very strong.

Merrick lay asleep on the bed.

She looked as if she'd never moved. It struck me now and only now how much her white blouse and skirt resembled the classic dress of the Candomble women. All she needed was a turban for her head to make the image complete.

The new bottle of rum was open on the table beside her, and about a third of it consumed. Nothing else had changed that I could ascertain. The scent was powerful, which meant she might have sprayed it through her teeth into the air, an offering to the god.

In sleep she looked perfect, as people often do when they relax utterly; she seemed the girl of herself. And it struck me that were she to be made a vampire, she would have this flawless countenance.

I was filled with fear and abhorrence. I was filled also;?

?for the first time in these many years;^awith the full realization that I, and I without the help of anyone else, could grant this magic, the transformation into a vampire, to her, or to any human. For the first time, I understood its monstrous temptation.

Of course nothing of this sort would befall Merrick. Merrick was my child. Merrick was my . . . daughter.

"Merrick, wake up!" I said sharply. I touched her shoulder. "You're going to explain these visions to me. Wake up!"

No response. She appeared to be dead drunk.

"Merrick, wake up!" I said again, very crossly. And this time I lifted her shoulders with both hands, but her head tumbled back. The scent of the Chanel perfume rose from her. Ali, that was precisely what I so loved.

I became painfully conscious of her breasts, quite visible in the scoop neck of her cotton blouse. Down into the pillows I let her fall.

"Why did you do these things?" I demanded of the inert body of the beautiful woman lying on the bed. "What did you mean with all this? Do you think I'm to be frightened away?"

But it was useless. She wasn't pretending. She was out cold. I could divine no dreams or subterranean thoughts in her. And quickly examining the little hotel wet bar, I saw that she'd drunk a couple of little bottles of gin.

"Typical Merrick," I said with faint anger.

It had always been her way to drink to excess at specific times. She'd work very hard at her studies or in the field for months on end, and then announce that she was "going to the Moon," as she called it, at which time she would lay in liquor and drink for several nights and days. Her favorite drinks were those with sweetness and flavor: sugarcane rum, apricot brandy, Grand Marnier, ad infinitum.

She was introspective when drunk, did a lot of singing and writing and dancing about during such periods, and demanded to be left alone. If no one crossed her, she was all right. But an argument could produce hysterics, nausea, disorientation, an attempt to

regain sobriety desperately, and finally, guilt. But this rarely happened. Usually, she just drank for a week, unmolested. Then she'd wake one morning, order breakfast with strong coffee, and within a matter of hours return to work, not to repeat her little vacation for perhaps another six to nine months.

But even on social occasions if she drank, she drank to get drunk. She'd swill her rum or sweet liquor in fancy mixed drinks. She had no desire for drink in moderation. If we had a great dinner at the Motherhouse, and we did have many, she either abstained or continued drinking on her own until she passed out. Wine made her impatient.

Well, she was passed out now. And even if I did succeed in waking her, there might be a pitched battle.

I went again to look at St. Peter, or Papa Legba, in the makeshift Voodoo shrine. I had to eliminate my fear of this little entity or graven image or whatever I perceived to be there.

Ah, I was stunned as I considered the statue for a second time. My pocket handkerchief was spread out beneath the statue and the candle, and beside it lay my own oldfashioned fountain pen! I hadn't even seen them before.

"Merrick!" I swore furiously.

And hadn't she wiped my forehead in the car? I glared at the handkerchief. Sure enough there were tiny smears of blood;^athe sweat from my forehead! And she had it for her spell.

"Ali, not merely satisfied with an article of my clothing, my handkerchief, but you had to take the fluids from my skin. "

Marching back into the bedroom, I made another very ungentlemanly attempt to rouse her from her torpor, ready for a brawl, but it was no good. I laid her back down tenderly, brushing her hair with my fingers, and observed, in spite of my anger, how truly pretty she was.

Her creamy tan skin was beautifully molded over her cheekbones and her eyelashes were so long that they made distinct tiny shadows on her face. Her lips were dark, without rouge. I took off her plain leather sandals and laid them beside the bed, but this was just another excuse to touch her, not something generous.

Then, backing away from the bed, with a glance through the door to the shrine in the parlor, I looked about for her purse, her large canvas bag.

It had been flung on a chair and it gaped open, revealing, as I had hoped, a bulging envelope with Aaron's unmistakable writing on the outside.

Well, she'd stolen my handkerchief and my pen, hadn't she? She'd retrieved my blood, my very blood, which must never fall into the hands of the Talamasca, hadn't she? Oh, it wasn't for the Order, no. She stole it for herself and her charms, but she stole it, didn't she? And I'd been kissing her all the while like a schoolboy.

So I had every right to inspect this envelope in her purse. Besides, she had asked me if I wanted these papers. So I would take them. It was her intention to give them to me, was it not?

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At once I snatched up the envelope, opened it, confirmed that it was all Aaron's papers concerning me and my adventures, and resolved to take it with me. As for the rest of the contents of Merrick's bag, it contained her own journal, which I had no right to read, and which would most likely be written in impossible French code, a handgun with a pearl handle, a wallet full of money, an expensive cigar labeled Montecristo, and a thin small bottle of the Florida water cologne.

The cigar gave me pause. Certainly it was not for her. It was for that little Papa Legba, that cigar. She had brought with her the statue, the Florida water, and the cigar. She had come prepared for some sort of conjuring. Ah, it infuriated me, but what right had I to preach against it?

I went back into the parlor, and, avoiding the eyes of the statue and its seeming expression, snatched up my fountain pen from the makeshift altar. I located the hotel stationery in the middle drawer of a fancy French desk, sat down, and wrote a note:

All right, my dear, I'm impressed. You've learnt even more tricks

since last we met. But you must explain the reasons for this spell.

I've taken the pages written by Aaron. I've retrieved my hand-

kerchief and fountain pen as well. Stay in the hotel as long as

you like.

David.

It was short, but I did not feel particularly effusive after this little misadventure. Also, I had the unpleasant sensation that Papa Legba was glaring at me from the violated shrine. In a fit of pique, I added a postscript.

"It was Aaron who gave me this pen!" Enough said.

Now, with considerable apprehension, I went back to the altar.

I spoke rapidly in Portuguese first, and then in Latin, once again greeting the spirit in the statue, the opener of the spiritual realm. Open my understanding, I prayed, and take no offense at what I do, for I want only knowledge, and mean no disrespect. Be assured of my understanding of your power. Be assured that I am a sincere soul.

I dug deep into my memory now for sensation as well as fact. I told the spirit in the statue that I was dedicated to the orisha, or god, called Oxal'ç, lord of creation. I explained that I had been faithful in my own way always to that deity, though I had not done all the little things that others had prescribed to be done. Nevertheless, I loved this god, I loved his stories, and his personality, I loved all I could know of him.

A bad feeling crept over me. How could a blood drinker be faithful to the lord of creation? Was not every act of blood drinking a sin against Oxal'ç? I pondered this. But I didn't retreat. My emotions belonged to Oxal'ç, just as they had many many decades ago in Rio de Janeiro. Oxal'ç was mine, and I was his.

"Protect us in what we mean to do," I whispered.

Then, before I could lose heart, I snuffed out the candle, lifted the statue, and, retrieving the handkerchief, set the statue back with care. I said, "Goodbye Papa Legba" to the statue and prepared to leave the suite.

I found myself quite motionless, my back to the altar, facing the door to the corridor outside. I couldn't move. Or rather it seemed I shouldn't move.

Very slowly, my mind became rather empty. Focused upon my physical senses, if anything, I turned and looked towards the bedroom doorway through which I'd only ju

st come.

It was the old woman, of course, the wizened little Great Nananne, with her fingers on the doorjamb, staring at me, and her thin lipless mouth working as if she were whispering to herself or to someone unseen, her head tilted just a little to one side.

I sucked in my breath and stared at her. She showed no signs of weakening, this wee apparition, this tiny old woman who regarded me rather directly in spite of moving lips. She was clothed in a faintly flowered nightgown of flannel that was stained all over with coffee, perhaps, or longfaded blood. Indeed, I became intensely conscious that her image was becoming all the more solid and detailed.

Her feet were bare and her toenails the color of yellowed bone. Her gray hair was now quite visible and distinct, as if a light were being brightened upon her, and I saw the veins moving up the sides of her head, and the veins on the back of the one hand which dangled at her side. Only very old people looked as she looked. And of course this woman looked exactly as she had when I'd seen her ghost in the carriageway earlier this evening, and exactly as she had on the day of her death. Indeed, I remembered the nightgown. I remembered the stains upon it. I remembered that on her dying body it had been stained but fresh and clean.

I broke into a true sweat as I stared at her, and I could not move a muscle, except to speak.

"You think I'll harm her?" I whispered.

The figure did not change. The little mouth continued to work, but I could hear only a faint dry rustling noise, as from an old woman telling her rosary in church.

"You think I mean to do something wrong?" I said.

The figure was gone. It was gone past tense. I was talking to no one.

I turned on my heel and glared at the statue of the saint. It seemed to be material and nothing more. I seriously considered smashing it, but my mind was full of confusion as to my intentions and their implications, when quite suddenly there came a deafening knock on the hallway door.

Well, it seemed to be deafening. I suspect it was ordinary. I was violently startled. Regardless I opened the door and said crossly:

"What in hell do you want?"

To my astonishment and his astonishment also, I was addressing one of the ordinary and innocent attendants who worked in the hotel.

"Nothing, Sir, excuse me," he said in his slow southern manner, "just this for the lady."
" He lifted a small plain white envelope and I took it out of his hand.

"Oh, wait, please," I said, as I fumbled to retrieve a tendollar bill from my pocket. I had put several in my suit just for this purpose and gave one over to him, with which he seemed pleased.

I shut the door. The envelope contained the twopiece leather hair barrette which I had taken off Merrick so carelessly in the cab. There was an oval of leather, and then a long pin covered with leather with which she gathered and fixed her hair in place.

I was trembling all over. This was too dreadful.

How in the hell had this come to be here? It seemed quite impossible that the cabby had retrieved it. But then how was I to know? At the time, I'd been aware that I ought to pick it up and pocket it, but I'd fancied myself to be under duress.

I went to the altar, laid the barrette in front of Papa Legba, avoiding his eyes as I did so, and I went straight out of the suite, down the stairs and out of the lobby, and out of the hotel.

This time, I vowed to observe nothing, to look for nothing, and I went directly to our

home.

If there were spirits along the way, I did not see them, keeping my eyes on the ground, moving as swiftly as I could safely move without causing a stir among mortals, and going directly through the carriageway, back to the courtyard, and then up the iron steps into the flat.

Chapter 4

4

THE FLAT WAS DARK, which I hadn't expected, and I did not find Louis in either the front parlor or the back, or in his room.

As for Lestat, the door of his room was closed, and the harpsichord music, very rapid and very beautiful, seemed to emanate from the very walls, as is so often the case with modern compact disc recordings.

I lighted all the lamps in the front parlor and settled on the couch, with Aaron's pages in hand. I told myself I had important business.

It was no good thinking about Merrick and her charms and her spirits, and no good at all dwelling upon the old woman with her unintelligible whispers and her small wrinkled face.

As for my thoughts on my orisha, Oxal'ç they were grim. The long ago years I had spent in Rio were ones of severe dedication. I had believed in Candomble insofar as I, David Talbot, could believe in anything. I had given myself over to the religion insofar as I could be abandoned to anything. And I had become Oxal'ç's follower and worshiper. I had been possessed by him many a time with little or no memory of the trance, and I had scrupulously followed his rules.

But all that had been a detour in my life, an intermezzo. I was, after all, a British scholar, before and after. And once I had entered the Talamasca, the power of Oxal' or any orisha over me had been broken forever. Nevertheless, I felt confusion and guilt now. I had come to Merrick to discuss magic, imagining that I could control what happened! And the very first night had been chastening, indeed.

However, I had to get my mind clear. Indeed, I owed it to Aaron, my old friend, to pull myself together at once and look at his papers. Everything else could wait, I told myself.

However, I couldn't get the old woman out of my head. I longed for Louis to come. I wanted to discuss these matters. It was important that Louis understand things about Merrick, but where Louis might be at this hour, I had no idea.

The harpsichord music was something of a comfort, as Mozart always is, with his merriment, no matter what the composition, but nevertheless, I felt restless and unsafe in these warm rooms where I was accustomed to spend many hours in comfort alone or with Louis or Louis and Lestat.

I determined to shrug it off.

Indeed, it was absolutely the best time to read Aaron's pages.

I took off my jacket, seated myself at the large writing desk which faced into the room quite conveniently (as none of us liked to work with our back to the room), and opened the envelope and drew out the pages that I meant to read.

There wasn't very much at all, and a quick perusal indicated that Merrick had given me a complete picture of Aaron's thoughts at the end. Nevertheless, I owed it to Aaron to read these writings, word by word.

It took me only a few moments to forget everything about me, as I found myself hearing Aaron's familiar voice in English in spite of the fact that all he'd written was in Latin. It was as if he were there, reviewing it all with me, or reading me his report so that I might comment before he sent it on to the Elders.

Aaron described how he had come to meet me in Florida, where he had found the aged body of his friend David Talbot dead and in need of proper burial, while the soul of David was firmly ensconced in the body of an anonymous young man.

The young man was AngloIndian in background, six feet four in height, had wavy darkbrown hair, bronze skin, and extremely large sympathetic darkbrown eyes. The young man was in excellent health and physical condition. The young man had very acute hearing and a good sense of balance. The young man seemed devoid of any spirit whatsoever save that of David Talbot.

Aaron went on to describe our days together in Miami, during which time I had frequently projected my spirit out of the host body, only to recapture the body perfectly with no unseen resistance from any known or unknown realm.

Finally, after a month or so of such experiments, I'd been convinced that I could remain in the youthful body and I had set about gathering what information I could about the soul which had previously reigned within it.

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Those particulars I will not relate here insofar as they have to do with persons in no way connected with this narrative. It is sufficient to say that Aaron and I were satisfied that the soul which had once governed my new body was gone beyond reprieve. Hospital records pertaining to the last months of that soul's life on earth made it more than clear that "the mind" of the individual had been destroyed by psychological disasters and the bizarre chemistry of certain drugs which the man had ingested, though there had been no damage to the cells of the brain.

I, David Talbot, in full possession of the body, sensed no damage to the brain.

Aaron had been very full in his descriptions of things, explaining how clumsy I'd been with my new height for the first few days, and how he had watched this "strange body" gradually "become" his old friend David, as I took to sitting in chairs with my legs crossed, or to folding my arms across my chest, or to hunching over my writing or reading materials in familiar fashion.

Aaron remarked that the improved vision of the new eyes had been a great blessing to David Talbot, as David had suffered poor vision in his last years. Ah, that was so true, and I hadn't even thought of it. And now of course, I saw as a vampire and could not even remember those key gradations of mortal vision in my brief Faustian youth.

Aaron then laid down his feelings that the full report on this incident must not be placed in the Files of the Talamasca, which were open to all.

"It is plain to see from David's transformation," he wrote in so many words, "that body switching is entirely possible when one is dealing with skilled individuals, and what arouses my horror is not David's present occupation of this splendid young

body, but the manner in which the body was stolen from its original owner by that one whom we shall call the Body Thief, for sinister purposes of the thief's own. "

Aaron went on to explain that he would endeavor to put these pages directly into the hands of the Elders of the Talamasca.

But for tragic reasons, obviously, this had never been done.

There came a final series of paragraphs comprising about three pages, handwritten a little more formally than what had gone before.

David's Disappearance was written at the top. Lestat was referred to merely as TVL. And this time, Aaron's phrasing reflected considerably more caution and some sadness.

He described how I had vanished on the island of Barbados, without leaving any message for anyone, abandoning my suitcases, typewriter, books, and pages, which he, Aaron, had gone to retrieve.

How dreadful that must have been for Aaron, picking up the trash of my life, with no word of apology from me.

"Were I not so busy with the matters of the Mayfair Witches," he wrote, "perhaps this disappearance would never have occurred. I might have been more attentive to D. during his time of transition. I might have held him more firmly in my affections and thereby earned more surely his complete trust. As it is, I can only surmise what has become of him, and I fear that he has met with spiritual catastrophe quite against his will.

"Undoubtedly he will contact me. I know him too well to think otherwise. He will come to me. He will;^a whatever his state of mind, and I cannot possibly imagine

it;^acome to me to give me some solace, if nothing else. "

It hurt me so deeply to read this that I stopped and put the pages aside. For a moment, I was aware only of my own failing, my own terrible failing, my own cruel failing.

But there were two more pages, and I had to read them. Finally I picked them up and read Aaron's last notes.

I wish that I could appeal to the Elders directly for help. I wish that after my many years in the Talamasca I had complete faith in our Order, and complete faith that the authority of the Elders is for the best. However, our Order, insofar as I know, is made up of fallible mortal men and women. And I cannot appeal to anyone without placing in his or her hands knowledge which I do not want to share.

The Talamasca in recent months has had its internal troubles aple

nty. And until the whole question of the identity of the Elders, and the certainty of communication with them, has been resolved, this report must remain in my hands.

Meanwhile nothing can shake my faith in D. , or my belief in his basic goodness. Whatever corruption we might have suffered in the Talamasca never tainted David's ethics, or those of many like him, and though I cannot yet confide in them, I do take comfort from the fact that David may appear to them if not to me.

Indeed, my faith in David is so great that sometimes my mind plays tricks on me, and I think I see him though I soon realize I am wrong. I search crowds for him in the evening. I have gone back to Miami to look for him. I have sent out my call to him telepathically. And I have no doubt that one night very soon, David will respond, if only to say farewell.

The pain I felt was crushing. Moments passed in which I did nothing but allow

myself to feel the immensity of the injustice done to Aaron.

At last, I forced myself to move my limbs.

I folded up the pages properly, put them back into the envelope, and sat quiet again for a long time, my elbows on the desk, my head bowed.

The harpsichord music had stopped some time ago, and much as I'd loved it, it did interfere with my thoughts somewhat, so I treasured the quiet.

I was as bitterly sad as I have ever been. I was as without hope as I have ever been. The mortality of Aaron seemed as real to me as his life had ever seemed. And indeed both seemed miraculous in the extreme.

As for the Talamasca, I knew it would heal its wounds by itself. I had no real fear for it, though Aaron had been right to be suspicious of things with the Elders until questions of their identity and authority had been resolved.

When I had left the Order, the question of the identity of the Elders had been hotly debated. And incidents pertaining to secrets had caused corruption and betrayal. Aaron's murder had become part of it. The famous Body Thief who seduced Lestat had been one of our own.

Who were the Elders? Were they themselves corrupt? I hardly thought so. The Talamasca was ancient, and authoritarian, and it moved slowly on eternal matters, rather on a Vatican clock. But it was all quite closed to me now. Human beings had to go on cleansing and reforming the Talamasca, as they had already begun to do. I could do nothing to help in such an endeavor.

But to the best of my knowledge, internal difficulties had been solved. How precisely, and by whom, I did not know and really didn't want to know.

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I knew only that those I loved, including Merrick, seemed at peace within the Order, though it did seem to me that Merrick, and those upon whom I'd spied now and then in other places, had a more "realistic" view of the Order and its problems than I had ever had.

And of course, what I'd done in speaking to Merrick, that had to remain secret between Merrick and me.

But how was I to have a secret with a witch who'd cast a spell on me with such promptness, effectiveness, and abandon? It made me cross again to think of it. I wish I'd taken the statue of St. Peter with me. That would have served her right.

But what had been Merrick's purpose in the whole affair;^ato warn me of her power, to impress upon me the realization that Louis and I, as earthbound creatures, were hardly immune to her, or that our plan was indeed a dangerous plan?

I felt sleepy suddenly. As I've already mentioned, I'd fed before I ever met with Merrick, and I had no need of blood. But I had a great desire for it, kindled by the physical touch of Merrick, and very much caught up with wordless fantasies of her, and now I felt drowsy from the struggle, drowsy from my grief for Aaron, who had gone to the grave with no words of comfort at all from me.

I was about to lie down on the couch, when I heard a very pleasant sound which I at once recognized, though I hadn't heard it at close range for years. It was the sound of a canary, singing, and making a little bit of a metallic ruckus in a cage. I heard the motion of the wings, the creak of the little trapeze or swing or whatever you call it, the creak of the cage on its hinge.

And there came the harpsichord music again, very rapid, indeed far more rapid than any human could possibly desire. It was rippling and mad, and full of magic, this music, as though a preternatural being had set upon the keys.

I realized at once that Lestat was not in the flat, and had never been, and these sounds;^athis music and the gentle commotion of the birds;^awere not coming from his closed room.

Nevertheless, I had to make a check.

Lestat, being as powerful as he is, can mask his presence almost completely, and I, being his fledgling, can pick up nothing from his mind.

I rose to my feet, heavily, sleepily, amazed at my exhaustion, and made my way down the passage to his room. I knocked respectfully, waited a decent interval, and then opened his door.

All was as it should be. There stood the giant plantationstyle fourposter of tropical mahogany with its dusty canopy of rose garlands and the drapery of darkred velvet, the color which Lestat prefers above all else. Dust overlay the bedside table and the nearby desk and the books in the bookshelf. And there was no machine for making music in sight.

I turned, meaning to go back to the parlor, to write down all of this in my diary, if I could find it, but I felt so heavy and so drowsy and it seemed a better idea to sleep. Then there was the matter of the music and the birds. Something about the birds struck me. What was it? Something Jesse Reeves had written in her report of being haunted decades ago in the ruin of this very house. Little birds.

"Then it's begun?" I whispered. I felt so weak, so deliciously weak, actually. I wondered if Lestat would mind so very terribly if I were to lie down for a little while

on his bed? He might yet come this evening. We never knew, did we? It wasn't very proper to do such a thing. And drowsy as I was, I was moving my right hand rapidly with the music. I knew this sonata by Mozart, it was lovely, it was the first one that the boy genius had ever written, and how excellent it was. No wonder the birds were so happy, it must have been a kindred sound to them, but it was important that this music not speed on so precipitously, no matter how clever the performer, no matter how clever the child.

I made my way out of the room as if I were moving through water, and went in search of my own room where I had my own bed, quite comfortable, and then it seemed imperative that I seek my coffin, my hiding place, because I could not remain conscious until dawn.

"Ah, yes, it's vital that I go," I said aloud, but I couldn't hear my words on account of the thunder of the tripping music, and I realized, with great distress, that I had entered the back parlor of the flat, the one which looked out upon the courtyard, and I had settled there on the couch.

Louis was with me. Louis was helping me to a seat on the couch, as a matter of fact. Louis was asking me what was wrong.

I looked up, and it seemed to me that he was a vision of male perfection, dressed in a snow white silk shirt and a finely cut black velvet jacket, his curly black hair very properly and beautifully combed back over his ears and curling above his collar in the most lively and fetching style. I loved looking at him, rather as I loved looking at Merrick.

It struck me how different were his green eyes from hers. His eyes were darker. There was no distinct circle of blackness around the irises and, indeed, the pupils did not stand out so clearly. Nevertheless, they were beautiful eyes.

The flat went absolutely quiet.

For a moment I could say or do nothing.

Then I looked at him as he seated himself in a rosecolored velvet chair near to me, and his eyes were filled with the light from the nearby electric lamp. Whereas Merrick had something of a mild challenge in even her most casual expression, his eyes were patient, restful, like the eyes in a painting, fixed and reliable.

"Did you hear it?" I asked.

"What, precisely?" he asked.

"Oh, my God, it's started," I said softly. "You remember. Think back, man. You remember, what Jesse Reeves told you. Think. "

Then it came out of me in a bit of a gush; the har-

psichord music and the sound of the birds. Decades ago it had come upon Jesse, on the night she'd found Claudia's diary in a secret place in a broken wall. It had come upon her with a vision of oil lamps and moving figures. And in terror she had fled the flat, taking with her a doll, a rosary, and the diary, and never coming back.

The ghost of Claudia had pursued her to a darkened hotel room. And from there Jesse had been taken ill, sedated, hospitalized, and finally taken home to England, never to return to this place, insofar as I knew.

Jesse Reeves had become a vampire due to her destiny, not through the mistakes or failings of the Talamasca. And Jesse Reeves herself had told Louis this tale.

It was all quite familiar to both of us, but I had no recollection of Jesse ever

identifying the piece of music which she'd heard in the shadows.

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It was up to Louis to state now in a soft voice that, yes, his beloved Claudia had loved the early sonatas of Mozart, that she had loved them because he composed them while he'd still been a child.

Suddenly an uncontrollable emotion seized Louis and he stood up and turned his back to me, looking out, apparently, through the lace curtains, to whatever sky lay beyond the rooftops and the tall banana trees that grew against the courtyard walls.

I watched him in polite silence. I could feel my energy returning. I could feel the usual preternatural strength upon which I'd always counted since the first night that I'd been filled with the blood.

"Oh, I know it must be tantalizing," I said, finally. "It's so easy to conclude that we're coming close. "

"No," he said, turning to me politely. "Don't you see, David? You heard the music. I haven't heard it. Jesse heard the music. I've never heard it. Never. And I've been years waiting to hear it, asking to hear it, wanting to hear it, but I never do. "

His French accent was sharp and precise, as always happened when he was emotional, and I loved the richness it gave to his speech. I think we are wise, we English speakers, to savor accents. They teach us things about our own tongue.

I rather loved him, loved his lean graceful movements, and the way in which he responded wholeheartedly to things, or not at all. He had been gracious to me since the first moment we met, sharing this, his house, with me, and his loyalty to Lestat was without a doubt.

"If it's any consolation to you," I hastened to add, "I've seen Merrick Mayfair. I've put the request to her, and I don't think she means to turn us down. "

His surprise amazed me. I forget how completely human he is, being the very weakest of us, and that he cannot read minds at all. I had assumed also that he'd been watching me of late, keeping his distance, but spying as only a vampire or an angel can, to see when this meeting would take place.

He came back around and sat down again.

"You must tell me about the whole thing," he said. His face flushed for an instant. It lost the preternatural whiteness and he seemed a young man of twentyfour^a with sharply defined and beautiful features, and gaunt wellmodeled cheeks. He might have been made by God to be painted by Andrea del Sarto, so deliberately perfect did he seem.

"David, please let me know everything," he pressed, due to my silence.

"Oh, yes, I mean to. But let me have a few moments more. Something is going on, you see, and I don't know if it's her general wickedness. "

"Wickedness?" he asked in utter innocence.

"I don't mean it so seriously. You see, she's such a strong woman and so strange in her ways. Let me tell you everything, yes. "

But before I began I took stock of him once more, and made myself note that no one among us, that is, no one of the vampires or immortal blood drinkers whom I had encountered, was anything like him.

In the years since I'd been with him, we'd witnessed wonders together. We had seen the very ancient of the species and been thoroughly humbled by these visitations,

which had made a weary mockery of Louis's long nineteenth-century quest for answers which did not exist.

During our recent convocations, many of the old ones had offered Louis the power of their ancient blood. Indeed, the very ancient Maharet, who was now perceived to be the twin of the absolute Mother of us all, had pressed Louis in the extreme to drink from her veins. I had watched this with considerable apprehension. Maharet seemed offended by one so weak.

Louis had refused her offer. Louis had turned her away. I shall never forget the conversation.

"I don't treasure my weaknesses," he'd explained to her. "Your blood conveys power, I don't question that. Only a fool would. But I know from what I've learnt from all of you that the ability to die is key. If I drink your blood I'll become too strong for a simple act of suicide just as you are now. And I cannot allow that. Let me remain the human one among you. Let me acquire my strength slowly, as you once did, from time and from human blood. I wouldn't become what Lestat has become through his drinking from the ancients. I would not be that strong and that distant from an easy demise. "

I had been amazed at Maharet's obvious displeasure. Nothing about Maharet is simple precisely because everything is. By that I mean that she is so ancient as to be divorced utterly from the common expression of tender emotions, except perhaps by deliberate merciful design.

She had lost all interest in Louis when he'd refused her, and to the best of my knowledge she never looked at him, or mentioned him, ever again. Of course she didn't harm him, and she had plenty of opportunity. But he was no longer a living being for her, no longer one of us, for her. Or so I had divined.

But then who was I to judge such a creature as Maharet? That I had seen her, that I'd

heard her voice, that I'd visited with her for a time in her own sanctuary;^aall that was reason for thanks.

I myself had felt a great respect for Louis's disinclination to drink the absolute elixir of the dark gods. Louis had been made a vampire by Lestat when Lestat had been very young, indeed. And Louis was considerably stronger than humans, well able to spellbind them, and could outmaneuver the most clever mortal opponent with ease. Though he was still bound by the laws of gravity to a far greater extent than I was, he could move about the world very rapidly, attaining a brand of invisibility which he very much enjoyed. He was no mind reader, and no spy.

However, Louis would very likely die if exposed to sunlight, though he was well past the point where sunlight would reduce him to pure ash, as it had done Claudia only seventy years or so after her birth. Louis still had to have blood every night. Louis could very probably seek oblivion in the flames of a pyre.

I shuddered now, as I reminded myself of this creature's deliberate limitations, and of the wisdom he seemed to possess.

My own blood was quite remarkably strong because it came from Lestat who had drunk not only from the elder Marius, but from the Queen of the Damned, the progenital vampire herself. I didn't know precisely what I might have to do to terminate my existence, but I knew it would not be an easy thing. As for Lestat, when I thought of his adventures and his powers, it seemed impossible by any means for him to exit this world.

These thoughts so disturbed me that I reached out and clasped Louis's hand.

"This woman is very powerful," I said, as I made to begin. "She's been playing a few tricks on me this evening, and I'm not sure why or how. "

"It has you exhausted," he said considerately. "Are you sure you don't want to rest?"