



The Tale of the Body Thief (The Vampire Chronicles 4)

Author: *Anne Rice*

Category: Paranormal, Vampires, Fantasy, Horror, Fiction

Description: In a gripping feat of storytelling, Anne Rice continues the extraordinary Vampire Chronicles that began with the now-classic Interview with the Vampire. For centuries, Lestat—vampire-hero, enchanter, seducer of mortals—has been a courted prince in the dark and flourishing universe of the living dead. Now he is alone. And in his overwhelming need to destroy his doubts and his loneliness, Lestat embarks on the most dangerous enterprise he has undertaken in all the years of his haunted existence.

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THE Vampire Lestat here. I have a story to tell you, It's about something that happened to me.

It begins in Miami, in the year 1990, and I really want to start right there. But it's important that I tell you about the dreams I'd been having before that time, for they are very much part of the tale too. I'm talking now about dreams of a child vampire with a woman's mind and an angel's face, and a dream of my mortal friend David Talbot.

But there were dreams also of my mortal boyhood in France - of winter snows, my father's bleak and ruined castle in the Auvergne, and the time I went out to hunt a pack of wolves that were preying upon our poor village.

Dreams can be as real as events. Or so it seemed to me afterwards.

And I was in a dark frame of mind when these dreams began, a vagabond vampire roaming the earth, sometimes so covered with dust that no one took the slightest notice of me. What good was it to have full and beautiful blond hair, sharp blue eyes, razzle-dazzle clothes, an irresistible smile, and a well-proportioned body six feet in height that can, in spite of its two hundred years, pass for that of a twenty-year-old mortal. I was still a man of reason however, a child of the eighteenth century, in which I'd actually lived before I was Born to Darkness.

But as the 1980s were drawing to a close I was much changed from the dashing fledgling vampire I had once been, so attached to his classic black cape and Bruxelles lace, the gentleman with walking stick and white gloves, dancing beneath the gas lamp.

I had been transformed into a dark god of sorts, thanks to suffering and triumph, and too much of the blood of our vampire elders. I had powers which left me baffled and sometimes even frightened, I had powers which made me sorrowful though I did not always understand the reason for it.

I could, for example, move high into the air at will, traveling the night winds over great distances as easily as a spirit. I could effect or destroy matter with the power of my mind. I could kindle afire by the mere wish to do so. I could also call to other immortals over countries and continents with my preternatural voice, and I could effortlessly read the minds of vampires and humans.

Not bad, you might think. I loathed it. Without doubt, I was grieving for my old selves-the mortal boy, the newborn revenant once determined to be good at being bad if that was his predicament.

I'm not a pragmatist, understand. I have a keen and merciless conscience. I could have been a nice guy. Maybe at times I am. But always, I've been a man of action. Grief is a waste, and so is fear. And action is what you will get here, as soon as I get through this introduction.

Remember, beginnings are always hard and most are artificial. It was the best of times and the worst of times-really? When! And all happy families are not alike; even Tolstoy must have realized that. I can't get away with "In the beginning," or "They threw me off the hay truck at noon," or I would do it. I always get away with whatever I can, believe me. And as Nabokov said in the voice of Humbert Humbert, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style. "Can't fancy mean experimental? I already know of course that I am sensuous, florid, lush, humid-enough critics have told me that.

Alas, I have to do things my own way. And we will get to the beginning-if that isn't a contradiction in terms-I promise you.

Right now I must explain that before this adventure commenced, I was also grieving for the other immortals I had known and loved, because they had long ago scattered from our last late-twentieth century gathering place. Folly to think we wanted to create a coven again. They had one by one disappeared into time and the world, which was inevitable.

Vampires don't really like others of their kind, though their need for immortal companions is desperate.

Out of that need I'd made my fledglings-Louis de Pointe du Lac, who became my patient and often loving nineteenth-century comrade, and with his unwitting aid, the beautiful and doomed child vampire, Claudia. And during these lonely vagabond nights of the late twentieth century, Louis was the only immortal whom I saw quite often. The most human of us all, the most ungodlike.

I never stayed away too long from his shack in the wilderness of uptown New Orleans. But you'll see. I'll get to that. Louis is in this story.

The point is-you find precious little here about the others. Indeed, almost nothing.

Except for Claudia. I was dreaming more and more often of Claudia. Let me explain about Claudia. She'd been destroyed over a century before, yet I felt her presence all the time as if she were just around the corner.

It was 1794 when I made this succulent little vampire out of a dying orphan, and sixty years passed before she rose up against me. "I'll put you in your coffin forever, Father. "

I did sleep in a coffin then. And it was a period piece, that lurid attempted murder, involving as it did mortal victims baited with poisons to cloud my mind, knives tearing my white flesh, and the ultimate abandonment of my seemingly lifeless form

in the rank waters of the swamp beyond the dim lights of New Orleans.

Well, it didn't work. There are very few sure ways to kill the undead. The sun, fire. . . One must aim for total obliteration. And after all, we are talking about the Vampire Lestat here.

Claudia suffered for this crime, being executed later by an evil coven of blood drinkers who thrived in the very heart of Paris in the infamous Theatre of the Vampires. I'd broken the rules when I made a blood drinker of a child so small, and for that reason alone, the Parisian monsters might have put an end to her. But she too had broken their rules in trying to destroy her maker, and that you might say was their logical reason for shutting her out into the bright light of day which burnt her to ashes.

It's a hell of a way to execute someone, as far as I'm concerned, because those who lock you out must quickly retire to their coffins and are not even there to witness the mighty sun carrying out their grim sentence. But that's what they did to this exquisite and delicate creature that I had fashioned with my vampiric blood from a ragged, dirty waif in a ramshackle Spanish colony in the New World-to be my friend, my pupil, my love, my muse, my fellow hunter. And yes, my daughter.

If you read Interview with the Vampire, then you know all about this. It's Louis's version of our time together. Louis tells of his love for this our child, and of his vengeance against those who destroyed her.

If you read my autobiographical books, The Vampire Lestat and The Queen of the Damned, you know all about me, also. You know our history, for what it's worth-and history is never worth too much-and how we came into being thousands of years ago and that we propagate by carefully giving the Dark Blood to mortals when we wish to take them along the Devil's Road with us.

But you don't have to read those works to understand this one. And you won't find here the cast of thousands that crowded *The Queen of the Damned*, either. Western civilization will not for one second teeter on the brink. And there will be no revelations from ancient times or old ones confiding half-truths and riddles and promising answers that do not in fact exist and never have existed.

No, I have done all that before.

This is a contemporary story. It's a volume in the *Vampire Chronicles*, make no mistake. But it is the first really modern volume, for it accepts the horrifying absurdity of existence from the start, and it takes us into the mind and the soul of its hero- guess who?-for its discoveries.

Read this tale, and I will give you all you need to know about us as you turn the pages. And by the way, lots of things do happen! I'm a man of action as I said-the James Bond of the vampires, if you will-called the Brat Prince, and the Damnedest Creature, and "you monster" by various and sundry other immortals.

The other immortals are still around, of course-Maharet and Mekare, the eldest of us all, Khayman of

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the First Brood, Eric, Santino, Pandora, and others whom we call the Children of the Millennia. Armand is still about, the lovely five-hundred-year-old boy-faced ancient who once ruled the Theatre des Vampires, and before that a coven of devil worshiping blood drinkers who lived beneath the Paris Cemetery, Les Innocents. Armand, I hope, will always be around.

And Gabrielle, my mortal mother and immortal child will no doubt turn up one of these nights sometime before the end of another thousand years, if I'm lucky.

As for Marius, my old teacher and mentor, the one who kept the historical secrets of our tribe, he is still with us and always will be. Before this tale began, he would come to me now and then to scold and plead: Would I not stop my careless kills which invariably found their way into the pages of mortal newspapers! Would I not stop deviling my mortal friend David Talbot, and tempting him with the Dark Gift of our blood? Better we make no more, did I not know this?

Rules, rules, rules. They always wind up talking about rules. And I love to break the rules the way mortals like to smash their crystal glasses after a toast against the bricks of the fireplace.

But enough about the others. The point is-this is my book from start to finish.

Let me speak now of the dreams that had come to trouble me in my wanderings.

With Claudia, it was almost a haunting. Just before my eyes would close each dawn, I'd see her beside me, hear her voice in a low and urgent whisper. And sometimes I'd slide back over the centuries to the little colonial hospital with its rows of tiny beds

where the orphan child had been dying.

Behold the sorrowful old doctor, potbellied and palsied, as he lifts the child's body. And that crying. Who is crying? Claudia was not crying. She slept as the doctor entrusted her to me, believing me to be her mortal father. And she is so pretty in these dreams. Was she that pretty then? Of course she was.

"Snatching me from mortal hands like two grim monsters in a nightmare fairy tale, you idle, blind parents!"

The dream of David Talbot came once only.

David is young in the dream and he is walking in a mangrove forest. He was not the man of seventy-four who had become my friend, the patient mortal scholar who regularly refused my offer of the Dark Blood, and laid his warm, fragile hand on my cold flesh unflinchingly to demonstrate the affection and trust between us.

No. This is young David Talbot of years and years ago, when his heart didn't beat so fast within his chest. Yet he is in danger.

Tyger, tyger burning bright.

Is that his voice, whispering those words or is it mine?

And out of the dappled light it comes, its orange and black stripes like the light and shade itself so that it is scarcely visible. I see its huge head, and how soft its muzzle, white and bristling with long, delicate whiskers. But look at its yellow eyes, mere slits, and full of horrid mindless cruelty. David, its fangs! Can't you see these fangs!

But he is curious as a child, watching its big pink tongue touch his throat, touch the thin gold chain he wears around his throat. Is it eating the chain? Good God, David!

The fangs.

Why is my voice dried up inside me? Am I even there in the mangrove forest? My body vibrates as I struggle to move, dull moans coming from behind my sealed lips, and each moan taxes every fiber of my being. David, beware!

And then I see that he is down on one knee, with the long shiny rifle cocked against his shoulder. And the giant cat is still yards away, bearing down on him. On and on it rushes, until the crack of the gun stops it in its tracks, and over it goes as the gun roars once again, its yellow eyes full of rage, its paws crossed as they push in one last final breath at the soft earth.

I wake.

What does this dream mean-that my mortal friend is in danger? Or simply that his genetic clock has ticked to a stop. For a man of seventy-four years, death can come at any instant.

Do I ever think of David that I do not think of death?

David, where are you?

Fee, Fie, Fo, Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman.

"I want you to ask me for the Dark Gift," I'd said to him when first we met. "I may not give it to you. But I want you to ask. "

He never had. He never would. And now I loved him. I saw him soon after the dream. I had to. But I could not forget the dream and perhaps it did come to me more than once in the deep sleep of my daylight hours when I am stone cold and helpless under literal cover of darkness.

All right, you have the dreams now.

But picture the winter snow in France one more time, if you would, piling about the castle walls, and a young male mortal asleep on his bed of hay, in the light of the fire, with his hunting dogs beside him. This had become the image of my lost human life, more truly than any remembrance of the boulevard theatre in Paris, where before the Revolution I'd been so very happy as a young actor.

Now we are truly ready to begin. Let's turn the page, shall we?

Chapter 1

ONE

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MIAMI-the vampires' city. This is South Beach at sunset, in the luxurious warmth of the winterless winter, clean and thriving and drenched in electric light, the gentle breeze moving in from the placid sea, across the dark margin of cream-colored sand, to cool the smooth broad pavements full of happy mortal children.

Sweet the parade of fashionable young men displaying their cultured muscles with touching vulgarity, of young women so proud of their streamlined and seemingly sexless modern limbs, amid the soft urgent roar of traffic and human voices.

Old stucco hostelryes, once the middling shelters of the aged, were now reborn in smart pastel colors, sporting their new names in elegant neon script. Candles flickered on the white-draped tables of the open-porch restaurants. Big shiny American cars pushed their way slowly along the avenue, as drivers and passengers viewed the dazzling human parade, lazy pedestrians here and there blocking the thoroughfare.

On the distant horizon the great white clouds were mountains beneath a roofless and star-filled heaven. Ah, it never failed to take my breath away-this southern sky filled with azure light and drowsy relentless movement.

To the north rose the towers of new Miami Beach in all their splendour. To the south and to the west, the dazzling steel skyscrapers of the downtown city with its high roaring freeways and busy cruise-ship docks. Small pleasure boats sped along the sparkling waters of the myriad urban canals.

In the quiet immaculate gardens of Coral Gables, countless lamps illuminated the handsome sprawling villas with their red-tiled roofs, and swimming pools shimmering with turquoise light. Ghosts walked in the grand and darkened rooms of

the Biltmore. The massive mangrove trees threw out their primitive limbs to cover the broad and carefully tended streets.

In Coconut Grove, the international shoppers thronged the luxurious hotels and fashionable malls. Couples embraced on the high balconies of their glass-walled condominiums, silhouettes gazing out over the serene waters of the bay. Cars sped along the busy roads past the ever-dancing palms and delicate rain trees, past the squat concrete mansions draped with red and purple bougainvillea, behind their fancy iron gates.

All of this is Miami, city of water, city of speed, city of tropical flowers, city of enormous skies. It is for Miami, more than any other place, that I periodically leave my New Orleans home. The men and women of many nations and different colors live in the great dense neighborhoods of Miami. One hears Yiddish, Hebrew, the languages of Spain, of Haiti, the dialects and accents of Latin America, of the deep south of this nation and of the far north. There is menace beneath the shining surface of Miami, there is desperation and a throbbing greed; there is the deep steady pulse of a great capital-the tow grinding energy, the endless risk.

It's never really dark in Miami. It's never really quiet.

It is the perfect city for the vampire; and it never fails to yield to me a mortal killer-some twisted, sinister morsel who will give up to me a dozen of his own murders as I drain his memory banks and his blood.

But tonight it was the Big-Game Hunt, the unseasonal Easter feast after a Lent of starvation-the pursuit of one of those splendid human trophies whose gruesome modus operandi reads for pages in the computer files of mortal law enforcement agencies, a being anointed in his anonymity with a flashy name by the worshipful press: "Back Street Strangler. "

I lust after such killers!

What luck for me that such a celebrity had surfaced in my favorite city. What luck that he has struck six times in these very streets-slayer of the old and the infirm, who have come in such numbers to live out their remaining days in these warm climes. Ah, I would have crossed a continent to snap him up, but he is here waiting for me. To his dark history, detailed by no less than twenty criminologists, and easily purloined by me through the computer in my New Orleans lair, I have secretly added the crucial elements-his name and mortal habitation.

A simple trick for a dark god who can read minds. Through his blood-soaked dreams I found him. And tonight the pleasure will be mine of finishing his illustrious career in a dark cruel embrace, without a scintilla of moral illumination.

Ah, Miami. The perfect place for this little Passion Play.

I always come back to Miami, the way I come back to New Orleans. And I'm the only immortal now who hunts this glorious corner of the Savage Garden, for as you have seen, the others long ago deserted the coven house here-unable to endure each other's company any more than I can endure them.

But so much the better to have Miami all to myself.

I stood at the front windows of the rooms I maintained in the swanky little Park Central Hotel on Ocean Drive, every now and then letting my preternatural hearing sweep the chambers around me in which the rich tourists enjoyed that premium brand of solitude-complete privacy only steps from the flashy street-my Champs Elysees of the moment, my Via Veneto.

My strangler was almost ready to move from the realm of his spasmodic and fragmentary visions into the land of literal death. Ah, time to dress for the man of my

dreams.

Picking from the usual wilderness of freshly opened cardboard boxes, suitcases, and trunks, I chose a suit of gray velvet, an old favorite, especially when the fabric is thick, with only a subtle luster. Not very likely for these warm nights, I had to admit, but then I don't feel hot and cold the way humans do. And the coat was slim with narrow lapels, very spare and rather like a hacking jacket with its fitted waist, or, more to the point, like the graceful old frock coats of earlier times. We immortals forever fancy old-fashioned garments, garments that remind us of the century in which we were Born to Darkness. Sometimes you can gauge the true age of an immortal simply by the cut of his clothes.

With me, it's also a matter of texture. The eighteenth century was so shiny! I can't bear to be without a little luster. And this handsome coat suited me perfectly with the plain tight velvet pants. As for the white silk shirt, it was a cloth so soft you could ball the garment in the palm of your hand. Why should I wear anything else so close to my indestructible and curiously sensitive skin Then the boots. Ah, they look like all my fine shoes of late. Their soles are immaculate, for they so seldom touch the mother earth.

My hair I shook loose into the usual thick mane of glowing yellow shoulder-length waves. What would I look like to mortals I honestly don't know. I covered up my blue eyes, as always, with black glasses, lest their radiance mesmerize and entrance at random-a real nuisance-and over my delicate white hands, with their telltale glassy fingernails, I drew the usual pair of soft gray leather gloves.

Ah, a bit of oily brown camouflage for the skin. I smoothed the lotion over my cheekbones, over the bit of neck and chest that was bare.

I inspected the finished product in the mirror. Still irresistible. No wonder I'd been such a smash in my brief career as a rock singer. And I've always been a howling

success as a vampire. Thank the gods I hadn't become invisible in my airy wanderings, a vagabond floating far above the clouds, light as a cinder on the wind. I felt like weeping when I thought of it.

The Big-Game Hunt always brought me back to the actual. Track him, wait for him, catch him just at the moment that he would bring death to his next victim, and take him slowly, painfully, feasting upon his wickedness as you do it, glimpsing through the filthy lens of his soul all his earlier victims . . .

Please understand, there is no nobility in this. I don't believe that rescuing one poor mortal from such a fiend can conceivably save my soul. I have taken life too often—unless one believes that the power of one good deed is infinite. I don't know whether or not I believe that. What I do believe is this: The evil of one murder is infinite, and my guilt is like my beauty—eternal. I cannot be forgiven, for there is no one to forgive me for all I've done.

Nevertheless I like saving those innocents from their fate. And! like taking my killers to me because they are my brothers, and we belong together, and why shouldn't they die in my arms instead of some poor merciful mortal w

ho has never done anyone any willful harm These are the rules of my game. I play by these rules because I made them. And I promised myself, I wouldn't leave the bodies about this time; I'd strive to do what the others have always ordered me to do. But still. . . I liked to leave the carcass for the authorities. I liked to fire up the computer later, after I'd returned to New Orleans, and read the entire postmortem report.

Suddenly I was distracted by the sound of a police car passing slowly below, the men inside it speaking of my killer, that he will strike soon again, his stars are in the correct positions, the moon is at the right height. It will be in the side streets of South Beach most certainly, as it has been before. But who is he How can he be stopped

Seven o'clock. The tiny green numerals of the digital clock told me it was so, though I already knew, of course. I closed my eyes, letting my head drop just a little to one side, bracing myself perhaps for the full effects of this power which I so loathed. First came an amplification of the hearing again, as if I had thrown a modern technological switch. The soft purring sounds of the world became a chorus from hell-full of sharp-edged laughter and lamentation, full of lies and anguish and random pleas. I covered my ears as if that could stop it, then finally I shut it off.

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Gradually I saw the blurred and overlapping images of their thoughts, rising like a million fluttering birds into the firmament. Give me my killer, give me his vision!

He was there, in a small dingy room, very unlike this one, yet only two blocks from it, just rising from his bed. His cheap clothes were rumpled, sweat covering his coarse face, a thick nervous hand going for the cigarettes in his shirt pocket, then letting them go-already forgotten. A heavy man he was, of shapeless facial features and a look full of vague worry, or dim regret.

It did not occur to him to dress for the evening, for the Feast for which he'd been hungering. And now his waking mind was almost collapsed beneath the burden of his ugly palpitating dreams. He shook himself all over, loose greasy hair falling onto his sloping forehead, eyes like bits of black glass.

Standing still in the silent shadows of my room, I continued to track him, to follow down a back stairs, and out into the garish light of Collins Avenue, past dusty shop windows and sagging commercial signs, propelled onward, towards the inevitable and yet unchosen object of his desire.

And who might she be, the lucky lady, wandering blindly and inexorably towards this horror, through the sparse and dismal crowds of the early evening in this same dreary region of town Does she carry a carton of milk and a head of lettuce in a brown paper bag Will she hurry at the sight of the cutthroats on the corner Does she grieve for the old beachfront where she lived perhaps so contentedly before the architects and the decorators drove her to the cracked and peeling hostelrys further away

And what will he think when he finally spots her, this filthy angel of death Will she

be the very one to remind him of the mythic shrew of childhood, who beat him senseless only to be elevated to the nightmare pantheon of his subconscious, or are we asking too much

I mean there are killers of this species who make not the smallest connection between symbol and reality, and remember nothing for longer than a few days. What is certain is only that their victims don't deserve it, and that they, the killers, deserve to meet with me.

Ah, well, I will tear out his menacing heart before he has had a chance to "do" her, and he will give me everything that he has, and is.

I walked slowly down the steps, and through the smart, glittering art deco lobby with its magazine-page glamour. How good it felt to be moving like a mortal, to open the doors, to wander out into the fresh air. I headed north along the sidewalk among the evening strollers, eyes drifting naturally over the newly refurbished hotels and their little cafes.

The crowd thickened as I reached the corner. Before a fancy open-air restaurant, giant television cameras focused their lenses on a stretch of sidewalk harshly illuminated by enormous white lights. Trucks blocked the traffic; cars slowed to a stop. A loose crowd had gathered of young and old, only mildly fascinated, for television and motion picture cameras in the vicinity of South Beach were a familiar sight.

I skirted the lights, fearing their effect upon my highly reflective face. Would I were one of the tan-skinned ones, smelling of expensive beach oils, and half naked in friable cotton rags. I made my way around the corner. Again, I scanned for the prey. He was racing, his mind so thick with hallucinations that he could scarce control his shuffling, sloppy steps.

There was no time left.

With a little spurt of speed, I took to the low roofs. The breeze was stronger, sweeter. Gentle the roar of excited voices, the dull natural songs of radios, the sound of the wind itself.

In silence I caught his image in the indifferent eyes of those who passed him; in silence I saw his fantasies once more of withered hands and withered feet, of shrunken cheeks and shrunken breasts. The thin membrane between fantasy and reality was breaking.

I hit the pavements of Collins Avenue, so swiftly perhaps I simply seemed to appear. But nobody was looking. I was the proverbial tree falling in the uninhabited forest.

And in minutes, I was ambling along, steps behind him, a menacing young man perhaps, piercing the little clusters of tough guys who blocked the path, pursuing the prey through the glass doors of a giant ice-cooled drugstore. Ah, such a circus for the eye-this low-ceilinged cave-chock-full of every imaginable kind of packageable and preserved foodstuff, toilet article, and hair accoutrement, ninety percent of which existed not at all in any form whatsoever during the century when I was born.

We're talking sanitary napkins, medicinal eyedrops, plastic bobby pins, felt-tip markers, creams and ointments for all nameable parts of the human body, dishwashing liquid in every color of the rainbow, and cosmetic rinses in some colors never before invented and yet undefined. Imagine Louis XVI opening a noisy crackling plastic sack of such wonders What would he think of Styrofoam coffee cups, chocolate cookies wrapped in cellophane, or pens that never run out of ink

Well, I'm still not entirely used to these items myself, though I've watched the progress of the Industrial Revolution for two centuries with my own eyes. Such drugstores can keep me enthralled for hours on end. Sometimes I become spellbound in the middle of Wal-Mart.

But this time I had a prey hi my sights, didn't I Later for Time and Vogue, pocket computer language translators, and wristwatches that continue to tell time even as you swim in the sea.

Why had he come to this place The young Cuban families with babies in tow were not his style. Yet aimlessly he wandered the narrow crowded aisles, oblivious to the hundreds of dark faces and the fast riffs of Spanish around him, unnoticed by anyone but me, as his red-rimmed eyes swept the cluttered shelves.

Lord God, but he was filthy-all decency lost in his mania, craggy face and neck creased with dirt. Will I love it Hell, he's a sack of blood. Why push my luck I couldn't kill little children anymore, could I Or feast on waterfront harlots, telling myself it's all perfectly fine, for they have poisoned their share of flat-boatmen. My conscience is killing me, isn't it And when you're immortal that can be a really long and ignominious death. Yeah, look at him, this dirty, stinking, lumbering killer. Men in prison get better chow than this.

And then it hit me as I scanned his mind once more as if cutting open a cantaloupe. He doesn't know what he is! He has never read his own headlines! And indeed he does not remember episodes of his life in any discerning order, and could not in truth confess to the murders he has committed for he does not truly recall them, and he does not know that he will kill tonight! He does not know what I know!

Ah, sadness and grief, I had drawn the very worst card, no doubt about it. Oh, Lord God! What had I been thinking of to hunt this one, when the starlit world is full of more vicious and cunning beasts I wanted to weep.

But then came the provocative moment. He had seen the old woman, seen her bare wrinkled arms, the small hump of her back, her thin and shivering thigh

hs beneath her pastel shorts. Through the glare of fluorescent light, she made her way

idly, enjoying the buzz and throb of those around her, face half hidden beneath the green plastic of a visor, hair twisted with dark pins on the back of her small head.

She carried in her little basket a pint of orange juice in a plastic bottle, and a pair of slippers so soft they were folded up into a neat little roll. And now to this she added, with obvious glee, a paperback novel from the rack, which she had read before, but fondled lovingly, dreaming of reading it again, like visiting with old acquaintances. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Yes, I loved it too.

In a trance, he fell in behind her, so close that surely she felt his breath on her neck. Dull-eyed and stupid, he watched as she inched her way closer and closer to the register, drawing out a few dirty dollar bills from the sagging collar of her blouse.

Out the doors they went, he with the listless plodding style of a dog after a bitch in heat, she making her way slowly with her gray sack drooping from its cut-out handles, veering broadly and awkwardly around the bands of noisy and brazen youngsters on the prowl. *Is she talking to herself Seems so. I didn't scan her, this little being walking faster and faster. I scanned the beast behind her, who was wholly unable to see her as the sum of her parts.*

Pallid, feeble faces flashed through his mind as he trailed behind her. He hungered to lie on top of old flesh; he hungered to put a hand over an old mouth.

When she reached her small forlorn apartment building, made of crumbling chalk, it seemed, like everything else in this seedy section of town, and guarded by bruised palmettos, he came to a sudden swaying stop, watching mutely as she walked back the narrow tiled courtyard and up the dusty green cement steps. He noted the number of her painted door as she unlocked it, or rather he clamped on to the location, and sinking back against the wall, he began to dream very specifically of killing her, in a featureless and empty bedroom that seemed no more than a smear of color and light.

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Ah, look at him resting against the wall as if he had been stabbed, head lolling to one side. Impossible to be interested in him. Why don't I kill him now!

But the moments ticked, and the night lost its twilight incandescence. The stars grew ever more brilliant. The breeze came and went.

We waited.

Through her eyes, I saw her parlour as if I could really see through walls and floors-clean, though filled with careless old furniture of ugly veneer, round-shouldered, unimportant to her. But all had been polished with a scented oil she loved. Neon light passed through the Dacron curtains, milky and cheerless as the view of the yard below. But she had the comforting glow of her small carefully positioned lamps. That was what mattered to her.

In a maple rocking chair with hideous plaid upholstery, she sat composed, a tiny but dignified figure, open paperback novel in hand. What happiness to be once more with Francie Nolan. Her thin knees were barely hidden now by the flowered cotton robe she had taken from her closet, and she wore the little blue slippers like socks over her small misshapen feet. She had made of her long gray hair one thick and graceful braid.

On the small black-and-white television screen before her, dead movie stars argued without making a sound. Joan Fontaine thinks Gary Grant is trying to kill her. And judging by the expression on his face, it certainly did seem that way to me. How could anyone ever trust Gary Grant, I wondered-a man who looked as though he were made entirely of wood

She didn't need to hear their words; she had seen this movie, by her careful count, some thirteen times. She had read this novel in her lap only twice, and so it will be with very special pleasure that she revisits these paragraphs, which she does not know yet by heart.

From the shadowy garden below, I discerned her neat and accepting concept of self, without drama and detached from the acknowledged bad taste that surrounded her. Her few treasures could be contained in any cabinet. The book and the lighted screen were more important to her than anything else she owned, and she was well aware of their spirituality. Even the color of her functional and styleless clothes was not worth her concern.

My vagabond killer was near paralysis, his mind a riot of moments so personal they defied interpretation.

I slipped around the little stucco building and found the stairs to her kitchen door. The lock gave easily when I commanded it to do so. And the door opened as if I had touched it, when I had not.

Without a sound I slipped into the small linoleum-tiled room. The stench of gas rising from the small white stove was sickening to me. So was the smell of the soap in its sticky ceramic dish. But the room touched my heart instantly. Beautify! the cherished china of Chinese blue and white, so neatly stacked, with plates displayed. Behold the dog-eared cookbooks. And how spotless her table with its shining oilcloth of pure yellow, and waxen green ivy growing in a round bowl of clear water, which projected upon the low ceiling a single quivering circle of light.

But what filled my mind as I stood there, rigid, pushing the door shut with my fingers, was that she was unafraid of death as she read her Betty Smith novel, as she occasionally glanced at the glittering screen. She had no inner antenna to pick up the presence of the spook who stood, sunk into madness, in the nearby street, or the

monster who haunted her kitchen now.

The killer was immersed so completely in his hallucinations that he did not see those who passed him by. He did not see the police car prowling, or the suspicious and deliberately menacing looks of the uniformed mortals who knew all about him, and that he would strike tonight, but not who he was.

A thin line of spit moved down his unshaven chin. Nothing was real to him-not his life by day, not fear of discovery- only the electric shiver which these hallucinations sent through his hulking torso and clumsy arms and legs. His left hand twitched suddenly. There was a catch at the left side of his mouth.

I hated this guy! I didn't want to drink his blood. He was no classy killer. It was her blood I craved.

How thoughtful she was in her solitude and silence, how small, how contented, her concentration as fine as a light beam as she read the paragraphs of this story she knew so well. Traveling, traveling back to those days when she first read this book, at a crowded soda fountain on Lexington Avenue in New York City, when she was a smartly dressed young secretary in a red wool skirt and a white ruffled blouse with pearl buttons on the cuffs. She worked in a stone office tower, infinitely glamorous, with ornate brass doors on its elevators, and dark yellow marble tile in its halls.

I wanted to press my lips to her memories, to the remembered sounds of her high heels clicking on the marble, to the image of her smooth calf beneath the pure silk stocking as she put it on so carefully, not to snag it with her long enameled nails. I saw her red hair for an instant. I saw her extravagant and potentially hideous yet charming yellow brimmed hat.

That's blood worth having. And I was starving, starving as I have seldom been in all these decades. The unseasonal Lenten fast had been almost more than I could endure.

Oh, Lord God, I wanted so to kill her!

Below in the street, a faint gurgling sound came from the lips of the stupid, clumsy killer. It cleared its way through the raging torrent of other sounds that poured into my vampiric ears.

At last, the beast lurched away from the wall, listing for a moment as if he would go sprawling, then sauntered towards us, into the little courtyard and up the steps.

Will I let him frighten her It seemed pointless. I have him in my sights, do I not Yet I allowed him to put his small metal tool into the round hole in her doorknob, I gave him time to force the lock. The chain tore loose from the rotten wood.

He stepped into the room, fixing upon her without expression. She was terrified, shrinking back in her chair, the book slipping from her lap.

Ah, but then he saw me in the kitchen doorway-a shadowy young man in gray velvet, glasses pushed up over his forehead. I was gazing at him in his own expressionless fashion. Did he see these iridescent eyes, this skin like polished ivory, hair like a soundless

explosion of white light Or was I merely an obstacle between him and his sinister goal, all beauty wasted

In a second, he bolted. He was down the steps as the old woman screamed and rushed forward to slam the wooden door.

I was after him, not bothering to touch terra firma, letting him see me poised for an instant under the street lamp as he turned the corner. We went for half a block before I drifted towards him, a blur to the mortals, who didn't bother to notice. Then I froze beside him, and heard his groan as he broke into a run.

For blocks we played this game. He ran, he stopped, he saw me behind him. The sweat poured down his body. Indeed the thin synthetic fabric of the shirt was soon translucent with it, and clinging to the smooth hairless flesh of his chest.

At last he came to his seedy flophouse hotel and pounded up the stairs. I was in the small top-floor room when he reached it. Before he could cry out, I had him in my arms. The stench of his dirty hair rose in my nostrils, mingled with a thin acidic smell from the chemical fibers of the shirt. But it didn't matter now. He was powerful and warm in my arms, a juicy capon, chest heaving against me, the smell of his blood flooding my brain. I heard it pulsing through ventricles and valves and painfully constricted vessels. I licked at it in the tender red flesh beneath his eyes.

His heart was laboring and nearly bursting-careful, careful, don't crush him, I let my teeth clamp down on the wet leathery skin of his neck. Hmmm. My brother, my poor befuddled brother. But this was rich, this was good.

The fountain opened; his life was a sewer. All those old women, those old men. They were cadavers floating in the current; they tumbled against each other without meaning, as he went limp in my arms. No sport. Too easy. No cunning. No malice. Crude as a lizard he had been, swallowing fly after fly. Lord God, to know this is to know the time when the giant reptiles ruled the earth, and for a million years, only their yellow eyes beheld the falling rain, or the rising sun.

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Never mind. I let him go, tumbling soundlessly out of my grip. I was swimming with his mammalian blood. Good enough. I closed my eyes, letting this hot coil penetrate my intestines, or whatever was down there now in this hard powerful white body. In a daze, I saw him stumbling on his knees across the floor. So exquisitely clumsy. So easy to pick him up from the mess of twisted and tearing newspapers, the overturned cup pouring its cold coffee into the dust-colored rug.

I jerked him back by his collar. His big empty eyes rolled up into his head. Then he kicked at me, blindly, this bully, this killer of the old and weak, shoe scuffing my shin. I lifted him to my hungry mouth again, fingers sliding through his hair, and felt him stiffen as if my fangs were dipped in poison.

Again the blood flooded my brain. I felt it electrify the tiny veins of my face. I felt it pulse even into my fingers, and a hot prickling warmth slide down my spine. Draught after draught filled me. Succulent, heavy creature. Then I let him go once more, and when he stumbled away this time, I went after him, dragging him across the floor, turning his face to me, then tossing him forward and letting him struggle again.

He was speaking to me now in something that ought to have been language, but it wasn't. He pushed at me but he could no longer see clearly. And for the first time a tragic dignity infused him, a vague look of outrage, blind as he was. It seemed I was embellished and enfolded now in old tales, in memories of plaster statues and nameless saints. His fingers clawed at the instep of my shoe. I lifted him up, and when I tore his throat this time, the wound was too big. It was done.

The death came like a fist in the gut. For a moment I felt nausea, and then simply the heat, the fullness, the sheer radiance of the living blood, with that last vibration of

consciousness pulsing through all my limbs.

I sank down on his soiled bed. I don't know how long I lay there.

I stared at his low ceiling. And then when the sour musty smells of the room surrounded me, and the stench of his body, I rose and stumbled out, an ungainly figure as surely as he had been, letting myself go soft in these mortal gestures, in rage and hatred, in silence, because I didn't want to be the weightless one, the winged one, the night traveler. I wanted to be human, and feel human, and his blood was threaded all through me, and it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough!

Where are all my promises The stiff and bruised palmettos rattle against the stucco walls.

"Oh, you're back," she said to me.

Such a low, strong voice she had, no tremor in it. She was standing in front of the ugly plaid rocker, with its worn maple arms, peering at me through her silver-rimmed glasses, the paperback novel clasped in her hand. Her mouth was small and shapeless and showing a bit of yellow teeth, a hideous contrast to the dark personality of the voice, which knew no infirmity at all.

What in God's name was she thinking as she smiled at me Why doesn't she pray

"I knew you'd come," she said. Then she took off the glasses, and I saw that her eyes were glazed. What was she seeing What was I making her see I who can control all these elements flawlessly was so baffled I could have wept. "Yes, I knew. "

"Oh And how did you know" I whispered as I approached her, loving the embracing closeness of the common little room.

I reached out with these monstrous fingers too white to be human, strong enough to tear her head off, and I felt her little throat. Smell of Chantilly-or some other drugstore scent.

"Yes," she said airily but definitely. "I always knew. "

"Kiss me, then. Love me. "

How hot she was, and how tiny were her shoulders, how gorgeous in this the final withering, the flower tinged with yellow, yet full of fragrance still, pale blue veins dancing beneath her flaccid skin, eyelids perfectly molded to her eyes when she closed them, the skin flowing over the bones of her skull.

"Take me to heaven," she said. Out of the heart came the voice.

"I can't. I wish I could," I was purring into her ear.

I closed my arms around her. I nuzzled her soft nest of gray hair. I felt her fingers on my face like dried leaves, and it sent a soft chill through me. She, too, was shivering. Ah, tender and worn little thing, ah, creature reduced to thought and will with a body insubstantial like a fragile flame! Just the "little drink," Lestat, no more.

But it was too late and I knew it when the first spurt of blood hit my tongue. I was draining her. Surely the sounds of my moans must have alarmed her, but then she was past hearing. . . They never hear the real sounds once it's begun.

Forgive me.

Oh, darling!

We were sinking down together on the carpet, lovers in a patch of nubby faded

flowers. I saw the book fallen there, and the drawing on the cover, but this seemed unreal. I hugged her so carefully, lest she break. But I was the hollow shell. Her death was coming swiftly, as if she herself were walking towards

me in a broad corridor, in some extremely particular and very important place. Ah, yes, the yellow marble tile. New York City, and even up here you can hear the traffic, and that low boom when a door slams on a stairway, down the hall.

Good night, my darling, she whispered.

Am I hearing things How can she still make words

I love you. Yes, darling. I love you too.

She stood in the hallway. Her hair was red and stiff and curling prettily at her shoulders; she was smiling, and her heels had been making that sharp, enticing sound on the marble, but there was only silence around her as the folds of her woolen skirt still moved; she was looking at me with such a strange clever expression; she lifted a small black snub-nosed gun and pointed it at me.

What the hell are you doing

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She is dead. The shot was so loud that for a moment I could hear nothing. Only ringing in my ears. I lay on the floor staring blankly at the ceiling overhead, smelling cordite in a corridor in New York.

But this was Miami. Her clock was ticking on the table. From the overheated heart of the television came the pinched and tiny voice of Gary Grant telling Joan Fontaine that he loved her. And Joan Fontaine was so h

appy. She'd thought for sure Gary Grant meant to kill her.

And so had I.

South Beach. Give me the Neon Strip once more. Only this time I walked away from the busy pavements, out over the sand and towards the sea.

On and on I went until there was no one near-not even the beach wanderers, or the night swimmers. Only the sand, blown clean already of all the day's footprints, and the great gray nighttime ocean, throwing up its endless surf upon the patient shore. How high the visible heavens, how full of swiftly moving clouds and distant unobtrusive stars.

What had I done I'd killed her, his victim, pinched out the light of the one I'd been bound to save. I'd gone back to her and I'd lain with her, and I'd taken her, and she'd fired the invisible shot too late.

And the thirst was there again.

I'd laid her down on her small neat bed afterwards, on the dull quilted nylon, folding her arms and closing her eyes.

Dear God, help me. Where are my nameless saints Where are the angels with their feathered wings to carry me down into hell When they do come, are they the last beautiful thing that you see As you go down into the lake of fire, can you still follow their progress heavenward Can you hope for one last glimpse of their golden trumpets, and their upturned faces reflecting the radiance of the face of God What do I know of heaven

For long moments I stood there, staring at the distant night-scape of pure clouds, and then back at the twinkling lights of the new hotels, flash of headlamps.

A lone mortal stood on the far sidewalk, staring in my direction, but perhaps he did not note my presence at all-a tiny figure on the lip of the great sea. Perhaps he was only looking towards the ocean as I had been looking, as if the shore were miraculous, as if the water could wash our souls clean.

Once the world was nothing but the sea; rain fell for a hundred million years! But now the cosmos crawls with monsters. He was still there, that lone and staring mortal. And gradually I realized that over the empty sweep of beach and its thin darkness, his eyes were fixed intently on mine. Yes, looking at me.

I scarce thought about it, looking at him only because I did not bother to turn away. Then a curious sensation passed over me-and one which I had never felt before.

I was faintly dizzy as it began, and a soft tingling vibration followed, coursing through my trunk and then my arms and legs. It felt as if my limbs were growing tighter, narrower, and steadily compressing the substance within. Indeed, so distinct was this feeling that it seemed I might be squeezed right out of myself. I marveled at it. There was something faintly delicious about it, especially to a being as hard and

cold and impervious to all sensations as I am. It was overwhelming, very like the way the drinking of blood is overwhelming, though it was nothing as visceral as that. Also no sooner had I analyzed it than I realized it was gone.

I shuddered. Had I imagined the entire thing I was still staring at that distant mortal-poor soul who gazed back at me without the slightest knowledge of who or what I was. There was a smile on his young face, brittle and full of crazed wonder. And gradually I realized I had seen this face before. I was further startled to make out in his expression now a certain definite recognition, and the odd attitude of expectation. Suddenly he raised his right hand and waved.

Balfling.

But I knew this mortal. No, more nearly accurate to say I had glimpsed him more than once, and then the only certain recollections returned to me with full force.

In Venice, hovering on the edge of the Piazza San Marco, and months after in Hong Kong, near the Night Market, and both times I had taken particular notice of him because he had taken particular notice of me. Yes, there stood the same tall, powerfully built body, and the hair was the same thick, wavy brown hair.

Not possible. Or do I mean probable, for there he stood!

Again he made the little gesture of greeting, and then hurriedly, indeed very awkwardly, he ran towards me, coming closer and closer with his strange ungainly steps as I watched in cold unyielding amazement.

I scanned his mind. Nothing. Locked up tight. Only his grinning face coming clearer and clearer as he entered the brighter luminous glare of the sea. The scent of his fear filled my nostrils along with the smell of his blood. Yes, he was terrified, and yet powerfully excited. Very inviting he looked suddenly- another victim all but thrown

into my arms.

How his large brown eyes glittered. And what shining teeth he had.

Coming to a halt some three feet from me, his heart pounding, he held out a fat crumpled envelope in his damp and trembling hand.

I continued to stare at him, revealing nothing-not injured pride nor respect for this astonishing accomplishment that he could find me here, that he would dare. I was just hungry enough to scoop him up now and feed again without giving it another thought. I wasn't reasoning anymore as I looked at him. I saw only blood.

And as if he knew it, indeed sensed it in full, he stiffened, glared at me fiercely for one moment, and then tossed the thick envelope at my feet and danced back frantically over the loose sand. It seemed his legs might go out from under him. He almost fell as he turned and fled.

The thirst subsided a little. Maybe I wasn't reasoning, but I was hesitating, and that did seem to involve some thought. Who was this nervy young son of a bitch

Again, I tried to scan him. Nothing. Most strange. But there are mortals who cloak themselves naturally, even when they have not the slightest awareness that another might pry into their minds.

On and on he sped, desperately and in ungainly fashion, disappearing in the darkness of a side street as he continued his progress away from me.

Moments passed.

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Now I couldn't pick up his scent anymore at all, save from the envelope, which lay where he had thrown it down.

What on earth could all this mean He'd known exactly what I was, no doubt of it. Venice and Hong Kong had not been coincidence. His sudden fear, if nothing else, had made it plain. But I had to smile at his overall courage. Imagine, following such a creature as me.

Was he some crazed worshiper, come to pound on the temple door in the hopes I'd give him the Dark Blood simply out of pity or reward for his temerity It made me angry suddenly, and bitter, and then again I simply didn't care.

I picked up the envelope, and saw that it was blank and unsealed. Inside, I found, of all things, a printed short story clipped apparently from a paperback book.

It made a small thick wad of pulp pages, stapled together in the upper-left-hand corner. No personal note at all. The author of the story was a lovable creature I knew well, H. P. Lovecraft by name, a writer of the supernatural and the macabre. In fact, I knew the story, too, and could never forget its title: The Thing on the Doorstep. It had made me laugh.

The Thing on the Doorstep. I was smiling now. Yes, I remembered the story, that it was clever, that it had been fun.

But why would this strange mortal give such a story to me It was ludicrous. And suddenly I was angry again, or as angry as my sadness allowed me to be.

I shoved the packet in my coat pocket absently. I pondered. Yes, the fellow was definitely gone. Couldn't even pick up an image of him from anyone else.

Oh, if only he had come to tempt me on some other night, when my soul wasn't sick and weary, when I might have cared just a little-enough at least to have found out what it was all about.

But it seemed already that eons had passed since he had come and gone. The night was empty save for the grinding roar of the big city, and the dim crash of the sea. Even the clouds had thinned and disappeared. The sky seemed endless and harrowingly still.

I looked to the hard bright stars overhead, and let the low sound of the surf wrap me in silence. I gave one last grief-stricken look to the lights of Miami, this city I so loved.

Then I went up, simple as a thought to rise, so swift no mortal could have seen it, this figure ascending higher and higher through the deafening wind, until the great sprawling city was nothing but a distant galaxy fading sl

owly from view.

So cold it was, this high wind that knows no seasons. The blood inside me was swallowed up as if its sweet warmth had never existed, and soon my face and hands wore a sheathing of cold as if I'd frozen solid, and that sheathing moved underneath my fragile garments, covering all my skin.

But it caused no pain. Or let us say it did not cause enough pain.

Rather it simply dried up comfort. It was only dismal, dreary, the absence of what makes existence worth it-the blazing warmth of fires and caresses, of kisses and

arguments, of love and longing and blood.

Ah, the Aztec gods must have been greedy vampires to convince those poor human souls that the universe would cease to exist if the blood didn't flow. Imagine presiding over such an altar, snapping your fingers for another and another and another, squeezing those fresh blood-soaked hearts to your lips like bunches of grapes.

I twisted and turned with the wind, dropped a few feet, then rose again, arms outstretched playfully, then falling at my sides. I lay on my back like a sure swimmer, staring again into the blind and indifferent stars.

By thought alone, I propelled myself eastward. The night still stretched over the city of London, though its clocks ticked out the small hours. London.

There was time to say farewell to David Talbot-my mortal friend.

It had been months since our last meeting in Amsterdam, and I had left him rudely, ashamed for that and for bothering him at all. I'd spied upon him since, but not troubled him. And I knew that I had to go to him now, whatever my state of mind.

There wasn't any doubt he would want me to come. It was the proper, decent thing to do.

For one moment I thought of my beloved Louis. No doubt he was in his crumbling little house in its deep swampy garden in New Orleans, reading by the light of the moon as he always did, or giving in to one shuddering candle should the night be cloudy and dark. But it was too late to say farewell to Louis . . . If there was any being among us who would understand, it was Louis. Or so I told myself. The opposite is probably closer to the truth . . .

On to London I went.

Chapter 2

TWO

THE Motherhouse of the Talamasca, outside London, silent in its great park of ancient oaks, its sloped rooftops and its vast lawns blanketed with deep clean snow.

A handsome four-storey edifice full of lead-mulhoned windows, and chimneys ever sending their winding plumes of smoke into the night.

A place of dark wood-paneled libraries and parlours, bedrooms with coffered ceilings, thick burgundy carpets, and dining rooms as quiet as those of a religious order, and members dedicated as priests and nuns, who can read your mind, see your aura, tell your future from the palm of your hand, and make an educated guess as to who you might have been in a past life.

Witches Well, some of them are, perhaps. But in the main they are simply scholars-those who have dedicated their lives to the study of the occult in all its manifestations. Some know more than others. Some believe more than others. For example, there are those members in this Motherhouse-and in other

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motherhouses, in Amsterdam or Rome or the depths of the Louisiana swamp-who have laid eyes upon vampires and werewolves, who have felt the potentially lethal physical telekinetic powers of mortals who can set fires or cause death, who have spoken to ghosts and received answers from them, who have battled invisible entities and won-or lost.

For over one thousand years, this order has persisted. It is in fact older, but its origins are shrouded in mystery-or, to put it more specifically, David will not explain them to me.

Where does the Talamasca get its money There is a staggering abundance of gold and jewels in its vaults. Its investments in the great banks of Europe are legendary. It owns property in all its home cities, which alone could sustain it, if it did not possess anything else. And then there are its various archival treasures-paintings, statues, tapestries, antique furnishings and ornaments-all of which it has acquired in connection with various occult cases and upon which it places no monetary value, for the historical and scholarly value far exceeds any appraisal which could be made.

Its library alone is worth a king's ransom in any earthly currency. There are manuscripts in all languages, indeed some from the famous old library of Alexandria burnt centuries ago, and others from the libraries of the martyred Cathars, whose culture is no more. There are texts from ancient Egypt for a glimpse of which archaeologists might cheerfully commit murder. There are texts by preternatural beings of several known species, including vampires. There are letters and documents in these archives which have been written by me.

None of these treasures interest me. They never have. Oh, in my more playful

moments I have toyed with the idea of breaking into the vaults and reclaiming a few old relics that once belonged to immortals I loved. I know these scholars have collected possessions which I myself have abandoned-the contents of rooms in Paris near the end of the last century, the books and furnishings of my old house in the tree-shaded streets of the Garden District, beneath which I slumbered for decades, quite oblivious to those who walked the rotted floors above. God knows what else they have saved from the gnawing mouth of time.

But I no longer cared about those things. That which they had salvaged they might keep.

What I cared about was David, the Superior General who had been my friend since the long ago night when I came rudely and impulsively through the fourth-storey window of his private rooms.

How brave and poised he had been. And how I had liked to look at him, a tall man with a deeply lined face and iron-gray hair. I wondered then if a young man could ever possess such beauty. But that he knew me, knew what I was-that had been his greatest charm for me.

What if I make you one of us. I could do it, you know . . .

He's never wavered in his conviction. Not even on my deathbed will I accept, he'd said. But he'd been fascinated by my mere presence, he couldn't conceal it, though he had concealed his thoughts well enough from me ever since that first time.

Indeed his mind had become like a strongbox to which there was no key. And I'd been left only with his radiant and affectionate facial expressions and a soft, cultured voice that could talk the Devil into behaving well.

As I reached the Motherhouse now in the small hours, amid the snow of the English

winter, it was to David's familiar windows that I went, only to find his rooms empty and dark.

I thought of our most recent meeting. Could he have gone to Amsterdam again

That last trip had been unexpected or so I was able to find out, when I came to search for him, before his clever flock of psychics sensed my meddlesome telepathic scanning-which they do with remarkable efficiency-and quickly cut me off.

Seems some errand of great importance had compelled David's presence in Holland.

The Dutch Motherhouse was older than the one outside London, with vaults beneath it to which the Superior General alone had the key. David had to locate a portrait by Rembrandt, one of the most significant treasures in the possession of the order, have it copied, and send that copy to his close friend Aaron Lightner, who needed it his connection with an important paranormal investigation being carried on in the States.

I had followed David to Amsterdam and spied on him there, telling myself that I would not disturb him, as I had done many times before.

Let me tell the story of that episode now. At a safe distance I had tracked him as he walked briskly in the late evening, masking my thoughts as skillfully as he always masked his own. What a striking figure he made under the elm trees along the Singel gracht, as he stopped again and again to admire the narrow old three- and four-storey Dutch houses, with their high step gables, and bright windows left undraped, it seemed, for the pleasure of the passersby.

I sensed a change in him almost at once. He carried his cane as always, though it was plain he still had no need of it, and he flipped it upon his shoulder as he'd done before. But there was a brooding to him as he walked; a pronounced dissatisfaction; and hour after hour passed during which he wandered as if time were of no

importance at all.

It was very clear to me soon that David was reminiscing, and now and then I did manage to catch some pungent image of his youth in the tropics, even flashes of a verdant jungle so very different from this wintry northern city, which was surely never warm. I had not had my dream of the tiger yet. I did not know what this meant.

It was tantalizingly fragmentary. David's skills at keeping his thoughts inside were simply too good.

On and on he walked, however, sometimes as if he were being driven, and on and on I followed, feeling strangely comforted by the mere sight of him several blocks ahead.

Had it not been for the bicycles forever whizzing past him, he would have looked like a young man. But the bicycles startled him. He had an old man's inordinate fear of being struck down and hurt. He'd look resentfully after the young riders. Then he'd fall back into his thoughts.

It was almost dawn when he inevitably returned to the Motherhouse. And surely he must have slept the greater part of each day.

He was already walking again when I caught up with him one evening, and once again there seemed no destination in particular. Rather he meandered through Amsterdam's many small cobblestoned streets. He seemed to like it as much as I knew he liked Venice, and with reason, for the cities, both dense and darkly colored, have, in spite of all their marked differences, a similar charm. That one is a Catholic city, rank and full of lovely decay, and the other is Protestant and therefore very clean and efficient, made me, now and then, smile.

The following night, he was again on his own, whistling to himself as he covered the

miles briskly, and it soon came clear to me that he was avoiding the Motherhouse. Indeed, he seemed to be avoiding everything, and when one of his old friends-another Englishman and a member of the order- chanced to meet him unexpectedly near a bookseller's in the Leidsestraat, it was plain from the conversation that David had not been himself for some time.

The British are so very polite in discussing and diagnosing such matters. But this is what I

separated out from all the marvelous diplomacy. David was neglecting his duties as Superior General. David spent all his time away from the Mother-house. When in England, David went to his ancestral home in the Cotswolds more and more often. What was wrong

David merely shrugged off all these various suggestions as if he could not retain interest in the exchange. He made some vague remark to the effect that the Talamasca could run itself without a Superior General for a century, it was so well disciplined and tradition bound, and filled with dedicated members. Then off he went to browse in the bookseller's, where he bought a paperback translation in English of Goethe's Faust. Then he dined alone in a small Indonesian restaurant, with Faust propped before him, eyes racing over the pages, as he consumed his spicy feast.

As he was busy with his knife and fork, I went back to the bookstore and bought a copy of the very same book. What a bizarre piece of work!

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I can't claim to have understood it, or why David was reading it. Indeed it frightened me that the reason might be obvious and perhaps I rejected the idea at once.

Nevertheless I rather loved it, especially the ending, where Faust went to heaven, of course. I don't think that happened in the older legends. Faust always went to hell. I wrote it off to Goethe's Romantic optimism, and the fact that he had been so old by the time he wrote the end. The work of the very old is always extremely powerful and intriguing, and infinitely worth pondering, and all the more perhaps because creative stamina deserts so many artists before they are truly old.

In the very small hours, after David had vanished into the Motherhouse, I roamed the city alone. I wanted to know it because he knew it, because Amsterdam was part of his life.

I wandered through the enormous Rijksmuseum, perusing the paintings of Rembrandt, whom I had always loved. I crept like a thief through the house of Rembrandt in the Jodenbree-straat, now made into a little shrine for the public during daylight hours, and I walked the many narrow lanes of the city, feeling the shimmer of olden times. Amsterdam is an exciting place, swarming with young people from all over the new homogenized Europe, a city that never sleeps.

I probably would never have come here had it not been for David. This city had never caught my fancy. And now I found it most agreeable, a vampire's city for its vast late-night crowds, but it was David of course that I wanted to see. I realized I could not leave without at least exchanging a few words.

Finally, a week after my arrival, I found David in the empty Rijksmuseum, just after

sunset, sitting on the bench before the great Rembrandt portrait of the Members of the Drapers' Guild.

Did David know, somehow, that I'd been there Impossible, yet there he was.

And it was obvious from his conversation with the guard- who was just taking his leave of David-that his venerable order of mossback snoops contributed mightily to the arts of the various cities in which they were domiciled. So it was an easy thing for the members to gain access to museums to see their treasures when the public was barred.

And to think, I have to break into these places like a cheap crook!

It was completely silent in the high-ceilinged marble halls when I came upon him. He sat on the long wooden bench, his copy of Faust, now very dog-eared and full of bookmarks, held loosely and indifferently in his right hand.

He was staring steadily at the painting, which was that of several proper Dutchmen, gathered at a table, dealing with the affairs of commerce, no doubt, yet staring serenely at the viewer from beneath the broad brims of their big black hats. This is scarcely the total effect of this picture. The faces are exquisitely beautiful, full of wisdom and gentleness and a near angelic patience. Indeed, these men more resemble angels than ordinary men.

They seemed possessed of a great secret, and if all men were to learn that secret, there would be no more wars or vice or malice on earth. How did such persons ever become members of the Drapers' Guild of Amsterdam in the 1600s But then I move ahead of my tale . . . David gave a start when I appeared, moving slowly and silently out of the shadows towards him. I took a place beside him on the bench.

I was dressed like a tramp, for I had acquired no real lodgings in Amsterdam, and my

hair was tangled from the wind.

I sat very still for a long moment, opening my mind with an act of will that felt rather like a human sigh, letting him know how concerned I was for his well-being, and how I'd tried for his sake to leave him in peace.

His heart was beating rapidly. His face, when I turned to him, was filled with immediate and generous warmth.

He reached over with his right hand and grasped my right arm. I'm glad to see you as always, so very glad.

Ah, but I've done you harm. I know I have. I didn't want to say how I'd followed him, how I'd overheard the conversation between him and his comrade, or dwell upon what I saw with my own eyes.

I vowed I would not torment him with my old question. And yet I saw death when I looked at him, even more perhaps for his brightness and cheerfulness, and the vigor in his eyes.

He gave me a long lingering thoughtful look, and then he withdrew his hand, and his eyes moved back to the painting.

Are there any vampires in this world who have such faces? he asked. He gestured to the men staring down at us from the canvas. I am speaking of the knowledge and understanding which lies behind these faces. I'm speaking of something more indicative of immortality than a preternatural body anatomically dependent upon the drinking of human blood.

Vampires with such faces? I responded. David, that is unfair. There are no men with such faces. There never were. Look at any of Rembrandt's paintings. Absurd to

believe that such people ever existed, let alone that Amsterdam was full of them in Rembrandt's time, that every man or woman who ever darkened his door was an angel. No, it's Rembrandt you see in these faces, and Rembrandt is immortal, of course.

He smiled. It's not true what you're saying. And what a desperate loneliness emanates from you. Don't you see I can't accept your gift, and if I did, what would you think of me Would you still crave my company Would I crave yours?

I scarce heard these last words. I was staring at the painting, staring at these men who were indeed like angels. And a quiet anger had come over me, and I didn't want to linger there anymore. I had forsworn the assault, yet he had defended himself against me. No, I should not have come.

Spy on him, yes, but not linger. And once again, I moved swiftly to go.

He was furious with me for doing it. I heard his voice ring out in the great empty space.

Unfair of you to go like that! Positively rude of you to do it! Have you no honor What about manners if there is no honor left? And then he broke off, for I was nowhere near him, it was as if I'd vanished, and he was a man alone in the huge and cold museum speaking aloud to himself.

I was ashamed but too angry and bruised to go back to him, though why, I didn't know. What had I done to this being! How Marius would scold me for this.

I wandered about Amsterdam for hours, purloining some thick parchment writing paper of the kind I most like, and a fine-pointed pen of the automatic kind that spews black ink forever, and then I sought a noisy sinister little tavern in the old red-light district with its painted women and drugged vagabond youths, where I could work on

a letter to David, unnoticed and undisturbed as long as I kept a mug of beer at my side.

I didn't know what I meant to write, from one sentence to the next, only that I had to tell him hi some way that I was sorry for my behavior, and that something had snapped in my soul when I beheld the men in the Rembrandt portrait, and so I wrote, in a hasty and driven fashion, this narrative of sorts.

You are right. It was despicable the way I left you. Worse, it was cowardly. I promise you that when we meet again, I shall let you say all you have to say.

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I myself have this theory about Rembrandt. I have spent many hours studying his paintings everywhere-in Amsterdam, Chicago, New York, or wherever I find them-and I do believe as I told you that so many great souls could not h

ave existed as Rembrandt's paintings would have us believe.

This is my theory, and please bear in mind when you read it that it accommodates all the elements involved. And this accommodation used to be the measure of the elegance of theories . . . before the word science came to mean what it means today.

I believe that Rembrandt sold his soul to the Devil when he was a young man. It was a simple bargain. The Devil promised to make Rembrandt the most famous painter of his time. The Devil sent hordes of mortals to Rembrandt for portraits. He gave wealth to Rembrandt, he gave him a charming house in Amsterdam, a wife and later a mistress, because he was sure he would have Rembrandt's soul in the end.

But Rembrandt had been changed by his encounter with the Devil. Having seen such undeniable evidence of evil, he found himself obsessed with the question What is good He searched the faces of his subjects for their inner divinity; and to his amazement he was able to see the spark of it in the most unworthy of men.

His skill was such-and please understand, he had got no skill from the Devil; the skill was his to begin with- that not only could he see that goodness, he could paint it; he could allow his knowledge of it, and his faith in it, to suffuse the whole.

With each portrait he understood the grace and goodness of mankind ever more deeply. He understood the capacity for compassion and for wisdom which resides in

every soul. His skill increased as he continued; the flash of the infinite became ever more subtle; the person himself ever more particular; and more grand and serene and magnificent each work.

At last the faces Rembrandt painted were not flesh-and-blood faces at all. They were spiritual countenances, portraits of what lay within the body of the man or the woman; they were visions of what that person was at his or her finest hour, of what that person stood to become.

This is why the merchants of the Drapers' Guild look like the oldest and wisest of God's saints.

But nowhere is this spiritual depth and insight more clearly manifest than in Rembrandt's self-portraits. And surely you know that he left us one hundred and twenty-two of these.

Why do you think he painted so many? They were his personal plea to God to note the progress of this man who, through his close observation of others like him, had been completely religiously transformed. This is my vision, said Rembrandt to God.

Towards the end of Rembrandt's life, the Devil grew suspicious. He did not want his minion to be creating such magnificent paintings, so full of warmth and kindness. He had believed the Dutch to be a materialistic and therefore worldly people. And here in pictures full of rich clothing and expensive possessions, gleamed the undeniable evidence that human beings are wholly unlike any other animal in the cosmos—they are a precious mingling of the flesh and immortal fire.

Well, Rembrandt suffered all the abuse heaped upon him by the Devil. He lost his fine house in the Jodenbree-straat. He lost his mistress, and finally even his son. Yet on and on he painted, without a trace of bitterness or perversity; on and on he infused his paintings with love.

Finally he lay on his deathbed. The Devil pranced about, gleefully, ready to snatch Rembrandt's soul and pinch it between evil little fingers. But the angels and saints cried to God to intervene.

In all the world, who knows more about goodness? they asked, pointing to the dying Rembrandt. Who has shown more than this painter We look to his portraits when we would know the divine in man.

And so God broke the pact between Rembrandt and the Devil. He took to himself the soul of Rembrandt, and the Devil, so recently cheated of Faust for the very same reason, went mad with rage.

Well, he would bury the life of Rembrandt in obscurity. He would see to it that all the man's personal possessions and records were swallowed by the great flow of time. And that is of course why we know almost nothing of Rembrandt's true life, or what sort of person he was.

But the Devil could not control the fate of the paintings. Try as he might, he could not make people burn them, throw them away, or set them aside for the newer, more fashionable artists. In fact, a curious thing happened, seemingly without a marked beginning. Rembrandt became the most admired of all painters who had ever lived; Rembrandt became the greatest painter of all time.

That is my theory of Rembrandt and those faces.

Now if I were mortal, I would write a novel about Rembrandt, on this theme. But I am not mortal. I cannot save my soul through art or Good Works. I am a creature like the Devil, with one difference. I love the paintings of Rembrandt!

Yet it breaks my heart to look at them. It broke my heart to see you there in the museum. And you are perfectly right that there are no vampires with faces like the

saints of the Drapers' Guild.

That's why I left you so rudely in the museum. It was not the Devil's Rage. It was merely sorrow.

Again, I promise you that next time we meet, I shall let you say all that you want to say.

I scribbled the number of my Paris agent on the bottom of this letter, along with the post address, as I had done in the past when writing to David though David had never replied.

Then I went on a pilgrimage of sorts, revisiting the paintings of Rembrandt in the great collections of the world. I saw nothing in my travels to sway me in my belief in Rembrandt's goodness. The pilgrimage proved penitential, for I clung to my fiction about Rembrandt. But I resolved anew never to bother David again.

Then I had the dream. Tyger, tyger . . . David in danger. I woke with a start in my chair in Louis's little shack-as if I'd been shaken by a warning hand.

Night had almost ended in England. I had to hurry. But when I finally found David, he was in a quaint little tavern in a village in the Cotswolds which can only be reached by one narrow and treacherous road.

This was his home village, not far from his ancestral manor, I quickly divined from scanning those around him-a little one-street place of sixteenth-century buildings, housing shops and an inn now dependent upon the fickleness of tourists, which David had restored from his own pocket, and visited more and more often to escape his London life.

Positively eerie little spot!

All David was doing, however, was guzzling his beloved single-malt Scotch and scribbling drawings of the Devil on napkins. Mephistopheles with his lute The horned Satan dancing under the light of the moon It must have been his dejection I had sensed over the miles, or more truly the concern of those watching him. It was their image of him which I had caught.

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I wanted so to talk to him. I didn't dare to do it. I would have created too much of a stir in the little tavern, where the concerned old proprietor and his two hulking and silent nephews remained awake and smoking their odoriferous pipes only on account of the august presence of the local lord-who was getting as drunk as a lord.

For an hour, I had stood near, peering through the little window. Then I'd gone away.

Now-many, many months later-as the snow fell over London, as it fell in big silent flakes over the high facade of the Motherhouse of the Talamasca, I searched for him, in a dull weary state, thinking that there was no one in all the world whom I must see but him. I scanned the minds of the members, sleeping and awake. I roused them. I heard them come to attention as clearly as if they had snapped on their lights on rising from bed.

But I had what I wanted before they could shut me out.

David was gone to the manor house in the Cotswolds, somewhere, no doubt, in the vicinity of that curious little village with its quaint tavern.

Well, I could find it, couldn't I I went to seek him there.

The snow was falling ever more heavily as I traveled close to the earth, cold and angry, with all memory of the blood I'd drunk now wiped away.

Other dreams came back to me, as they always do in bitter winter, of the harsh and miserable snows of my mortal boyhood, of the chill stone rooms of my father's castle, and of the little fire, and my great mastiffs snoring in the hay beside me, keeping me

snug and warm.

Those dogs had been slain on my last wolf hunt.

I hated so to remember it, and yet it was always sweet to think I was there again-with the clean smell of the little fire and of those powerful dogs tumbled against me, and that I was alive, truly alive!-and the hunt had never taken place. I'd never gone to Paris, I'd never seduced the powerful and demented vampire Magnus. The little stone room was full of the good scent of the dogs, and I could sleep now beside them, and be safe.

At last I drew near to a small Elizabethan manor house in the mountains, a very beautiful stone structure of deep-pitched roofs and narrow gables, of deep-set thick glass windows, far smaller than the Motherhouse, yet very grand on its own scale.

Only one set of windows was lighted, and when I approached I saw that it was the library and David was there, seated by a great noisily burning fire.

He had his familiar leatherbound diary in his hand, and he was writing with an ink pen, very rapidly. He had no sense at all that he was being watched. Now and then he consulted another leatherbound book, on the table at his side. I could easily see that this was a Christian Bible, with its double columns of small print and the gilt edges of its pages, and the ribbon that marked his place.

With only a little effort I observed it was the Book of Genesis from which David was reading, and apparently making notes. There was his copy of Faust beside it. What on earth interested him in all this

The room itself was lined with books. A single lamp burned over David's shoulder. It was as many a library in northern climes-cozy and inviting, with a low beamed ceiling, and big comfortable old leather chairs.

But what rendered it unusual were the relics of a life lived in another clime. There were his cherished mementos of those remembered years.

The mounted head of a spotted leopard was perched above the glowing fireplace. And the great black head of a buffalo was fixed to the far right wall. There were many small Hindu statues of bronze here and there on shelves and on tables. Small jewel-like Indian rugs lay on the brown carpet, before hearth and doorway and windows.

And the long flaming skin of his Bengal tiger lay sprawled in the very center of the room, its head carefully preserved, with glass eyes and those immense fangs which I had seen with such horrid vividness in my dream.

It was to this last trophy that David gave his full attention suddenly, and then taking his eyes off it with difficulty, went back to writing again. I tried to scan him. Nothing. Why had I bothered Not even a glimmer of the mangrove forests where such a beast might have been slain. But once again he looked at the tiger, and then, forgetting his pen, sank deep into his thoughts.

Of course it comforted me merely to watch him, as it had always done. I glimpsed many framed photographs in the shadows-pictures of David when he'd been young, and many obviously taken of him in India before a lovely bungalow with deep porches and a high roof. Pictures of his mother and father.

Pictures of him with the animals he'd killed. Did this explain my dream

I ignored the snow falling all around me, covering my hair and my shoulders and even my loosely folded arms. Finally I stirred. There was only an hour before dawn.

I moved around the house, found a back door, commanded the latch to slide back, and entered the warm little low-ceilinged hall. Old wood in this place, soaked through and through with lacquers or oil. I laid my hands on the beams of the door and saw in a

shimmer a great oak woodland full of sunlight, and then only the shadows surrounded me. I smelled the aroma of the distant fire.

I realized David was standing at the far end of the hallway, beckoning for me to come near. But something in my appearance alarmed him. Ah, well, I was covered with snow and a thin layer of ice.

We went into the library together and I took the chair opposite his. He left me for a moment during which time I was merely staring at the fire and feeling it melt the sleet that covered me. I was thinking of why I had come and how I would put it into words. My hands were as white as the snow was white.

When he appeared again, he had a large warm towel for me, and I took this and wiped my face and my hair and then my hands. How good it felt.

Thank you, I said.

You looked a statue, he said.

'Yes, I do look that way, now, don't I I'm going on.

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What do you mean? He sat down across from me. Explain.

I'm going to a desert place. I've figured a way to end it, I think. This is not a simple matter at all.

Why do you want to do that?

Don't want to be alive anymore. That part is simple enough. I don't look forward to death the way you do. It isn't that. Tonight I- I stopped. I saw the old woman in her neat bed, in her flowered robe, against the quilted nylon. Then I saw that strange brown-haired man watching me, the one who had come to me on the beach and given me the story which I still had, crammed inside my coat.

Meaningless. You come too late, whoever you are.

Why bother to explain

I saw Claudia suddenly as if she were standing there in some other realm, staring at me, waiting for me to see her. How clever that our minds can invoke an image so seemingly real. She might as well have been right there by David's desk in the shadows. Claudia, who had forced her long knife through my chest. I'll put you in your coffin forever, Father. But then I saw Claudia ail the time now, didn't I I saw Claudia in dream after dream . . .

Don't do this, David said.

It's tune, David, I whispered, thinking in a vague and distant way how disappointed

Marius would be.

Had David heard me Perhaps my voice had been too soft. Some small crackling sound came from the fire, a bit of kindling collapsing perhaps or sap still moist and sizzling within the huge log. I saw that cold bedchamber in my boyhood home again, and suddenly, I had my arm around one of those big dogs, those lazy loving dogs. To see a wolf slay a dog is monstrous!

I should have died that day. Not even the best of hunters should be able to slay a pack of wolves. And maybe that was the cosmic error. I'd been meant to go, if indeed there is any such continuity, and in overreaching, had caught the devil's eye. Wolf killer. The vampire Magnus had said it so lovingly, as he had carried me to his lair.

David had sunk back in the chair, putting one foot absently on the fender, and his eyes were fixed on the flames. He was deeply distressed, even a little frantic, though he held it inside very well.

Won't it be painful? he asked, looking at me.

Just for a moment, I didn't know what he meant. Then I remembered.

I gave a little laugh.

I came to say good-bye to you, to ask you if you're certain about your decision. It seemed somehow the right thing to tell you I was going, and that this would be your last chance. It seemed sporting, actually. You follow me Or do you think it's simply another excuse Doesn't matter really.

Like Magnus in your story, he said. You'd make your heir, then go into the fire.

It wasn't merely a story, I said, not meaning to be argumentative, and wondering why

it sounded that way. And yes, perhaps it's like that. I honestly don't know.

Why do you want to destroy yourself? He sounded desperate. How I had hurt this man.

I looked at the sprawling tiger with its magnificent black stripes and deep orange fur.

That was a man-eater, wasn't it? I asked.

He hesitated as if he didn't fully understand the question, then as if waking, he nodded. Yes. He glanced at the tiger, then he looked at me. I don't want you to do it. Postpone it, for the love of heaven. Don't do it. Why tonight, of all times?

He was making me laugh against my will. Tonight's a fine night for doing it, I said. No, I'm going. And suddenly there was a great exhilaration in me because I realized I meant it! It wasn't just some fancy. I would never have told him if it was. I've figured a method. I'll go as high as I can before the sun comes over the horizon. There won't be any way to find shelter. The desert there is very hard.

And I will die in fire. Not cold, as I'd been on that mountain when the wolves surrounded me. In heat

, as Claudia had died.

No, don't do it, he said. How earnest he was, how persuasive. But it didn't work.

Do you want the blood? I asked. It doesn't take very long. There's very little pain. I'm confident the others won't hurt you. I'll make you so strong they'd have a devil of a time if they tried.

Again, it was so like Magnus, who'd left me an orphan without so much as a warning

that Armand and his ancient coven could come after me, cursing me and seeking to put an end to my newborn life. And Magnus had known that I would prevail.

Lestat, I do not want the blood. But I want you to stay here. Look, give me a matter of a few nights only. Just that much. On account of friendship, Lestat, stay with me now. Can't you give me those few hours And then if you must go through with it, I won't argue anymore.

Why?

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He looked stricken. Then he said, Let me talk to you, let me change your mind,

You killed the tiger when you were very young, didn't you It was in India. I gazed around at the other trophies. I saw the tiger in a dream.

He didn't answer. He seemed anxious and perplexed.

I've hurt you, I said. I've driven you deep into memories of your youth. I've made you aware of time, and you weren't so aware of it before.

Something happened in his face. I had wounded him with these words. Yet he shook his head.

David, take the blood from me before I go! I whispered suddenly, desperately. You don't have a year left to you. I can hear it when I'm near you! I can hear the weakness in your heart.

You don't know that, my friend, he said patiently, Stay here with me. I'll tell you all about the tiger, about those days in India. I hunted in Africa then, and once in the Amazon. Such adventures. I wasn't the musty scholar then as I am now . . .

I know. I smiled. He had never spoken this way to me before, never offered so much. It's too late, David, I said. Again, I saw the dream. I saw that thin gold chain around David's neck. Had the tiger been going for the chain That didn't make sense. What remained was the sense of danger.

I stared at the skin of the beast. How purely vicious was his face.

Was it fun to kill the tiger? I asked.

He hesitated. Then forced himself to answer. It was a man-eater. It feasted on children. Yes, I suppose it was fun.

I laughed softly. Ah, well, then we have that in common, me and the tiger. And Claudia is waiting for me.

You don't really believe that, do you?

No. I guess if I did, I'd be afraid to die. I saw Claudia quite vividly. . . a tiny oval portrait on porcelain-golden hair, blue eyes. Something fierce and true in the expression, in spite of the saccharine colors and the oval frame. Had I ever possessed such a locket, for that is what it was, surely. A locket. A chill came over me. I remembered the texture of her hair. Once again, it was as if she were very near me. Were I to turn, I might see her beside me in the shadows, with her hand on the back of my chair. I did turn around. Nothing. I was going to lose my nerve if I didn't get out of here.

Lestat! David said urgently. He was scanning me, desperately trying to think of something more to say. He pointed to my coat. What's that in your pocket A note you've written You mean to leave it with me Let me read it now.

Oh, this, this strange little story, I said, here, you may

have it. I bequeath it to you. Fitting that it should be in a library, perhaps wedged somewhere on one of these shelves. I took out the little folded packet and glanced at it. Yes, I've read this. It's sort of amusing. I tossed the packet into his lap. Some fool mortal gave it to me, some poor benighted soul who knew who I was and had just enough courage to toss it at my feet.

Explain this to me, said David. He unfolded the pages. Why are you carrying it with you Good Lord-Lovecraft. He gave a little shake of his head.

I just did explain it, I said. It's no use, David, I can't be talked down from the high ledge. I'm going. Besides, the story doesn't mean a thing. Poor fool. . .

He had had such strange glittering eyes. Whatever had been so wrong about the way he came running towards me across the sand About his awkward panic-stricken retreat His manner had indicated such importance! Ah, but this was foolish. I didn't care, and I knew I didn't. I knew what I meant to do.

Lestat, stay here! David said. You promised the very next time we met, you would let me say all I have to say. You wrote that to me, Lestat, you remember You won't go back on your word.

Well, I have to go back on it, David. And you have to forgive me because I'm going. Perhaps there is no heaven or hell, and I'll see you on the other side.

And what if there is both What then?

You've been reading too much of the Bible. Read the Love-craft story. Again, I gave a short laugh. I gestured to the pages he was holding. Better for your peace of mind. And stay away from Faust, for heaven's sake. You really think angels will come in the end and take us away Well, not me, perhaps, but you?

Don't go, he said, and his voice was so soft and imploring that it took my breath away.

But I was already going.

I barely heard him call out behind me:

Lestat, I need you. You're the only friend I have.

How tragic those words! I wanted to say I was sorry, sorry for all of it. But it was too late now for that. And besides, I think he knew.

I shot upwards in the cold darkness, driving through the descending snow. All life seemed utterly unbearable to me, both in its horror and its splendour. The tiny house looked warm down there, its light spilling on the white ground, its chimney giving forth that thin coil of blue smoke.

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I thought of David again walking alone through Amsterdam, but then I thought of Rembrandt's faces. And I saw David's face again in the library fire. He looked like a man painted by Rembrandt. He had looked that way ever since I'd known him. And what did we look like-frozen forever in the form we had when the Dark Blood entered our veins. Claudia had been for decades that child painted on porcelain. And I was like one of Michelangelo's statues, turning white as marble. And just as cold.

I knew I would keep my word.

But you know there is a terrible lie in all this. I didn't really believe I could be killed by the sun anymore. Well, I was certainly going to give it a good try.

Chapter 3

THREE

THE Gobi Desert. Eons ago, in the saurian age, as men have called it, great lizards died in this strange part of the world by the thousands. No one knows why they came here; why they perished. Was it a realm of tropical trees and steaming swamps? We don't know. All we have now in this spot is the desert and millions upon millions of fossils, telling a fragmentary tale of giant reptiles who surely made the earth tremble with each step they took.

The Gobi Desert is therefore an immense graveyard and a fitting place for me to look the sun in the face. I lay a long time in the sand before the sunrise, collecting my last thoughts,

The trick was to rise to the very limit of the atmosphere, into the sunrise, so to speak. Then when I lost consciousness I would

tumble down in the terrible heat, and my body would be shattered by this great fall upon the desert floor. How could it then dig in beneath the surface, as it might have done, by its own evil volition, were I whole and in a land of soft soil

Besides, if the blast of light was sufficiently strong to burn me up, naked and so high above the earth, perhaps I would be dead and gone before my remains ever struck the hard bed of sand.

As the old expression goes, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Nothing much could have deterred me. Yet I did wonder if the other immortals knew what I meant to do and whether or not they were in the least concerned. I certainly sent them no farewell messages; I threw out no random images of what I meant to do.

At last the great warmth of dawn crept across the desert. I rose to my knees, stripped off my clothing, and began the ascent, my eyes already burning from the faintest bit of light.

Higher and higher I went, propelling myself well beyond the place where my body tended to stop and begin to float of its own accord. Finally I could not breathe, as the air was very thin, and it took a great effort to support myself at this height.

Then the light came. So immense, so hot, so blinding that it seemed a great roaring noise as much as a vision filling my sight. I saw yellow and orange fire covering everything. I stared right into it, though it felt like scalding water poured into my eyes. I think I opened my mouth as if to swallow it, this divine fire! The sun was mine suddenly. I was seeing it; I was reaching for it. And then the light was covering me like molten lead, paralyzing me and torturing me beyond endurance, and my own cries filled my ears. Still I would not look away, still I would not fall!

Thus I defy you, heaven! And there were no words suddenly and no thoughts. I was twisting, swimming in it. And as the darkness and the coldness rose up to envelop me-it was nothing but the loss of consciousness-I realized that I had begun to fall.

The sound was the sound of the air rushing past me, and it seemed that the voices of others were calling to me, and through the horrid mingled roar, I heard distinctly the voice of a child.

Then nothing . . .

Was I dreaming

We were in a small close place, a hospital smelling of sickness and death, and I was pointing to the bed, and the child who lay on the pillow, white and small and half dead.

There was a sharp riff of laughter. I smelled an oil lamp- that moment when the wick has blown out.

Lestat, she said. How beautiful her little voice.

I tried to explain about my father's castle, about the snow falling, and my dogs waiting there. That's where I had wanted to go. I could hear them suddenly, that deep baying bark of the mastiffs, echoing up the snow-covered slopes, and I could almost see the towers of the castle itself.

But then she said:

Not yet.

It was night again when I awoke. I was lying on the desert floor. The dunes bestirred

by the wind had spread a fine mist of sand over all my limbs. I felt pain all over. Pain even in the roots of my hair. I felt such pain I couldn't will myself to move.

For hours I lay there. Now and then I gave a soft moan. It made no difference in the pain I felt. When I moved my limbs even a little, the sand was like tiny particles of sharp glass against my back and my calves and the heels of my feet.

I thought of all those to whom I might have called for help. I did not call. Only gradually did I realize that if I remained here, the sun would come again, naturally enough, and I would be caught once more and burned once more. Yet still I might not die.

I had to remain, didn't I What sort of coward would seek shelter now

But all I had to do was look at my hands in the light of the stars to see that I was not going to die. I was burnt, yes, my skin was brown and wrinkled and roaring with pain. But I was nowhere near death.

At last I rolled over and tried to rest my face against the sand, but this was no more comforting than staring up into the stars.

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Then I felt the sun coming. I was weeping as the great orange light spilled over all the world. The pain caught my back first and then I thought my head was burning, that it would explode, and that the fire was eating my eyes. I was mad when the darkness of oblivion came, absolutely mad.

When I awoke the following evening, I felt sand in my mouth, sand covering me in my agony. In that madness, I'd apparently buried myself alive.

For hours I remained so, thinking only that this pain was more than any creature could endure.

Finally I struggled to the surface, whimpering like an animal, and I climbed to my feet, each gesture pulling at the pain and intensifying it, and then I willed myself into the air and I started the slow journey west and into the night.

No diminishing of my powers. Ah, only the surface of my body had been deeply harmed.

The wind was infinitely softer than the sand. Nevertheless it brought its own torment, like fingers stroking my burnt skin all over and tugging at the burnt roots of my hair. It stung my burnt eyelids; and scraped at my burnt knees.

I traveled gently for hours, willing myself to David's house once more and feeling the most glorious relief for a few moments as I descended through the cold wet snow.

It was just before morning in England.

I entered by the rear door again, each step an excruciating ordeal. Almost blindly, I found the library and I went down on my knees, ignoring the pain, and collapsed upon the tigerskin rug.

I laid my head beside the tiger's head, and my cheek against its open jaws. Such fine, close fur! I stretched out my arms on its legs and felt its smooth, hard claws under my wrists. The pain shot through me in waves. The fur felt almost silky and the room was cool in its darkness. And in faint shimmers of silent visions, I saw the mangrove forests of India, I saw dark faces, and heard distant voices. And once very clearly for a full instant I saw David as a young man, as I'd seen him in my dream.

It seemed such a miracle, this living young man, full of blood and tissue and such miraculous achievements as eyes and a beating heart and five fingers to each long slender hand.

I saw myself walking in Paris in the old days when I was alive. I was wearing the red velvet cloak, lined with the fur of the wolves I'd killed back in my native Auvergne, never dreaming that things lurked in the shadows, things that could see you and fall in love with you, just because you were young, things that could take your life, just because they loved you and you'd slain a whole pack of wolves . . .

David, the hunter! In belted khaki, with that magnificent gun.

Slowly, I became aware that the pain was already lessened. Good old Lestat, the god, healing with preternatural speed. The pain was like a deep glow settling over my body. I imagined myself giving a warm light to the entire room.

I picked up the scent of mortals. A servant had come into the room and quickly gone out. Poor old guy. It made me laugh to myself in my half sleep, to think what he had seen—a dark-skinned naked man, with a mop of unkempt blond hair, lying atop David's tiger in the darkened room.

Suddenly, I caught David's scent, and I heard again the low familiar thunder of blood in mortal veins. Blood. I was so thirsty for blood. My burnt skin cried for it, and my burning eyes.

A soft flannel blanket was laid over me, very light and cool-feeling to me. There followed a series of little sounds. David was pulling the heavy velvet draperies closed over the windows, which he had not bothered to do all winter. He was fussing with the cloth so that there would be no seams of light.

Lestat, he whispered. Let me take you down into the cellar, where you'll surely be safe.

Doesn't matter, David. May I stay here in this room?

Yes, of course, you may stay. Such solicitude.

Thank you, David. I started to sleep again, and snow was blowing through the window of my room in the castle, but then it was wholly different. I saw the little hospital bed once more, and the child was in it, and thank God that nurse wasn't there but had gone to stop the one who was crying. Oh, such a terrible, terrible sound. I hated it. I wanted to be . . . where Home in the deep French winter, of course.

This time the oil lamp was being lighted, instead of going out.

I told you it wasn't time. Her dress was so perfectly white, and look, how very tiny her pearl buttons! And what a fine band of pretty roses around her head.

But why? I asked.

What did you say? David asked.

Talking to Claudia, I explained. She was sitting in the petit-point armchair with her legs straight out before her, toes together and pointed at the ceiling. Were those satin slippers I grabbed her ankle and kissed it, and when I looked up I saw her chin and her eyelashes as she threw back her head and laughed. Such an exquisite full-throated laugh.

There are others out there, David said.

I opened my eyes, though it hurt to do it, hurt to see the dim shapes of the room. Sun almost coining. I felt the claws of the tiger under my fingers. Ah, precious beast. David stood at the window. He was peering through a tiny seam between the two panels of drapery.

Out there, he went on. They've come to see that you're all right.

Imagine that. Who are they? I couldn't hear them, didn't want to hear them. Was it Marius Surely not the very ancient ones. Why would they care about such a thing

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I don't know, he said. But they are there.

You know the old story, I whispered. Ignore them and they'll go away. Almost sunrise anyway. They have to go. And they certainly won't hurt you, David.

I know.

Don't read my mind if you won't let me read yours, I said.

Don't be cross. No one will come into this room or disturb you.

Yes, I can be a danger even in repose . . . I wanted to say more, to warn him further, but then I realized he was the one mortal who did not require such a warning. Talamasca. Scholars of the paranormal. He knew.

Sleep now, he said.

I had to laugh at that. What else can I do when the sun rises Even if it shines full upon my face. But he sounded so firm and reassuring.

To think, in the olden times, I always had the coffin, and sometimes I would polish it slowly until the wood had a great luster to it, and then I'd shine the tiny crucifix on top of it, smiling at myself, at the care with which I buffed the little twisted body of the massacred Christ, the Son of God. I'd loved the satin lining of the box. I'd loved the shape, and the twilight act of rising from the dead. But no more . . .

The sun was truly coming, the cold winter sun of England. I could feel it for certain,

and suddenly I was afraid. I could feel the light stealing over the ground outside and striking the windows. But the darkness held on this side of the velvet curtains.

I saw the little flame in the oil lamp rise. It scared me, just because I was in such pain and it was a flame. Her small rounded fingers on the golden key, and that ring, that ring I gave her with the tiny diamond set in pearls. What about the locket Should I ask her about the locket Claudia, was there ever a gold locket. . .

Turning the flame higher and higher. That smell again. Her dimpled hand. All through the long flat in the Rue Royale, one could catch the scent of the oil. Ah, that old wallpaper, and the pretty handmade furniture, and Louis writing at his desk, sharp smell of the black ink, dull scratch of the quill pen . . .

Her little hand was touching my cheek, so deliciously cold, and that vague thrill that passes through me when one of the others touches me, our skin.

Why would anyone want me to live? I asked. At least that was what I started to ask . . . and then I was simply gone.

Chapter 4

FOUR

TWILIGHT. The pain was still very great. I didn't want to move. The skin on my chest and on my legs was tightening and tingling and this only gave variation to the pain.

Even the blood thirst, raging fiercely, and the smell of the blood of the servants in the house couldn't make me move. I knew David was there, but I didn't speak to him. I thought if I tried to speak, I would weep on account of the pain.

I slept and I know that I dreamed, but I couldn't remember the dreams when next I opened my eyes. I would see the oil lamp again, and the light still frightened me. And so did her voice.

Once I woke talking to her in the darkness. Why you of all people Why you in my dreams Where's your bloody knife?

I was grateful when the dawn came. I had sometimes deliberately clamped my mouth shut not to cry out over the pain.

When I woke the second night, the pain was not very great. My body was sore all over, perhaps what mortals call raw. But the agony was clearly past. I was lying still on the tiger, and the room felt just a little uncomfortably cold.

There were logs stacked in the stone fireplace, set way back under the broken arch, against the blackened bricks. The kindling was all there, with a bit of rumpled newspaper. All in readiness. Hmmm. Someone had come dangerously close to me in my sleep. I hoped to heaven I had not reached out, as we sometimes do in our trance, and pinioned this poor creature.

I closed my eyes and listened. Snow falling on the roof, snow tumbling down into the chimney. I opened my eyes again and saw the gleaming bits of moisture on the logs.

Then I concentrated, and felt the energy leap out from me like a long thin tongue and touch the kindling, which burst at once into tiny dancing flames. The thick crusted surface of the logs began to warm and then blister. The fire was on its way.

I felt a sudden flush of exquisite pain in my cheeks and on my forehead as the light grew brighter. Interesting. I climbed to my knees and stood up, alone in the room. I looked at the brass lamp beside David's chair. With a tiny soundless mental twist, I turned it on.

There were clothes on the chair, a pair of new pants of thick soft dark flannel, a white cotton shirt, and a rather shapeless jacket of old wool. All these clothes were a little too big. They had been David's clothes. Even the fur-lined slippers were too big. But I wanted to be dressed. There were some undistinguished cotton undergarments also, of the kind everyone wears in the twentieth century, and a comb for my hair.

I took my time with everything, noting only a throbbing soreness as I pulled the cloth over my skin. My scalp hurt when I combed my hair. Finally I simply shook it until all the sand and dust was out of it, tumbling down into the thick carpet, and disappearing conveniently enough from view. Putting on the slippers was very nice. But what I wanted now was a mirror.

I found one in the hallway, an old dark mirror in a heavy gilded frame. Enough light came from the open library door for me to see myself fairly well.

For a moment, I could not quite believe what I beheld. My skin was smooth all over, as completely unblemished as it had ever been. But it was an amber color now, the very color of the frame of the mirror, and gleaming only slightly, no more than that of a mortal who had spent a long luxurious sojourn in tropical seas.

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My eyebrows and eyelashes shone brightly, as is always the case with the blond hair of such sun-browned individuals, and the few lines of my face, left to me by the Dark Gift, were a little bit more deeply etched than before. I refer here to two small commas at the corners of my mouth, the result of smiling so much when I was alive; and to a few very fine lines at the corners of my eyes, and the trace of a line or two across my forehead. Very nice to have them back for I had not seen them in a long time.

My hands had suffered more. They were darker than my face, and very human-looking, with many little creases, which put me in mind at once of how many fine wrinkles mortal hands do have.

The nails still glistened in a manner that might alarm humans, but it would be a simple thing to rub a bit of ash over them. My eyes, of course, were another matter. Never had they seemed so bright and so iridescent. But a pair of smoke-colored glasses was all that I needed there. The bigger mask of black glasses was no longer necessary to cover up the shining white skin.

Ye gods, how perfectly wonderful, I thought, staring at my own reflection. You look almost like a man! Almost like a man! I could feel a dull ache all over in these burnt tissues, but that felt good to me, as if it were reminding me of the shape of my body, and its human limits.

I could have shouted. Instead I prayed. May this last, and if it doesn't I'd go through it all again.

Then it occurred to me, rather crushingly-I was supposed to be destroying myself, not

perfecting my appearance so that I could move around better among men. I was supposed to be dying. And if the sun over the Gobi Desert hadn't done it. . . if all the long day of lying in the sun, and then the second sunrise . . .

Ah, but you coward, I thought, you could have found some way to stay above the surface for that second day! Or could you

Well, thank God you chose to come back.

I turned and saw David coming down the hall. He had only just returned home, his dark heavy coat was wet from the snow, and he hadn't even removed his boots.

He came to an abrupt halt and inspected me from head to toe, straining to see in the shadows. Ah, the clothes will do, he said. Good Lord, you look like one of those beachcombers, those surf people, those young men who live eternally in resorts.

I smiled.

He reached out, rather bravely, I thought, and took my hand and led me into the library, where the fire was quite vigorously burning by now. He studied me once again.

There's no more pain, he said tentatively.

There is sensation, but it's not exactly what we call pain. I'm going out for a little while. Oh, don't worry. I'll be back. I'm thirsting. I have to hunt.

His face went blank, but not so blank that I didn't see the blood in his cheeks, or all the tiny vessels in his eyes.

Well, what did you think? I asked. That I'd given it up?

No, of course not.

Well, then, care to come and watch?

He said nothing, but I could see I'd frightened him.

You must remember what I am, I said. When you help me, you help the devil. I made a little gesture to his copy of Faust, still lying on the table. And there was that Lovecraft story. Hmmm.

You don't have to take life to do it, do you? he asked quite seriously.

But what a crude question.

I made a short derisive noise. I like to take life, I said. I gestured to the tiger. I'm a hunter as you were once. I think it's fun.

He looked at me for a long moment, his face full of a sort of troubled wonder and then he nodded slowly as if accepting this. But he was very far from accepting it.

Have your supper while I'm gone, I said. I can tell you're hungry. I can smell meat cooking somewhere in this house. And you can be certain that I intend to have my supper before I come back.

You're quite determined that I'm to know you, aren't you? he asked. That there's to be no sentimentality or mistake.

Exactly. I drew back my lips and showed him my fangs for a second. They are very small, actually, nothing compared to the leopard and the tiger, with which he kept company so obviously by choice. But this grimace always frightens mortals. It does more than frighten them. It actually shocks them. I think it sends some primal

message of alarm through the organism which has little to do with its conscious courage or sophistication.

He blanched. He stood quite motionless, looking at me, and then gradually the warmth and the expression returned to his face.

Very welt, he said. I'll be here when you come back. If you don't come back, I'll be furious! I won't speak to you again, I swear it. You vanish on me tonight, you'll never get another nod from me. It will be a crime against hospitality. You understand?

All

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right, all right! I said with a shrug, though I was secretly touched that he wanted me here. I hadn't really been so sure, and I'd been so rude to him. I'll come back. Besides, I want to know.

What?

Why you aren't afraid of dying.

Well, you aren't afraid of it, are you?

I didn't answer. I saw the sun again, the great fiery ball becoming earth and sky, and I shuddered. Then I saw that oil lamp in my dream.

What is it? he asked.

I am afraid of dying, I said with a nod for emphasis. All my illusions are being shattered.

You have illusions? he asked quite honestly.

Of course I do. One of my illusions was that no one could really refuse the Dark Gift, not knowingly . . .

Lestat, must I remind you that you refused it yourself?

David, I was a boy. I was being forced. I fought instinctively. But that had nothing to do with knowing.

Don't sell yourself short, I think you would have refused even if you had fully understood.

Now we're speaking about your illusions, I said. I'm hungry. Get out of my way or I'll kill you.

I don't believe you. You had better come back.

I will. This time I'll keep the promise I made in my letter. You can say all you have to say.

I hunted the back streets of London. I was wandering near Charing Cross Station, looking for some petty cutthroat that would yield a mouthful even if his narrow little ambitions did sour my soul. But it didn't quite turn out that way.

There was an old woman walking there, shuffling along in a soiled coat, her feet bound with rags. Mad and bitter cold she was, and almost certain to die before morning, having stolen out of the back door of some place where they'd tried to lock her up, or so she bawled to the world in general, determined never to be caught again.

We made grand lovers! She had a name for me and a great warm cluster of memories, and there we were dancing in the gutter together, she and I, and I held her a long time in my arms. She was very well nourished, as so many beggars are in this century where food is so plentiful in the Western countries, and I drank slowly, oh, so slowly, savoring it, and feeling a rush all through my burnt skin.

When it was finished, I realized that I was experiencing the cold very keenly and had been all along. I was feeling all fluctuations of temperature with greater acuity. Interesting.

The wind was lashing me and I hated it. Maybe something of my flesh had actually

been burnt off. I didn't know. I felt the wet cold in my feet, and my hands hurt so much I had to bury them in my pockets. I caught those memories again of the French winter of my last year at home, of the young mortal country lord with a bed of hay, and only the dogs for companions. All the blood in the world seemed not enough suddenly. Time to feed again, and again.

They were derelicts, all of them, lured into the icy darkness from their shacks of trash and cardboard, and doomed, or so I told myself, moaning and feasting amid the stench of rancid sweat and urine, and phlegm. But the blood was blood.

When the clocks struck ten, I was still thirsting, and victims were still plentiful, but I was tired of it, and it didn't matter anymore.

I traveled for many blocks, into the fashionable West End, and there entered a dark little shop, full of smart, finely cut garments for gentlemen-ah, the ready-made wealth of these years-and outfitted myself to my taste in gray tweed pants and belted coat, with a thick white wool sweater, and even a pair of very pale green tinted glasses with delicate gold frames. Then off I wandered, back into the chill night full of swirling snowflakes, singing to myself and doing a little tap dance under the street lamp just as I used to do for Claudia and-

Slam! Bang! Up stepped this fierce and beautiful young tough with wine on his breath, divinely sleazy, who drew a knife on me, all set to murder me for the money I didn't have, which reminded me that I was a miserable thief for having just stolen a wardrobe of fine Irish clothes. Hmmm. But I was lost again in the tight hot embrace, crushing the bastard's ribs, sucking him dry as a dead rat in a summer attic, and he went down in amazement and ecstasy, one hand clutching painfully, to the very last, at my hair.

He did have some money in his pockets. What luck. I put that in the clothier's for the garments I'd taken, which seemed more than adequate when I did my arithmetic, at

which I am not so good, preternatural powers or no. Then I wrote a little note of thanks, unsigned, of course. And I locked up the shop door tight with a few little telepathic twists, and off I went again.

Chapter 5

FIVE

IT WAS striking midnight when I reached Talbot Manor. It was as if I had never seen the place before. I had time now to roam the maze in the snow, and to study the pattern of clipped shrubbery, and imagine what the garden would be come spring. Beautiful old place.

Then there were the close dark little rooms themselves, built to hold out the cold English winters, and the little lead-mullioned windows, many of which were full of light now, and most inviting in the snowy dark.

David had finished his supper, obviously, and the servants- an old man and woman- were at work still in the kitchen belowstairs while the lord changed his clothes in his bedroom on the second floor.

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I watched him as he put on, over his pajamas, a long black dressing gown with black velvet lapels and sash that made him look very much like a cleric, though it was far too ornately patterned to be a cassock, especially with the white silk scarf tucked in at the neck.

Then he made his way down the stairs.

I entered by my favorite door at the end of the passage and came up beside him in the library as he bent to rake the fire.

Ah, you did come back, he said, trying to conceal his delight, Good Lord, but you come and go so quietly!

Yes, it's very annoying, isn't it? I looked at the Bible on the table, the copy of Faust, and the little short story by Lovecraft, still stapled, but smoothed out. There was David's decanter of Scotch also and a pretty thick-bottomed crystal glass.

I stared at the short story, the memory of the anxious young man coming back to me. So odd the way he moved. A vague tremor passed through me at the thought of his having spotted me in three distinctly different places. I'd probably never lay eyes on him again. On the other hand . . . But there was time to deal with this pest of a mortal. David was on my mind now, and the delicious awareness that we had the night to talk to each other.

Wherever did you get those handsome clothes? David asked. His eyes passed over me slowly, lingeringly, and he seemed not to notice my attention to his books.

Oh, a little shop somewhere. I never steal the garments of my victims, if that's what you mean. And besides, I'm too addicted to lowlife and they don't dress well enough for that sort of thing.

I settled in the chair opposite his, which was my chair now, I supposed. Deep, pliant leather, creaking springs, but very comfortable, with a high winged back and broad substantial arms. His own chair did not match it but was just as good, and a little more creased and worn.

He stood before the flames, still studying me. Then he sat down too. He took the glass stopper from the crystal decanter, filled his glass, and lifted it in a little salute.

He took a deep swallow and winced slightly as the liquid obviously warmed his throat.

Suddenly, vividly, I remembered that particular sensation. I remembered being in the loft of the barn on my land in France, and drinking cognac just like that, and even making that grimace, and my mortal friend and lover, Nicki, snatching the bottle greedily from my hand.

I see you are yourself again, David said with sudden warmth, lowering his voice slightly as he peered at me. He sat back, with the glass resting on the right arm of his chair. He looked very dignified, though far more at ease than I had ever seen him. His hair was thick and wavy, and had become a beautiful shade of dark gray.

Do I seem myself? I asked.

You have that mischievous look in your eye, he answered under his breath, still scanning me intently. There's a little smile on your lips. Won't leave for more than a second when you speak. And the skin-it makes a remarkable difference. I pray you're not in pain. You aren't, are you?

I made a small dismissive gesture. I could hear his heartbeat. It was ever so slightly weaker than it had been in Amsterdam. Now and then it was irregular as well.

How long will your skin stay dark like this? he asked.

Years, perhaps, seems one of the ancient ones told me so. Didn't I write about it in The Queen of the Damned? I thought of Marius and how angry he was with me in general. How disapproving he would be of what I'd done.

It was Maharet, your ancient red-haired one, David said. In your book, she claimed to have done the very thing merely to darken her skin.

What courage, I whispered. And you don't believe in her existence, do you? Though I am sitting right here with you now.

Oh, I do believe in her. Of course I do. I believe everything you've written. But I know you! Tell me-what actually happened in the desert? Did you really believe you would die?

You would ask that question, David, and right off the bat. I sighed. Well, I can't claim that I did really believe it. I was probably playing my usual games. I swear to God I don't tell lies to others. But I lie to myself. I don't think I can die now, at least not in any way that I myself could contrive.

He let out a long sigh.

So why aren't you afraid of dying, David? I don't mean to torment you with the old offer. I honestly can't quite figure it out. You're really, truly not afraid to die, and that I simply do not understand. Because you can die, of course.

Was he having doubts? He didn't answer immediately. Yet he seemed powerfully

stimulated, I could see that. I could all but hear his brain working, though of course I couldn't hear his thoughts.

Why the Faust play, David Am I Mephistopheles? I asked. Are you Faust?

He shook his head. I may be Faust, he said finally, taking another drink of the Scotch, but you're not the devil, that's perfectly clear. He gave a sigh.

I have wrecked things for you, though, haven't I I knew it in Amsterdam. You don't stay in the Motherhouse unless you have to. I'm not driving you mad, but I've had a very bad effect, have I not?

Again, he didn't answer right away. He was looking at me with his large prominent black eyes, and obviously considering the question from all angles. The deep lines of his face-the creases in his forehead, the lines at the corners of his eyes and around the edges of his mouth-reinforced his genial and open expression. There was not a sour note to this being, but there was unhappiness beneath the surface, and it was tangled with deep considerations, going back through a long life.

Would have happened anyway, Lestat, he said finally. There are reasons why I'm no longer so good at being the Superior General. Would have happened anyway, I'm relatively certain of that.

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Explain it to me. I thought you were in the very womb of the order, that it was your life.

He shook his head. I was always an unlikely candidate for the Talamasca. I've mentioned how I spent my youth in India. I could have lived my life that way. I'm no scholar in the conventional sense, never was. Nevertheless I am like Faust in the play. I'm old, and I haven't cracked the secrets of the universe. Not at all. I thought I had when I was young. The first time I saw . . . a vision. The first time I knew a witch, the first time I heard the voice of a spirit, the first time I called up a spirit and made it do my bidding. I thought I had! But that was nothing. Those are earthbound things. . . earthbound mysteries. Or mysteries I'll never solve, at any rate.

He paused, as if he wanted to say something more, something in particular. But then he merely lifted the glass and drank almost absently, and this time without the grimace, for that obviously had been for the first drink of the night. He stared at the glass, and refilled it from the decanter.

I hated it that I couldn't read his thoughts, that I caught not the slightest flickering emanations behind his words.

You know why I became a member of the Talamasca? he asked. It had nothing to do with scholarship at all. Never dreamed I'd be confined to the Motherhouse, wading through papers, and typing files into the computer, and sending faxes off all over the world. Nothing like that at all. It started with another hunting expedition, a new frontier, so to speak, a trip to far-off Brazil. That's where I discovered the occult, you might say, in the little crooked streets of old Rio, and it seemed every bit as exciting and dangerous as my old tiger hunts had ever been. That's what drew me-the d

anger. And how I came to be so far from it, I don't know.

I didn't reply, but something came clear to me, that there was obviously a danger in his knowing me. He must have liked the danger. I had thought he was possessed of a scholar's naivete about it, but now this didn't seem to be the case.

Yes, he said at once, his eyes growing wide as he smiled. Exactly. Although I can't honestly believe you'd ever harm me.

Don't deceive yourself, I said suddenly. And you do, you know. You commit the old sin. You believe in what you see. I am not what you see.

How so?

Ah, come now. I look like an angel, but I'm not. The old rules of nature encompass many creatures like me. We're beautiful like the diamond-backed snake, or the striped tiger, yet we're merciless killers. You do let your eyes deceive you. But I don't want to quarrel with you. Tell me this story. What happened in Rio I'm eager to know.

A little sadness came over me as I spoke these words. I wanted to say, if I cannot have you as my vampire companion, then let me know you as a mortal. It thrilled me, softly and palpably, that we sat there together, as we did.

All right, he said, you've made your point and I acknowledge it. Drawing close to you years ago in the auditorium where you were singing, seeing you the very first tune you came to me-it did have the dark lure of danger. And that you tempt me with your offer-that, too, is dangerous, for I am only human, as we both know.

I sat back, a little happier, lifting my leg and digging my heel into the leather seat of the old chair. I like people to be a little afraid of me, I said with a shrug. But what happened in Rio?

I came full in the face of the religion of the spirits; he said. Candomble. You know the word?

Again I gave a little shrug. Heard it once or twice, I said. I'll go there sometime, maybe soon. I thought in a flash of the big cities of South America, of her rain forests, and of the Amazon. Yes, I had quite an appetite for such an adventure,

and the despair that had carried me down into the Gobi seemed very far away. I was glad I was still alive, and quietly I refused to be ashamed.

Oh, if I could see Rio again, he said softly, more to himself than to me. Of course, she isn't what she was in those days. She's a world of skyscrapers now and big luxury hotels. But I would love to see that curving shoreline again, to see Sugar Loaf Mountain, and the statue of Christ atop Corcovado. I don't believe there is a more dazzling piece of geography on earth. Why did I let so many years go by without returning to Rio?

Why can't you go anytime that you wish? I asked. I felt a strong protectiveness for him suddenly. Surely that bunch of monks in London can't keep you from going. Besides, you're the boss.

He laughed in the most gentlemanly manner. No, they wouldn't stop me, he said. It's whether or not I have the stamina, both mental and physical. But that's quite beside the point here, I wanted to tell you what happened. Or perhaps it is the point, I don't know.

You have the means to go to Brazil if you want to?

Oh, yes, that has never been an issue. My father was a clever man when it came to money. As a consequence I've never had to give it much thought.

I'd put the money in your hands if you didn't have it.

He gave me one of his warmest, most tolerant smiles. I'm old, he said, I'm lonely, and something of a fool, as any man must be if he has any wisdom at all. But I'm not poor, thank heaven.

So what happened to you in Brazil How did it begin?

He started to speak, then fell silent.

You really mean to remain here To listen to what I have to say?

Yes, I said immediately. Please. I realized I wanted nothing more in all the world. I had not a single plan or ambition in my heart, not a thought for anything else but being here with him. The simplicity of it stunned me somewhat.

Still he seemed reluctant to confide in me. Then a subtle change came over him, a sort of relaxation, a yielding perhaps.

Finally he began.

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It was after the Second World War, he said. The India of my boyhood was gone, simply gone. And besides, I was hungry for new places. I got up a hunting expedition with my friends for the Amazon jungles. I was obsessed with the prospect of the Amazon jungles. We were after the great South American jaguar- He gestured to the spotted skin of a cat I had not noticed before, mounted upon a stand in a corner of the room. How I wanted to track that cat.

Seems that you did.

Not immediately, he said with a short ironic laugh. We decided to preface our expedition with a nice luxurious holiday in Rio, a couple of weeks to roam Copacabana Beach, and all the old colonial sites-the monasteries, churches, and so forth. And understand, the center of the city was different in that time, a warren of little narrow streets, and wonderful old architecture! I was so eager for it, for the sheer alien quality of it! That's what sends us Englishmen into the tropics. We have to get away from all this propriety, this tradition-and immerse ourselves in some seemingly savage culture which we can never tame or really understand.

His whole manner was changing as he spoke; he was becoming even more vigorous and energetic, eyes brightening and words flowing more quickly in that crisp British accent, which I so loved.

Well, the city itself surpassed all expectations, of course. Yet it was nothing as entrancing as the people. The people in Brazil are like no people I've ever seen. For one thing, they're exceptionally beautiful, and though everyone agrees on this point, no one knows why. No, I'm quite serious, he said, when he saw me smile, Perhaps it's the blending of Portuguese and African, and then toss in the Indian blood. I honestly

can't say. The fact is, they are extraordinarily attractive and they have extremely sensuous voices. Why, you could fall in love with their voices, you could end up kissing their voices; and the music, the bossa nova, that's their language all right.

You should have stayed there.

Oh, no! he said, taking another quick sip of the Scotch. Well, to continue. I developed a passion, shall we say, for this boy, Carlos, the very first week. I was absolutely swept away; all we did was drink and make love for days and nights on end in my suite in the Palace Hotel. Quite truly obscene.

Your friends waited?

No, laid down the law. Come with us now, or we leave you. But it was perfectly fine with them if Carlos came along. He

made a little gesture with his right hand. Ah, these were all sophisticated gentlemen, of course.

Of course.

But the decision to take Carlos proved to be a dreadful mistake. His mother was a Candomble priestess, though I hadn't the slightest idea of it, She didn't want her boy going off into the Amazon jungles. She wanted him going to school. She sent the spirits after me.

He paused, looking at me, perhaps trying to gauge my reaction.

That must have been wonderful fun, I said.

They pummeled me in the darkness. They picked up the bed off the floor and dumped

me out! They turned the taps in the shower so that I was nearly scalded. They filled my teacups with urine. After a full seven days, I thought I was going out of my mind. I'd gone from annoyance and incredulity to sheer terror. Dishes flew off the table in front of me. Bells rang in my ears. Bottles went crashing from the shelves. Wherever I went, I saw dark-faced individuals watching me.

You knew it was this woman?

Not at first. But Carlos finally broke down and confessed everything. His mother didn't intend to remove the curse until I left. Well, I left that very night.

I came back to London, exhausted and half mad. But it didn't do any good. They came with me. Same things started to happen right here in Taibot Manor. Doors slamming, furniture moving, the bells ringing all the time in the servants' pantry belowstairs. Everyone was going mad. And my mother-my mother had been more or less of a spiritualist, always running . to various mediums all over London. She brought in the Talamasca. I told them the whole story, and they started explaining Candomble and spiritism to me.

They exorcised the demons?

No. But after a

bout a week's intense study in the library of the Motherhouse and extensive interviews with the few members who had been to Rio, I was able to get the demons under control myself. Everyone was quite surprised. Then when I decided to go back to Brazil, I astonished them. They warned me this priestess was plenty powerful enough to kill me.

That's exactly it I said to them. 'I want that sort of power myself. I'm going to become her pupil. She's going to teach me. ' They begged me not to go. I told them I'd give

them a written report on my return. You can understand how I felt. I'd seen the work of these invisible entities. I'd felt them touch me. I'd seen objects hurtling through the air. I thought the great world of the invisible was opening up to me. I had to go there. Why, nothing could have discouraged me from it. Nothing at all.

Yes, I see, I said. It was as exciting as hunting big game.

Precisely. He shook his head. Those were the days. I suppose I thought if the war hadn't killed me, nothing could kill me. He drifted off suddenly, into his memories, locking me out.

You confronted the woman?

He nodded.

Confronted her and impressed her, and then bribed her beyond her wildest dreams. I told her I wanted to become her apprentice. I swore on my knees to her that I wanted to learn, that I wouldn't leave until I'd penetrated the mystery, and learned all that I could. He gave a little laugh. I'm not sure this woman had ever encountered an anthropologist, even an amateur, and I suppose that is what I might have been called. Whatever, I stayed a year in Rio. And believe you me, that was the most remarkable year of my life. I only left Rio finally, because I knew if I didn't, I never would. David Talbot the Englishman would have been no more.

You learned how to summon the spirits?

He nodded. Again, he was remembering, seeing images I couldn't see. He was troubled, faintly sad. I wrote it all down, he said finally. It's in the files at the Motherhouse. Many, many have read the story over the years.

Never tempted to publish it?

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Can't do it. It's part of being in the Talamasca. We never publish outside.

You're afraid you've wasted your life, aren't you?

No. I'm not, really . . . Though what I said earlier is true. I haven't cracked the secrets of the universe. I've never even passed the point I reached in Brazil. Oh, there were shocking revelations afterwards. I remember the first night I read the files on the vampires, how incredulous I was, and then those strange moments when I went down into the vaults and picked through the evidence. But in the end it was like Candomble. I only penetrated so far.

Believe me, I know. David, the world is meant to remain a mystery. If there is any explanation, we are not meant to hit upon it, of that much I'm sure.

I think you're right, he said sadly.

And I think you're more afraid of death than you will admit. You've taken a stubborn tack with me, a moral one, and I don't blame you. Maybe you're old enough and wise enough to really know you don't want to be one of us. But don't go talking about death as if it's going to give you answers. I suspect death is awful. You just stop and there's no more life, and no more chance to know anything at all.

No. I can't agree with you there, Lestat, he said. I simply can't. He was gazing at the tiger again, and then he said, Somebody formed the fearful symmetry, Lestat. Somebody had to. The tiger and the lamb . . . it couldn't have happened all by itself.

I shook my head. More intelligence went into the creation of that old poem, David,

than ever went into the creation of the world. You sound like an Episcopalian. But I know what you're saying. I've thought it from time to time myself. Stupidly simple. There has to be something to all this. There has to be! So many missing pieces. The more you consider it, the more atheists begin to sound like religious fanatics. But I think it's a delusion. It is all process and nothing more.

Missing pieces, Lestat. Of course! Imagine for a moment that I made a robot, a perfect replica of myself. Imagine I gave him all the encyclopedias of information that I could—you know, programmed it into his computer brain. Well, it would only be a matter of time before he'd come to me, and say, David, where's the rest of it? The explanation! How did it all start? Why did you leave out the explanation for why there was ever a big bang in the first place, or what precisely happened when the minerals and other inert compounds suddenly evolved into organic cells? What about the great gap in the fossil record?

I laughed delightedly.

And I'd have to break it to the poor chap, he said, that there was no explanation. That I didn't have the missing pieces.

David, nobody has the missing pieces. Nobody ever will.

Don't be so sure.

That's your hope, then? That's why you're reading the Bible? You couldn't crack the occult secrets of the universe, and now you've gone back to God?

God is the occult secret of the universe, David said, thoughtfully, almost as if brooding upon it, face very relaxed and almost young. He was staring at the glass in his hand, maybe liking the way the light collected in the crystal. I didn't know. I had to wait for him to speak.

I think the answer might be in Genesis, he said finally, I really do.

David, you amaze me. Talk about missing pieces. Genesis is a bunch of fragments.

Yes, but telling fragments remain to us, Lestat. God created man in His own image and likeness. I suspect that that is the key. Nobody knows what it really means, you know. The Hebrews didn't think God was a man.

And how can it be the key?

God is a creative force, Lestat. And so are we. He told Adam, 'Increase and multiply. ' That's what the first organic cells did, Lestat, increased and multiplied. Not merely changed shape but replicated themselves. God is a creative force. He made the whole universe out of Himself through cell division. That's why the devils are so full of envy-the bad angels, I mean. They are not creative creatures; they have no bodies, no cells, they're spirit. And I suspect it wasn't envy so much as a form of suspicion-that God was making a mistake in making another engine of creativity in Adam, so like Himself. I mean the angels probably felt the physical universe was bad enough, with all the replicating cells, but thinking, talking beings who could increase and multiply. They were probably outraged by the whole experiment. That was their sin.

So you're saying God isn't pure spirit.

That's right. God has a body. Always did. The secret of cell-dividing life lies within God. And all living cells have a tiny part of God's spirit in them, Lestat, that's the missing piece as to what makes life happen in the first place, what separates it from nonlife. It's exactly like your vampiric genesis. You told us that the spirit of Amel-one evil entity-infused the bodies of all the vampires . . . Well, men share in the spirit of God in the same way.

Good Lord, David, you're going out of your mind. We're a mutation.

Ah, yes, but you exist in our universe, and your mutation mirrors the mutation that we are. Besides, others have struck upon the same theory. God is the fire, and we are all tiny flames; and when we die, those tiny flames go back into the fire of God. But the important thing is to realize that God Himself is Body and Soul! Absolutely.

Western civilization has been founded upon an inversion. But it is my honest belief that in our daily deeds we know and honor the truth. It is only when we talk religion that we say God is pure spirit and always was and always will be, and that the flesh is evil. The truth is in Genesis, it's there. I'll tell you what the big bang was, Lestat. It was when the cells of God began to divide.

This really is a lovely theory, David. Was God surprised?

No, but the angels were. I'm quite serious. I'll tell you the superstitious part-the religious belief that God is perfect. He's obviously not.

What a relief, I said. It explains so much.

You're laughing at me now. I don't blame you. But you're absolutely right. It explains everything. God has made many mistakes. Many, many mistakes. As surely God Himself knows! And I suspect the angels tried to warn Hun. The Devil became the Devil becau

se he tried to warn God. God is love. But I'm not sure God is absolutely brilliant.

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I was trying to suppress my laughter, but I couldn't do it entirely. David, if you keep this up, you'll be struck by lightning.

Nonsense. God does want us to figure it out.

No. That I can't accept,

You mean you accept the rest? he said with another little laugh. No, but I'm quite serious. Religion is primitive in its illogical conclusions. Imagine a perfect God allowing for the Devil to come into existence. No, that's simply never made sense.

The entire flaw in the Bible is the notion that God is perfect. It represents a failure of imagination on the part of the early scholars. It's responsible for every impossible theological question as to good and evil with which we've been wrestling through the centuries. God is good, however, wondrously good. Yes, God is love. But no creative force is perfect. That's clear.

And the Devil Is there any new intelligence about him?

He regarded me for a moment with just a touch of impatience. You are such a cynical being, he whispered.

No, I'm not, I said. I honestly want to know. I have a particular interest in the Devil, obviously. I speak of him much more often than I speak of God. I can't figure out really why mortals love him so much, I mean, why they love the idea of him. But they do.

Because they don't believe in him, David said. Because a perfectly evil Devil makes even less sense than a perfect God. Imagine, the Devil never learning anything during all this time, never changing his mind about being the Devil. It's an insult to our intellect, such an idea.

So what's your truth behind the lie?

He's not purely unredeemable. He's merely part of God's plan. He's a spirit allowed to tempt and try humans. He disapproves of humans, of the entire experiment. See, that was the nature of the Devil's Fall, as I see it. The Devil didn't think the idea would work. But the key, Lestat, is understanding that God is matter! God is physical, God is the Lord of Cell Division, and the Devil abhors the excess of letting all this cell division run wild.

Again, he went into one of his maddening pauses, eyes widening again with wonder, and then he said:

I have another theory about the Devil.

Tell me.

There's more than one of them. And nobody appointed much likes the job. This he said almost in a murmur. He was distracted, as if he wanted to say more, but didn't.

I laughed outright.

Now that I can understand, I said. Who would like the job of being the Devil And to think that one can't possibly win. And especially considering that the Devil was an angel at the start of it all, and supposed to be very smart.

Exactly. He pointed his finger at me. Your little story about Rembrandt. The Devil, if

he had a brain, should have acknowledged the genius of Rembrandt.

And the goodness of Faust.

Ah, yes, you saw me reading Faust in Amsterdam, didn't you And you purchased your own copy as a consequence.

How did you know that?

The proprietor of the bookstore told me the next afternoon. A strange blond-haired young Frenchman came in moments

after I'd left, bought the very same book, and stood in the street reading it for half an hour without moving. Whitest skin the man had ever seen. Had to be you, of course.

I shook my head and smiled. I do these clumsy things. It's a wonder some scientist hasn't scooped me up in a net.

That's no joke, my friend. You were very careless in Miami several nights ago. Two victims drained entirely of blood.

This created such instant confusion in me that at first I said nothing, then only that it was a wonder the news had reached him on this side of the sea. I felt the old despair touch me with its black wing.

Bizarre killings make international headlines, he answered. Besides, the Talamasca receives reports of all sorts of things. We have people who clip for us in cities everywhere, sending in items on all aspects of the paranormal for our files. 'Vampire Killer Strikes Twice in Miami. ' Several sources sent it along.

But they don't really believe it was a vampire, you know they don't.

No, but you keep it up and they might come to believe it. That's what you wanted to happen before with your little rock music career. You wanted them to catch on. It's not inconceivable. And this sport of yours with the serial killers! You're leaving quite a trail of those.

This truly astonished me. My hunting of the killers had taken me back and forth across continents. I had never thought anyone would connect these widely scattered deaths, except Marius, of course.

How did you come to figure it out?

I told you. Such stories always come into our hands. Satanism, vampirism, voodoo, witchcraft, sightings of werewolves; it all comes across my desk. Most of it goes into the trash, obviously. But I know the grain of truth when I see it. And your killings are very easy to spot.

You've been going after these mass murderers for some time now. You leave their bodies in the open. You left this last one in a hotel, where he was found only an hour after his death. As for the old woman, you were equally careless! Her son found her the following day. No wounds for the coroner to find on either victim. You're a nameless celebrity hi Miami, quite overshadowing the notoriety of the poor dead man in the hotel.

I don't give a damn, I said angrily. But I did, of course. I deplored my own carelessness, yet I did nothing to correct it. Well, this must surely change. Tonight, had I done any better It seemed cowardly to plead excuses for such things.

David was watching me carefully. If there was one dominant characteristic to David, it was his alertness. It's not inconceivable, he said, that you could be caught.

I gave a scornful, dismissive laugh.

They could lock you up in a laboratory, study you in a cage of space-age glass.

That's impossible. But what an interesting thought.

I knew it! You want it to happen.

I shrugged. Might be fun for a little while. Look, it's a sheer impossibility. The night of my one appearance as a rock singer, all manner of bizarre things happened. The mortal world merely swept up afterwards and closed its files. As for the old woman in Miami, that was a terrible mishap. Should never have happened- I stopped. What about those who died in London this very night

But you enjoy taking life, he said. You said it was fun.

I felt such pain suddenly I wanted to leave. But I'd promised I wouldn't. I just sat there, staring into the fire, thinking about the Gobi Desert, and the bones of the big lizards and the way the light of the sun had filled up the entire world. I thought of Claudia. I smelled the wick of the lamp.

I'm sorry, I don't mean to be cruel to you, he said.

Well, why the hell not I can't think of a finer choice for cruelty. Besides, I'm not always so kind to you.

What do you really want What is your overriding passion?

I thought of Marius, and Louis, who had both asked me that same question many a time.

What could redeem what I've done? I asked. I meant to put an end to the killer. He was a man-eating tiger, my brother. I lay in wait for him. But the old woman-she was a child in the forest, nothing more. But what does it matter? I thought of those wretched creatures whom I'd taken earlier this evening. I'd left such carnage in the back alleys of London. I wish I could remember that it doesn't matter, I said. I meant to save her. But what good would one act of mercy be in the face of all I've done I'm

damned if there is a God or a Devil. Now why don't you go on with your religious talk The odd thing is, I find talk of God and the Devil remarkably soothing. Tell me more about the Devil. He's changeable, surely. He's smart. He must feel. Why ever would he remain static?

Exactly. You know what it says in the Book of Job.

Remind me.

Well, Satan is there in heaven, with God. God says, where have you been And Satan says, roaming around the earth! It's a regular conversation. And they begin arguing about Job. Satan believes Job's goodness is founded entirely up

on his good fortune. And God agrees to let Satan torment Job. This is the most nearly true picture of the situation which we possess. God doesn't know everything. The Devil is a good friend of his. And the whole thing is an experiment. And this Satan is a far cry from being the Devil as we know him now, worldwide.

You're really speaking of these ideas as if they were real beings. . .

I think they are real, he said, his voice trailing off slightly as he fell into his thoughts. Then he roused himself. I want to tell you something. Actually I should have confessed it before now. In a way, I'm as superstitious and religious as the next man. Because all this is based on a vision of sorts-you know, the sort of revelation that affects one's reason.

No, I don't know. I have dreams but without revelation, I said. Explain, please.

He sank back into reverie again, looking at the fire.

Don't shut me out, I said softly.

Hmmm. Right. I was thinking how to describe it. Well, you know I am a Candomble priest still. I mean I can summon invisible forces: the pest spirits, the astral tramps, whatever one wants to call them . . . the poltergeist, the little haunts. That means I must have always had a latent ability to see spirits.

Yes. I suppose . . .

Well, I did see something once, something inexplicable, before I ever went to Brazil.

Yes?

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Before Brazil, I'd pretty much discounted it. In fact, it was so disturbing, so perfectly unaccountable, that I'd put it out of my mind by the time I went to Rio. Yet now, I think of it all the time. I can't stop myself from thinking of it. And that's why I've turned to the Bible, as if I'll find some wisdom there.

Tell me.

Happened in Paris right before the war. I was there with my mother. I was in a cafe on the Left Bank, and I don't even remember now which cafe it was, only that it was a lovely spring day and a simply grand time to be in Paris, as all the songs say. I was drinking a beer, reading the English papers, and I realized I was overhearing a conversation. He drifted away again. I wish I knew what really happened, he murmured under his breath.

He sat forward, gathered up the poker in his right hand, and jabbed at the logs, sending a plume of fiery sparks up the dark bricks.

I wanted desperately to pull him back, but I waited. At last he went on.

I was in this cafe, as I said.

Yes.

And I realized I was overhearing this strange conversation . . . and it wasn't in English and it wasn't in French . . . and gradually I came to know that it wasn't in any language really, and yet it was fully understandable to me. I put down my paper, and began to concentrate. On and on it went. It was a sort of argument. And suddenly I

didn't know whether or not the voices were audible in any conventional sense. I wasn't sure anyone else could actually hear this! I looked up and slowly turned around.

And there they were . . . two beings, seated at the table talking to each other, and just for a moment, it seemed normal-two men in conversation. I looked back at my paper, and this swimming feeling came over me. I had to anchor myself to something, to fix on the paper for a moment and then the tabletop, and make the swimming cease. The noise of the cafe came back like a full orchestra. And I knew I'd just turned and looked at two individuals who weren't human beings.

I turned around again, forcing myself to focus tightly, to be aware of things, keenly aware. And there they were still, and it was painfully clear they were illusory. They simply weren't of the same fabric as everything else. Do you know what I'm saying I can break it down into parts. They weren't being illuminated by the same light, for instance, they existed in some realm where the light was from another source.

Like the light in Rembrandt.

Yes, rather like that. Their clothes and their faces were smoother than those of human beings. Why, the whole vision was of a different texture, and that texture was uniform in all its details.

Did they see you?

No. I mean to say, they didn't look at me, or acknowledge me. They looked at each other, they went on talking, and I picked up the thread again instantly. It was God talking to the Devil and telling the Devil that he must go on doing the job. And the Devil didn't want to do it. He explained that his term had already been too long. The same thing was happening to him that had happened to all the others. God said that He understood, but the Devil ought to know how important he was, he couldn't

simply shirk his duties, it wasn't that simple, God needed him, and needed him to be strong. And all this was very amicable.

What did they look like?

That's the worst part of it. I don't know. At the time I saw two vague shapes, large, definitely male, or assuming male form, shall we say, and pleasant-looking-nothing monstrous, nothing out of the ordinary really. I wasn't aware of any absence of particulars-you know, hair color, facial features, that sort of thing. The two figures seemed quite complete. But when I tried to reconstruct the event afterwards, I couldn't recall any details! I don't think the illusion was that nearly complete. I think I was satisfied by it, but the sense of completeness sprang from something else.

From what?

The content, the meaning, of course.

They never saw you, never knew you were there.

My dear boy, they had to know I was there. They must have known. They must have been doing it for my benefit! How else could I have been allowed to see it?

I don't know, David. Maybe they didn't mean for you to see. Maybe it's that some people can see, and some people can't. Maybe it was a little rip in the other fabric, the fabric of everything else in the cafe.

That could be true. But I fear it wasn't. I fear I was meant to see it and it was meant to have some effect on me. And that's the horror, Lestat. It didn't have a very great effect.

You didn't change your life on account of it.

Oh, no, not at all. Why, two days later I doubted I'd even seen it. And with each telling to another person, with each little verbal confrontation-'David, you've gone crackers'-it became ever more uncertain and vague. No, I never did anything about it.

But what was there to do What can anybody do on account of any revelation but live a good life David, surely you told your brethren in the Talamasca about the vision.

Yes, yes, I told them. But that was much later, after Brazil,, when I filed my long memoirs, as a good member should do. I told them the whole story, such as it was, of course.

And what did they say?

Lestat, the Talamasca never says much of anything, that's what one has to face. 'We watch and we are always there. ' To tell the truth, it wasn't a very popular vision to go talking about with the other members. Speak of spirits in Brazil and you have an audience. But the Christian God and His Devil No, I fear the Talamasca is subject somewhat to prejudices and even fads, like any other institution. The story raised a few eyebrows. I don't recall much else. But then when you're talking to gentlemen who have seen werewolves, and been seduced by vampires, and fought witches, and talked to ghosts, well, what do you expect?

But God and the Devil, I said, laughing. David, that's the big time. Maybe the other members envied you more than you realized.

No, they didn't take it seriously, he said, acknowledging my humor with a little laugh of his own. I'm surprised that you've taken it seriously, to be quite frank.

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He rose suddenly, excitedly, and walked across the room to the window, and pushed back the drape with his hand. He stood trying to see out into the snow-filled night.

David, what could these apparitions have meant for you to do?

I don't know, he said, in a bitter discouraged voice. That's my point. I'm seventy-four, and I don't know. I'll die without knowing. And if there is no illumination, then so be it. That in itself is an answer, whether I am conscious enough to know it or not.

Come back and sit down, if you will. I like to see your face when you talk.

He obeyed, almost automatically, seating himself and reaching for the empty glass, eyes shifting to the fire again

.

What do you think, Lestat, really Inside of you Is there a God or a Devil I mean truly, what do you believe?

I thought for a long time before I answered. Then:

I do think God exists. I don't like to say so. But I do. And probably some form of Devil exists as well. I admit-it's a matter of the missing pieces, as we've said. And you might well have seen the Supreme Being and His Adversary in that Paris cafe. But it's part of their maddening game that we can never figure it out for certain. You want a likely explanation for their behavior Why they let you have a little glimpse They wanted to get you embroiled in some sort of religious response! They play with

us that way. They throw out visions and miracles and bits and pieces of divine revelation. And we go off full of zeal and found a church. It's all part of their game, part of their ongoing and endless talk. And you know I think your view of them-an imperfect God and a learning Devil-is just about as good as anyone else's interpretation. I think you've hit on it.

He was staring at me intently, but he didn't reply.

No, I continued. We aren't meant to know the answers. We aren't meant to know if our souls travel from body to body through reincarnation. We aren't meant to know if God made the world. If He's Allah or Yahweh or Shiva or Christ. He plants the doubts as He plants the revelations. We're all His fools.

Still he didn't answer.

Quit the Talamasca, David, I said. Go to Brazil before you're too old. Go back to India. See the places you want to see.

Yes, I think I should do that, he said softly. And they'll probably take care of it all for me. The elders have already met to discuss the entire question of David and his recent absences from the Motherhouse. They'll retire me with a nice pension, of course.

Do they know that you've seen me?

Oh, yes. That's part of the problem. The elders have forbidden contact. Very amusing really, since they are so desperate to lay eyes upon you themselves. They know when you come round the Motherhouse, of course.

I know they do, I said. What do you mean, they've forbidden contact?

Oh, just the standard admonition, he said, eyes still on the burning log. All very

medieval, really, and based upon an old directive: 'You are not to encourage this being, not to engage in or prolong conversation; if he persists in his visits, you are to do your best to lure him to some populated place. It is well known that these creatures are loath to attack when surrounded by mortals. And never, never are you to attempt to learn secrets from this being, or to believe for one moment that any emotions evinced by him are genuine, for these creatures dissemble with remarkable ability, and have been known, for reasons that cannot be analyzed, to drive mortals mad. This has befallen sophisticated investigators as well as hapless innocents with whom the vampires come in contact. You are warned to report any and all meetings, sightings, etc. , to the elders without delay. '

Do you really know this by heart?

I wrote the directive myself, he said, with a little smile. I've given it to many other members over the years.

They know I'm here now?

No, of course not. I stopped reporting our meetings to them a long time ago. He fell into his thoughts again, and then: Do you search for God? he asked.

Certainly not, I answered. I can't imagine a bigger waste of time, even if one has centuries to waste. I'm finished with all such quests. I look to the world around me now for truths, truths mired in the physical and in the aesthetic, truths I can fully embrace. I care about your vision because you saw it, and you told me, and I love you. But that's all.

He sat back, gazing off again into the shadows of the room.

Won't matter, David. In time, you'll die. And probably so shall I.

His smile was warm again as though he could not accept this except as a sort of joke.

There was a long silence, during which he poured a little more Scotch and drank it more slowly than he had before. He wasn't even close to being intoxicated. I saw that he planned it that way. When I was mortal I always drank to get drunk. But then I'd been very young, and very poor, castle or no castle, and most of the brew was bad.

You search for God, he said, with a little nod.

The hell I do. You're too full of your own authority. You know perfectly well that I am not the boy you see here.

Ah, I must be reminded of that, you're correct. But you could never abide evil. If you've told the truth half the time in your books, it's plain that you were sick of evil from the beginning. You'd give anything to discover what God wants of you and to do what He wants.

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You're in your dotage already. Make your will.

Oooh, so cruel, he said with his bright smile.

I was going to say something else to him, when I was distracted. There was a little pulling somewhere in my consciousness. Sounds. A car passing very slowly on the narrow road through the distant village, in a blinding snow.

I scanned, caught nothing, merely the snow falling, and the car edging its way along. Poor sad mortal to be driving through the country at this hour. It was four of the clock.

It's very late, I said. I have to leave now. I don't want to spend another night here, though you've been most kind. It's nothing to do with anyone knowing. I simply prefer . . .

I understand. When will I see you again?

Perhaps sooner than you think, I said. David, tell me. The other night, when I left here, hell-bent on burning myself to a crisp in the Gobi, why did you say that I was your only friend?

You are.

We sat there in silence for a moment.

You are my only friend as well, David, I said.

Where are you going?

I don't know. Back to London, perhaps. I'll tell you when I go back across the Atlantic. Is that all right?

Yes, do tell me. Don't . . . don't ever believe that I don't want to see you, don't ever abandon me again.

If I thought I was good for you, if I thought your leaving the order and traveling again was good for you . . .

Oh, but it is. I don't belong anymore in the Talamasca. I'm not even sure I trust it any longer, or believe in its aims.

I wanted to say more-to tell him how much I loved him, that I'd sought shelter under his roof and he'd protected me and that I would never forget this, and that I would do anything he wished of me, anything at all.

But it seemed pointless to say so. I don't know whether he would have believed it, or what the value would have been. I was still convinced that it was not good for him to see me. And there wasn't very much left to him in this life.

I know all this, he said quietly, gracing me with that smile again.

David, I said, the report you made of your adventures in Brazil. Is there a copy here
Could I read this report?

He stood up and went to the glass-doored bookshelf nearest his desk- He looked through the many materials there for a long moment, then removed two large leather folders from the shelf.

This is my life in Brazil-what I wrote in the jungles after, on a little rattletrap portable typewriter at a camp table, before I came home to England. I did go after the jaguar, of course. Had to do it. But the hunt was nothing compared to my experiences in Rio, absolutely nothing. That was the turning point, you see. I believe the very writing of this was some desperate attempt to become an Englishman again, to distance myself from the Candomble people, from the life I'd been living with them. My report for the Talamasca was based upon the material here.

I took it from him gratefully.

And this, he said, holding the other folder, is a brief summary of my days in India and Africa.

I would like to read that too.

Old hunting stories mostly. I was young when I wrote this. It's all big guns and action! It was before the war.

I took this second folder as well. I stood up, in slow gentlemanly fashion.

I've talked the night away, he said suddenly. That was rude of me. Perhaps you had things to say.

No, not at all. It was exactly what

I wanted. I offered my hand and he took it. Amazing the sensation of his touch against the burnt flesh.

Lestat, he said, the little short story here. . . the Lovecraft piece. Do you want it back, or shall I save it for you?

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Ah, that, now that's a rather interesting tale-I mean how I came in possession of that.

I took the story from him and shoved it in my coat. Perhaps I'd read it again. My curiosity returned, and along with it a sort of fearful suspicion. Venice, Hong Kong, Miami. How had that strange mortal spotted me in all three places, and managed to see that I had spotted him!

Do you care to tell me about it? David asked gently,

When there's more time, I said, I shall tell you. Especially if I ever see that guy again, I thought. How ever did he do it

I went out in a civilized manner, actually making a little bit of deliberate noise as I closed the side door of the house.

It was close to dawn when I reached London. And for the first time in many a night, I was actually glad of my immense powers, and the great feeling of security which they conveyed. I needed no coffins, no dark hiding places, merely a room completely isolated from the rays of the sun. A fashionable hotel with heavy curtains would provide both the peace and the comfort.

And I had a little time to settle in the warm light of a lamp and begin David's Brazilian adventure, which I looked forward to, with inordinate delight.

I had almost no money with me, thanks to my recklessness and madness, so I used my considerable powers of persuasion with the clerks of venerable old Claridge's so that they accepted the number of my credit account, though I had no card to verify it,

and upon my signature-Sebastian Melmoth, one of my favorite aliases-I was shown to a lovely upper suite crowded with charming Queen Anne furniture and fitted with every convenience I could wish.

I put out the polite little printed notice that I wasn't to be disturbed, left word with the desk I must not be bothered until well after sunset, then latched all the doors from the inside.

There really wasn't time to read. The morning was coming behind the heavy gray sky and the snow drifting down still in large soft wet flakes. I closed all the draperies, save one, so that I might look at the sky, and I stood there, at the front of the hotel, waiting for the spectacle of the light to come, and still a little afraid of its fury, and the pain in my skin growing a little worse from that fear, more than anything else.

David was much on my mind; I hadn't ceased to think about our conversation for a second since I'd left him. I kept hearing his voice and trying to imagine his fragmentary vision of God and the Devil in the cafe. But my position on all this was simple and predictable. I thought David in possession of the most comforting delusions. And soon he'd be gone from me. Death would have him. And all I would have would be these manuscripts of his life. I couldn't force myself to believe he would know anything more at all when he was dead.

Nevertheless it was all very surprising, really, the turn the conversation had taken, and his energy, and the peculiar things he'd said.

I was comfortable in these thoughts, watching the leaden sky and the snow piling on the sidewalks far below, when I suddenly experienced a bout of dizziness-in fact, a complete moment of disorientation, as though I were falling asleep. It was very pleasurable, actually, the subtle vibratory sensation, accompanied by a weightlessness, as though I were indeed floating out of the physical and into my dreams. Then came that pressure again which I'd felt so fleetingly in Miami-of my

limbs constricting, indeed of my whole form pressing inwards upon me, narrowing me and compressing me, and the sudden frightening image of myself being forced through the very top of my head!

Why was this happening I shuddered as I had done on that lonely dark Florida beach when it happened before. And at once the feeling was dissipated. I was myself again and vaguely annoyed.

Was something going wrong with my handsome, godlike anatomy Impossible. I didn't need the old ones to assure me of such a truth. And I had not made up my mind whether I should worry about this or forget it, or indeed, try to induce it again myself, when I was brought out of my preoccupation by a knock at the door.

Most irritating.

A message for you, sir. The gentleman requested I put it in your hands.

Had to be some mistake. Nevertheless I opened the door The young man gave me an envelope. Fat, bulky. For on second I could only stare at it. I had a one-pound note still in my pocket, from the little thief I'd chomped on earlier, and I gave this to the boy, and locked the door again.

This was exactly the same kind of envelope I'd been given in Miami by that lunatic mortal who'd come running towards me across the sand. And the sensation! I'd experienced that bizarre sensation right at the moment my eyes had fallen on that creature. Oh, but this was not possible . . .

I tore open the envelope. My hands were suddenly shaking. It was another little printed short story, clipped out of a book exactly as the first one had been, and stapled at the upper-left-hand corner in precisely the same way!

I was dumbfounded! How in the hell had this being tracked me here No one knew I was here! David didn't even know I was here! Oh, there were the credit card numbers involved, but dear God, it would have taken hours for any mortal to locate me that way, even if such a thing were possible, which it really was not.

And what had the sensation to do with it-the curious vibratory feeling and the pressure which seemed to be inside my own limbs

But there was no time to consider any of this. It was almost morning!

The danger in the situation made itself immediately apparent to me. Why the hell hadn't I seen it before This being did most definitely have some means of knowing where I was-even where I chose to conceal myself during daylight! I had to get out of these rooms. How perfectly outrageous!

Trembling with annoyance, I forced myself to scan this story, which was only a few pages in length. Eyes of the Mummy was the title, author Robert Bloch. A clever little tale, but what could it possibly mean to me I thought of the Lovecraft, which had been much longer and seemed wholly different. What on earth could all this signify The seeming idiocy of it further maddened me.

But it was too late to think about it anymore. I gathered up David's manuscripts, and left the rooms, rushing out of a fire exit and going up to the roof. I scanned the night in all directions. I couldn't find the little bastard! Lucky for him. I would surely have destroyed him on sight. When it comes to protecting my daylight lair, I have little patience or restraint.

I moved upwards, covering the miles with the greatest speed I could attain. At last I descended in a snow-covered wood far, far north of London and there I dug my own grave in the frozen earth as I had done so many times before.

I was in a fury for having to do so. A positive fury. I'm going to kill this son of a bitch, I thought, whoever the hell he is. How dare he come stalking me, and shoving these stories in my face! Yes, I shall do that, kill him as soon as I catch him.

But then the drowsiness came, the numbness, and very soon nothing mattered . . .

Once again I was dreaming, and she was there, lighting the oil lamp, and saying, Ah, the flame doesn't frighten you anymore . . .

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You're mocking me, I said, miserably. I'd been weeping.

Ah, but, Lestat, you do have a way of recovering from these cosmic fits of despair awfully fast. There you were dancing under the street lamps in London. Really!

I wanted to protest, but I was crying, and I couldn't talk . . .

In one last jolt of consciousness, I saw that mortal in Venice-under the arches of San Marco-where I'd first noticed him-saw his brown eyes and smooth youthful mouth.

What do you want I demanded.

Ah, but it is what you want, he seemed to reply.

Chapter 6

SIX

I WASN'T so angry with the little fiend when I woke up. Actually, I was powerfully intrigued. But then the sun had set and I had the upper hand.

I decided upon a little experiment. I went to Paris, making the crossing very quickly and on my own.

Now let me digress here for a moment, only to explain that in recent years I had avoided Paris utterly, and indeed, I knew nothing of it as a twentieth-century city at all. The reasons for this are probably obvious. I had suffered much there in ages past,

and I guarded myself against the visions of modern buildings rising around Pere-Lachaise cemetery or electrically lighted Ferns wheels turning in the Tuileries. But I had always secretly longed to return to Paris, naturally. How could I not

And this little experiment gave me courage and a perfect excuse. It deflected the inevitable pain of my observations, for I had a purpose. But within moments of my arrival, I realized that I was very truly in Paris-that this could be no place else-and I was overwhelmed with happiness as I walked on the grand boulevards, and inevitably past the place where the Theatre of the Vampires had once stood.

Indeed a few theatres of that period had survived into modern times, and there they were-imposing and ornate and still drawing in their audiences, amid the more modern structures on all sides.

I realized as I wandered the brilliantly lighted Champs Ely-sees-which was jammed with tiny speeding cars, as well as thousands of pedestrians-that this was no museum city, like Venice. It was as alive now as it had ever been in the last two centuries. A capital. A place of innovation still and courageous change.

I marveled at the stark splendour of the Georges Pompidou Center, rising so boldly within sight of the venerable flying buttresses of Notre Dame. Oh, I was glad I had come.

But I had a task, did I not

I didn't tell a soul, mortal or immortal, that I was there. I did not call my Paris lawyer, though it was most inconvenient. Rather I acquired a great deal of money in the old familiar manner of taking it from a couple of thoroughly unsavory and well-heeled criminal victims in the dark streets.

Then I headed for the snow-covered Place Vendome, which contained the very same

palaces which it had in my day, and under the alias of Baron Van Kindergarten, ensconced myself in a lavish suite at the Ritz.

There for two nights, I avoided the city, enveloped in a luxury and style that was truly worthy of Marie Antoinette's Versailles. Indeed it brought tears to my eyes to see the excessive Parisian decoration all around me, the gorgeous Louis XVI chairs, and the lovely embossed paneling of the walls. Ah, Paris. Where else can wood be painted gold and still look beautiful!

Sprawled on a tapestried directoire daybed, I set at once to reading David's manuscripts, only now and then breaking off to walk about the silent parlour and bedroom, or to open a real French window, with its encrusted oval knob, and gaze out at the back garden of the hotel, so very formal and quiet and proud.

David's writing captivated me. I soon felt closer to him than ever before.

What was plain was that David had been wholly a man of action in his youth, and drawn into the realm of books only when they spoke of action, and that he'd always found his greatest pleasure in the hunt. He had taken down his first game when he was only ten years old. His descriptions of shooting the big Bengal tigers were infused with the excitement of the pursuit itself and the risks he ultimately endured. Always drawing very close to the beast before he fired his gun, he had almost been killed more than once.

He had loved Africa as well as India, hunting elephants in the days when no one ever dreamed the species would be in danger of dying out. Again, he had been charged innumerable times before he had brought them down. And in hunting of the big bull and the lions of the Serengeti Plain he had courted similar risks.

Indeed, he had gone out of his way to hike arduous mountain trails, to swim in dangerous rivers, to lay his hand upon the tough hide of the crocodile, to overcome

his inveterate revulsion for snakes. He had loved to sleep in the open; to scribble entries in his diary by the light of oil lanterns or candles; to eat only the meat of the animals he killed, even when there was very little of it; and to skin his kills without aid.

His power of description was not so very great. He was not patient with written words, especially not when he was young. Yet one could feel the heat of the tropics in this memoir; one heard the buzz of the gnats. It seemed inconceivable that such a man had ever enjoyed the wintry comforts of Talbot Manor, or the luxury of the motherhouses of the order, to which he was somewhat addicted now.

But many another British gentleman had known such choices and done what he thought appropriate to his position and his age.

As for the adventure in Brazil, it might as well have been written by a different man. There was the same sparse and precise vocabulary, and there was the same lust for danger, naturally, but with the turning to the supernatural, a far more clever and cerebral individual had come to the fore. Indeed, the vocabulary itself changed, incorporating many baffling Portuguese and African words for concepts and physical feelings which David felt plainly at a loss to describe.

But the gist was that the deep telepathic powers of David's brain had been developed through a series of primitive and terrifying encounters with Brazilian priestesses, and spirits as well. And the body of David had become a mere instrument for this psychic power, thereby paving the way for the scholar who had emerged in the years that followed.

There was much physical description in this Brazilian memoir. It told of small wooden rooms in the country where the Candomble believers gathered, lighting candles before their plaster statues of Catholic saints and Candomble gods. It told of the drums and the dancing; and the inevitable trances as various members of the

group became unconscious hosts to the spirits and took on the attributes of a certain deity for long spells of unremembered time.

But the emphasis was now entirely upon the invisible-upon the perception of inner strength and the battle with the forces outside. The adventurous young man who had sought truth purely in the physical-the smell of the beast, the jungle path, the crack of the gun, the fall of the prey-was gone.

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By the time David had left the city of Rio de Janeiro he was a different being. For though his narrative had been tightened and polished later, and undoubtedly edited, it nevertheless included much of his diary written at the very time. There was no doubt that he had been on the verge of madness in the conventional sense. He no longer saw streets and buildings and people everywhere he looked; he saw spirits, gods, invisible powers emanating from others, and various levels of spiritual resistance upon the part of humans, both conscious and unconscious, to all such things. Indeed, if he had not gone into the jungles of the Amazon, if he had not forced himself to become the British game hunter again, he might have been lost forever from his old world.

For months, he had been a gaunt, sunburnt creature in shirtsleeves and soiled pants, wandering Rio in search of ever greater spiritual experience, having no contact whatsoever with his countrymen no matter how they badgered him for such contact. And then he'd outfitted himself in his proper khaki, taken up his big guns, laid up a store of the best British provisions for a camping trip, and gone off to recover himself as he brought down the spotted jaguar, and skinned and gutted the carcass of the beast with his own knife.

Body and soul!

It really wasn't so incredible that in all these years he had never returned to Rio de Janeiro, for if he had ever made the journey back there, perhaps he could not have left.

Yet obviously, the life of the Candomble adept was not enough for him. Heroes seek adventure, but the adventure itself does not swallow them whole.

How it sharpened my love for him to know of these experiences, and how it saddened me to think that he had spent his life in the Talamasca ever since. It did not seem worthy of him, or no, it did not seem the best thing to make him happy, no matter how he insisted that he had wanted it. It seemed t

he very wrong thing.

And of course, this deepening knowledge of him made me ache for him all the more. I considered again that in my dark preternatural youth, I had made companions for myself who could never really be companions-Gabrielle, who had no need of me; Nicolas, who had gone mad; Louis, who could not forgive me for having seduced him into the realm of the undead, even though he had wanted it himself.

Only Claudia had been the exception-my intrepid little Claudia, companion hunter and slayer of random victims- vampire par excellence. And it had been her alluring strength which caused her ultimately to turn upon her maker. Yes, she had been the only one who had been like me really-as they say in this day and age. And that might have been the reason that she was haunting me now.

Surely there was some connection to my love of David! And I had failed to see it before. How I loved him; and how deep had been the emptiness when Claudia turned against me, and was my companion no more.

These manuscripts more fully illuminated another point for me as well. David was the very man to refuse the Dark Gift, and to the bitter end. This man feared nothing really. He didn't like death, but he didn't fear it. He never had.

But I had not come to Paris merely to read this memoir. I had another purpose in mind. I left the blessed and timeless isolation of the hotel and began to wander-slowly, visibly- about.

In the Rue Madeleine, I purchased fine clothes for myself, including a dark blue double-breasted coat of cashmere wool. Then I spent hours on the Left Bank, visiting its bright and inviting cafes, and thinking of David's story of God and the Devil, and wondering what on earth he had really seen. Of course, Paris would be a fine place for God and the Devil but. . .

I traveled the underground Metro for some time, studying the other passengers, trying to determine what was so different about Parisians. Was it their alertness, their energy The way they avoided eye contact with others I could not determine it. But they were very different from Americans-I had seen it everywhere-and I realized I understood them. I liked them.

That Paris was such a rich city, so filled with expensive fur coats and jewels and boutiques beyond counting, left me faintly amazed. It seemed richer even than the cities of America. It had seemed no less rich perhaps in my time with its glass coaches and white-wigged ladies and gentlemen. But the poor had been there too, everywhere, even dying in the very streets. And now I saw only the rich, and at moments, the entire city with its millions of motorcars and countless stone town houses, hotels and mansions seemed almost beyond belief.

Of course I hunted. I fed.

At twilight the next night, I stood on the top floor of the Pompidou under a sky as purely violet as any in my beloved New Orleans, watching all the lights of the great sprawling city come to life. I gazed at the distant Eiffel Tower, rising so sharply in the divine gloom.

Ah, Paris, I knew I would come back here, yes, and soon. Some night in the future I would make a lair for myself on the rue St. Louis, which I had always loved. To hell with the big houses of the Avenue Foch. I would find the building where once Gabrielle and I had worked the Dark Magic together, mother leading her son to make

her his daughter, and mortal life had released her as if it were a mere hand I'd grabbed by the wrist.

I would bring Louis back with me-Louis, who had loved this city so much before he lost Qaudia. Yes, he must be invited to love it again.

Meantime I'd walk slowly over to the Cafe de la Paix in the great hotel where Louts and Claudia had lodged during that tragic year in the reign of Napoleon III, and I would sit there with my glass of wine, untouched, forcing myself to think calmly of all that-and that it was done.

Well, I had been strengthened by my ordeal in the desert, that was plain. And I was ready for something to happen . . .

. . . And finally in the early hours of the morning, when I had become a bit melancholy and was grieving a little for the old tumbledown buildings of the 1780s, and when the mists were hanging over the half-frozen river, and I was leaning on the high stone ledge of the bank very near the bridge to the lie de la Cite, I saw my man.

First came that sensation, and this time I recognized it right off for what it was. I studied it as it was happening to me-the faint disorientation which I allowed without ever losing control; and soft delicious ripples of vibration; and then the deep constriction which included my entire form-fingers, toes, arms, legs, trunk-as before. Yes, as if my entire body, while retaining its exact proportions, was growing smaller and smaller, and I was being forced out of this dwindling shape! At the very moment when it seemed damned nigh impossible to remain within myself, my head cleared, and the sensations came to a halt.

This was precisely what had happened both times before. I stood at the bridge, considering this, and memorizing the details.

Then I beheld a battered little car jerking to a stop on the far side of the river, and out he climbed-the young brown-haired one-awkwardly as before, and rising to his full height tentatively and fixing me with his ecstatic and glittering eyes.

He'd left the motor of his little machine running. I smelled his fear as I had before. Of course he knew that I had seen him, there could be no mistake of that. I'd been here a full two hours, waiting for him to find me, and I suppose he realized this as well.

Finally he screwed up his courage and came across the bridge through the fog, an immediately impressive figure in a long greatcoat, with a white scarf about the neck, half walking, half running, and stopping a few feet away from me, as I stood there with my elbow on the rail, staring at him coldly. He thrust at me another little envelope. I grabbed his hand.

Don't be hasty, Monsieur de Lioncourt! he whispered desperately. British accent, upper-class, very like David's, and he'd got the French syllables very close to perfect. He was near perishing with fear.

Who the hell are you! I demanded.

I have a proposition for you! You'd be a fool if you didn't listen. It's something you'll want very much. And no one else in this world can offer it to you, be assured!

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I let him go and he sprang back, nearly toppling over, hand flung out to catch the stone rail. What was it about this man's gestures He was powerfully built, but he moved as if he were a thin, tentative creature. I couldn't figure it out.

Explain this proposition now! I said, and I could hear his heart come to a stop inside his broad chest.

No, he said. But we shall talk very soon. Such a cultured voice, a polished voice.

Far too refined and careful for the large glazed brown eyes, and the smooth robust young face. Was he some hothouse plant grown to prodigious proportions in the company of elderly people, never having seen a person his own age

Don't be hasty! he shouted again, and off he ran, stumbling, then catching himself, and then forcing his tall, clumsy body into the small car, and driving off through the frozen snow.

Indeed, he was going so fast as he disappeared into St. Ger-main, I thought he would have a wreck and kill himself.

I looked down at the envelope. Another damned short story, no doubt. I tore it open angrily, not sure I should have let him go, and yet somehow enjoying this little game, and even enjoying my own indignation at his cleverness and capacity for tracking me.

I saw that, indeed, it was a videotape of a recent film. Vice Versa was the title. What on earth . . . I flipped it over, and scanned the advertisement. A comic piece.

I returned to the hotel. There was yet another package waiting for me. Another videotape. All of Me was the name of it, and once again, the description on the back of the plastic case gave a fair idea of what it was about.

I went to my rooms. No video player! Not even in the Ritz. I rang David, though it was now very near dawn.

Would you come to Paris I'll have everything arranged for you. See you at dinner, eight o'clock tomorrow in the dining room downstairs.

Then I did call my mortal agent, rousing him from bed and instructing him to arrange David's ticket, limousine, suite, and whatever else he

should need. There should be cash waiting for David; there should be flowers; and chilled champagne. Then I went out to find a safe place to sleep.

But an hour later-as I stood in the dark dank cellar of an old abandoned house-I wondered if the little mortal bastard couldn't see me even now, if he didn't know where I slept by day, and couldn't come bring in the sun upon me, like some cheap vampire-hunter in a bad movie, with no respect for the mysterious at all.

I dug deep beneath the cellar. No mortal alone could have found me there. And even in my sleep, I might have strangled him if he had, without my ever knowing it.

So what do you think it all means? I said to David. The dining room was exquisitely decorated and half empty. I sat there hi the candlelight, in black dinner jacket and boiled shirt, with my arms folded before me, enjoying the fact that I needed only the pale-violet tinted glasses now to hide my eyes. How well I could see the tapestried portieres, and the dim garden beyond the windows.

David was eating lustily. He'd been utterly delighted to come to Paris, loved his suite

over the Place Vendome, with its velvet carpets and gilded furnishings, and had spent all afternoon in the Louvre.

Well, you can see the theme, can't you? he replied.

I'm not sure, I said. I do see common elements, of course, but these little stories are all different.

How so?

Well, in the Lovecraft piece, Asenath, this diabolical woman, switches bodies with her husband. She runs about the town using his male body, while he is stuck at home in her body, miserable and confused. I thought it was a hoot, actually. Just wonderfully clever, and of course Asenath isn't Asenath, as I recall, but her father, who has switched bodies with her. And then it all becomes very Lovecraftian, with slimy half-human demons and such.

That may be the irrelevant part. And the Egyptian story?

Completely different. The moldering dead, which still possess life, you know . . .

Yes, but the plot.

Well, the soul of the mummy manages to get possession of the body of the archaeologist, and he, the poor devil, is put in the rotted body of the mummy-

Yes?

Good Lord, I see what you're saying. And then the film Vice Versa. It's about the soul of a boy and the soul of a man who switch bodies! All hell breaks loose until they are able to switch back. And the film All of Me, it's about body switching as well. You're

absolutely right. All four stories are about the same thing.

Exactly.

Christ, David. It's all coming clear. I don't know why I didn't see it. But. . .

This man is trying to get you to believe that he knows something about this body switching. He's trying to entice you with the suggestion that such a thing can be done.

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Good Lord. Of course. That explains it, the way he moves, walks, runs.

What?

I sat there stunned, reenvisioning the little beast before I answered, bringing up to mind every image of him from every conceivable angle which memory would allow. Yes, even in Venice, he'd had that obvious awkwardness about him.

David, he can do it.

Lestat, don't jump to such a mad conclusion! He may think that he can do it. He may want to try it. He may be living entirely in a world of delusions-

No. That's his proposition, David, the proposition he says that I will want to hear! He can switch bodies with people!

Lestat, you can't believe-

David, that's what's wrong with him! I've been trying to figure it since I saw him on the beach in Miami. That isn't his body! That's why he can't use its musculature or its . . . its height. That's why he almost falls when he runs. He can't control those long powerful legs. Good God, that man is in someone else's body. And the voice, David, I told you about his voice. It's not the voice of a young man. Oh, that explains it! And you know what I think I think he chose that particular body because I'd notice it. And I'll tell you something else. He's already tried this switching trick with me and it's failed.

I couldn't continue. I was too dazzled by the possibility.

How do you mean, tried?

I described the peculiar sensations-the vibration and the constriction, the sense that I was being forced quite literally out of my physical self.

He didn't reply to what I'd said, but I could see the effect this had upon him. He sat motionless, his eyes narrow, his right hand half closed and resting idly beside his plate.

It was an assault upon me, wasn't it He tried to get me out of my body! Maybe so that he could get in. And of course he couldn't do it. But why would he risk mortally offending me with such an attempt?

Has he mortally offended you? David asked.

No, he's merely made me all the more curious, powerfully curious!

There you have your answer. I think he knows you too well.

What? I heard what he said but I couldn't reply just now. I drifted into remembering the sensations. That feeling was so . Strong. Oh, don't you see what he's doing He's suggesting that he can switch with me. He's offering me that handsome young mortal frame.

Yes, David said coldly. I think you're right.

Why else would he stay in that body? I said. He's clearly very uncomfortable in it. He wants to switch. He's saying that he can switch! That's why he's taken this risk. He must know it would be easy for me to kill him, squash him like a little bug, I don't

even like him-the manner, I mean. The body is excellent. No, that's it. He can do it, David, he knows how.

Snap out of it! You can't put it to the test.

What Why not You're telling me it can't be done In all those archives you have no records . . . David, I know he's done it. He just can't force me into it. But he's switched with another mortal, that I know.

Lestat, when it happens we call it possession. It's a psychic accident! The soul of a dead person takes over a living body; a spirit possessing a human being; it has to be persuaded to let go. Living people don't go around doing it deliberately and in concerted agreement. No, I don't think it is possible. I don't think we do have any such cases! I . . . He broke off, clearly in doubt.

You know you have such cases, I said. You must. Lestat, this is very dangerous, too dangerous for any sort of trial. Look, if it can happen by accident, it can happen this way too. If a dead soul can do it, why not a living soul I know what it means to travel outside my body. You know. You learned it in Brazil. You described it in fine detail. Many, many human beings know. Why, it was part of the ancient religions. It's not inconceivable that one could return to another body and hold on to it while the other soul struggles in vain to recapture it.

What an awful thought.

I explained again about the sensations and how powerful they had been. David, it's possible he stole that body!

Oh, that's just lovely.

Again, I was remembering the feeling of constriction, the terrific and strangely

pleasurable feeling that I was being squeezed out of myself through the top of my head. How strong it had been! Why, if he could make me feel that, surely he could make a mortal man rise out of himself, especially if that mortal man did not have the slightest idea of what was being done.

Calm yourself, Lestat, David said a little disgustedly. He laid his heavy fork upon the half-empty plate. Now think this through. Perhaps such a switch could be achieved for a few minutes. But anchoring in the new body, remaining inside it, and functioning day in and day out No. This would mean functioning when you are asleep as well as awake. You're talking about something entirely different and obviously dangerous. You can't experiment with this. What if it worked?

That's the whole point. If it works, then I can get into that body. I paused. I could scarcely speak it and then I did. I said it. David, I can be a mortal man.

It took my breath away. A moment of silence passed as we stared at each other. The look of vague dread in his eyes did nothing to still my excitement.

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I'd know how to use that body, I said, half in a whisper. I'd know how to use those muscles and those long legs. Oh, yes, he cho

se that body because he knew I would consider it a possibility, a real possibility-

Lestat, you can't pursue this! He's speaking of trading here, switching! You can't let this suspect individual have your body in return! The idea's monstrous. You inside that body is quite enough!

I fell into stunned silence.

Look, he said, trying to bring me back to him. Forgive me for sounding like the Superior General of a religious order, but this is something you simply cannot do! First off, where did he get that body What if he did, in fact, steal it Surely no handsome young man cheerfully gave it over without so much as a qualm! This is a sinister being, and must be recognized as such. You can't deliver to him a body as powerful as your own.

I heard all this, I understood it, but I couldn't absorb it. Think of it, David, I said, knowing that I sounded mad and only barely coherent. David, I could be a mortal man.

Would you kindly wake up and pay attention to me, please! This is not a matter of comical stories and Lovecraftian pieces of gothic romance. He wiped his mouth with his napkin, and crossly slugged down a swallow of wine, and then reached across the table and took hold of my wrist.

I should have let him lift it and clasp it. But I didn't yield and he realized within a second that he could no more move my wrist away from the table than he could move that of a statue made of granite.

That's it, right there! he declared. You can't play with this. You can't take the risk that it will work, and this fiend, whoever he is, will have possession of your strength.

I shook my head. I know what you're saying, but, David, think of it. I have to talk to him! I have to find him and find out whether this can be done. He himself is unimportant. It's the process that's important. Can it be done?

Lestat, I'm begging you. Don't explore this any further. You're going to make another ghastly mistake!

What do you mean? It was so hard to pay attention to what he was saying. Where was that wily fiend right now I thought of his eyes, how beautiful they would be if he were not looking out of them. Yes, it was a fine body for this experiment! Wherever did he get it I had to find out.

David, I'm going to leave you now.

No, you're not! Stay right where you are, or so help me God I'll send a legion of hobgoblins after you, every filthy little spirit I trafficked with in Rio de Janeiro! Now listen to me.

I laughed. Keep your voice down, I said. We'll be thrown out of the Ritz.

Very well, we'll strike a bargain. I'll go back to London and hit the computer. I'll boot up every case of body switching in our files. Who knows what we'll discover Lestat, maybe he's in that body and it's deteriorating around him, and he can't get out or stop the deterioration. Did you think of that?

I shook my head. It's not deteriorating. I would have caught the scent. There's nothing wrong with that body.

Except maybe he stole it from its rightful owner and that poor soul is stumbling around in his body, and what that looks like, we haven't a clue.

Cairn down, David, please. You go on back to London, and hit the files, as you described. I'm going to find this little bastard. I'm going to hear what he has to say. Don't worry! I won't proceed without consulting you. And if I do decide-

You won't decide! Not until you talk to me.

All right.

This is a pledge?

On my honor as a bloodthirsty murderer, yes.

I want a phone number in New Orleans.

I stared at him hard for a moment. Ail right. I've never done this before. But here it is. I gave him the phone number of my French Quarter rooftop rooms. Aren't you going to write it down?

I've memorized it.

Then farewell!

I rose from the table, struggling, in my excitement, to move like a human. Ah, move like a human. Think of it, to be inside a human body. To see the sun, really see it, a tiny blazing ball in a blue sky! Oh, and, David, I almost forgot, everything's covered

here. Call my man. He'll arrange for your flight . . .

I don't care about that, Lestat. Listen to me. Set an appointment to speak with me about this, right now! You dare vanish on me, I'll never-

I stood there smiling down at him. I could tell I was charming him. Of course he wouldn't threaten never to speak to me again. How absurd. Ghastly mistakes, I said, unable to stop smiling. Yes, I do make them, don't I?

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What will they do to you-the others Your precious Marius, the older ones, if you do such a thing?

They might surprise you, David. Maybe all they want is to be human again. Maybe that's all any of us want. Another chance. I thought of Louis in his house hi New Orleans. Dear God, what would Louis think when I told him about all this

David muttered something under his breath, angry and impatient, yet his face was full of affection and concern.

I blew him a little kiss and was gone.

Scarcely an hour had passed before I realized I couldn't find the wily fiend. If he was in Paris, he was cloaked so that I couldn't pick up the faintest shimmer of his presence. And nowhere did I catch an image of him in anyone else's mind.

This didn't mean he wasn't in Paris. Telepathy is extremely hit or miss; and Paris was a vast city, teeming with citizens of all the countries of the world.

At last I came back to the hotel, discovered David had already checked out, leaving all his various phone numbers with me for fax, computer, and regular calls.

Please contact me tomorrow evening, he'd written. I shall have some information for you by then.

I went upstairs to prepare for the journey home. I couldn't wait to see this lunatic mortal again. And Louis- I had to lay it all before Louis. Of course he wouldn't

believe it was possible, that would be the first thing he'd say. But he would understand the lure. Oh, yes, he would.

I hadn't been in the room a minute, trying to determine if there was anything here I needed to take with me-ah, yes, David's manuscripts-when I saw a plain envelope lying on the table beside the bed. It was propped against a great vase of flowers. Count van Kindergarten was written on it in a firm, rather masculine script.

I knew the minute I saw it that it was a note from him. The message inside was handwritten, in the same firm, heavily engraved style.

Don't be hasty. And don't listen to your fool friend from the Talamasca either. I shall see you in New Orleans tomorrow night. Don't disappoint me. Jackson Square. We shall then make an appointment to work a little alchemy of our own. I think you understand now what's at stake.

Yours sincerely, Raglan James

Raglan James. I whispered the name aloud. Raglan James. I didn't like the name. The name was like him.

I dialed the concierge.

This fax system which has just been invented, I said in French, you have it here Explain it to me, please.

It was as I suspected, a complete facsimile of this little note could be sent from the hotel office over a telephone wire to David's London machine. Then David would not only have this information, he would have the handwriting, for what it was worth.

I arranged to have this done, picked up the manuscripts, stopped by the desk with the

note of Raglan James, had it faxed, took it back, and then went to Notre Dame to say good-bye to Paris with a little prayer.

I was mad. Absolutely mad. When had I ever known such pure happiness! I stood in the dark cathedral, which was now locked on account of the hour, and I thought of the first time I'd ever stepped into it so many, many decades ago. There had been no great square before the church doors, only the little Place de Greve hemmed in with crooked buildings; and there had been no great boulevards in Paris such as there are now, only broad mud streets, which we thought so very grand.

I thought of all those blue skies, and what it had felt like to be hungry, truly hungry for bread and for meat, and to be drunk on good wine. I thought of Nicolas, my mortal friend, whom I'd loved so much, and how cold it had been in our little attic room. Nicki and I arguing the way that David and I had argued! Oh, yes, It seemed my great long ex

istence had been a nightmare since those days, a sweeping nightmare full of giants and monsters and horrid ghastly masks covering the faces of beings who menaced me in the eternal dark. I was trembling. I was weeping. To be human, I thought. To be human again. I think I said the words aloud.

Then a sudden whispered laugh startled me. It was a child somewhere in the darkness, a little girl.

I turned around. I was almost certain I could see her-a small gray form darting up the far aisle towards a side altar, and then out of sight. Her footsteps had been barely audible. But surely this was some mistake. No scent. No real presence. Just illusion.

Nevertheless I cried out: Claudia!

And my voice came tumbling back to me in a harsh echo. No one there, of course.

I thought of David: You're going to make another ghastly mistake!

Yes, I have made ghastly mistakes. How can I deny it Terrible, terrible errors. The atmosphere of my recent dreams came back to me, but it wouldn't deepen, and there remained only an evanescent sense of being with her. Something about an oil lamp and her laughing at me.

I thought again of her execution-the brick-walled air well, the approaching sun, how small she had been; and then the remembered pain of the Gobi Desert mingled with it and I couldn't bear it any longer. I realized I had folded my arms around my chest, and was trembling, my body rigid, as though being tormented with an electric shock. Ah, but surely she hadn't suffered. Surely it had been instantaneous for one so tender and little. Ashes to ashes . . .

This was pure anguish. It wasn't those times I wanted to remember, no matter how long I'd lingered in the Cafe de la Paix earlier, or how strong I imagined I had become. It was my Paris, before the Theatre of the Vampires, when I'd been innocent and alive.

I stayed a while longer in the dark, merely looking at the great branching arches above me. What a marvelous and majestic church this was-even now with the pop and rattle of motorcars beyond. It was like a forest made of stone.

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I blew a kiss to it, as I had to David. And I went off to undertake the long journey home.

Chapter 7

SEVEN

NEW ORLEANS. I arrived quite early in the evening for I had gone backwards in time against the turning of the world. It was cold and crisp, but not cruelly so, though a bad norther was on its way. The sky was without a cloud and full of small and very distinct stars. I went at once to my little rooftop apartment in the French Quarter, which for all its glamour is not very high at all, being on the top of a four-storey building, erected long before the Civil War, and having a rather intimate view of the river and its beautiful twin bridges, and which catches, when the windows are open, the noises of the happily crowded Cafe du Monde and of the busy shops and streets around Jackson Square.

It was not until tomorrow night that Mr. Raglan James meant to meet me. And impatient as I was for this meeting, I found the schedule comfortable, as I wanted to find Louis right away.

But first I indulged in the mortal comfort of a hot shower, and put on a fresh suit of black velvet, very trim and plain, rather like the clothes I'd worn in Miami, and a pair of new black boots. And ignoring my general weariness-I would have been asleep in the earth by now, had I been still in Europe-I went off, walking like a mortal, through the town.

For reasons of which I wasn't too certain, I took a turn past the old address in the Rue Royale where Claudia and Louis and I had once lived. Actually I did this rather often, never allowing myself to think about it, until I was halfway there.

Our coven had endured for over fifty years in that lovely upstairs apartment. And surely this factor ought to be considered when I'm being condemned, either by myself or by someone else, for my errors. Louis and Claudia had both been made by me, and for me, I admit that. Nevertheless, ours had been a curiously incandescent and satisfying existence before Claudia decided I should pay for my creations with my life.

The rooms themselves had been crammed with every conceivable ornament and luxury which the times could provide. We'd kept a carriage, and a team of horses at the nearby stables, and servants had lived beyond the courtyard in back. But the old brick buildings were now somewhat faded, and neglected, the flat unoccupied of late, except for ghosts, perhaps, who knows, and the shop below was rented to a bookseller who never bothered to dust the volumes in the window, or those on his shelves. Now and then he procured books for me-volumes on the nature of evil by the historian Jeffrey Burton Russell, or the marvelous philosophical works of Mircea Eliade, as well as vintage copies of the novels I loved.

The old man was in there reading, in fact, and I watched him for a few minutes through the glass. How different were the citizens of New Orleans from all the rest of the American world. Profit meant nothing to this old gray-haired being at all.

I stood back and looked up at the cast-iron railings above. I thought of those disturbing dreams-the oil lamp, her voice. Why was she haunting me so much more relentlessly than ever before

When I closed my eyes, I could hear her again, talking to me, but the substance of her words was gone. I found myself thinking back once more on her life and her death.

Gone now without a trace was the little hovel in which I'd first seen her in Louis's arms. A plague house it had been. Only a vampire would have entered. No thief had dared even to steal the gold chain from her dead mother's throat. And how ashamed Louis had been that he had chosen a tiny child as his victim. But I had understood. No trace remained, either, of the old hospital where they'd taken her afterwards. What narrow mud street had I passed through with that warm mortal bundle in my arms, and Louis rushing after me, begging to know what I meant to do.

A gust of cold wind startled me suddenly.

I could hear the dull raucous music from the taverns of the Rue Bourbon only a block away; and people walking before the cathedral-laughter from a woman nearby. A car horn blasting in the dark. The tiny electronic throb of a modern phone.

Inside the bookstore, the old man played the radio, twisting the dial from Dixieland to classical and finally to a mournful voice singing poetry to the music of an English composer . . .

Why had I come to this old building, which stood forlorn and indifferent as a tombstone with all its dates and letters worn away

I wanted no more delay, finally.

I'd been playing with my own mad excitement at what had only just happened in Paris, and I headed uptown to find Louis and lay it all before him.

Again, I chose to walk. I chose to feel the earth, to measure it with my feet.

In our time-at the end of the eighteenth century-the uptown of the city didn't really exist. It was country upriver; there were plantations still, and the roads were narrow and hard to travel, being paved only with dredged shells.

Later in the nineteenth century, after our little coven had been destroyed, and I was wounded and broken, and gone to Paris to search for Claudia and Louis, the uptown with all its small towns was merged with the great city, and many fine wooden houses in the Victorian style were built.

Some of these ornate wooden structures are vast, every bit as grand in their own cluttered fashion as the great antebellum Greek Revival houses of the Garden District, which always put me in mind of temples, or the imposing town houses of the French Quarter itself.

But much of uptown with its small clapboard cottages, as well as big houses, still retains for me the aspect of the country, what with the enormous oaks and magnolias sprouting up everywhere to tower over the little roofs, and so many streets without sidewalks, along which the gutters are no more than ditches, full of wildflowers flourishing in spite of the winter cold.

Even the little commercial streets-a sudden stretch here and there of attached buildings-remind one not of the French Quarter with its stone facades and old-world sophistication, but rather of the quaint main streets of rural American towns.

This is a great place for walking in the evening; you can hear the birds sing as you will never hear them in the Vieux Carre; and the twilight lasts forever over the roofs of the warehouses along the ever-curving river, shining through the great heavy branches of the trees. One can happen upon splendid mansions with rambling galleries and gingerbread decoration, houses with turrets and gables, and widow's walks. There are big wooden porch swings hanging behind freshly painted wooden railings. There are white picket fences. Broad avenues of clean well-clipped lawns.

The little cottages display an endless variation; some are neatly painted in deep brilliant colors according to the current fashion; others, more derelict but no less beautiful, have the lovely gray tone of driftwood, a condition into which a house can

fall easily in this tropical place.

Here and there one finds a stretch of street so overgrown one can scarce believe one is still within a city. Wild four-o'clocks and blue plumbago obscure the fences that mark property; the limbs of the oak bend so low they force the passerby to bow his head. Even in its coldest winters, New Orleans is always green.

The frost can't kill the camellias, though it does sometimes bruise them. The wild yellow Carolina jasmine and the purple bougainvillea cover fences and walls.

It is in one such stretch of soft leafy darkness, beyond a great row of huge magnolia trees, that Louis made his secret home.

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The old Victorian mansion behind the rusted gates was unoccupied, its yellow paint almost all peeled away. Only now and then did Louis roam through it, a candle in his hand. It was a cottage in back-covered with a great shapeless mountain of tangled pink Queen's Wreath-which was his true dwelling, full of his books and miscellaneous objects he'd collected over the years. Its windows were quite hidden from the street. In fact, it's doubtful anyone knew this house existed. The neighbors could not see it for the high brick walls, the dense old trees, and oleander growing wild around it. And there was no real path through the high grass.

When I came upon him, all the windows and doors were open to the few simple rooms. He was at his desk, reading by the light of a single candle flame.

For a long moment, I spied upon him. I loved to do this. Often I

followed him when he went hunting, simply to watch him feed. The modern world doesn't mean, anything to Louis. He walks the streets like a phantom, soundlessly, drawn slowly to those who welcome death, or seem to welcome it. (I'm not sure people really ever welcome death.) And when he feeds, it is painless and delicate and swift. He must take life when he feeds. He does not know how to spare the victim. He was never strong enough for the little drink which carries me through so many nights; or did before I became the ravenous god.

His clothes are old-fashioned always. As so many of us do, he finds garments which resemble the styles of his time in mortal life. Big loose shirts with gathered sleeves and long cuffs please him, and tight-fitting pants. When he wears a coat, which is seldom, it is fitted like the ones I choose-a rider's jacket, very long and full at the hem.

I bring him these garments sometimes as presents, so that he doesn't wear his few acquisitions right to rags. I had been tempted to straighten up his house, hang the pictures, fill the place with finery, sweep him up into heady luxury the way I had in the past.

I think he wanted me to do this, but he wouldn't admit it. He existed without electricity, or modern heat, wandering in chaos, pretending to be wholly content.

Some of the windows of this house were without glass, and only now and then did he bolt the old-fashioned louvered shutters. He did not seem to care if the rain came in on his possessions because they weren't really possessions. Just junk heaped here and there.

But again, I think he wanted me to do something about it. It's amazing how often he came to visit me in my overheated and brilliantly illuminated rooms downtown. There he watched my giant television screen for hours. Sometimes he brought his own films for it on disk or tape. *The Company of Wolves*, that was one which he watched over and over. *Beauty and the Beast*, a French film by Jean Cocteau, also pleased him mightily. Then there was *The Dead*, a film made by John Huston from a story by James Joyce. And please understand this film has nothing to do with our kind whatsoever; it is about a fairly ordinary group of mortals in Ireland in the early part of this century who gather for a convivial supper on Little Christmas night. There were many other films which delighted him. But these visits could never be commanded by me, and they never lasted very long. He often deplored the rank materialism in which I wallowed and turned his back on my velvet cushions and thickly carpeted floor, and lavish marble bath. He drifted off again, to his forlorn and vine-covered shack.

Tonight, he sat there in all his dusty glory, an ink smudge on his white cheek, poring over a large cumbersome biography of Dickens, recently written by an English novelist, turning the pages slowly, for he is no faster at reading than most mortals.

Indeed of all of us survivors he is the most nearly human. And he remains so by choice.

Many times I've offered him my more powerful blood. Always, he has refused it. The sun over the Gobi Desert would have burnt him to ashes. His senses are finely tuned and vampiric, but not like those of a Child of the Millennia. He cannot read anyone's thoughts with much success. When he puts a mortal into a trance, it's always a mistake.

And of course I cannot read his thoughts because I made him, and the thoughts of the fledgling and master are always closed to each other, though why, no one of us knows. My suspicion is that we know a great deal of each other's feelings and longings; only the amplification is too loud for any distinct image to come clear. Theory. Someday perhaps they will study us in laboratories. We will beg for live victims through the thick glass walls of our prisons as they ply us with questions, and extract samples of blood from our veins. Ah, but how to do that to Lestat who can burn another to cinders with one decisive thought

Louis didn't hear me in the high grass outside his little house.

I slipped into the room, a great glancing shadow, and was already seated in my favorite red velvet bergere-I'd long ago brought it there for myself-opposite him when he looked up.

Ah, you! he said at once, and slammed the book shut.

His face, quite thin and finely drawn by nature, an exquisitely delicate face for all its obvious strength, was gorgeously flushed. He had hunted early, I'd missed it. I was for one second completely crushed.

Nevertheless it was tantalizing to see him so enlivened by the low throb of human

blood. I could smell the blood too, which gave a curious dimension to being near him. His beauty has always maddened me. I think I idealize him in my mind when I'm not with him; but then when I see him again I'm overcome.

Of course it was his beauty which drew me to him, in my first nights here in Louisiana, when it was a savage, lawless colony, and he was a reckless, drunken fool, gambling and picking fights in taverns, and doing what he could to bring about his own death. Well, he got what he thought he wanted, more or less.

For a moment, I couldn't understand the expression of horror on his face as he stared at me, or why he suddenly rose and came towards me and bent down and touched my face. Then I remembered. My sun-darkened skin.

What have you done? he whispered. He knelt down and looked up at me, resting his hand lightly on my shoulder. Lovely intimacy, but I wasn't going to admit it. I remained composed in the chair.

It's nothing, I said, it's finished. I went into a desert place, I wanted to see what would happen . . .

You wanted to see what would happen? He stood up, took a step back, and glared at me. You meant to destroy yourself, didn't you?

Not really, I said. I lay in the light for a full day. The second morning, somehow or other I must have dug down into the sand.

He stared at me for a long moment, as if he would explode with disapproval, and then he retreated to his desk, sat down a bit noisily for such a graceful being, composed his hands over the closed book, and looked wickedly and furiously at me.

Why did you do it?

Louis, I have something more important to tell you, I said. Forget about all this. I made a gesture to include my face. Something very remarkable has happened, and I have to tell you the whole tale. I stood up, because I couldn't contain myself. I began to pace, careful not to trip over all the heaps of disgusting trash lying about, and maddened slightly by the dim candlelight, not because I couldn't see in it, but because it was so weak and partial and I like light.

I told him everything-how I'd seen this creature, Raglan James, in Venice and in Hong Kong, and then in Miami, and how he'd sent me the message in London and then followed me to Paris as I supposed he would. Now we were to meet near the square tomorrow night. I explained the short stories and their meaning. I explained the strangeness of the young man himself, that he was not in his body, that I believed he could effect such a switch.

You're out of your mind, Louis said.

Don't be so hasty, I answered.

You quote this idiot's words to me Destroy him. Put an end to him. Find him tonight if you can and do away with him.

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Louis, for the love of heaven . . .

Lestat, this creature can find you at will That means he knows where you lie. You've led him here now. He knows where I lie. He's the worst conceivable enemy! Mon Dieu, why do you go looking for adversity Nothing on earth can destroy you now, not even the Children of the Millennia have the combined strength to do it, and not even the sun at midday in the Gobi Desert-so you court the one enemy who has power over you. A mortal man who can walk in the light of day. A man who can achieve complete dominion over you when you yourself are without a spark of consciousness or will. No, destroy him. He's far too dangerous. If I see him, I'll destroy him.

Louis, this man can give me a human body. Have you listened to anything that I've said.

Human body! Lestat, you can't become human by simply taking over a human body! You weren't human when you were alive! You were born a monster, and you know it. How the hell can you delude yourself like this.

I'm going to weep if you don't stop.

Weep. I'd like to see you weep. I've read a great deal about your weeping in the pages of your books but I've never seen you weep with my ow

n eyes.

Ah, that makes you out to be a perfect liar, I said furiously. You described my weeping in your miserable memoir in a scene which we both know did not take

place!

Lestat, kill this creature! You're mad if you let him come close enough to you to speak three words.

I was confounded, utterly confounded. I dropped down in the chair again and stared into space. The night seemed to breathe with a soft lovely rhythm outside, the fragrance of the Queen's Wreath just barely touching the moist cool air. A faint incandescence seemed to come from Louis's face, from his hands folded on the desk. He was veiled in stillness, waiting for my response, I presumed, though why, I had no idea.

I never expected this from you, I said, crestfallen. I expected some long philosophical diatribe, like the trash you wrote in your memoir, but this?

He sat there, silent, peering at me steadily, the light sparking for an instant in his brooding green eyes. He seemed tormented in some deep way, as if my words had caused him pain. Certainly it wasn't my insult to his writing. I insulted his writing all the time. That was a joke. Well, sort of a joke.

I couldn't figure what to say or do. He was working on my nerves. When he spoke his voice was very soft.

You don't really want to be human, he said. You don't believe that, do you?

Yes, I believe it! I answered, humiliated by the feeling in my voice. How could you not believe it? I stood up and commenced my pacing again. I made a circuit of the little house, and wandered out into the jungle garden, pushing the thick springy vines out of my way. I was in such a state of confusion I couldn't speak to him anymore.

I was thinking of my mortal life, vainly trying not to mythologize it, but I could not

drive away from me those memories-the last wolf hunt, my dogs dying in the snow. Paris. The boulevard theatre. Unfinished! You don't really want to be htonan. How could he say such a thing

It seemed an age I was out in the garden, but finally, for better or worse, I wandered back inside. I found him still at his desk, looking at me in the most forlorn, almost heartbroken way.

Look, I said, there are only two things which I believe- the first is that no mortal can refuse the Dark Gift once he really knows what it is. And don't speak to me about David Talbot refusing me. David is not an ordinary man. The second thing I believe is that all of us would be human again if we could. Those are my tenets. There's nothing else.

He made a little weary accepting gesture and sat back hi his chair. The wood creaked softly beneath his weight, and he lifted his right hand languidly, wholly unconscious of the seductive quality of this simple gesture, and ran his fingers back through his loose dark hair.

The memory pierced me suddenly of the night I had given him the blood, of how he had argued with me at the last moment that I must not do it, and then he'd given in. I had explained it all to him beforehand-while he was still the drunken feverish young planter in the sickbed with the rosary wound around the bedpost. But how can such a thing be explained! And he'd been so convinced that he wanted to come with me, so certain that mortal life held nothing for him-so bitter and burnt out and so young!

What had he known then Had he ever read a poem by Milton, or listened to a sonata by Mozart Would the name Marcus Aurelius have meant anything to him In all probability, he would have thought it a fancy name for a black slave. Ah, those savage and swaggering plantation lords with their rapiers and their pearl-handled pistols! They did appreciate excess; I shall, in retrospect, give them that.

But he was far from those days now, wasn't he The author of Interview with the Vampire, of all preposterous titles! I tried to quiet myself. I loved him too much not to be patient, not to wait until he spoke again. I'd fashioned him of human flesh and blood to be my preternatural tormentor, had I not

It can't be undone that easily, he said now, rousing me from memory, dragging me back into this dusty room. His voice was deliberately gentle, almost conciliatory or imploring. It can't be that simple. You can't change bodies with a mortal man. To be candid, I don't even think it's possible, but even if it were-

I didn't answer. I wanted to say, But what if it can be done! What if I can know again what it means to be alive.

And then what about your body, he said, pleading with me, holding his anger and outrage in check so skillfully. Surely you can't place all your powers at the disposal of this creature, this sorcerer or whatever he is. The others have told me that they cannot even calculate the limits of your power. Ah, no. It's an appalling idea. Tell me, how does he know how to find you! That's the most significant part.

That's the least significant part, I replied. But clearly, if this man can switch bodies, then he can leave his body. He can navigate as a spirit for long enough to track me and find me. I must be very visible to him when he's in this state, given what I am. This is no miracle in itself, you understand.

I know, he said. Or so I read and so I hear. I think you've found a truly dangerous being. This is worse than what we are.

How so worse?

It implies another desperate attempt at immortality, switching bodies! Do you think this mortal, whoever he is, plans to grow old in this or any other body, and allow

himself to die!

I had to confess I followed his meaning. Then I told him about the man's voice, the sharp British accent, the cultured sound of it, and how it didn't seem the voice of a young man.

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He shuddered. He probably comes from the Talamasca, he said. That's probably where he found out about you.

All he had to do was buy a paperback novel to find out about me.

Ah, but not to believe, Lestat, not to believe it was true.

I told him that I had spoken to David. David would know if this man was from his own order, but as for myself I didn't believe it. Those scholars would never have done such a thing. And there was something sinister about this mortal. The members of the Talamasca were almost tiresome in their whole-someness. Besides, it didn't matter. I would talk to this man and discover everything for myself.

He grew reflective again and very sad. It almost hurt me to look at him. I wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him, but that would only have made him furious.

I love you, he said softly.

I was amazed.

You're always looking for a way to triumph, he continued. You never give in. But there is no way to triumph. This is purgatory we're in, you and I. All we can be is thankful that it isn't actually hell.

No, I don't believe it, I said. Look, it doesn't matter what you say or what David said. I'm going to talk to Raglan James. I want to know what this is about! Nothing's going to prevent that.

Ah, so David Talbot has also warned you against him.

Don't choose your allies among my friends!

Lestat, if this human comes near me, if I believe that I am in danger from him, I will destroy him. Understand.

Of course, I do. He wouldn't approach you. He's picked me, and with reason.

He's picked you because you are careless and flamboyant and vain. Oh, I don't say this to hurt you. Truly I don't. You long to be seen and approached and understood and to get into mischief, to stir everything up and see if it won't boil over and if God won't come down and grab you by the hair. Well, there is no God. You might as well be God.

You and David . . . the same song, the same admonitions, though he claims to have seen God and you don't believe He exists.

David has seen God? he asked respectfully.

Not really, I murmured with a scornful gesture. But you both scold in the same way. Marius scolds in the same way.

Well, of course, you pick the voices that scold you. You always have, in the same manner in which you pick those who will turn on you and stick the knife right into your heart.

He meant Claudia, but he couldn't bear to speak her name. I knew I could hurt him if I said it, like flinging a curse in his face. I wanted to say, You had a hand in it! You were there when I made her, and there when she lifted the knife!

&nb

sp; I don't want to hear any more! I said. You'll sing the song of limitations all your long dreary years on this earth, won't you Well, I am not God. And I am not the Devil from hell, though I sometimes pretend to be. I am not the crafty cunning lagoon. I don't plot ghastly scenarios of evil. And I can't quash my curiosity or my spirit. Yes, I want to know if this man can really do it. I want to know what will happen. And I won't give up.

And you'll sing the song of victory eternally though there is none to be had.

Ah, but there is. There must be.

No. The more we learn, the more we know there are no victories. Can't we fall back on nature, do what we must to endure and nothing more?

That is the most paltry definition of nature I have ever heard. Take a hard look at it—not in poetry but in the world outside. What do you see in nature What made the spiders that creep beneath the damp floorboards, what made the moths with then-multicolored wings that look like great evil flowers in the dark The shark in the sea, why does it exist? I came towards him, planted my hands on his desk and looked into his face. I was so sure you would understand this. And by the way, I wasn't born a monster! I was a born a mortal child, the same as you. Stronger than you! More will to live than you! That was cruel of you to say.

I know. It was wrong. Sometimes you frighten me so badly I hurl sticks and stones at you. It's foolish. I'm glad to see you, though I dread admitting it. I shiver at the thought that you might have really brought an end to yourself in the desert! I can't bear the thought of existence now without you! You infuriate me! Why don't you laugh at me You've done it before.

I drew myself up and turned my back on him. I was looking out at the grass blowing gently in the river wind, and the tendrils of the Queen's Wreath reaching down to veil the open door.

I'm not laughing, I said. But I'm going to pursue this, no sense in lying about that to you. Lord God, don't you see If I'm in a mortal body for five minutes only, what I might learn?

All right, he said despairingly. I hope you discover the man's seduced you with a pack of lies, that all he wants is the Dark Blood, and that you send him straight to hell. Once more, let me warn you, if I see him, if he threatens me, I shall kill him. I haven't your strength. I depend upon my anonymity, that my little memoir, as you always call it, was so very far removed from the world of this century that no one took it as fact.

I won't let him harm you, Louis, I said. I turned and threw an evil glance at him. I would never ever have let anyone harm you.

And with this I left.

Of course, this was an accusation, and he felt the keen edge of it, I'd seen that to my satisfaction, before I turned again and went out.

The night Claudia rose up against me, he had stood there, the helpless witness, abhorring but not thinking to interfere, even as I called his name.

He had taken what he thought to be my lifeless body and dumped it in the swamp. Ah, naive little fledglings, to think you could so easily get rid of me.

But why think of it now He had loved me then whether or not he knew it; of my love for him and for that wretched angry child, I had never the slightest doubt.

He had grieved for me, I'll give him that much. But then he is so good at grieving! He wears woe as others wear velvet; sorrow flatters him like the light of candles; tears become him like jewels.

Well, none of that trash works with me.

I went back to my rooftop quarters, lighted all my fine electric lamps, and lay about wallowing in rank materialism for a couple of hours, watching an endless parade of video images on the giant screen, and then slept for a little while on my soft couch before going out to hunt. I was weary, off my clock from wandering. I was thirsty too.

It was quiet beyond the lights of the Quarter, and the eternally illuminated

skyscrapers of downtown. New Orleans sinks very fast into dimness, either in the pastoral streets I've already described or amid the more forlorn brick buildings and houses of the central town.

It was through these deserted commercial areas, with their shut-up factories and warehouses and bleak little shotgun cottages, that I wandered to a wondrous place near the river, which perhaps held no significance for any other being than myself.

It was an empty field close to the wharves, stretching beneath the giant pylons of the freeways which led to the high twin river bridges which I have always called, since the first moment I beheld them, the Dixie Gates.

I must confess these bridges have been given some other, less charming name by the official world. But I pay very little attention to the official world. To me these bridges will always be the Dixie Gates, and I never wait too long after returning home before I go to walk near them and admire them, with all their thousands of tiny twinkling lights.

Understand they are not fine aesthetic creations such as the Brooklyn Bridge, which incited the devotion of the poet Hart Crane. They do not have the solemn grandeur of San Francisco's Golden Gate.

But they are bridges, nevertheless, and all bridges are beautiful and thought-provoking; and when they are fully illuminated as these bridges are, their many ribs and girders take on a grand mystique.

Let me add here that the same great miracle of light occurs in the black southern nighttime countryside with the vast oil refineries and electric power stations, which rise in startling splendour from the flat invisible land. And these have the added glories of smoking chimneys and ever-burning gas flames. The Eiffel Tower is now no mere scaffold of iron but a sculpture of dazzling electric light.

But we are speaking of New Orleans, and I wandered now to this riverfront wasteland, bounded on one side by dark drab cottages, and on the other by the deserted warehouses, and at the northern end by the marvelous junkyards of derelict machinery and chain-link fences overgrown with the inevitable copious and beautiful flowering vines.

Ah, fields of thought and fields of despair. I loved to walk here, on the soft barren earth, amid the clumps of high weeds, and scattered bits of broken glass, to listen to the low pulse of the river, though I could not see it, to gaze at the distant rosy glow of downtown.

It seemed the essence of the modern world, this awful horrid forgotten place, this great gap amid picturesque old buildings, where only now and then did a car creep by, on the deserted and supposedly dangerous streets. .

And let me not fail to mention that this area, in spite of the dark paths which led up to it, was itself never really dark. A deep steady flood of illumination poured down from the lamps of the freeways, and came forth from the few street lights, creating an even and seemingly sourceless modern gloom.

Makes you want to rush there, doesn't it Aren't you just dying to go prowl around there in the dirt

Seriously, it is divinely sad to stand there, a tiny figure in the cosmos, shivering at the muffled noises of the city, of awesome machines groaning in faraway industrial compounds, or occasional trucks rumbling by overhead.

From there it was a stone's throw to a boarded-up tenement, where in the garbage-strewn rooms I found a pair of killers, their feverish brains dulled by narcotics, upon whom I fed slowly and quietly, leaving them both unconscious but alive.

Then I went back* to the lonely empty field, roaming with my hands in my pockets, kicking the tin cans I found, and circling for a long time beneath the freeways proper, then leaping up and walking out on the northern arm of the nearer Dixie Gate itself.

How deep and dark my river. The air was always cool above it; and in spite of the dismal haze hanging over all, I could still see a wealth of cruel and tiny stars.

For a long time I lingered, pondering everything Louis had said to me, everything David had said to me, and still wild with excitement to meet the strange Raglan James the following night.

At last I became bored even with the great river. I scanned the city for the crazy mortal spy, and couldn't find him. I scanned uptown and could not find him. But still I was unsure.

As the night wore away, I made my way back to Louis's house-which was dark and deserted now-and I wandered the narrow little streets, more or less stilt searching for the mortal spy, and standing guard. Surely Louis was safe in his secret sanctuary, safe within the coffin to which he retreated well before every dawn.

Then I walked back down to the field again, singing to myself, and thought how the Dixie Gates with all their lights reminded me of the pretty steamboats of the nineteenth century, which had looked like great wedding cakes decked with candles, gliding by. Is that a mixed metaphor I don't care. I heard the music of the steamboats in my head.

I tried to conceive of the next century, and what forms it would bring down upon us, and how it would shuffle ugliness and beauty with new violence, as each century must. I studied the pylons of the freeways, graceful soaring arches of steel and concrete, smooth as sculpture, simple and monstrous, gently bending blades of

colorless grass.

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And here came the train finally, rattling along the distant track before the warehouses, with its tedious string of dingy boxcars, disruptive and hideous and striking deep alarms with its shrieking whistle, within my all too human soul.

The night snapped back with utter emptiness after the last boom and clatter had died away. No visible cars moved on the bridges, and a heavy mist traveled silently over the breadth of the river, obscuring the fading stars.

I was weeping again. I was thinking of Louis, and of his warnings. But what could I do I knew nothing of resignation, I never would. If that miserable Raglan James did not come tomorrow night, I'd search the world for him. I didn't want to talk to David anymore, didn't want to hear his warnings, couldn't listen. I knew I would follow this through.

I kept staring at the Dixie Gates. I couldn't get the beauty of the twinkling lights out of my head. I wanted to see a church with candles-lots of small flickering candles like the candles I'd seen in Notre Dame. Fumes rising from their wicks like prayers.

An hour till sunrise. Enough time. I headed slowly downtown.

The St. Louis Cathedral had been locked all night, but these locks were nothing to me.

I stood in the very front of the church, in the dark foyer, staring at the bank of candles burning beneath the statue of the Virgin. The faithful made their offerings in the brass coin box before lighting these candles. Vigil lights, they called them.

Often I'd sat in the square in the early evening, listening to these people come and go. I liked the smell of the wax; I liked the small shadowy church which seemed to have changed not one whit in over a century. I sucked in my breath and then I reached into my pockets, drew out a couple of crumpled dollars, and put them through the brass slot.

I lifted the long wax wick, dipped it into an old flame, and carried the fire to a fresh candle, watched the little tongue grow orange and bright.

What a miracle, I thought. One tiny flame could make so many other flames; one tiny flame could set afire a whole world. Why, I had, with this simple gesture, actually increased the sum total of light in the universe, had I not

Such a miracle, and for this there will never be an explanation, and there are no Devil and God speaking together in a Paris cafe. Yet David's crazed theories soothed me when I thought of them in reverie. Increase and multiply, said the Lord, the great Lord, Yahweh-from the flesh of the two a multitude of children, like a great fire from only two little flames. . .

There was a noise suddenly, sharp, distinct, ringing through the church like a deliberate footfall. I froze, quite astonished that I hadn't known someone was there. Then I remembered Notre Dame, and the sound of the child's steps on the stone floor. A sudden fear swept over me. She was there, wasn't she If I looked around the corner, I would see her this time, maybe with her bonnet on, and her curls straggling from the wind, and her hands wrapped in woolen mittens, and she'd be looking up at me with those immense eyes. Golden hair and beautiful eyes.

There came a sound again. I hated this fear!

Very slowly I turned, and I saw Louis's unmistakable form emerging from the shadows. Only Louis. The light of the candles slowly revealed his placid and slightly

gaunt face.

He had on a dusty sad coat, and his worn shirt was open at the collar, and he looked faintly cold. He approached me slowly and clasped my shoulder with a firm hand.

Something dreadful's going to happen to you again, he said, the light of the candles playing exquisitely in his dark green eyes. You're going to see to it. I know.

I'll win out, I said with a little uneasy laugh, a tiny giddy happiness at seeing him. Then a shrug. Don't you know that by now I always do.

But I was amazed that he'd found me here, that he had come so close to dawn. And I was trembling still from all my mad imaginings, that she had come, come as she had in my dreams, and I had wanted to know why.

I was worried for him suddenly; he seemed so fragile with his pallid skin and long delicate hands. And yet I could feel the cool strength emanating from him as I always had, the strength of the thoughtful one who does nothing on impulse, the one who sees from all angles, who chooses his words with care. The one who never plays with the coming sun.

He drifted back away from me, abruptly, and he slipped silently out the door. I went after him, failing to lock the door behind me, which was unforgivable, I suppose, for the peace of churches should never be disturbed, and I watched him walk through the cold black morning, along the sidewalk near the Pontalba Apartments, across from the square.

He was hurrying in his subtle graceful way, with long easy strides. The light was coming, gray and lethal, giving a dull gleam to the shop windows beneath the overhanging roof. I could stand it for another half hour, perhaps. He could not.

I realized I didn't know where his coffin was hidden, and how far he had to go to reach it. I had not the slightest idea.

Before he reached the corner nearest the river, he turned around. He gave a little wave to me, and in that gesture there was more affection than in anything he had said.

I went back to close up the church.

Chapter 8

EIGHT

THE next night, I went at once to Jackson Square. The terrible norther had finally come down into New Orleans, bringing with it a freezing wind. This sort of thing can happen at any time during the winter months, though some years it happens not at all. I'd stopped at my rooftop flat to put on a heavy wool overcoat, delighted as before that I had such feeling now in my newly bronzed skin.

A few tourists braved the weather to visit the cafes and bakeries still open near the cathedral; and the evening traffic was noisy and hurried. The greasy old Cafe du Monde was crowded behind its closed doors. I saw him immediately. What luck.

They had chained the gates of the square, as they always did now at sunset, a dreadful annoyance, and he was outside, facing the cathedral, looking anxiously about.

I had a moment to study him before he realized I was there. He was a little taller than I am, six feet two, I figured, and he was extremely well built, as I'd seen before. I'd been right about the age. The body couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old. He was clad in very expensive clothes—a fur-lined raincoat, very well tailored, and a thick scarlet cashmere scarf. When he saw me, a spasm passed through him, of pure anxiety and mad delight. That awful glittering smile came over him and vainly

trying to conceal his panic, he fixed his eyes upon me as I made a slow, humanlike approach.

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Ah, but you do look like an angel, Monsieur de Lioncourt, he whispered breathlessly, and how splendid your darkened skin. What a lovely enhancement. Forgive me for not saying so before.

So you're here, Mr. James, I said, raising my eyebrows. What's the proposition I don't like you. Talk fast.

Don't be so rude, Monsieur de Lioncourt, he said. It would be a dreadful mistake to offend me, really it would. Yes, a voice exactly like David's voice. Same generation, most likely. And something of India in it, no doubt.

You're quite right on that, he said. I spent many years in India too. And a little time in Australia and Africa as well.

Ah, so you can read my thoughts very easily, I said.

No, not as easily as you might think, and now probably not at all.

I'm going to kill you, I said, if you don't tell me how you've managed to follow me and what you want,

You know what I want, he said, laughing mirthlessly and anxiously under his breath, his eyes fixing on me and then veering away. I told you through the stories, but I can't talk here in the freezing cold. This is worse than Georgetown, which is where I live, by the way. I was hoping to escape this sort of weather. And why ever did you drag me to London and Paris at this time of year? More dry anxious spasms of laughter. Obviously he couldn't stare at me for more than a minute before glancing away as if I

were a blinding light. It was bitter cold in London. I hate cold. This is the tropics, is it not Ah, you with your sentimental dreams of winter snow.

This last remark stunned me before I could conceal it. I was enraged for one silent instant, and then I regained my control.

Come, the cafe, I said, pointing to the old French Market at the other side of the square. I hurried ahead along the pavement. I was too confused and excited to risk another word.

The cafe was extremely noisy but warm. I led the way to a table in the farthest corner from the door, ordered the famous cafe au lait for both of us, and sat there in rigid silence, faintly distracted by the stickiness of the little table, and grimly fascinated by him, as he shivered, unwound his red scarf anxiously, then put it on again, and finally pulled off his fine leather gloves, and stuffed them in his pockets, and then took them out again, and put on one of them, and laid the other one on the table and then snatched it up again, and put it on as well.

There was something positively horrible about him, about the way this alluringly splendid body was pumped up with his devious, jittery spirit, and cynical fits of laughter. Yet I couldn't take my eyes off him. In some devilish way I enjoyed watching him. And I think he knew it.

There was a provocative intelligence lurking behind this flawless, beautiful face. He made me realize how intolerant I had become of anyone truly young.

Suddenly the coffee was set down before us, and I wrapped my naked hands around the warm cup. I let the steam rise in my face. He watched this, with his large clear brown eyes, as if he were the one who was fascinated, and now he tried to hold my gaze steadily and calmly, which he found very hard. Delicious mouth, pretty eyelashes, perfect teeth.

What the hell's the matter with you? I asked.

You know. You've figured it out. I'm not fond of this body, Monsieur de Lioncourt. A body thief has his little difficulties, you know.

Is that what you are?

Yes, a body thief of the first rank. But then you knew that when you agreed to see me, did you not You must forgive me my occasional clumsiness, I have been for most of my life a lean if not emaciated man. Never in such good health. He gave a sigh, the youthful face for a moment sad.

But those chapters are closed now, he said with sudden discomfort. Let me come to the point immediately, out of respect for your enormous preternatural intellect and vast experience-

Don't mock me, you little pissant! I said under my breath. **You play with me, I'll tear you apart slowly. I told you I don't like you. Even your little title for yourself I don't like.

That shut him up. He canned down altogether. Perhaps he lost his temper, or was frozen with terror. I think it was simply that he stopped being so fearful and became coldly angry instead.

All right, he said softly, and soberly, without all the frenzy. I want to trade bodies with you. I want yours for a week. I'll see to it that you have this body. It's young, it's in perfect health. You like the look of it, obviously. I shall show you various certificates of health if you wish. The body was quite thoroughly tested and examined right before I took possession of it. Or stole it. It's quite strong; you can see that. Obviously, it's strong, quite remarkably strong-

How can you do it?

We do it together, Monsieur de Lioncourt, he said very politely, his tone becoming more civil and courteous with each sentence he spoke. There can be no question of body theft when I'm dealing with a creature such as you.

But you've tried, haven't you?

He studied me for a moment, clearly unsure as to how he should answer. Well, you can't blame me for that now, can you? he said imploringly. Any more than I can blame you for drinking blood. He smiled as he said the word blood. But really I was simply trying to get your attention, which isn't an easy thing to do. He seemed thoughtful, utterly sincere. Besides, cooperation is always involved on some level, no matter how submerged that level may be.

Yes, I said, but what are the actual mechanics, if that isn't too crude a word. How do we cooperate with each other! Be specific with me. I don't believe this can be done.

Oh, come now, of course you do, he suggested gently, as if he were a patient teacher. It seemed almost an impersonation of David, without David's vigor. How else would I have managed to take ownership of this body? He made a little illustrative gesture as he continued. We will meet at an appropriate place. Then we will rise out of our bodies, which you know very well how to do and have so eloquently described in your writing, and then we will take possession of each other's bodies. There's nothing to it really, except complete courage and an act of will. He lifted the cup, his hand trembling violently, and he drank a mouthful of the hot coffee. For you, the test will be the courage, nothing more.

What will keep me anchored in the new body?

There'll be no one in there, Monsieur de Lioncourt, to push you out. This is entirely

different from possession, you understand. Oh, possession is a battle. When you enter into this body, there will be not the slightest resistance from it. You can remain until you choose to disengage.

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It's too puzzling! I said, with obvious annoyance. I know reams have been written on these questions, but something doesn't quite . . .

Let me try to put it in perspective, he said, voice hushed an

d almost exquisitely accommodating. We're dealing here with science, but it is science which has not yet been fully codified by scientific minds. What we have are the memoirs of poets and occult adventurers, quite incapable of anatomizing what takes place.

Exactly. As you pointed out, I've done it myself, traveled out of the body. Yet I don't know what takes place. Why doesn't the body die when one leaves it I don't understand. The soul has more than one part, as does the brain. Surely you know that a child can be born without a cerebellum, yet the body can live if it has what is called the brain stem. Dreadful thought.

Happens all the time, I assure you. Victims of accidents in which the brain is damaged irretrievably can still breathe and . even yawn in their slumber, as the lower brain carries on. And you can possess such bodies? Oh, no, I need a healthy brain in order to take full possession, absolutely must have all those cells in good working order and able to lock into the invading mind Mark my words, Monsieur de Lioncourt. Brain is not mind. But again, we are not talking of possession, but of something infinitely finer than that. Allow me to continue, please. Go ahead.

As I was saying, the soul has more than one part, in the same manner as the brain. The larger part of it-identity, personality, consciousness, if you will-this is what springs loose and travels; but a small residual soul remains. It keeps the vacant body

animate, so to speak, for otherwise vacancy would mean death, of course.

I see. The residual soul animates the brain stem; that is what you mean.

Yes. When you rise out of your body, you will leave a residual soul there. And when you come into this body, you will find the residual soul there as well. It's the very same residual soul I found when I took possession. And that soul will lock with any higher soul eagerly and automatically; it wants to embrace that higher soul. Without it, it feels incomplete. And when death occurs both souls leave? Precisely. Both souls go together, the residual soul and the larger soul, in a violent evacuation, and then the body is a mere lifeless shell and begins its decay. He waited, observing me with the same seemingly sincere patience, and then he said:

The tale of the Body Thief

Believe me, the force of actual death is much stronger. There's no danger at all in what we propose to do.

But if this little residual soul is so damned receptive, why can't I, with all my power, jolt some little mortal soul right out of its skin, and move in?

Because the larger soul would try to reclaim its body, Monsieur de Lioncourt, even if there were no understanding of the process, it would try again and again. Souls do not want to be without a body. And even though the residual soul welcomes the invader, something in it always recognizes the particular soul of which it was once a part. It will choose that soul if there is a battle. And even a bewildered soul can make a powerful attempt to reclaim its mortal frame.

I said nothing, but much as I suspected him, indeed reminded myself to be on guard, I found a continuity in all he said.

Possession is always a bloody struggle, he reiterated. Look what happens with evil spirits, ghosts, that sort of thing. They're always driven out eventually, even if the victor never knows what took place. When the priest comes with his incense and his holy-water mumbo jumbo, he is calling on that residual soul to oust the intruder and draw the old soul back in.

But with the cooperative switch, both souls have new bodies.

Precisely. Believe me, if you think you can hop into a human body without my assistance, well, give it a try, and you'll see what I mean. You'll never really experience the five senses of a mortal as long as the battle's raging inside.

His manner became even more careful, confidential. Look at this body again, Monsieur de Lioncourt, he said with beguiling softness. It can be yours, absolutely and truly yours. His pause seemed as precise suddenly as his words. It was a year ago you first saw it in Venice. It's been host to an intruder without interruption for all of that time. It will play host to you.

Where did you get it?

Stole it, I told you, he said. The former owner is dead.

You have to be more specific.

Oh, must I, really I do so hate to incriminate myself.

I'm not a mortal officer of the law, Mr. James. I'm a vampire. Speak in words I can understand.

He gave a soft, faintly ironic laugh. The body was carefully chosen, he said. The former owner had no mind left. Oh, there was nothing organically wrong with him,

absolutely nothing. As I told you, he'd been quite thoroughly tested. He'd become a great quiet laboratory animal of sorts. He never moved. Never spoke. His reason had been hopelessly shattered, no matter how the healthy cells of the brain continued to pop and crackle along, as they are wont to do. I accomplished the switch in stages. Jolting him out of his body was simple. It was luring him down into my old body and leaving him there which took the skill.

Where is your old body now?

Monsieur de Lioncourt, there is simply no way that the old soul will ever come knocking; that I guarantee.

I want to see a picture of your old body.

Whatever for?

Because it will tell me things about you, more perhaps than you yourself are telling me. I demand it. I won't proceed without it.

You won't? He retained the polite smile. What if I get up and leave here?

I'll kill your splendid new body as soon as you try. No one in this cafe will even notice. They'll think you're drunk and that you've tumbled into my arms. I do that sort of thing all the time.

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He fell silent, but I could see that he was calculating fiercely, and then I realized how much he was savoring all this, that he had been all along. He was like a great actor, deeply immersed in the most challenging part of his career.

He smiled at me, with startling seductiveness, and then, carefully removing his right glove, he drew a little item out of his pocket and put it in my hand. An old photograph of a gaunt man with thick white wavy hair. I judged him to be perhaps fifty. He wore some sort of white uniform with a little black bow tie.

He was a very nice looking man, actually, much more delicate in appearance than David, but he had the same sort of British elegance about him, and his smile was not unpleasant. He was leaning on the railing of what might have been the deck of a ship. Yes, it was a ship.

You knew I'd ask for this, didn't you?

Sooner or later, he said.

When was this taken?

That's of no importance. Why on earth do you want to know? He betrayed just a little annoyance, but then he covered it at once. It was ten years ago, he said with a slight sinking of the voice. Will it do?

And so that makes you . . . what Mid-sixties, perhaps?

I'll settle for that, he said with a very broad and intimate smile.

How did you learn all this Why haven't others perfected this trick?

He looked me up and down and a little coldly, and I thought his composure might snap. Then he retreated into his polite manner again. Many people have done it, he said, his voice assuming a tone of special confidence. Your friend David Talbot could have told you that. He didn't want to. He lies, like all those wizards in the Talamasca. They're religious. They think they can control people; they use their knowledge for control.

How do you know about them?

I was a member of their order, he said, his eyes brightening playfully, as he smiled again. They kicked me out of it. They accused me of using my powers for gain. What else is there, Monsieur de Lioncourt What do you use your powers for, if not for gain?

So, Louis had been right. I didn't speak. I tried to scan him but it was useless. Instead, I received a strong sense of his physical presence, of the heat emanating from him, of the hot fount of his blood. Succulent, that was the word for this body, no matter what one thought of his soul. I disliked the feeling because it made me want to kill him now.

I found out about you through the Talamasca, he said, assuming the same confidential tone as before. Of course I was familiar with your little fictions. I read all th

at sort of thing. That's why I used those short stories to communicate with you. But it was in the archives of the Talamasca that I discovered that your fictions weren't fictions at all.

I was silently enraged that Louis had figured it right.

All right, I said. I understand all this about the divided brain and the divided soul, but what if you don't want to give my body back to me after we've made this little switch, and I'm not strong enough to reclaim it; what's to keep you from making off with my body for good?

He was quite still for a moment, and then said with slow measured words: A very large bribe.

Ah.

Ten million dollars in a bank account waiting for me when I repossess this body. He reached into his coat pocket again and drew out a small plastic card with a thumbnail picture of his new face on it. There was also a clear fingerprint, and his name, Raglan James, and a Washington address.

You can arrange it, surely. A fortune that can only be claimed by the man with this face and this fingerprint. You don't think I'd forfeit a fortune of that size, do you? Besides, I don't want your body forever. You don't even want it forever, do you? You've been far too eloquent on the subject of your agonies, your angst, your extended and noisy descent into hell, etcetera. No. I only want your body for a little while. There are many bodies out there, waiting for me to take possession of them, many kinds of adventure. I studied the little card. Ten million, I said. That's quite a price. It's nothing to you and you know it. You have billions squirreled away in international banks under all your colorful aliases. A creature with your formidable powers can acquire all the riches of the world. It's only the tawdry vampires of second-rate motion pictures who tramp through eternity living hand to mouth, as we both know.

He blotted his lips fastidiously with a linen handkerchief, then drank a gulp of his coffee.

I was powerfully intrigued, he said, by your descriptions of the vampire Armand in The Queen of the Damned-how he used his precious powers to acquire wealth, and built his great enterprise, the Night Island, such a lovely name. It rather took my breath away. He smiled, and then went on, the voice amiable and smooth as before. It wasn't very difficult for me to document and annotate your assertions, you realize, though as we both know, your mysterious comrade has long ago abandoned the Night Island, and has vanished from the realm of computer records-at least as far as I can ascertain. I didn't say anything.

Besides, for what I offer, ten million is a bargain. Who else has made you such an offer There isn't anyone else-at the moment, that is-who can or will.

And suppose / don't want to switch back at the end of the week? I asked. Suppose I want to be human forever. That's perfectly fine with me, he said graciously. I can get rid of your body anytime I want. There are lots of others who'll take it off my hands. He gave me a respectful and admiring smile.

What are you going to do with my body?

Enjoy it. Enjoy the strength, the power! I've had everything the human body has to offer-youth, beauty, resilience. I've even been in the body of a woman, you know. And by the way, I don't recommend that at all. Now I want what you have to offer. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head. If there were any corporeal angels hanging about, well, I might approach one of them.

The Talamasca has no record of angels?

He hesitated, then gave a small contained laugh. Angels are pure spirit, Monsieur de Lioncourt, he said. We are talking bodies, no I am addicted to the pleasures of the flesh. And vampires are fleshly monsters, are they not They thrive on blood. Again, a light came into his eyes when he said the word blood.

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What's your game? I asked. I mean really. What's your passion It can't be the money. What's the money for What will you buy with it Experiences you haven't had?

Yes, I would say that's it. Experiences I haven't had. I'm obviously a sensualist, for want of a better word, but if you must know the truth-and I don't see why there should be any lies between us-I'm a thief in every respect. I don't enjoy something unless I bargain for it, trick someone out of it, or steal it. It's my way of making something out of nothing, you might say, which makes me like God!

He stopped as if he were so impressed with what he had just said that he had to catch his breath. His eyes were dancing, and then he looked down at the half-empty coffee cup and gave a long secretive private smile.

You do follow my drift, don't you? he asked. I stole these clothes, he said. Everything in my house in Georgetown is stolen-every piece of furniture, every painting, every little object d'art. Even the house itself is stolen, or shall we say, it was signed over to me amid a morass of false impressions and false hopes. I believe they call it swindling All the same thing. He smiled proudly again, and with such seeming depth of feeling that I was amazed. All the money I possess is stolen. So is the car I drive in Georgetown. So are the airline tickets I used to chase you around the world.

I didn't respond. How strange he was, I thought, intrigued by him and yet still repelled by him, for all his graciousness and seeming honesty. It was an act, but what a nearly perfect act. And then the bewitching face, which seemed with every new revelation to be more mobile and expressive and pliant. I roused myself. There was more I had to know.

How did you accomplish that, following me about How did you know where I was?

Two ways, to be perfectly frank with you. The first is obvious. I can leave my body for short periods, and during those periods I can search for you over vast distances. But I don't like that sort of bodiless travel at all. And of course you are not easy to find. You cloak yourself for long periods; then you blaze away in careless visibility; and of course you move about with no discernible pattern. Often by the time I'd located you, and brought my body to the location, you were gone.

Then there's another way, almost as magical-computer systems. You use many aliases. I've been able to discover four of them. I'm often not quick enough to catch up with you through the computer. But I can study your tracks. And when you double back again, I know where to close in.

I said nothing, merely marveling again at how much he was enjoying all of this.

I like your taste in cities, he said. I like your taste in hotels-the Hassler in Rome, the Ritz in Paris, the Stanhope in New York. And of course the Park Central in Miami, lovely little hotel. Oh, don't get so suspicious. There's nothing to chasing people through computer systems. There's nothing to bribing clerks to show you a credit card receipt, or bullying bank employees to reveal things they've been told not to reveal. Tricks usually handle it perfectly well. You don't have to be a preternatural killer to do it. No, not at all.

You steal through the computer systems?

When I can, he said with a little twist to his mouth. I steal in any fashion. Nothing's beneath my dignity. But I'm not capable of stealing ten million dollars through any means. If I were, I wouldn't be here, now, would I I'm not that clever. I've been caught twice. I've been in prison. That's where I perfected the means of traveling out of body, since there wasn't any other way. He made a weary bitter sarcastic smile.

Why are you telling me all this?

Because your friend David Talbot is going to tell you. And because I think we should understand each other. I'm weary of taking risks. This is the big score, your body-and ten million dollars when I give it up.

What is it with you? I asked. This all sounds so petty, so mundane.

Ten million is mundane?

Yes. You've swapped an old body for a new one. You're young again! And the next step, if I consent, will be my body, my powers. But it's the money that matters to you. It's really just the money and nothing else.

It's both! he said sourly and defiantly. They're very similar. With conscious effort he regained his composure. You don't realize it because you acquired your wealth and your power simultaneously, he said. Immortality and a great casket full of gold and jewels. Wasn't that the story You walked out of Magnus's tower an immortal with a king's ransom. Or is the story a lie You're real enough, that's plain.

But I don't know about all those things you wrote. But you ought to understand what I'm saying. You're a thief yourself.

I felt an immediate flush of anger. Suddenly he was more consummately distasteful than he'd been in that anxious jittering state when we first sat down.

I'm not a thief, I said quietly.

Yes, you are, he answered with amazing sympathy. You always steal from your victims. You know you do.

No, I never do unless. . . I have to.

Have it your way. I think you're a thief. He leant forward, eyes glittering again, as the soothing measured words continued: You steal the blood you drink, you can't argue with that.

What actually happened with you and the Talamasca? I asked.

I told you, he said. The Talamasca threw me out. I was accused of using my gifts to gain information for personal use. I was accused of deception. And of stealing, of course. They were very foolish and shortsighted, your friends in the Talamasca. They underestimated me completely. They should have valued me. They should have studied me. They should have begged me to teach them the things I know.

Instead they gave me the boot. Six months' severance. A pittance. And they refused my last request for first-class passage to America on the Queen Elizabeth 2. It would have been so simple for them to grant my wish. They owed me that much, after the things I'd revealed to them. They should have done it. He sighed, and glanced at me, and then at his coffee. Little things like that matter in this world. They matter very much.

I didn't reply. I looked down at the picture again, at the figure on the deck of the ship, but I'm not sure he took notice of it. He was staring off into the noisy glare of the cafe, eyes dancing over walls and ceiling and occasional tourists and taking note of none.

I tried to bargain with them, he said, voice soft and measured as before. If they wanted a few items returned or a few questions answered-you know. But they wouldn't hear of it, not them! And money means nothing to them, no more than it means to you. They were too mean-spirited to even consider it. They gave me a tourist-class plane ticket, and a check for six months' pay. Six months' pay! Oh, I am

so very weary of all the little ups and downs!

What made you think you could outwit them?

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I did outwit them, he said, eyes flashing with a little smile. They're not very careful with their inventories. They have no idea really how many of their little treasures I managed to appropriate. They'll never guess. Of course you were the real theft-the secret that you existed. Ah, discovering that little vault full of relics was such a stroke of good luck. Understand, I didn't take anything of your old possessions-rotted frock coats from your very closets in New Orleans, parchments with your fancy signature, why, there was even a locket with a painted miniature of that accursed little child-

Watch your tongue, I whispered.

He went quiet. I'm sorry. I meant no offense, truly.

What locket? I asked, Could he hear the sudden racing of my heart I tried to still it, to keep the warmth from rising again in my face.

How meek he looked as he answered. A gold locket on a chain, little oval miniature inside. Oh, I didn't steal it. I swear to you. I left it there. Ask your friend Talbot. It's still in the vault.

I waited, commanding my heart to be still, and banishing all images of that locket from my mind. Then: The point is, the Talamasca caught you and they put you out.

You don't have to continue insulting me, he said humbly.

It's entirely possible for us to make our little bargain without any unpleasantness. I'm very sorry that I mentioned this locket, I didn't-

I want to think over your proposition, I said.

That might be a mistake.

Why?

Give it a chance! Act quickly. Act now. And remember, please, if you harm me, you'll throw away this opportunity forever. I'm the only key to this experience; use me or you'll never know what it's like to be a human being again. He drew close to me, so close I could feel his breath on my cheek. You'll never know what it's like to walk in the sunlight, to enjoy a full meal of real food, to make love to a woman or a man.

I want you to leave here now. Get out of this city and never come back. I'll come to you at this address in Georgetown when I'm ready. And it won't be for a week this switch. Not the first time at any rate. It will be . . .

May I suggest two days?

I didn't answer.

What if we start with one day? he asked. If you like it, then we can arrange for a longer time?

One day, I said, my voice sounding very strange to me. One period of twenty-four hours . . . for the first time.

One day and two nights, he said quietly. Let me suggest this coming Wednesday, as soon after sunset as you like. We shall make the second switch early on Friday, before dawn.

I didn't reply.

You have this evening and tomorrow evening to make your preparations, he said coaxingly. After the switch you will have all of Wednesday night and the full day Thursday. Of course you'll have Thursday night as well up until. . . shall we say, two hours before Friday's sunrise That ought to be comfortable enough.

He studied me keenly, then became more anxious: Oh, and bring one of your passports with you. I don't care which one. But I want a passport, and a bit of credit plastic, and money in my pockets over and above the ten million. You understand?

I didn't say anything.

You know this will work.

Again, I didn't answer.

Believe me, all I've told you is true. Ask Talbot. I wasn't born this handsome individual you see before you. And this body is waiting right now this very minute for you.

I was quiet.

Come to me Wednesday, he said. You'll be very glad that you did. He paused, and then his manner became even softer. Look, I. . . feel that I know you, he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. I know what you want! It's dreadful to want something and not to have it. Ah, but then to know that it's within your grasp.

I looked up slowly into his eyes. The handsome face was tranquil, devoid of any stamp of expression, and the eyes seemed rather miraculous in their fragility and their precision. The skin itself seemed supple and as if it would feel like satin to my touch.

And then came the voice again, in a seductive half whisper, the words touched with sadness.

This is something only you and I can do, he said. In a way, it is a miracle which only you and I can understand.

The face appeared monstrous suddenly in its tranquil beauty; even the voice seemed monstrous in its lovely timbre and eloquence, so expressive of empathy and even affection, perhaps even love.

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I had the urge to grab the creature by the throat; I had the urge to shake it until it lost its composure and its semblance of deep feeling, but I would not have dreamed of doing so really. I was mesmerized by the eyes and the voice. I was allowing myself to be mesmerized, the way I had allowed those earlier physical sensations of assault to sweep over me. And it occurred to me that I allowed this simply because this being seemed so very fragile and foolish and I was sure of my own strength.

But that was a He. I wanted to do this thing! I wanted to make this switch.

Only after a long while, he broke away, and let his gaze move over the cafe. Was he biding his time What went on inside his clever conniving, and thoroughly concealed soul! A being who could steal bodies! Who could live inside another's flesh.

Slowly, he took a pen from his pocket, tore loose one of the paper napkins, and wrote down the name and address of a bank. He gave this to me and I took it and slipped it into my pocket. I didn't speak.

Before we switch, I'll give you my passport, he said, studying me with every word. The one with the correct face on it, of course. I'll leave you comfortable in my house. I assume you'll have money in your pockets. You always do. You'll find it quite cozy, my house. You'll like Georgetown. His words were like soft fingers tapping the back of my hand, annoying yet vaguely thrilling. It's quite a civilized place, an old place. Of course it is snowing there. Y

ou realize it. It's very cold. If you really don't want to do it in a cold climate-

I don't mind about the snow, I said under my breath.

Yes, of course. Well, I'll be sure to leave you quite a few winter garments, he said in the same conciliatory manner.

None of those details matter, I said. What a fool he was to think that they did. I could feel my heart skipping beats.

Oh, I don't know about that, he said. When you're human you might find that a lot of things matter.

To you, perhaps, I thought. All that matters to me is to be in that body, and to be alive. In my mind's eye, I saw the snow of that last winter in the Auvergne. I saw the sun spilling down on the mountains. . . I saw the little priest from the village church, shivering in the great hall as he complained to me about the wolves coming down into the village at night. Of course I would hunt down the wolves. It was my duty.

I didn't care whether he'd read these thoughts or not.

Ah, but don't you want to taste good food Don't you want to drink good wine What about a woman, or a man, for that matter You'll need money and pleasant accommodations, of course.

I didn't reply. I saw the sun on the snow. I let my eyes move slowly to his face. I thought how curiously graceful he seemed in this new mode of persuasiveness, how very like David, indeed.

He was about to go on with his talk of luxuries when I gestured for silence.

All right, I said. I think you'll see me on Wednesday. Shall we say an hour after dark Oh, and I must warn you. This fortune often million dollars. It will only be available to you for two hours on Friday morning. You'll have to appear in person to claim it. And here I touched his shoulder lightly. This person, of course.

Of course. I'm looking forward to it.

And you'll need a code word to complete the transaction. And you'll only learn the code word from me when you return my body as agreed.

No. No code words. The transfer of funds must be complete and irrevocable before the bank closes on Wednesday afternoon. All I have to do the following Friday is appear before the representative, allow him to take my fingerprint if you insist upon it, and then he will sign the money over to me.

I was quiet, thinking it over.

After all, my handsome friend, he said, what if you don't like your day as a human being What if you don't feel you've gotten your money's worth?

I'll get my money's worth, I whispered, more to myself than to him.

No, he said patiently but insistently. No code words.

I studied him. He smiled at me, and he appeared almost innocent and truly young. Good Lord, it must have meant something to him, this youthful vigor. How could it not have dazzled him, at least for a while In the beginning, perhaps, he must have thought he'd attained everything that he could ever want.

Not by a long shot! he said suddenly, as if he couldn't stop the words from slipping out of his mouth.

I couldn't help but laugh.

Let me tell you a little secret about youth, he said with sudden coldness. Bernard Shaw said it was wasted on the young, you remember that clever overrated little

remark?

Yes.

Well, it isn't. The young know how difficult and truly dreadful youth can be. Their youth is wasted on everyone else, that's the horror. The young have no authority, no respect.

You're mad, I said. I don't think you use what you steal very well. How could you not thrill to the sheer stamina Glory in the beauty you see reflected in the eyes of those who look at you everywhere you go?

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He shook his head. That's for you to enjoy, he said. The body's young the way you've always been young. You will thrill to the stamina of it, as you say. You will glory in all those loving looks. He broke off. He took the final sip of his coffee and stared into the cup,

No code words, he said politely.

Very well.

Ah, good, he said with a full warm smile of amazing brightness. Remember I offered you a week for this sum, he said. It's your decision to take one full day. Perhaps after you've had a taste you'll want a much longer time.

Perhaps so, I said. Again, I was distracted by the sight of him, by the sight of the large warm hand which he covered now with the glove.

And another switch will cost you another handsome sum, he said merrily, all smiles now, as he arranged his scarf within his lapels.

Yes, of course.

Money really doesn't mean anything to you, does it? he asked, thoughtfully.

Nothing at all. How tragic for you, I thought, that it means so much.

Well, perhaps I should take my leave now, and allow you to make your preparations. I shall see you Wednesday as planned.

Don't try to run out on me, I said in a low voice, leaning forward slightly, and then lifting my hand and touching his face.

The gesture clearly startled him; he became motionless, like an animal in the wood who suddenly sensed danger where there had been none before. But his expression remained calm, and I let my fingers rest against his smoothly shaven skin.

Then I moved them down slowly, feeling the firmness of his jawbone, and then I placed my hand on his neck. Here, too, the razor had passed, leaving its faint dark shadow; the skin was firm, surprisingly muscular, and a clean, youthful scent rose from it as I saw the sweat break out on his forehead, as I saw his lips move in a surprisingly graceful smile.

Surely you enjoyed being young just a little, I said under my breath.

He smiled, as if he knew just how radiant and seductive the smile could be.

I dream the dreams of the young, he said. And they are always dreams of being older, and richer, and wiser, and stronger, don't you think?

I gave a little laugh.

I'll be there Wednesday night, he said with the same silver-tongued sincerity. You can be certain of it. Come. It will happen, I promise you. He leant forward and whispered. You will be inside this body! And once again, he smiled in the most charming and ingratiating fashion. You'll see.

I want you to leave New Orleans now.

Ah, yes, immediately, he said. And without another word, he stood up, moving back away from me, and then tried to conceal his sudden fear. I have my ticket already, he

said. I don't like your filthy little Caribbean backwater. He made a little self-deprecating laugh, an almost pretty laugh. Then he went on as if he were a wise teacher scolding a student. We'll talk more when you come to Georgetown. And don't try to spy on me in the meantime. I'll know it if you do. I'm too good at picking up that sort of thing. Even the Talamasca was amazed at my powers. They should have kept me in the fold! They should have studied me! He broke off.

I'll spy on you anyway, I said, echoing his low key and careful tone. I don't really care whether or not you know.

He laughed again, in a low, subdued, and slightly smoldering fashion, and then gave me a little nod and rushed towards the door. He was once again the awkward, ungainly being, full of crazed excitement. And how tragic it seemed, for surely that body could move like a panther with another soul inside.

I caught him on the sidewalk, startling him, indeed scaring him half out of his powerful little psychic mind. We were almost eye-to-eye.

What do you want to do with my body? I asked. I mean, besides flee from the sun every morning as if you were a nocturnal insect or a giant slug?

What do you think? he said, once again playing the charming English gentleman with utter sincerity. I want to drink blood. His eyes grew very wide, and he leaned closer. I want to take life when I drink it. That's the point, isn't it? It's not merely the blood you steal from them, it's their lives. I've never stolen anything that valuable from anyone. He gave me a knowing smile. The body, yes, but not the blood and the life.

I let him go, backing away from him as sharply as he'd backed away from me only a moment before. My heart was pounding, and I could feel a tremor passing through me as I stared at him, at his handsome and seemingly innocent face.

He continued to smile. You are a thief par excellence,

he said. Every breath you take is stolen! Oh, yes, I must have your body. I must experience this. To invade the vampire files of the Talamasca was a triumph, but to possess your body, and to steal blood whilst in it! Ah, that is beyond all my finest accomplishments! You are the ultimate thief.

Get away from me, I whispered.

Oh, come now, don't be so fastidious, he said. You hate it when other people do it to you. You're quite privileged, Lestat de Lioncourt. You've found what Diogenes was searching for. An honest man! Another broad smile, and then a low volley of simmering laughter, as if he couldn't contain it any longer. I shall see you Wednesday. And you must come early. I want as much of the night as I can have.

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He turned and hurried into the street, waving frantically for a taxi, and then bolting against the traffic to force his way into a cab which had just come to a stop, quite obviously, for someone else. A little argument ensued, but he won out immediately, slamming the door in the other fellow's face as the cab sped off. I saw him wink at me through the dirty window, and wave. And then he and his taxi were gone.

I was sick with confusion. I stood there unable to move. The night for all its coldness was busy and full of the mingled voices of the passing tourists, of cars slowing as they passed the square. Without intent, without words, I tried to see it as it might be in the sunshine; I tried to imagine the heavens over this spot that shocking vague blue.

Then slowly I turned up the collar of my coat.

I walked for hours. I kept hearing that beautiful cultured voice in my ears.

It's not merely the blood you steal from them, it's their lives. I've never stolen anything that valuable from anyone. The body, yes, but not the blood and the life.

I couldn't have faced Louis. I couldn't bear the thought of talking to David. And if Marius learned of this, I was finished before I'd begun. Who knew what Marius would do to me for even entertaining such an idea And yet Marius, with all his vast experience, would know if this was truth or fancy! Ye gods, had Marius never wanted to do it himself

At last, I went back to my apartment, and turned out the lights and sat sprawled on the soft velvet sofa, before the darkened glass wall, peering out at the city below.

Remember, please, if you harm me, you'll throw away this opportunity forever. . . Use me or you 'll never know what it's like to be a human being again . . . You'll never know what it's like to walk in the sunlight, to enjoy a full meal of real food, to make love to a woman or a man.

I thought about the power of rising out of one's material form. I didn't like this power, and it did not happen to me spontaneously, this astral projection, as it was called, this spirit traveling. Indeed, I had used it so few times I could have counted them on one hand.

And in all my suffering in the Gobi, I had not tried to leave my material form, nor had I been propelled out of it, nor had I even thought of such a possibility.

Indeed, the idea of being disconnected from my body-of floating about, earthbound, and unable to find a door to heaven or hell-was absolutely terrifying to me. And that such a traveling, disembodied soul could not pass through the gates of death at will had been plain to me the very first time I'd ever experimented with this little trick. But to go into the body of a mortal! To anchor there, to walk, to feel, to see, as a mortal, ah, I could not contain my excitement. It was becoming pure pain.

After the switch you will have all of Wednesday night and the full day Thursday. The full day Thursday, the full day . . .

Finally, sometime before morning, I called my agent in New York. This man had no knowledge of my Paris agent at all. He knew me under two names only. And I had not used either of these in many a moon. It was very unlikely Raglan James had any knowledge of these identities and their various resources. It seemed the simplest route to pursue.

I have some work for you, very complicated work. And it must be done immediately.

Yes, sir, always, sir.

All right, this is the name and address of a bank in the District of Columbia. I want you to write it down . . .

Chapter 9

NINE

THE following evening I completed all the necessary papers for this transfer of ten million in American dollars, and sent these papers by messenger to the bank in Washington, along with Mr. Raglan James's photo-identification card, and a full reiteration of instructions in my own hand, and with the signature of Lestan Gregor, which for various reasons, was the best name to be used for the entire affair.

My New York agent also knew me by another alias, as I have indicated, and we agreed that this other name would in no way figure in this transaction, and that should I need to contact my agent, this other name, and a couple of new code words, would empower him to make transfers of money on verbal instructions alone.

As for the name Lestan Gregor, it was to disappear utterly from record as soon as this ten million went into the possession of Mr. James. All the remaining assets of Mr. Gregor were now transferred to my other name-which by the way was Stanford Wilde, for all that it matters now.

All of my agents are used to such bizarre instructions-shifts of funds, collapsing of identities, and the authority to wire funds to me anywhere I might be in the world on the basis of a telephone call. But I tightened the system. I gave bizarre and difficult-to-pronounce code words. I did everything I could, in short, to improve security surrounding my identities, and to fix the terms of the transfer of the ten million as firmly as I could.

As of Wednesday noon, the money would be in a trust account at the Washington bank, from which it could only be claimed by Mr. Raglan James, and only between the hours of ten and twelve on the following Friday. Mr. James would verify his identity by physical conformity to his picture, and by fingerprint, and by signature, before the money would be placed in his account. At one minute after twelve noon, the entire transaction would be null and void, and the money would be sent back to New York. Mr. James was to be presented with all these terms on Wednesday afternoon at the very latest, and with the assurance that nothing could prevent this transfer if all the instructions were followed as laid out.

It seemed an ironclad arrangement, as far as I could figure, but then I wasn't a thief, contrary to what Mr. James believed. And knowing that he was, I examined all aspects of the deal over and over, rather compulsively, in order to deny him the upper hand.

But why was I still deceiving myself, I wondered, that I would not go through with this experiment For surely I intended to do exactly that.

Meantime, the phone in my apartment was ringing over and over again, as David tried desperately to reach me, and I sat there in the dark, thinking things over, and refusing to answer, vaguely annoyed by the ringing, and finally unplugging the cord.

This was despicable, what I meant to do. This varmint would use my body, no doubt, for the most sinister and cruel crimes. And I was going to allow this to happen, merely so that I could be human How impossible to justify, in any light whatever, to anyone whom I knew.

Every time I thought of the others discovering the truth- any of them-I shuddered, and put the thought completely from my mind. Pray they were busy throughout the vast hostile world, with their own inevitable pursuits.

How much better to think about the entire proposition with pounding excitement. And Mr. James was right about the matter of money, of course. Ten million meant absolutely nothing to me. I had carried through the centuries a great fortune, increasing it by various offhand means until even I myself did not know its true size.

And much as I understood how very different the world was for a mortal being, I still could not quite comprehend why the money was so important to James. After all, we were dealing with questions of potent magic, of vast preternatural power, of potentially devastating spiritual insights, and demonic, if not heroic, deeds. But the money was clearly what the little bastard wanted. The little bastard, for all his insults, did not really see past the money. And perhaps that was just as well.

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Think how very dangerous he might be had he truly grand ambitions. But he did not.

And I wanted that human body. And that was the bottom line.

The rest was rationalization at best. And as the hours passed, I did quite a bit of that,

For example, was the surrender of my powerful body really so despicable The little creep couldn't even use the human body he had. He'd turned into the perfect gentleman for half an hour at the cafe table, then blown it with his awkward graceless gestures, as soon as he'd stood up. He'd never be able to use my physical strength. He wouldn't be able to direct my telekinetic powers either, no matter how psychic he claimed to be. He might do all right with the telepathy, but when it came to

entrancing or spellbinding, I suspected he would not even begin to use those gifts. I doubted he would be able to move very fast. Indeed, he'd be clumsy and slow and ineffective. Actual flight probably wouldn't be a possibility for him. And he might even get himself into a terrible scrape.

Yes, it was all well and good that he was such a small-souled miserable little schemer. Better that than a god on a rampage, certainly. As for me, what did I plan to do

The house in Georgetown, the car, these things meant nothing! I'd told him the truth. I wanted to be alive! Of course I would need some money for food and drink. But seeing the light of day cost nothing. Indeed, the experience need not involve any great material comfort or luxury. I wanted the spiritual and physical experience of being mortal flesh again. I saw myself as wholly unlike the miserable Body Thief!

But I had one remaining doubt. What if ten million wasn't enough to bring this man back with my body Perhaps I should double the amount. To such a small-minded person, a fortune of twenty million would truly be an enticement. And in the past, I had always found it effective to double the sums which people charged for their services, thereby commanding a loyalty from them of which they had not even conceived.

I called New York again. Double the sum. My agent, naturally enough, thought I was losing my mind. We used our new code words to confirm the authority of the transaction. Then I hung up.

It was time now to talk to David or go to Georgetown. I had made a promise to David. I sat very still, waiting for the phone to ring, and when it did, I picked it up.

Thank God you're there.

What is it? I asked.

I recognized the name Raglan James immediately, and you're absolutely right. The man is not inside his own body! The person you're dealing with is sixty-seven years old. He was born in India, grew up in London, and has been in prison five times. He's a thief known to every law enforcement agency in Europe, and what they call in America a confidence man. He's also a powerful psychic, a black magician-one of the most crafty we've ever known.

So he told me. He worked his way into the order.

Yes, he did. And this was one of the worst mistakes we've ever made. But Lestat, this man could seduce the Blessed Virgin, and steal a pocket watch from the Living Lord. Yet he was his own undoing within a matter of months. That's the crux of what I'm trying to tell you. Now, please do listen. This sort of black witch or sorcerer always

brings evil upon himself! With his gifts he should have been able to deceive us forever; instead he used his skill to fleece the other members, and to steal from the vaults!

He told me that. What about this whole question of body switching Can there be any doubt?

Describe the man as you've seen him.

I did. I emphasized the height and the robust nature of the physical frame. The thick glossy hair, the uncommonly smooth and satin like skin. The exceptional beauty.

Ah, I'm looking at a picture of the man right now.

Explain.

He was confined briefly in a London hospital for the criminally insane. Mother an Anglo-Indian, which may explain the exceptionally beautiful complexion you're describing, and which I can see here plainly enough. Father a London cabbie who died in jail. The fellow himself worked in a garage in London, specializing in extremely expensive cars. Dealt in drugs as a sideline so that he could afford the cars

h
himself. One night he murdered his entire family-wife, two children, brother-in-law and mother-and then gave himself up to the police. A frightening mix of hallucinogenic drugs was found in his blood, along with a great deal of alcohol. These were the very same drugs he often sold to the neighborhood youths.

Derangement of the senses but nothing wrong with the brain.

Precisely, the entire murderous tantrum was drug induced as far as the authorities

could see. The man himself never spoke a word after the incident. He remained steadfastly immune to any stimulus until three weeks after his commitment to hospital, at which time he mysteriously escaped, leaving the body of a slain orderly in his room. Can you guess who this slain orderly turned out to be?

James.

Exactly. Positive identification made postmortem through fingerprints, and confirmed through Interpol and Scotland Yard. James had been working in the hospital under an assumed name for a month before the incident, no doubt waiting for just such a body to arrive!

And then he cheerfully murdered his own body. Steely little son of a bitch to do that.

Well, it was a very sick body-dying of cancer to be precise. The autopsy revealed he wouldn't have survived another six months. Lestat, for all we know, James may have contributed to the commission of the crimes which placed the young man's body at his disposal. If he hadn't stolen this body, he would have hit upon another in a similar state. And once he'd dealt the death blow to his old body, it went into the grave, don't you see, carrying James's entire criminal record with it.

Why did he give me his real name, David? Why did he tell me he'd belonged to the Talamasca?

So I could verify his story, Lestat. Everything he does is calculated. You don't understand how clever this creature is. He wants you to know that he can do what he says he can do! And that the former owner of that young body is quite unable to interfere.

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But, David, there are still aspects to this which are baffling. The soul of the other man. Did it die in that old body Why didn't it. . . get out!

Lestat, the poor being probably never knew such a thing was possible. Undoubtedly James manipulated the switch. Look, I have a file here of testimony from other members of the order pertaining to how this character jolted them right out of the physical and took possession of their bodies for short periods of time.

All the sensations you experienced-the vibration, the constriction-were reported by these people as well. But we are speaking here of educated members of the Order of the Talamasca. This garage mechanic had no training in such things.

His entire experience with the preternatural had to do with drugs. And God knows what ideas were mixed up with it. And throughout, James was dealing with a man in a severe state of shock.

What if it's all some sort of clever ruse, I said. Describe James to me, the man you knew.

Slender, almost emaciated, very vibrant eyes, and thick white hair. Not a bad-looking man. Beautiful voice, as I recall.

That's our man.

Lestat, the note you faxed to me from Paris-it leaves no doubt. It's James's writing. It's his signature. Don't you realize that he found out about you through the order, Lestat! That is the most disturbing aspect of this to me, that he located our files.

So he said.

He entered the order to gain access to such secrets. He cracked the computer system. There's no telling what he might have discovered. Yet he couldn't resist stealing a silver wrist-watch from one of the members, and a diamond necklace from the vaults. He played reckless games with the others. He robbed their rooms. You can't entertain any further communication with this person! It's out of the question.

You sound like the Superior General, now, David.

Lestat, we're speaking of switching here! That means putting your body, with all its gifts, at the disposal of this man.

I know.

You cannot do it. And let me make a shocking suggestion. If you do enjoy taking life, Lestat, as you've told me, why not murder this revolting individual as soon as you can?

David, this is wounded pride talking. And I am shocked.

Don't play with me. There's no time for it here. You realize that this character is plenty clever enough to be counting upon your volatile nature in this little game. He has picked you for this switch just as he picked the poor mechanic in London. He has studied the evidence of your impulsiveness, your curiosity, your general fearlessness. And he can fairly well assume that you won't listen to a word of warning from me.

Interesting.

Speak up; I can't hear you.

What else can you tell me?

What else do you require!

I want to understand this.

Why?

David, I see your point about the poor befuddled mechanic; nevertheless, why didn't his soul pop loose from the cancer-riddled body when James dealt it one fine blow to the head?

Lestat, you said it yourself. The blow was to the head. The soul was already enmeshed with the new brain. There was no moment of clarity or will in which it could have sprung free. Even with a clever sorcerer like James, if you damage the tissues of the brain severely before the soul has a chance to disengage, it cannot do it, and physical death will follow, taking the entire soul with it out of this world. If you do decide to put an end to this miserable monster, by all means take him by surprise, and see to it that you smash his cranium as you might a raw egg.

I laughed. David, I've never heard you so incensed.

That's because I know you, and I think you mean to do this switch, and you must not!

Answer a few more of my questions. I want to think this through.

No.

Near-death experiences, David. You know, those poor souls that suffer a heart attack, go up through a tunnel, see a light, and then come back to life. What's happening with them?

Your guess is as good as mine.

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I don't believe you. I reported James's talk of the brain stem and the residual soul, as best I could. In these near-death experiences, has a little bit of the soul remained behind?

Perhaps, or maybe these individuals do confront death- they actually do cross over- and yet the soul, whole and entire, is sent back. I don't know.

But whatever the case, you can't simply die by going out of your body, can you? If in the Gobi Desert, I had gone up and out of my body, I couldn't have found the gateway, could I? It wouldn't have been there. It opens only for the whole soul.

Yes. As far as I know, yes. He paused. Then: Why do you ask me this? Do you still dream of dying? I don't believe it. You're too desperately fond of being alive.

I've been dead for two centuries, David. What about ghosts? The earthbound spirits?

They've failed to find that gateway, even though it opened. Or they refused to go through. Look, we can talk about all this some night in the future, roaming the alleyways of Rio, or wherever you like. The important thing is, you must swear to me not to deal with this sorcerer any longer, if you won't go so far as to follow my suggestion that you put an end to him as soon as you can.

Why are you so afraid of him!

Lestat, you must understand how destructive and vicious this individual can be. You can't give your body over to him! And that is just what you mean to do. Look, if you meant to possess a mortal body for a while, I'd be dead against it, for that is diabolical

and unnatural enough! But to give your body to this madman! Ye gods, will you please come here to London Let me talk you out of this. Don't you owe me as much!

David, you investigated him before he became a member of the order, did you not What sort of man is he. . . I mean how did he become this wizard of sorts?

He deceived us with elaborate fabrications and counterfeit records on a scale you wouldn't believe. He loves that sort of connivance. And he's something of a computer genius. Our real investigation took place after he'd gone.

So Where did it all start?

Family was rich, merchant class. Lost its money before the war. Mother was a famous medium, appar

ently quite legitimate and dedicated, and charged a pittance for her services. Everybody in London knew her. I remember hearing of her, long before I was ever interested in that sort of thing. The Talamasca pronounced her genuine on more than one occasion, but she refused to be studied. She was a fragile creature, and very much loved her only son.

Raglan, I said.

Yes, She died of cancer. Terrible pain. Her only daughter became a seamstress, still works for a bridal shop in London. Simply exquisite work. She's deeply grieved over the death of her troublesome brother, but relieved he's gone. I talked to her this morning. She said her brother had been destroyed when he was quite young, by their mother's death.

Understandable, I said.

Father worked almost all his life for Cunard shipping, spending his last years as a cabin steward in first class on the Queen Elizabeth 2. Very proud of his record. Great scandal and disgrace not so many years ago, when James was also hired, thanks to the influence of his father, and promptly robbed one of the passengers of four hundred pounds in cash. Father disowned him, was reinstated by Cunard before he died. Never spoke to his son again.

Ah, the photograph on the ship, I said.

What?

And when you expelled him, he had wanted to sail on that very vessel back to America . . . first class, of course.

He told you that It's possible. I didn't really handle the particulars myself.

Not important, go on. How did he get into the occult?

He was highly educated, spent years at Oxford, though at times he had to live like a pauper. Started dabbling in medium-ship even before his mother died. Didn't come into his own until the fifties, in Paris, where he soon acquired an enormous following, then started bilking his clients in the most crude and obvious ways imaginable, and went to jail.

Same thing happened later in Oslo, more or less. After a series of odd jobs, including very menial work, he started some sort of a spiritualist church, swindled a widow out of her life savings, and was deported. Then Vienna, where he worked as a waiter in a first-class hotel until he became a psychic counselor to the rich within a matter of weeks. Soon a hasty departure. He barely escaped arrest. In Milan, he bilked a member of the old aristocracy out of thousands before he was discovered, and had to leave the city in the middle of the night. His next stop was Berlin, where he was

arrested but talked himself out of custody, and then back to London, where he went to jail again.

Ups and downs, I said, remembering his words.

That's always the pattern. He rises from the lowest employment to living in extravagant luxury, running up ludicrous accounts for fine clothing, motorcars, jet excursions here and there, and then it all collapses in the face of his petty crimes, treachery, and betrayal. He can't break the cycle. It always brings him down.

So it seems.

Lestat, there is something positively stupid about this creature. He speaks eight languages, can invade any computer network, and possess other people's bodies long enough to loot their wall safes-he is obsessed with wall safes, by the way, hi an almost erotic fashion!-and yet he plays silly tricks on people and ends up with handcuffs on his wrists! The objects he took from our vaults were nearly impossible for him to sell. He ended up dumping them on the black market for a pittance. He's really something of an arch fool.

I laughed under my breath. The thefts are symbolic, David. This is a creature of compulsion and obsession. It's a game. That's why he cannot hang on to what he steals. It's the process that counts with him, more than anything else.

But, Lestat, it's an endlessly destructive game.

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I understand, David. Thank you for this information. I'll call you soon.

Wait just a minute, you can't ring off, I won't allow it, don't you realize-

Of course I do, David.

Lestat, there is a saying in the world of the occult. Like attracts like. Do you know what it means?

What would I know about the occult, David That's your territory, not mine.

This is no time for sarcasm.

I'm sorry. What does it mean?

When a sorcerer uses his powers in a petty and selfish fashion, the magic always rebounds upon him.

Now you're talking superstition.

I am talking a principle which is as old as magic itself.

He isn't a magician, David, he's merely a creature with certain measurable and definable psychic powers. He can possess other people. In one case of which we know, he effected an actual switch.

It's the same thing! Use those powers to try to harm others and the harm comes back

to oneself.

David, I am the extant proof that such a concept is false. Next you will explain the concept of karma to me and I will slowly drop off to sleep.

James is the quintessential evil sorcerer! He's already defeated death once at the expense of another human being; he must be stopped.

Why didn't you try to stop me, David, when you had the opportunity I was at your mercy at Talbot Manor. You could have found some way.

Don't push me away with your accusations!

I love you, David. I will contact you soon. I was about to put down the phone, when I thought of something. David, I said. There's something else I'd like to know.

Yes, what? Such relief that I hadn't hung up.

You have these relics of ours-old possessions in your vaults.

Yes. Discomfort. This was an embarrassment to him, it seemed.

A locket, I said, a locket with a picture of Claudia, you have seen such a thing?

I believe I have, he said. I verified the inventory of all of those items after you first came to me. I believe there was a locket. I'm almost certain, in fact. I should have told you this, shouldn't I, before now?

No. Doesn't matter. Was it a locket on a chain, such as women wear?

Yes. Do you want me to look for this locket If I find it, I shall give it to you, of

course.

No, don't look for it now. Perhaps sometime in the future. Good-bye, David. I'll come to you soon.

I hung up, and removed the small phone plug from the wall. So there had been a locket, a woman's locket. But for whom had such a thing been made And why did I see it in my dreams Claudia would not have carried her own image with her in a locket. And surely I would remember it if she had. As I tried to envision it, or remember it, I was filled with a peculiar combination of sadness and dread. It seemed I was very near a dark place, a place full of actual death. And as so often happens with my memories, I heard laughter. Only it wasn't Claudia's laughter this time. It was mine. I had a sense of preternatural youth and endless possibility. In other words I was remembering the young vampire I'd been in the old days of the eighteenth century before time had dealt its blows.

Well, what did I care about this damned locket Maybe I'd picked up the image from James's brain as he pursued me. It had been for him merely a tool to ensnare me. And the fact was, I'd never even seen such a locket. He would have done better to pick some other trinket that had once belonged to me.

No, that last explanation seemed too simple. The image was too vivid. And I'd seen it in my dreams before James had made his way into my adventures. I grew angry suddenly. I had other things to consider just now, did I not Get thee behind me, Claudia. Take your locket, please, ma chérie, and go.

For a very long time, I sat still in the shadows, conscious that the clock was ticking on the mantel, and listening to the occasional noise of traffic from the street.

I tried to consider the points David had made to me. I tried. But all I was thinking was . . . so James can do it, really do it. He is the white-haired man in the photograph, and

he did switch with the mechanic in the hospital in London. It can be done!

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Now and then I saw the locket in my mind's eye-I saw the miniature of Claudia painted so artfully in oils. But no emotion came to me, no sorrow, no anger, no grief.

It was James upon whom my entire heart was fastened. James can do it! James isn't lying. I can live and breathe in tha

t body! And when the sun rises over Georgetown on that morning, I shall see it with those eyes.

It was an hour after midnight when I reached Georgetown. A heavy snow had been falling all evening long, and the streets were filled with deep white drifts of it, clean and beautiful; and it was banked against the doors of the houses, and etching in white the fancy black iron railings and the deep window ledges here and there.

The town itself was immaculate and very charming-made up of graceful Federal-style buildings, mostly of wood, which had the clean lines of the eighteenth century, with its penchant for order and balance, though many had been built in the early decades of the nineteenth. I roamed for a long time along deserted M Street, with its many commercial establishments, and then through the silent campus of the nearby university, and then through the cheerfully lighted hillside streets.

The town house of Raglan James was a particularly fine structure, made of red brick and built right on the street. It had a pretty center doorway and a hefty brass knocker, and two cheerful flickering gas lamps. Old-fashioned solid shutters graced the windows, and there was a lovely fanlight over the door.

The windows were clean, in spite of the snow on the sills, and I could see into the

bright and orderly rooms. There was a smart look to the interior-trim white leather furnishings of extreme modern severity and obvious expense. Numerous paintings on the walls-Picasso, de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol-and intermingled with these multimillion dollar canvases, several large expensively mounted photographs of modern ships. Indeed there were several replicas of large ocean liners in glass cases in the lower hall. The floors gleamed with plastic lacquer. Small dark Oriental rugs of geometric design were everywhere, and the many ornaments gracing glass tables and inlaid teak cabinets were almost exclusively Chinese.

Meticulous, fashionable, costly, and highly individual-that was the personality of the place. It looked to me the way the dwellings of mortals always did-like a series of pristine stage sets. Quite impossible to believe I could be mortal, and belong in such a house, even for an hour or more.

Indeed, the small rooms were so polished it seemed impossible that anyone actually inhabited them at all. The kitchen was full of gleaming copper pots, and black glass-doored appliances, cabinets without visible handles to open them, and bright red ceramic plates.

In spite of the hour, James himself was nowhere to be found.

I entered the house.

A second storey held the bedroom, with a low modern bed, no more than a wooden frame with a mattress inside it, and covered with a quilt of bright geometric pattern, and numerous white pillows-as austere and elegant as all the rest. The closet was crammed with expensive garments, and so were the drawers of the Chinese bureau and another small hand-carved chest by the bed.

Other rooms lay empty, but nowhere was there evidence of neglect. I saw no computers here either. No doubt he kept these someplace else.

In one of these rooms, I concealed a great deal of money for my later use, hiding it inside the chimney of the unused fireplace.

I also concealed some money in an unused bathroom, behind a mirror on the wall.

These were simple precautions. I really couldn't conceive of what it would be like to be human. I might feel quite helpless. Just didn't know.

After I made these little arrangements, I went up on the roof. I could see James at the base of the hill, just turning the corner from M Street, a load of parcels in his arms. He'd been up to thievery, no doubt, for there was no place to shop in these slow hours before dawn. I lost sight of him as he started his ascent.

But another strange visitor appeared, without making the slightest sound that a mortal could hear. It was a great dog, seeming to materialize out of nowhere, which made its way back the alleyway and to the rear yard.

I'd caught its scent as soon as it approached, but I did not see the animal until I came over the roof to the back of the house. I'd expected to hear from it before this time, for surely it would pick up my scent, know instinctively that I wasn't human, and then begin to sound its natural alarm of growls and barks.

Dogs had done that enough to me over the centuries, though they don't always. Sometimes I can entrance them and command them. But I feared the instinctive rejection and it always sent a pain through my heart.

This dog had not barked or given any clue that he knew I was there. He was staring intently at the rear door of the house and the butter-yellow squares of light falling from the window of the door onto the deep snow.

I had a good chance to study him in undisturbed silence, and he was, very simply, one

of the most handsome dogs I had ever beheld.

He was covered in deep, plush fur, beautifully golden and gray in places, and overlaid with a faint saddle of longer black hairs. His overall shape was that of a wolf, but he was far too big to be a wolf, and there was nothing furtive and sly about him, as is the case with wolves. On the contrary, he was wholly majestic in the way that he sat staring motionless at the door.

On closer inspection, I saw that he most truly resembled a giant German shepherd, with the characteristic black muzzle and alert face.

Indeed, when I drew close to the edge of the roof, and he at last looked up at me, I found myself vaguely thrilled by the fierce intelligence gleaming in his dark almond-shaped eyes.

Still he gave no bark, no growl. There seemed a near-human comprehension in him. But how could that explain his silence I had done nothing to enthrall him, to lure or befuddle his dog mind. No. No instinctive aversion at all.

I dropped down into the snow in front of him, and he merely continued to look at me, with those uncanny and expressive eyes. Indeed, so large was he and so calm and sure of himself, that I laughed to myself with delight as I looked at him. I couldn't resist reaching out to touch the soft fur between his ears.

He cocked his head to one side as he continued to look at me, and I found this very endearing, and then to my further amazement he lifted his immense paw and stroked my coat. His bones were so big and heavy he put me in mind of my mastiffs of long ago. He had their slow heavy grace as he moved. I reached out to embrace him, loving his strength and his heaviness, and he reared back on his hind legs and threw his huge paws up on my shoulders, and ran his great ham-pink tongue over my face.

This produced in me a wonderful happiness, really near to weeping, and then some giddy laughter. I nuzzled him, and held him, and stroked him, loving his clean furry smell, and kissing him all over his black muzzle, and then looking him in the eye.

Ah, this is what Little Red Riding Hood saw, I thought, when she beheld the wolf in her grandmother's nightcap and gown. It was too funny, really, the extraordinary and keen expression in his dark face.

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Why don't you know me for what I am? I asked. And then as he sank back down to a majestic sitting position, and looked up at me almost obediently, it struck me that this was an omen, this dog.

No, omen is not the proper word. This did not come from anyone, this gift. It was merely something which put me more in mind of what I meant to do and why I meant to do it, and how little I really cared about the risks involved.

I stood beside the dog, petting him and stroking him and moments passed. It was a small garden, and the snow was falling again, deepening around us, and the cold pain in my skin was growing deeper too. The trees were bare and black in the silent storm. Whatever flowers or grass there might have been was of course not visible; but a few garden statues of darkened concrete and a sharp, thick shrubbery-now nothing but bare twigs and snow-marked a clear rectangular pattern to the whole.

I must have been there with the dog perhaps three minutes before my hand discovered the round silver disk dangling from his chain-link collar, and finally I gathered this up and held it to the light.

Mojo. Ah, I knew this word. Mojo. It had to do with voodoo, gris-gris, charms. Mojo was a good charm, a protective charm. I approved of it as a name for a dog; it was splendid, in fact, and when I called him Mojo he bec

ame faintly excited and once again stroked me slowly with his big eager paw.

Mojo, is it? I said again. That's very beautiful. I kissed him and felt the leathery black tip of his nose. There was something else written on the disk, however. It was the

address of this house.

Very suddenly the dog stiffened; it moved slowly and gracefully out of the sitting position and into an alert stance. James was coming. I heard his crunching steps in the snow. I heard the sound of his key in the lock of his front door. I sensed him realize suddenly that I was very near.

The dog gave a deep fierce growl and moved slowly closer to the rear door of the house. There came the sound of the boards inside creaking under James's heavy feet.

The dog gave a deep angry bark. James opened the door, fixed his fierce crazy eyes on me, smiled, and then hurled something heavy at the animal which it easily dodged.

Glad to see you! But you're early, he said.

I didn't answer him. The dog was growling at him in the same menacing fashion and he gave his attention to the animal again, with great annoyance.

Get rid of it! he . said, purely furious. Kill it!

You're talking to me? I asked coldly. I laid my hand on the animal's head again, stroking it, and whispering to it to be still. It drew closer to me, rubbing its heavy flank against me and then seated itself beside me.

James was tense and shivering as he watched all this. Suddenly he pushed up his collar against the wind, and folded his arms. The snow was blowing all over him, like white powder, clinging to his brown eyebrows and his hair.

It belongs to this house, doesn't it? I said coldly. This house which you stole.

He regarded me with obvious hatred, and then flashed one of those awful evil smiles.

I truly wished he'd lapse back into being the English gentleman. It was so much easier for me when he did. It crossed my mind that it was absolutely base to have to deal with him. I wondered if Saul had found the Witch of Endor so distasteful. But the body, ah, the body, how splendid it was.

Even in his resentment, with his eyes fixed upon the dog, he could not wholly disfigure the beauty of the body.

Well, it seems you've stolen the dog too, I said.

I'll get rid of it, he whispered, looking at it again with fierce contempt. And you, where do things stand with you I won't give you forever to make up your mind. You've given me no certain answer. I want an answer now.

Go to your bank tomorrow morning, I said. I'll see you after dark. Ah, but there is one more condition.

What is it! he asked between his clenched teeth.

Feed the animal. Give it some meat.

Then I made my exit so swiftly he couldn't see it, and when I glanced back, I could see Mojo gazing up at me, through the snowy darkness, and I smiled to think that the dog had seen my movement, fast as it was. The last sound I heard was James cursing to himself ungracefully as he slammed the back door.

An hour later, I lay in the dark waiting for the sun above, and thinking again of my youth in France, of the dogs lying beside me, of riding out on that last hunt with those two huge mastiffs, picking their way slowly through the deep snow.

And the face of the vampire peering at me from the darkness in Paris, calling me

Wolfkiller with such reverence, such crazed reverence, before he sank his fangs into my neck.

Mojo, an omen.

So we reach into the raging chaos, and we pluck some small glittering thing, and we cling to it, and tell ourselves it has meaning, and that the world is good, and we are not evil, and we will all go home in the end.

Tomorrow night, I thought, if that bastard has been lying, I shall split open his chest and tear out his beating heart, and feed it to that big beautiful dog.

Whatever happens, I shall keep this dog.

And I did.

And before this story moves any further, let me say something about this dog. He isn't going to do anything in this book.

He won't save a drowning baby, or rush into a burning building to rouse the inhabitants from near-fatal sleep. He isn't possessed by an evil spirit; he isn't a vampire dog. He's in this narrative simply because I found him in the snow behind that town house in Georgetown, and I loved him, and from that first moment, he seemed somehow to love me. It was all too true to the blind and merciless laws I believe in-the laws of nature, as men say; or the laws of the Savage Garden, as I call them myself. Mojo loved my strength; I loved his beauty. And nothing else ever really mattered at all.