

Nocturnes
in
Purgatory

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Joseph Armstead

By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts



Nocturnes in Purgatory

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PROLOGUE

“If the devil does not exist, and man has therefore created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881)

“Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

It had come from the ice—buried for untold millennia in diamond-hard glacial ice nearly seven feet deep. In the tenth century, the man who discovered it was an outcast from the Magyar tribes of the lower eastern Carpathian basin of Hungary, a Ceangău monk of the Trinitarian Order named Friar Domonkos. Part of an expedition of adventurers and scholars mapping out the densely wooded, high-altitude regions of what had once been Roman-occupied territories, Domonkos was a linguist and mathematician who had answered the Holy Calling...but only after he'd sated his basest, vilest urges as a sadistic torturer in the employ of the army of a recently deposed Bulgarian warlord in the territory of Banat. It was said he had a hole in his soul.

The monk had stared deep into the textures and pictograms marking the blue-black slab of magnesium-rich soapstone, his imagination aflame and his chest filling with a growing sense of dread. He instinctively knew it for what it was: a sigil, an artifact carved with arcane, forbidden magic symbols. The thing called to him.

Domonkos had more than a passing knowledge of some of the lower Grimoires of occultism. He knew he had found something rare and unusual, a fragment of damnation that harkened back to times before the Romans, even before the Kingdom of Dacia in this wild and brutish mountain region. It was the last vestige of a dark, primordial empire: the ancient Dire Apostate Host, an enigmatic alien civilization that had occupied a continent rumored to have been called Lemuria. The creatures of the Dire Apostate Host were referred to in common mythology as Star Devils. The Friar knew that the technology of the

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Star Devils, awesome beings of ancestry like Gammedryx the Overlord, Zerfrak the Deviant, Wyrmaggon the Accuser, and Ny' Garr-Tesh the Dream-Judge, had created the inches-thick, foot-long fragment of steatite he'd chipped from the high ice. He knew. He could sense it.

And it was not something he could share with the rest of mankind.

Friar Domonkos killed the other seven members of his exploratory team three nights after the dig, drugging them at dinner with medicinal powders he slipped into the communal wine decanter, then slitting their throats or strangling them while they slept. With blood thick and wet on his trembling hands, he stole away into the night and into the obscure depths of history, taking The Sigil with him, until it was found four hundred years later on the northern coast of California, by the Miwok Indians native to the region.

The Sigil washed ashore from the waters of Borrego Bay amidst the wreckage of a wooden sailing ship, *The Kurzeme Princess*, a Latvian vessel that had crossed the Baltic from the Ottoman-ruled city of Constantinople. The Sigil was found clutched in the death-grip of a drowned man, a pale-skinned man with hair the color of dirty straw, the like of which no Native American had then ever seen.



The waves pounded the tidal inlet mercilessly, thundering and spouting geysers of cold sea spray as they slammed against the opposing apices of the rocky bluffs enclosing the two-mile-wide beach. The ocean reflected the dull slate color of the midwinter sky and an angry wind, the last remnant of the storm that had passed within the hour, fanned the waters into a froth. Rain still fell, though lightly, and on the distant horizon there were still bright flashes of light as the storm receded to sea.

The wreckage of the sailing vessel, a three-masted barque, lay on its port side, impaled by a fifteen foot spire of rock. Debris—the remains of broken boxes, shattered glass, broken dishes, torn sails and shredded clothing—swirled in the agitated waters. Some of it pushed shoreward with the ebb and flow of the frantic tide. Interspersed with the wreckage were clumps of human remains, the broken, lifeless bodies of crewmen and passengers from the pulverized ship. They were men in strange clothing, members of a far away nation seldom seen on these rocky shores. Seagulls and cormorants soared in the gray skies, their cries and wails piercing the repetitive drumbeat of the surf, and the musk of death mingled in the air with the smell of salt and fish.

Eighty feet above the pebble-strewn beach, at the edge of a grove of towering Douglas Fir and knobcone pine trees, a lean, hard-visaged man in

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buckskin, a coyote pelt draped over his shirtless torso, watched a white-skinned shaman perform a mysterious ritual. The man in buckskin was a Miwok warrior, a slayer of infamous renown amongst his tribesmen, and his name was Th'uletap. Just entering the middle of his twenty-fourth winter, Th'uletap had traveled up and down the Californian coast, and was known to the Mexican outlaws and white-skinned traders who invaded the Indian territories.

The white man he was watching, red-bearded and lean yet lacking the musculature of a woodsman or warrior, denied he was a shaman and instead, in the strange language of his odd people, declared himself to be something called a "priest," a Holy Man, and said he spoke to the god of the Whites. He had supposedly been sent to the western coast by other Holy Men across the great waters to teach the native peoples there the ways of the whites, and to bring them closer to an unhappy and unfriendly god that white people seemed to worship out of fear. But Th'uletap did not believe him. In the nine months the white man had lived among the Miwok, he had seen how the so-called priest had looked at the young women of his tribe, seemingly mesmerized by the supple flesh of only the youngest among the females. His unclean hungers were barely disguised, and Th'uletap had known the white man was no Holy Man. Too, the man was always furtively watching the shadows, almost as if they spoke to him, apparently listening to secrets best kept from the minds of normal men. He was more of a conjurer, a sorcerer, and he had more than a touch of the jackal about him. Often muttering to himself and prone to sudden, inexplicable fits of rage, he had been touched by devils. His name was almost unpronounceable to the Miwok tribespeople, but it sounded like "Ay - ry - awk Kane."

To the left of the priest stood a being Th'uletap could not understand, more than a mere man, with motivations, passions and otherworldly powers the Miwok could only attach to gods or devils. Dressed in a deep blue tunic of coarsely-woven cloth, the man was a giant, taller than any Miwok warrior, more thickly muscled than two strong men, and his skin was the color of the bark from the darkest redwood tree. As if his skin color, wide nose and large lips weren't enough to mark him as an alien to these climes, the man's scalp was hairless except for a single strip of ice-white hair, wide as a child's hand, that ran up the middle of his head. His bushy eyebrows were the same ice-white color. His voice was a sonorous rumble, and on the few occasions he spoke, his words came out in a singsong cadence that sounded as if he had a mouth full of stones. There was something about him that seemed perpetually dissatisfied and angry. Though the women in Th'uletap's tribe were attracted to the dark-skinned stranger, none of them dared approach the bull-like man. They all instinctively knew that matters of the flesh were of no concern to him. His alien mind was engaged elsewhere.

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He never offered them a name by which he could be called. So they simply referred to him as “The Dark Man.”

The Dark Man had known that the mighty wooden ship of the strangers from across the ocean would crash upon the shores of the bay. Privately Th’uletap believed The Dark Man had caused the tragedy, sinking the ship because it held something valuable to him deep in its hold, but he would not speak of his suspicions. A primal instinct told him not to let on to either The Dark Man or the priest just how intelligent he really was. Besides, Th’uletap, too, had his secrets. . .

Secrets like the oath he had taken to the hermit woman of the wood, the one with feline eyes and cool, silken skin that never aged who visited him in the night, her long ivory teeth glistening behind lush hungry lips. The woman had been mistress to his father and to his father’s father before that. Unchanging and forever beautiful, yet evil and murderous in her demands upon the warrior’s family, she claimed to be one of the Chosen of the Moon: a nation who lived in the dark places of the world, side-by-side with Man, yet, because of their need to drink blood to sustain their nearly eternal lives, remaining always separate from Man.

She had been waiting for the arrival of the ship, waiting for its sailors to carry to her a relic of powerful magic from her people across the great waters. She had told the Native American warrior to look for a stone artifact decorated with carvings very similar to those their forefathers had seen marked into the stone cliff sides of the bay. They were the markings of the sky-people, the hated enemies of O-let’-te Coyote the Creator, dark beings who were also called The Hungry Ones Who Hid in Dreams. Once they had ruled this world, though they were not of it. They came from someplace else, someplace in the night sky. Once mankind had served them on bent knee and worshipped them. They were Star Devils.

Th’uletap believed they were fathers to the hermit woman and her people and, perhaps, even to The Dark Man.

The mad priest, Arioch Qayin, at The Dark Man’s behest, began uttering a frenzied rush of ancient words in a high, keening voice and raised his arms, gathering the last energies of the dying storm to him, commanding the remaining ghosts of the wind, rain and lightning to do his bidding. For some unknown reason, The Dark Man had shared some ancient and forbidden knowledge with the priest and commanded him to bring the ship’s secret treasure to shore. Th’uletap did not understand why The Dark Man needed the priest, but he reasoned that there were rules restricting The Dark Man’s behavior that if violated, would result in horrible calamity, perhaps even in imprisonment or death to the arrogant demigod. No doubt his recruitment of the priest as his cat’s-paw was a matter

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of strict necessity.

They had enlisted Th'uletap's sure-footed aid in retrieving this thing they called The Sigil from the beach below due to his knowledge of the safest climbing points on the cliff face over the inlet.

That suited Th'uletap's purposes just fine.

Down below, the corpse of one of the fallen sailors twitched and began to crawl fitfully and awkwardly further up the beach. In one of his dirty, gnarled hands he clutched a stone tablet the length of a gun chest and the thickness of a water canteen.

Smiling, Th'uletap quickly began the dangerous descent, already having plotted his treachery earlier that morning. He'd mapped his escape route down the beach and around the craggy southern horn of the pebble-strewn inlet, secure in the knowledge that neither stranger would expect him to act autonomously, independent of their desires.



When the day was done, Th'uletap had stolen The Sigil and escaped into the hills off the wild, windswept bay, where he presented the gift to his dark mistress. It did nothing, however, to deter her from killing Th'uletap. For his loyalty and devotion, she painfully rewarded him with eternal life as one of the Undead. So he, too, became Chosen of the Moon.

If the demonic Star Devils had cared about such things, they would have laughed. Irony was always entertaining.



As she wept, her tears rolling like bitter acid across flesh dead as stone, she remembered...

She awakened sluggishly, regretfully, from a brief lifetime's immersion in a universe of exquisite pain.

It was a dream, she decided. It had to be. It tested her sanity. It frightened her. It fascinated her. It was beyond anything in her life's experience. It couldn't be real. Nothing real could have felt like this.

And it was wrong. She sensed that. Instinctively, she *knew* that. Nothing truly good could possibly have felt like this.

She had to be dreaming...

Impossibly, she could see the world around her, even though she knew—and that knowledge was a sad thing—that it was beyond the limitations of her

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vision. She could see...

The world had resolved into a milling crowd of moving shadows and humanoid shapes against a backdrop of infinite space, and all the shadows were linked together by a complex interconnection of psychic webbing. She could see this. She could see the details of the web, see the strands of flowing, flexing red threads, traveling through Time itself, from Past through to Present, while bright flashes of lightning ran up and down those liquid red ribbons. It was a map. Somehow, she knew this. It was an episodic map of Time, Incident, Causation and Predation. She could see how one thing led to another thing and how those events created a tapestry of mayhem and murder viewed through her mind's eye.

She was sure that, if Death were an actual living entity, this would be how it saw Reality.

She felt sick. She did not want to decipher the meaning behind what she saw, did not want to know what it meant for her.

She did not want it to mean what she, at her heart, knew it meant.

It was a dream. It had to be.

Because if it wasn't a dream, then the very worst thing she could imagine in her darkest, most nihilistic moments had happened.

She was cold. Inside. The dampness within the concrete cell made her bones ache. The place smelled of mold and bleach, and blue-black beetles scurried across the oil-stained, grime-smearred floor. She'd lost track of time a while ago, after the first beating they'd given her, so she didn't know whether it was day or night outside, in the world up above the dark cavern in which she was being held. But she could tell by the grumbling in her empty stomach and the dryness of her mouth that many hours had passed, if not an entire day. People would start missing her soon. They couldn't afford to keep her hostage much longer. She didn't want to think about what that might mean. Her nose was still running and her eyes were sore from crying, but the inner fire from her anger and outrage still pumped molten steel through her veins...

No right. They had no right to do this to her. No right to do it to anyone. If they thought they were going to break her, they were sadly mistaken. She would survive, somehow, some way, and she'd expose them for the animals they were, putting all their dirty secrets out in the street for all to see. Secrecy was their armor. And somehow, she'd strip it from them.

She had to believe that, despite the dire circumstances of her current situation, despite the fact she was sitting chained atop a block of dirty concrete penned inside a cage made of iron bars. She had to believe...

The flat metallic sounds of a key turning in the lock of the heavy steel door set into the cavern wall stole her attention away from her internal musings.

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She tried to control her breathing as she waited for them to come for her, but anxiety and fearful anticipation of new physical punishment and degradation set her fevered brain ablaze.

Bastards. She wasn't going to cry anymore for these insane bastards.

The door slowly opened and they solemnly entered the area of the cell beyond the wall of iron bars. It was the same group as usual: the big man, quiet, threatening, thick like a block of granite, exuding strength and arrogance; the small thin man, wasp-like and detached, possessing an air of great maturity and knowledge, emotionally cold; and the one she had mentally named "the aristocrat," the impatient one, distracted, disaffected, repulsed by the filth and earthiness of his surroundings and disdainful of having to subject himself to her presence. All three wore hooded masks, with only nose, mouth and eye-holes cut into the black denim, and all three wore surgical gloves and white, long-sleeved, nylon coveralls over their street clothing. They were careful. They didn't want to leave any forensic evidence on her or near her. It was painfully obvious they had done this many times before.

Didn't matter. Somehow she'd beat them. She'd survive. She had to believe that.

The big man spoke first. He always did. He began his questioning with a mechanically unchanging assurance.

"What do you know about The Sigil?" he asked, his voice sounding even and almost casual. "How did you learn of its existence? Who have you told?"

"Go to hell!" she shouted defiantly.

"Gladly," the smaller, thin man answered calmly.

"What say we dispense with the questioning for a minute," the aristocrat offered in a thin, breathy voice, "This is our third session with this stubborn one. Let's allow ourselves a moment to unwind a little and enjoy ourselves. We can question her afterwards."

"I suppose we could do that. What do you suggest?" the thin man asked of his partner.

"I want to burn her," the aristocrat said as if his request were an absolutely reasonable one to make in polite conversation.

"Burn?" the thin man repeated. "That's a bit exotic, given the circumstances."

"Oh yes. But I think it would afford us much enjoyment," the aristocrat explained.

"She'll go into shock and she won't be able to answer our questions," the big man warned.

"I have drugs we can administer that'll stave off the effects of traumatic shock for a couple of hours," the aristocrat said.

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“We have a job to do. I don’t like wandering away from the program like that,” the thin man complained. “It’s a breakdown in discipline.”

“It’s psychologically advantageous to us with a strong-willed, defiant subject like this one,” the aristocrat said.

The big man shrugged. “Just so long as we don’t waste too much time on it. I’m on a tight schedule. I have things to do... watch out not to damage her face or speech centers.”

The aristocrat tut-tutted in response to the big man’s words. “I’m not an amateur, you know that. I won’t cripple or blind her. This will be a strictly controlled operation...”

“So get to it already. I saw the acetylene tank and welding gear outside in the hall. But she’d better not go comatose on us—or worse—or it’s on *your* head.”

“Ye of little faith,” the aristocrat said.

And then he winked at her, as if he were sharing some private joke between them. He walked back towards the doorway whistling a jaunty tune.

That was when, despite her courage and stoicism, she broke down, her resolve crumbling, and started weeping piteously in great heaving sobs.

They had no right to treat her this way. No right at all.

In spite of her deepening despair and growing, harrowing fear, she wondered if the mountain of hate growing inside her would drive her mad.

The scenario dissolved into darkness. The Past became Present. She remembered and she decided she would weep no more. The smoldering fury within her began to consume what was left of who she used to be...

ONE

“When it comes to the point, really bad men are just as rare as really good ones.”

-- George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950)

Wiseguys. He hated them, regardless of their national or cultural origins. Throwbacks to an earlier evolutionary state, in a time when the law of the jungle ruled the development of the human clan, they embodied the worst characteristics of Predatory Man: ego, greed, rage, jealousy, and unfocused fury. They entered Life thinking the World owed them something, thinking that Life had cheated them out of their Just Due. Declaring themselves “the little guy” and playing the victim, they embraced a nihilistic hypocrisy where they saw themselves as heroes and the rest of Humanity as villains. Born liars, they willingly deluded themselves and sought to excuse their crimes against society. They were undisciplined and brutish, without impulse control, and everything they touched had a tendency to unravel into violence. They were killers and corruptors.

As far as Quinn was concerned it was always a nice start to his day when he could put a bullet through one of them.

Today was turning out to be a very nice day, indeed...

Morning had blossomed in the skies over West Sussex, California, after a night of storm-driven rain. A veritable battalion of noisy seagulls swarmed over the city’s baroque skyline while blustery remnants of the storm fanned the waves of the bay. Commuter traffic threatened to create gridlock over the mile-and-a-half-long bridge between West Sussex and its closest neighbor, sleek and modern New Barrington, while the bustling financial districts in both cities dealt with the crisis of failing investor confidence in the real estate market and the changing face of the “war against terror.”

The Barcastle Docks, on an isthmus housing West Sussex’s industrial SoWest End, were hosts to a scene of controlled chaos. Members of the local police department’s Tactical Response Unit and a crew of firefighters and paramedics watched the activity past a barrier of yellow police crime scene tape.

They were nervous. Though many of them were seasoned law enforcement professionals and had seen most of the venal brutishness man could inflict on his fellow man, this situation badly frightened them. They were dealing with

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criminals outside the recognized parameters of normal organized crime. There was something that indicated these criminals had been tainted by a deeper, uglier evil that had led them down the proverbial road to Damnation.

And that was why the police had, however reluctantly, turned to him for aid.

Damnation, understanding it and dealing with it, was something of a specialty with him.

Montgomery Quinn coolly surveyed the dimly lit interior of the abandoned cannery plant with a detached gaze that belied the turmoil he felt inside.

He should have paid closer attention to watching things in his own corner. He'd depended too much on the professionalism of others, assumed they'd be as detail-oriented and meticulous about things as he usually was, and he should have known better. When that arrogant, wannabe-gangster Randal had come out from the shadows of the cannery and publicly fingered him as a special operative for the New Barrington District Attorney's department, he should've already had a backup plan in motion. There should already have been a plausible lie on the tip of his tongue. He should have known better than to rely on the UCCCF to watch his back. Instead he'd been caught flat-footed.

The damn shotgun had jammed. Unbelievable. Worthless piece of crap. He should have expected no less from such an inelegant weapon. He carefully set it aside, wary of making unnecessary noise that could give away his position in the gloom, and shrugged his shoulders to adjust the strap across them. He juggled the leather-bound, notebook-sized parcel he carried under his left arm, moving it aside so he could reach his other weapons.

Inside the dark, ninety by sixty foot, two-story cannery, he thought back to the moments prior to the rendezvous, during which he hadn't had a lot of time to memorize the floor plan and note alternate points of egress. Truthfully, he'd already doubted the plans he'd photocopied from the City Assessor's office were all that current. Quinn's usual territory, when he allowed himself to become engaged in discrete investigatory work, was mostly in New Barrington. That city's streets were as familiar to him as the back of his own hand. But a phone call from Bryce Rooker, the West Sussex District Attorney's Major Crimes Task Force Liaison, had brought him across the bridge to this crumbling, decrepit place.

Places like this weren't real big on keeping city government informed of what they were doing.

He shouldn't have taken Bryce's call. He didn't do work like this.

A shadow moved. He quickly drew his Ruger Super Blackhawk .44 Magnum and fired, the weapon roaring as it spat a pair of 225-grain hollow-point rounds across the twenty yard space between support beams as he ran. He blinked away

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the blossoming purple retina flashes from the pistol's muzzle flare and squinted, peering for more targets. He couldn't tell whether or not he'd hit anything, but he knew the power of the Magnum would make his attackers think twice before committing to any further assault. Magnums. Not his weapon of choice. Too big and too loud and you had to be careful where you aimed them because the velocity and energy of the bullet ripped through just about everything short of battleship steel plating if your target was under a hundred feet away. Still, it was the best he could do considering he'd hadn't had any time to retrieve his field kit from his office, where his twin Smith & Wesson Sigma 9VE semi-automatic pistols sat in expensive custom-made holsters hanging over a hook on his coat rack.

That was the trouble with this gig: there was no subtlety or finesse about any of it.

Still, the job *did* have its perks. He was afforded the opportunity to stick it to Mafioso Gian-Carlino Vestremaglia's Paymar Park Gang. Vestremaglia was a sixty-eight year-old street punk who'd inherited a seventy million dollar criminal empire from his father, Pietro, courtesy of the elder Vestremaglia's assassination by "unknown associates" of his underworld rival, Russian mobster and ex-GRU Colonel Anatoly Beluchienko.

Quinn began gagging on the thick clouds of smoke and dust that gale force winds drove through the wreckage of the dockside cannery. The damage the explosions had done to the building had let the remnants of the vile stormy weather indoors and occasional gusts of wind-driven, needle-like rain were rushing almost horizontal to the oil-stained floor. Amid the tumbles of debris, bodies were scattered across the interior. Splashes of blood cast across walls and broken crates looked reddish-black under the blue-white glow from fluorescent emergency lights. The echoes from round after round of gunfire made his ears buzz.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. They'd told him that Beluchienko was trying to keep his organization distant from dealings with Vestremaglia's Paymar Park outfit because he didn't want Federal attention drawn to his dealings in Borrego Bay. But Bryce Rooker had strongly suspected that Beluchienko's more aggressive silent partners would force him to do otherwise. The Russian wasn't his own man anymore: everyone on the street knew that and they gossiped about it in dire, grim whispers, afraid to be caught talking about it aloud. The forbidden word most commonly associated with the rumors was "UltraKin." When Rooker had heard that word, he had immediately sought Quinn's help.

UltraKin indicated that a parahuman and paranormal element was involved.

A "parahuman and paranormal element" in the Borrego Bay area usually

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resulted in Federal involvement, and the West Sussex D.A.'s Major Crimes Task Force didn't want a bunch of heavy-handed, arrogant Feds running the streets in their town.

Bryce Rooker knew that the best way to counteract the Feds was to get Montgomery Quinn on the West Sussex D.A.'s payroll, for however brief a time.

Quinn ducked reflexively on hearing a sudden popping crack from a small explosion in the confines of the crumbling building. He dropped low, still running forward, and looked around, peering into the shadows for more assailants. He didn't see anyone. The chill breeze off the oceanside dock brought with it a subtle sound of whispering and the scuffing of footfalls other than his own. The tall, mustached black man wasn't alone. They were still after him. Crap. He'd been certain that everyone who hadn't been killed or wounded had beaten a hasty path outside. After all, they'd lost the parcel and a large police presence was just outside a hastily erected barricade. The longer they were there, the more likely they would be arrested—or worse. Unless they planned on taking him on, there was no sense in sticking around the battle zone.

Hell, Quinn didn't much want to stick around any longer, either. And he wouldn't have except that he'd promised Haggard he'd babysit Randal, the little inbred dipshit. Damn all armchair detectives to hell. Special Situations Section Officer Peter Randal, a deskbound research analyst, wasn't prepared for field work in any way whatsoever, certainly not by his native temperament nor by intellect. But the little creep was politically-connected and intended to rise through the DOJ's federal ranks to become a full-fledged field agent in the UCCCF. What no one had counted on was that Randal's ambition to do so was guided by his greed, eventually convincing him to become a turncoat and informer, with a mission to deliver ever-increasing amounts of illegally-gathered intel to criminals like Gian-Carlino Vestremaglia's organization at fifteen thousand dollars a pop.

Well, he'd picked the wrong case to cut his teeth on. The UCCCF, more formally known as the Urban Crimes Crisis Control Force, was a little known arm of the Department of Justice's Law Enforcement Management division, independent of the Department of Homeland Security, specializing in cases involving paramilitary and "abnormal urban terrorist" crimes. They shouldn't even have known about the case. Though it ran parallel to their usual caseload of UltraKin parahuman criminal activities, it was something that should never have made their operational radar. This was about power on the streets. This was about one criminal organization flexing its muscle and attempting to intimidate another criminal organization. It was a turf war. However, it turned out that turf was only the surface part of it.

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Bryce Rooker had called Quinn because he strongly suspected the influence of nightrunners on the situation, manipulating the Mafia and the Russians from behind a curtain of secrecy.

Nightrunners. That was what they were called on the streets of the Sister Cities of Borrego Bay. They were clannish, secretive, psychotic and lethal, an ancient breed, a twisted subculture. They were better known among the highest branches of international law enforcement by another name entirely: the Moon-Chosen.

The Moon-Chosen were not a criminal organization in the strictest sense of the word, but rather a subspecies that had bonded into an influential criminal nation. They were *Homo Draconis*, classified by a rare scientific theory biologists and anthropologists called “parallel evolution.” They were a predatory race of humanoid beings in whom the usually latent *Chiroptera Leptonycteris* genes in their DNA were ascendant. *Chiroptera Leptonycteris* was the scientific designation for the species of bat commonly known as “long-nosed.” Humans, but inextricably linked by mutant genetics to bats. Definitely UltraKin. They were the stuff of legend.

There was only one true name for them.

Vampires. Real, blood-drinking, parahuman, super-powered murderers. Not the familiar cartoonish, supernatural villains from countless bad Hollywood movies, but mutant products of parallel evolution, a separate subspecies of human being. They’d developed alongside normal humankind, but with distinctly different biophysical traits, not the least of which was their need to periodically consume fresh human blood.

And the UCCCF was responsible for controlling them.

Peter Randal was working with them both, one against the other, although he probably didn’t understand that any dealings with the Moon-Chosen, no matter how removed through intermediaries and agents, always ended in death. They owned the little asswipe. He may not have understood much more than the rudimentary requirements of fieldwork, but Randal certainly seemed to have a firm grasp on how to play both sides against the middle. What he didn’t understand yet was that the Moon-Chosen saw him as nothing more than any human: food, a meal not yet devoured.

What it all really came down to was ownership of the parcel now tucked under Quinn’s left arm. The parcel was everything. Whoever possessed the parcel possessed the power over the local vampire families, cliquish bio-strain communities called Gathers, to dictate the control over territory, and manpower resources in those territories. It should have been outside the purview of any federal police organization enforcing the dictates of the Raptor Protocols and the

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Subspecies Sovereignty Non-Intervention Treaties. But, according to Mitchell Haggard, the Feds wanted the parcel, too.

Quinn had lost sight and track of Randal about thirty seconds after the Russian Mob's hit squad had descended on the meeting, catching everyone by surprise. Macho asshads. Couldn't ever trust them, couldn't rely on them either, and they had a well-earned reputation for burning independent contractors like himself. But the Moon-Chosen had their hands in the pie, manipulating things from the shadows.

It was Chaos. It was sheer insanity. It was a far cry from a doomsday situation, the kind of a thing that usually involved the phrase "end of the world." But it was a deadly serious, murderous business that could temporarily tip the local underworld's balance of power in favor of creatures that would, and could, happily invoke Armageddon for nothing else than the sheer joy of watching hordes of bodies fall. If any of them had any sense, they'd run away, turn a blind eye, burn the documentation and the surveillance photographs, erase the taped phone calls, and deny even knowing about it. Even he should have run away screaming from it. But it was impossible for him to walk away: he was The Adversary.

Adversary. How he hated that title...he could still, all these long centuries of struggle and warfare later, hear his ancient teacher, the enigmatic and quixotic Qi-Tung, an Asian warrior, scholar and alchemist, speaking to him in a voice cold as stone, yet weary with the effort of holding raw emotions barely in check.

"The Light of the Universe shines down on all things, even the darkest of shadows. In the shadows, the monsters hide. And you can see them. You will stand one foot in the Light and the other in deepest Darkness. Greet each new day with the knowledge that you will slay monsters. Know that they fear standing in your shadow. Take solace in the single-mindedness of your mission.

"You are the Archangel to The Reaper himself, the Soul-Reaver's princely Champion, the strong Right-Hand of Death.

"No matter the heroism of your good deeds, no matter how many lives you save, no matter how many monsters you slay, those you save will still, and always, hate you.

"They must. They are entirely of the Light. They cannot tolerate the Dark. And you carry the Darkness forever within you—because you are a child of The Nameless.

"You cannot escape what you are. You are The Adversary and in the end, my darkling child, you will take far more lives than you will save. Your legacy is pain, your destiny is slaughter, your altar an abattoir, your credo a brutal and violent nihilism.

"You are the favored child of Murder Itself.

"You are The Adversary."

He was only steps from running through a lighted doorway, through which he could smell outside air, when the figure of a man leapt through it towards him.

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They slammed into each other and the parcel went flying past them both towards the light outside.

Even as they fell, they kicked and punched at one another, their hands grappling to get leverage, their breath steaming through their clenched teeth. Quinn could feel a strength in his assailant that far exceeded what he would have expected from even the toughest mobster or hired gun—inhuman strength, the power to punch through cinder blocks like they were plywood, the power to bend steel bars...

Strength very much like his own.

“It’s you, always *you*, you black bastard!” the furious killer growled in a voice like sandpaper scratching across broken glass. “Always *you!* *Die, you bastard, die!*”

His brain and body reacted: the primal brain took over, adrenaline boosted his physical responses, experience and training for confrontations in an often violent profession guided his moves. The attacker’s elbow thrust at Quinn’s jaw. He spun his head away slightly so the blow lost most of its power, then, although the impact was still jarring, Quinn twisted into his attacker until his back was to the man’s chest. Quinn ducked while striking backwards with his elbows. The strikes collided with the man’s ribcage even through the Kevlar trauma armor covering his torso. Trauma armor: that meant the vampire had expected an armed response at the rendezvous.

Quinn stepped forward and twisted at the hip, raising his knee to hip-level. He kicked straight out—hard. The nightrunner grunted and flew back into a stack of plastic containers. Never give the enemy time to think: Quinn spun completely around and charged into the killer even as the man bounced off from the heavy plastic drums, launching his forearm into the vampire’s throat. Simultaneously he thrust his knee up into his assailant’s groin, even though his protective body armor included a groin-guard. The Moon-Chosen goon stiffened at the assault. Quinn struck twice more with a closed fist, both blows to the sides of the vampire’s abdomen through the opening in the body armor. The punches hit with power enough to shatter inch thick marble.

The vampire gasped, belching air and spittle, and went down hard.

The parcel. He needed to find the parcel... He dropped to his knees, hands out before him probing the dark like a blind man as he fanned through the wreckage littering the warehouse floor. Damn, damn, damn! The flickering lights from the fires behind him and from the building’s dim emergency lighting reflected spots and rivulets from the pools of water created moments ago by the sprinkler system.

Footsteps coming up from behind him.

He rolled and whirled, hands frantically scrabbling for his holstered gun. He

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brought his arms and the Ruger Super Blackhawk up in a two-handed grip and fired blindly. What took only a fraction of a second felt like minutes. The weapon roared and bucked in his fists. He heard a bark of pain and then the sound of a body falling. He didn't worry whether or not he'd only wounded his assailant: the .44 Magnum Blackhawk was loaded with rounds carrying a cyanide and silver nitrate payload, lethal to vampires. Quinn knew the Moon-Chosen thug had already succumbed to the laws of physics as the fatally wounded body surrendered its stolen vitality to Time, quickly degenerating into a pile of wet ash. He kept the weapon out to his side at arm's length while his other hand scoured the floor. His attention was cautiously divided between keeping watch for other attackers and for any glimpses of the parcel as he searched. There...

Got it.

He stood up, senses probing the shadows and gloom within the cannery, heard a soft scuffing sound that brought him around with his weapon at the ready, and was startled to find himself face to face with Peter Randal.

The slender, rather anonymous-looking turncoat was moving very slowly, almost shuffling, and he was slightly bent over, breathing heavily. His lungs were obviously laboring as they drew air into his pain-racked body. Sweat dripped in fat drops from his face and chin and his hands trembled as he raised them to wave off the barrel of Quinn's gun.

"...f-f-fuckers tried to... shaft me, tried to kill me, ... *me!* After what I gave them... better than that, though, I'm better than that...got away...shot the ... fuck ... right in his fanged face," he muttered in a strangled voice punctuated with gagging coughs.

Quinn didn't speak. Apparently Randal had lost his sidearm in a struggle against a Moon-Chosen assailant. He obviously hadn't counted on nor prepared for the one-sidedness of a physical confrontation with an angry vampire. The big black man watched impassively as Randal stumbled awkwardly on wobbly legs and propped himself against the wall of a nearby corridor. The smaller man was mortally wounded, blood gushing from a ragged wound in his throat. One of the eyes in his mangled face was torn from its socket, and it was apparent his ribs were shattered.

Dumb amateur. Greedy Yuppie wannabe-Player. He was dying, his wounds too severe for even advanced emergency medical treatment to stabilize, but his scrabbling, desperate, frightened animal's instincts for survival wouldn't let him just lay down and die.

"It would seem you were very well paid for all your work," Quinn remarked coldly.

The immortal Olympian turned his broad back on the man and rapidly

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moved away, leaving him in the dark.

Quinn launched himself down the corridor and sprinted across a debris-littered storage area, then through a doorway into a small, cement-walled hallway. He threw himself at a heavy metal door, slamming down on the latch and lurching outside into the gray, misty morning.

Seven police officers aiming their service revolvers over the front hoods of their police cars greeted him while a helicopter overhead provided the tactical team air support. They were all shouting at him to drop his weapon and hit the ground, peppering their instructions with a lot of angry invective and threats to kill him on the spot. They sounded a lot like a pack of excited hunting dogs that had treed their prey.

They obviously hadn't a clue who, or what, they were dealing with.

"Don't move! *Don't you fucking move!*"

Luckily they saw the official badge hanging, glinting in the light, from its chain around his neck. He had instinctively raised his hands, dropping his weapon, seeking to avoid any calamitous reactions from nervous or untrained trigger-happy officers at the perimeter. The parcel fell to the ground, splash-landing in an oil-streaked water puddle. He dropped to his knees onto the damp asphalt outside the cannery and clasped his hands behind his head, bellowing loudly:

"West Sussex District Attorney's Office, Major Crimes Task Force, Mayor's Division, Special Investigator Montgomery Quinn, on assignment. Temporary Badge 22170."

Two SWAT officers in full combat uniform and helmets ran over to him, one pointing a Heckler & Koch MC 51 assault rifle into his face while the other, holding a Colt .45 Model 1911A1 automatic, got behind him and quickly patted him down, each pat feeling like an unspoken insult.

"Clear!" the officer roared.



The wind was an insistent shriek in their ears, like the cry of a predatory bird on the hunt. They were standing atop an opulently-designed twelve story building three blocks away from the docks: six figures, five of whom were draped in the three-quarter-length leather coats with caped shoulders commonly referred to as "outriders." They were intently watching the morning's mayhem though binoculars.

Three of the figures, though tall and rangy, were female, and obviously sisters. Triplets. They were brunettes, with almond-shaped blue eyes, their

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peaches and cream complexions intercut with faint purplish tracings where the veins and capillaries were visible under the skin. There was something unclean and repellent about their physical perfection, as if you could see the darkness of their souls through their flesh. Their shoulder-length sable-colored hair fluttered like the ends of tattered flags in the damp morning breezes. Below the hems of the olive-hued coats, the legs of the black tactical body armor suits they wore were tucked into knee-high, steel-toed black boots. Their long, slender hands were encased in half-finger, padded Light Assault gloves. Their clothing was not new; there were telltale signs of wear that told even a casual observer the way they dressed was anything but a fashion statement: these women had military special operations experience.

And they were vampires.

Two of the four men with them on the rooftop of the beaux arts-styled Maritime Records Hall were also Moon-Chosen wampir, all of whom preferred to be known by their racial designation of “Apollyonu,” and they were hardened, grizzled men, blond, bearded, tall and brutish. They and the triplets were standing next to the forward slope of a crowning oval dome of filigreed copper, surrounding the physically smallest member of the group: a rotund, middle-aged bald man dressed in an expensive, navy-blue Saville Row suit. He, too, exuded an air of military discipline and terseness, but he was not a vampire.

He was Anatoly Beluchienko, formerly a Colonel within Russia’s *Glavnoje Razvedyvatel’noje Upravlenije*, the Main Intelligence Directorate within the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, the military-based rival agency of the KGB. He had once commanded, nearly two decades past, the infamous, ultra-secret SD-8, a.k.a. Special Department 8, under the aegis of the GRU’s Administration for Scientific Intelligence division in the sprawling organization’s 12th Directorate.

He had grown to know a great deal about the history and society of the Apollyonu. These days he frequently regretted ever attaining such knowledge.

He especially regretted it now, in the presence of the Waldgrave Sisters, Karine, Louisa, and Marie-Germaine, and the deathless soldiers, Balthasar and Sakarias Halldor, outcast from the Moon-Chosen’s Gen Vespertine nation and ejected from the ranks of the Spectralle Gather in Denmark. The Waldgrave triplets were royalty within the ranks of the Verrigotta Gather, while the Halldor brothers were mercenaries in their employ.

Anatoly Beluchienko was entranced, blood-bound, to the Verrigottas. He was psychically-puppeteered by none other than the mad albino Dame Arathyssa, the cold and ruthless leader of the Gather-family. Dame Arathyssa had psychically implanted Reins of Domination, known within the vampire culture as

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“soul-bridles,” into Beluchienko’s subconscious mind. This allowed her to telepathically trace his movements and summon him whenever she was of a mood. He was not a Thrall and she was not his Blood-Master, as was the usual way in which elder wampirii controlled their human agents. Beluchienko would have been of very little use to her as a mindless minion, little more than a hypnotically-controlled slave. Instead, use of the soul-bridle allowed the human agents to maintain their waking identity and individual autonomy while they acted as mobile intelligence gathering units, her remote eyes and ears in the human underworld, telepathically switched on or off according to her needs. She walked with him, a sliver of distant malevolent consciousness in his mind, always waiting and watching, ready to control his actions. Her constant invasive presence made him feel dirty and ineffectual, impotent. He was her prisoner. He hated her. She, in turn, loved him for his hatred. His indignation and raw fury, the cancer of his black rancor towards her and all of her kind, was like a nectar to her. Whenever she could, she would exercise her control over him and humiliate him in little ways to let him know she was there. She drove him to psychotic excess. He made her, an alien thing of the tombs, feel alive.

In some ways, it was the most satisfying relationship with a woman he’d ever had.

It was hell.

“He has it, dammit,” Marie-Germaine Waldgrave hissed past clenched teeth. “Quinn has The Sigil.”

“He won’t know what it is. No one does outside the Elders of the Apollyonu nation,” Louisa insisted. “He’ll just assume it’s a badge of office, or the seal of protocol for an inter-Gather courier. To him, viewing it with his typical Olympian’s arrogance, it’ll be just a dusty stone artifact that we silly vampires use in some outdated ceremony or other. He won’t recognize its importance...”

“Don’t underestimate the Olympians or their knowledge and familiarity of Apollyonu history,” Sakarias Halldor intoned. “He is an immortal. His kind has had more than enough time over the millennia to infiltrate our ranks and learn our secrets. Quinn, in particular, has proven most adept at knowing details of our history that only the eldest amongst us remember.”

“He is our oldest, most persistent and deadliest enemy,” Balthasar added. “That isn’t by chance. It would be a mistake to guess what he does or does not know. Assume he knows.”

“Yes, I agree. I think it would be wisest to assume he knows,” Marie-Germaine said reluctantly.

“Then why are we watching from over here? What are we accomplishing by this hands-off approach? If we really think he’ll recognize The Sigil for what

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it truly is, then we should act! We should be down there killing the entire lot of them, including Quinn, and *take* what's ours!" Karine Waldgrave declared hotly.

Balthasar harrumphed at her words. "No Apollyonu has ever bested an Olympian in a physical confrontation, not ever. And even among Olympians, Quinn is unique, the deadliest of his kind: fiercer, stronger, faster, more resistant to pain and damage, and there are his mutant extrasensory abilities to consider..."

"Formidable enough, certainly, but that isn't what I fear," Sakarias said ominously.

Louisa lowered her binoculars long enough to favor the muscular vampire mercenary with a look that spoke of shared, dire knowledge. "You're speaking about that accursed war-pike of his, aren't you? That ancient, demonic, screaming *thing* he keeps on a leash, barely under his control..."

"The Angelkiller," Sakarias said with a nod. "Qus'n Fadyim. The pike's a monster that lives only to slay and feed off we Moon-Chosen. I've seen it at work and I barely escaped with my soul intact. It's more than just a weapon. It's alive. I'll war unafraid against any creature on this planet, but I tell you now, I won't senselessly sacrifice myself to that terrible thing."

"Amen to that, brother," Balthasar muttered darkly.

"If we can stay under The Adversary's radar, then we will," Marie-Germaine allowed. "But The Sigil *must* come back under our control!"

"You mean Dame Arathyssa's control, don't you?" Beluchienko reluctantly joined the conversation, aware he was there as an agent protecting his Master's interests. He coolly chided the vampiress with implied malice.

"I mean Apollyonu control," she said stiffly. "And don't presume to insinuate that you, of all creatures, know where my allegiances should lie."

"Tell us how you're going to handle Vestremaglia after this debacle," Louisa prompted. "The Sicilian won't be pleased that you and that renegade federal agent just screwed him out of control over The Sigil. Vestremaglia was no doubt counting on using the artifact to insinuate his way deeper into an alliance with the Verrigotta Gather. That isn't going to happen now."

"Don't worry about that cocky guinea thug," he snarled. "I can handle him."

"You'd better," Louisa spat.

"I'm surprised none of you are more worried than you are about intervention from the Feds. Those look like UCCCF agents down there with the local police," Beluchienko said. "The Freak Show and its agents have been keeping a tighter rein on your kind these past few years since The Adversary's splashy intervention into your affairs."

"The UCCCF? Puh-leez," Karine said. "They're far too busy lately with budget cuts and interdepartmental disputes with Homeland Security and the

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FBI. They're fighting over whose territory it is to handle 'the Vampire Problem' in organized crime. The whole Raptor Protocols thing has become a joke."

"Maybe. But be careful. Back in the nineteen-sixties through the early nineteen-eighties, the Mafia made the mistake of counting out the Feds one too many times and wound up getting burned because they became overconfident. Trust me when I say this: they're watching you guys, watching closely, and the conservative, pro-Human members of their executive staff would love to repeal some of the more vampire-friendly Gather-family Territorial Edicts and Non-Human Immigrant Rights clauses in the protocols and stick the lot of you into detention camps," Beluchienko pointed out. "It's an election year and John Q. Public won't tolerate the existence of monsters as members of a criminal underworld. Reputations can be made off persecuting the Moon-Chosen."

"Fuck them, fuck them all," Balthasar Halldor growled. "We have always been here. And we always will be. Their silly legislations can't hold our nation hostage from its greater destiny. For now, we cooperate with them, but we don't have to—we can return to the Old Ways and resume the practice of relentless, random predation upon them. Maybe after we kill a few hundred of them in one great feeding frenzy, they'll realize their so called 'laws' aren't worth the paper they're printed on."

"Maybe," Beluchienko agreed reluctantly, momentarily taken aback at Balthasar's venomous outburst. "Or maybe, as a response to that feeding frenzy, they'll give Quinn and the other Olympians a free pass to slaughter as many of you as they'd like. Imagine that: an army of ice-cold, immortal, super-powered executioners given permission to exterminate your species by every government on the planet. And then imagine your pure-blood Elders tracing the beginnings of that bloodbath back to each of you and the decisions you made here, today. You don't want to put yourself in that position."

Marie-Germaine raised an eyebrow as she snidely said, "My goodness, I never realized how concerned you actually were about the future of the Moon-Chosen—or us. As a human, that's remarkably open-minded of you."

"I'm neither concerned nor open-minded. But, frankly, Quinn and his kind scare me a whole helluva lot more than you do," the Russian said. "I'm not so sure they have Humankind's best interests at heart. They're too secretive. I just know they have their own covert agenda. And there's something truly, I don't know, *alien* is the word, I guess, about them that sets my nerves on edge."

"Then concentrate the efforts of your organization on shutting down Vestremaglia's Paymar Park Gang, and plan a way for us to get The Sigil back from The Adversary without putting a bulls eye on the backs of the Verrigotta Gather," Louisa said.

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“Don’t worry. I’ll do *my* part. You just make sure you do *yours*,” Beluchienko spat back.

“I can guarantee we’d never *consider* denying you the fruits of your labors,” Karine replied, smiling nastily. “We will make sure you get everything that’s coming to you, Colonel.”

There was little else to be said and as the small band of conspirators left the rooftop, Anatoly Beluchienko couldn’t shake the grim feeling he was dancing barefoot on broken glass...

...no matter how carefully he tread, one way or another he was going to wind up bleeding.

TWO

“I should have no use for a paradise in which I should be deprived of the right to prefer hell.”

-- Jean Rostand (1894 – 1977)

Montgomery Quinn idly observed traffic through a floor-to-ceiling window on the east side of the Hailey Government Plaza building, from the twenty-sixth floor. He watched people rushing to and from work as they crossed the intersection below while the wind blew mist and tattered pages from abandoned newspapers past their faces.

He wondered what it would be like to be down there among them, to be one of them, hurrying to some nameless, repetitive desk job in a cubicle-farm or to some annoying corporate meeting, wrapped in the security of anonymity. That anonymity would have been a gift.

The thought brought a humorless smile to his lips.

Regrets? How unlike him.

He knew for a fact that the vast majority of them would envy him that singularly incredible gift that set him apart from all living things: his immortality. He was a being classified by the government as UltraKin. He was an Olympian. He was Forever. *Deo Sapiens Eternae*. He was one of 1100 reclusive beings, deviations from the human evolutionary chain, disseminated globally, who were not known to favor many alliances, even among themselves, and they possessed incredible knowledge about the true course of human history, what they called among themselves the “Secret Tree.” That knowledge, a great deal of it classified as myth and legend or occult heresy, was kept hidden from normal Humanity.

Olympians were flesh and blood beings, subject to all the laws of natural physics affecting most of normal humanity, but possessed of a regenerating biology that allowed them to survive the ravages of time and environment with impunity. Olympians ran the gamut of ages and sexes because some Olympians were “forged,” a process wherein a normal human was turned from someone possessing a limited lifespan into a true and actual immortal. The change occurred by virtue of energies transferred from an Olympian with similar genetic traits at

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the moment of the immortal's violent unexpected death. The transferees became frozen at whatever moment the catalytic event happened. The mysterious number of 1100 was kept constant by some unknown cosmic Law of Balance: should an Olympian be killed, then a "normal" human possessing the dormant DNA sequence, the TransAgathic Gene, most closely matching that of the dying immortal became their replacement. The geographically nearest Olympian was then duty-bound to mentor the new immortal until they felt they could survive, and keep the grim secrets of their species, on their own.

Some immortals, the oldest and most powerful, the few who were possessed of mutant extrasensory abilities, disappeared into a kind of torpor every so often for a period of seventy years, rebuilding, reconstructing and literally rebirthing themselves into each new age of history as a being even more physically invulnerable than before.

Quinn was one of those few. This was his third incarnation. He had last re-emerged into the world fully-grown, all his memories from past lives intact, in the year 1074 A.D. In this life, as in all the rest he had lived, he was supreme among predators, a master soldier, a crusader, a killer of killers...

...an Adversary.

He was in a spacious office filled with bookshelves populated by legal texts and leather bound journals of city and county history. It was furnished with a comfortable Broyhill leather sofa, an ergonomically-safe computer nook with a sleek PC workstation, a saltwater aquarium on a rotating cedar stand filled with colorful ocean fish, and an American Flag in one corner beside a large, kidney-shaped desk. There were pictures of uniformed soldiers circa the 1980s, policemen and a pair of U.S. Presidents adorning the cream-colored walls. It was a very masculine and imposing room, full of earthy tones and right angles, a place of power and tradition.

It was not a suitable place for reflection and contemplation. It was a place infected by the trappings of Ego-as-defined-by-Power, where decisions were made and action was born. It was not a place where Justice was welcome.

Generally, he resented the hell out of such places.

"I apologize we couldn't meet at UCCCF headquarters in the Federal Quadrangle," Mitchell Haggard said, "but due to the lack of a non-aggression treaty or interspecies alliance agreement between the Olympians and the U.S. government, there's no way you would be welcome there. National Security clearance issues and all that. The D.O.J. and Homeland don't trust your kind. Neither does the FBI, but they, at least, have learned that you in particular are a reasonable security risk. And, too, there's still a lot of bad blood about what happened to Ric Corrigan last year, even if he was criminally compromised..."

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“Not a problem,” Quinn replied softly, ignoring the comment about Haggard’s deceased predecessor as the UCCCF’s Metropolitan Section Chief over the Violent Anomalous Cases Division. Corrigan, a high-ranking managerial operative within Anomalous Cases, commonly called The Freak Show, had been acting as a double-agent in the employ of the Apollyonu. “Your government has yet to understand that we Olympians are not a ‘nation’ or a ‘people’ in the traditionally defined sense.”

“Yeah, well, it might not hurt you guys to get together, unpleasant as you each may find it, and see if you can jointly define something to present to the United Nations or somebody so you can freely interface with the human world with less friction—not to mention less bloodshed,” Haggard suggested. From his manner, he clearly recognized there was little hope his words would have any effect.

“You scared a lot of people this time, Quinn.” Bryce Rooker, a large, red-haired, bearded man was sitting at his desk. “Scared them a lot. Your past as an ex-Navy SEAL and ex-Secret Service notwithstanding, they’re starting to wonder how it is you can do the things you do. That one man army act only works in Hollywood movies. In real life, experienced law enforcement officers and military start to get real interested when one person can take on a small army and come out on top. There were bodies all over that warehouse, and a lot of piles of oily black ash that our Forensics people identified as having human DNA, plus something like four hundred rounds of ammunition expended between all the antagonists, and you walked out of there without so much as a scratch. We’ve had to work damned hard to keep your name from popping up in the local press and even harder getting the Commish to keep our own police force from vetting you.”

“The deal was that you keep all Forensics away from the site, particularly to avoid them uncovering evidence of vampire remains,” Quinn pointed out.

“Yeah, well that’s a little hard to do even if the Commissioner orders it. Hell, *especially* if the Commish orders it. It’s standard crime scene procedure. To do otherwise would’ve caught the attention of all the wrong people.” Rooker was informed about the UCCCF and the Apollyonu in the Borrego Bay sister cities, but he wasn’t yet comfortable with the knowledge. The idea of a secret criminal society of vampires roaming the streets of his city, in direct competition with local organized crime over control of vice, stolen goods, and high-tech espionage, seriously disturbed him.

“You seem unduly bothered by all this,” Quinn said. “This isn’t your first time dealing with the Moon-Chosen. Something’s made you nervous. What’s going on?”

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"I dunno," Rooker said evasively. "It's just it seems like there were a lot of nightrunners in that cannery and it was in broad daylight. I thought they supposedly had serious problems with daylight..."

Quinn made an annoyed sound deep in his throat. "Ah yes, the legacy of Hollywood's idiotic mishmash of vampire mythology. In reality, only the most senior individuals in Moon-Chosen bloodlines, like the Ancients and the Elders, have toxic physiological reactions from exposure to daylight. It's akin to the rare human disorder *Xeroderma Pigmentosum*, a genetic syndrome where defective enzymes in skin cells no longer have the ability to withstand exposure to even the smallest amount of ultraviolet light. Anyway, vampire pure bloods and First Generation turned-wampir, those who were once human, have an over-amped version of that disorder and can die from it. Later generation wampir, like the Second Kin, the Blooded Brethren and Fledgling bloodlines, develop only minor allergic reactions from prolonged exposure to ultraviolet radiation in sunlight. They get bad rashes, hives, maybe even a first degree burn from it, but nothing fatal. Otherwise, they walk around relatively comfortable in daylight just like you or me."

"Jesus..." Rooker muttered. "It's hard to believe they exist at all, much less that they're actually related to humans and not supernatural."

"Is anyone going to subject those piles of ash to forensic examination?" Quinn asked.

"Damn it, I said 'No' already!"

"I did this as a favor to you. I'm not going to regret this, am I? Is this under control?" An undercurrent of implied threat tinted Quinn's voice. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's controlled," Rooker answered huffily, looking away from the cold stare in the tall black man's obsidian eyes.

There was a voice in Rooker's mind, the voice of the child he once was, the kid still afraid of The Dark, a voice that challenged him to deal with the fact he was speaking with someone...hell, some-thing...that looked and sounded like a man, but was in actuality almost as old as Stonehenge. Quinn was an immortal. A goddamn *immortal*, for Christ's sakes! When Quinn spoke there was always an undercurrent of menace in his voice that made Rooker cringe. Like the child he once was, his way of dealing with his dread was to adopt a cocky, gruff persona that he knew Quinn could see right through.

Are you sure? Christ, no, he *wasn't* sure, but the thought of saying that aloud to Quinn was enough to make his already sour stomach rebel.

"So how did I manage to make everyone so worried?" Quinn asked.

"The parcel," Haggard said.

"Oh, that."

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“Did you have any idea what it is? Do you have any idea what it may be worth to collectors of religious antiquities, book collectors, historians, and religious zealots? We’re talking the equivalent of a stolen Rembrandt or the Gutenberg Bible or a missing Da Vinci sketch. This thing has tremendous value.”

“Apparently value enough to pull the Apollyonu, who generally do not deal in stolen art, or black market trade in objects of antiquity, and an ex-GRU Colonel Russian Mafia leader who generally deals in drugs and pornography, into a confrontation where they went head-to-head over it, fighting to the death,” Rooker reasoned. “I don’t think we have a handle on this. I don’t think that we’re reading enough into it. These guys were out on the bleeding edge with this thing. There was almost something personal about it, like a vendetta deal, you know? It wasn’t business. This wasn’t about money. I almost feel like they were working for someone else, for someone outside their own circles of influence. They were there because they *had* to be there. Not by any choice they would normally have made.”

“So you think maybe this was about territoriality?” Haggard queried.

Quinn shook his head. “Turf? Not likely. The Moon-Chosen are justifiably arrogant: they go where they want to go and do what they want to do when they get there. The upraised fists and curses of some angry *Pisans* would only amuse them. If they want a territory, they’ll just go in and slaughter everyone and everything they consider an obstacle. No, the parcel is a part of a greater occult whole, a paranormal key to harnessing something far beyond the limitations of traditional organized crime.”

“Yeah, that’s what we thought, too,” Rooker said, nodding towards Haggard. “That’s why we still want you to investigate this, off the books, beyond procedure, no paper trail. Someone wants it, someone who is not a traditional criminal, and they want it because of what they think it can do for them. They think the parcel holds some sort of power. It doesn’t matter if that’s true or not, it’s a matter of perception. What’s important is that someone with a lot of pull and resources thinks that. And this is someone who is ruthless enough to pull the strings of a lot of vicious people.”

Quinn pursed his lips as he thought for a moment. He turned away from his view out the window and frowned at Haggard and Rooker. “So what are you leaving out?”

Mitchell Haggard sighed and rubbed a hand across his forehead before he spoke. “The Moonwatch Analysts over at Anomalous Cases, mostly professional criminologists, organized crime specialists and violent case profilers, received an unexpected package from a young journalism student a couple of days ago—before we had officially made the decision to call you in and deputize you,

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back when we were mostly concerned about any covert intel Peter Randal had sold to the nightrunners. The package, a big manila envelope, contained a wild tale of conspiracy that would do a dozen schizo-paranoids proud. At first they were going to ignore the contents, which included a bunch of printouts from a couple of theological legendary websites, a few photocopied pages of decades-old newspaper clippings, and a computer CD-ROM with a college thesis about reputed ‘forbidden texts.’ But then they found the transcript of an online chat session on a USB thumb drive included in the envelope. They were able to trace the chat back to an actual FBI website—a pirate ‘undersite,’ an unofficial secure portal Bulletin Board where government employees with security clearances often broke protocol and discussed things they shouldn’t. That chat transcript definitely revolved around the parcel and rumors about what it could mean, and—well, we had to at least consider the possibilities.”

“Somebody else out there, I presume this journalism student in particular, knew about the existence of the Moon-Chosen and this thing they wanted,” Quinn concluded.

“You got it.”

“And I care because...?”

Rooker made a face. On the whole, he disliked sarcasm and particularly when it was aimed towards himself. “That journalism student is now officially missing. Her friends filed a missing persons report on her about nineteen hours ago. They waited a full four days before filing the report. It was red-flagged because of the relation to the parcel.”

“Okay, I’ll admit there’s an angle here, but you know very well I don’t do missing persons cases. I don’t work old-fashioned domestic crime, nothing standard, nothing involving civilians. I have no interest or motivation for that,” Quinn said irritably, already seeming uncomfortable with the idea of helping to track down a missing college girl. “FBI Missing Persons does that kind of stuff pretty well. The UCCCF can handle the paranormal angle. You don’t need an immortal for that.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. There was, in the chat transcript, a strong indication that several people of power and influence, maybe even people with government positions, have been compromised by the Apollyonu. Frankly, we don’t trust anyone else to look into this,” Haggard said.

“I don’t work for you, either of you. And I am not your personal attack dog. Today at the cannery was a one-time deal.”

“This is important, Quinn! A lot of people died today. Hell, we lost two cops and Haggard’s force lost a UCCCF agent, not counting Randal. The other side lost even more. This isn’t about our personal preferences and sociological differ-

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ences. Something bad is going to happen! Our hands are tied. *You* can cut through a lot of bureaucratic red tape. *You* can mingle among the UltraKin. We need to know why a college journalism student would be ass-deep into the dealings of vampires and Russian Mafia gangsters,” Rooker said, the burly District Attorney’s Major Crimes Task Force Liaison allowing his emotions to color his words.

“Why on earth should it matter to you *what* this journalism student, this—and forgive me if I’m being too cynical, but I’m playing Devil’s Advocate here—little nobody, found out? I would imagine that to the Moon-Chosen and to the Russian Mob, the results of her private investigations, like her life, are completely expendable. Did she post any of this in a journal or in her blog online? Is there some expectant veteran reporter for the news media whom she contacted salivating at the opportunity to get this on the airwaves or onto the front page? Whose ear does she have that would make passing along what she learned *matter* to anyone?” Quinn asked cautiously.

“What? *Little nobody*? Did you really ask me that? She’s a human being and her *life* matters,” Rooker immediately retorted. “This office and this administration actually care about protecting and serving the citizens of this city!”

“Really? How refreshing is that?” Quinn said.

“What are you hinting at?” Rooker barked.

Quinn shrugged. He looked over at Mitch Haggard and raised an eyebrow. The UCCCF Section Chief looked down at the floor as he admitted, “Her uncle is a retired California Supreme Court judge who’s best friends with the State Attorney General.”

Quinn could see that both law enforcement officials resented the implications in that statement, and that they were uncomfortable with him making them give it voice. They wanted to retain their moral high ground as they pled their case, but the sands on which they stood shifted as the Olympian confirmed his suspicions.

Quinn nodded. “And if I decide to help you with this. . . mess. . . what happens if any of this leads back to the Mayor’s office or to the UCCCF?”

Mitchell Haggard’s face became cold as stone. “No restraints. Do what you do. Period.”

“Not that you wouldn’t anyway,” Rooker commented ruefully.

“Easy for you to say now. . . Gentlemen, be aware of this one fact,” Quinn said slowly, with solemn emphasis. “No matter how this turns out, you’ll owe me. And rest assured, one day I *will* collect. Do you understand that?”

Both men nodded, reluctance, and more than a little dread, in their eyes.

“This girl. She’s been missing a minimum of four to four and a half days according to your timeline. Probably can add another twenty-four to thirty-six

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hours on top of that while her friends touched bases with one another before deciding to take her disappearance seriously. So make that almost a week gone. The trail has no doubt gone seriously cold. Name?"

"Soames. The missing girl is named Brooke Soames. Her uncle, the former Supreme Court judge I referred to, is the honorable Wallace David Wrightson."

"The same Wallace David Wrightson who went after Gian-Carlino Vestremaglia and his Paymar Park Gang in a series of failed RICO indictments three years ago?"

Haggard nodded.

"My, my, look how small the world has become," the big man muttered wryly.

"So you'll do it?" Haggard pressed, albeit reluctantly. He didn't know Quinn well or long, but, from their few, but incredibly intense, adventures together, he'd come to respect the immortal soldier's ethics and motivations.

"For now," Quinn replied noncommittally.

"You'll be briefed on the rest of the case's details by our special investigative consultant," Rooker said stiffly, still smarting from Quinn's cynical questioning of his motives. "We went with an outside contractor for this one, someone as unorthodox as you."

"An outside contractor? I suddenly have a partner on this case? Uh-uhn. For obvious reasons, I don't work with partners unless they're of my own choosing."

"I think you'll approve. You know her," Haggard offered.

"Ulrich. Her name's January Ulrich," Rooker interjected before Quinn could ask.

"Really," Quinn mused. "So you reached into the fringes of the UltraKin community with little enough hesitation, I'd say. But I'm supposed to approve..."

"She created a fair amount of bad blood in the past helping you," Rooker pointed out. "She assaulted a pair of Federal officers, if memory serves. This is her opportunity to put the slate clean."

Quinn blinked. He was momentarily speechless. Then his eyes narrowed and he said, "Oh, you are definitely going to owe me for this. And I'll look forward to collecting on it."

Both Haggard and Rooker very quickly became very uncomfortable. They felt as if they'd just made a deal with the Devil.

The meeting could not end soon enough to suit them.



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Quinn's impatience was driving him to distraction and that was a most unusual feeling for him. Gifted with a wide-ranging and analytical intellect, he often worked on a multitude of problems simultaneously, and he was able to focus his attention on both internal and external stimuli, and correlate that data, with little effort. But the chaotic episode at the docks and the immediate aftermath in Bryce Rooker's office left him feeling he had allowed himself to be maneuvered into making a series of bad decisions based on incomplete information. This was not how he normally worked.

Quinn instinctively knew the artifact Rooker and Haggard called "the parcel" posed a far greater danger than either man was ready to recognize. They desperately wanted to depend on Quinn to give them direction in their investigation into its properties. He, on the other hand, didn't really want to be involved. He doubted that, on their own, they'd be able to unlock or truly fathom the secrets the parcel possessed. However, he had no doubt that they'd learn just enough to further increase the already tense animosity existing between the Moon-Chosen and the human law enforcement community. As far as Quinn was concerned, that was merely a matter of politics. Or perhaps, more accurately, political evolution. Either way, he wasn't a baby-sitter for the local police or for the Feds. And he wasn't their mouthpiece for interaction with the vampire community. Let them find their own way through the maze. He had more than enough on his plate already.

Quinn was at the lobby elevator on his way to his twenty-second floor penthouse condominium in the Maximoff Building in New Barrington. His home was in an expensive community called The Overlook, sitting near the coast on the westernmost of New Barrington's three largest hills, and one could see Fender Point and Borrego Bay's Julian Islands from his condominium's panoramic windows. It hadn't always been such a refined place in which to live.

In the recent past, The Overlook had been the territorial border between hotly contested turf for New Barrington's most lethal criminal gangs: the Asian Celestial Temple gang, known then as the Shi-Fans, and the Hispanic Mestizo Negras, who had been more popularly known as the Los Indios Locos. The gangs had almost exclusively battled one another until the more business-savvy Sicilian Mafia purchased their real estate right from under them. A few years later, the FBI had decimated the Sicilians' criminal ranks with RICO stings. Those were dark and ugly days for the city, until the advent of the silicon revolution and the massive influx of venture capital money into technological business development made gangland turf wars almost obsolete. Presently the gang confrontations contesting territorial control of the streets were more secretive and much more lethal, not to mention predominantly non-human. It turned out it was the

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Gather-families of the Moon-Chosen who had provided the venture capital to evolve the area towards independent high-tech start-ups.

Through it all, the hybridized Art Nouveau-Gothic cathedral mass of the Maximoff Building had been Quinn's headquarters and sanctuary. Even though the UCCCF knew where he lived, they had, for the most part, left him alone there, only occasionally surveilling his comings and goings until the recent flare-ups in his war against the Apollyonu.

Inside the multimillion dollar custom condo, his sometime-partners, private detectives Sam Carstairs and Ashton Brazil, waited for Quinn. Carstairs was a raw-boned, cowboyish, middle-aged man, who'd had a career in which he'd been a Vietnam-era Special Forces Black Beret LRRP, an acronym for "long-range reconnaissance patrol," and, briefly, a DOJ Federal Marshal. These days he was a professional Skip-Tracer and independent corporate security specialist. Despite his rough-and-tumble brawler's exterior, Carstairs was a well-respected regional military historian and a collector of antiquities, especially old firearms. His friend and partner was Ashton Brazil, a tall, dour faced Englishman with shoulders and fists like a professional boxer and a penchant for Hong Kong-tailored sharkskin suits. Brazil carried himself like a continental playboy, all wry humor and aristocratic detachment, befitting the private fortune that allowed him his expensive recreational excesses, but this image was not to be taken at face value. Ashton Brazil was a vampire. A rogue vampire, unaffiliated with any Gather-family. He owed no allegiances to others of his Apollyonu brethren and, quite honestly, despised most of them as homicidal monsters. He was not a true-blood wampir and Brazil still remembered and treasured his time as a human being. He considered himself a man first and foremost. Fate and circumstance had made him a vampire. He was an oddity among the many odd members of Quinn's far-flung, secretive inner circle of associates.

The Adversary had made a unique exception in accepting Brazil among his comrades-at-arms, since natively, Olympians and Moon-Chosen did not keep one another's company, but Quinn was, himself, unique in that way. He often chose his friends and associates based on the integrity of their actions as opposed to their species designations. If a person proved themselves to be morally upright, dependable, and independent of thought, Quinn would consider revealing himself to them and accepting them as a potential ally. For his part, while Brazil was not wholly trusting of Quinn, he respected the big man and acknowledged his role in keeping the encroaching homicidal tide of vampire darkness from enveloping human civilization.

Carstairs and Brazil were the rare men who, albeit begrudgingly, kept many of Quinn's secrets.

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As he entered the door and strode through his foyer, Quinn could tell they were there to deliver him news he didn't want.

Carstairs was closest inside the entrance foyer, on his left, examining the three-tiered, cubic display case of ancient fighting knives Quinn had collected over the decades. Brazil was staring intently at a tall, carved ivory statue of the Chinese God of War, named Guan Yu, that sat perched atop a black marble column. Brazil was particularly interested in the mythological warrior-king's *guandao* which, according to legend, was named Green Dragon Crescent Blade. The carving of the legendary weapon very much resembled a halberd: it was a heavy, slightly curved blade mounted atop a six foot long pole with a pointed counterweight at the opposite end. Brazil couldn't help but notice the close similarity of the mythical weapon to Quinn's ominous war-pike, Qus'n Fadyim, the Angelkiller. Quinn's arrival afforded the gentleman vampire a welcome opportunity to take his mind off the mysterious origins of the immortal's demonic weapon-of-choice.

"Been a while and it's good to see you, guv'nor, but we're not especially happy with you right now. We came across a bit of trouble today. We had unscheduled visitors at the downtown office. They drove up in what looked like an armored limousine and their chauffeur was dressed in black tactical gear. Strange and altogether unfriendly," Brazil said. He sounded annoyed.

Quinn cocked his head as he slowed his stride across the breadth of the ceramic-tiled foyer and stopped in the center of the Medici medallion set into it. Beyond the foyer was the formal Florentine living room, an urban modernist space with baroque flourishes decorated with rare and authentic Egyptian artifacts. The motif of the living space reflected the exotic history of its enigmatic owner.

"Kind of threw us for a loop, Q," Carstairs said, taking up the thread. He, too, appeared irritated. "They were UltraKin, but not the variety we're used to dealing with. They weren't locals. European. Cocky. Unpleasantly special. They were like you. When they walked into the room, you could feel it set your nerves on edge. They were dressed very expensively..."

"Cavalli, Givenchy, Balenciaga, Geoffrey Beane, you know what I mean," Brazil said with a sniff. Carstairs irritably motioned to the vampire that the interruption was ill-timed. Brazil shrugged.

Carstairs turned his attention back to Quinn and continued. "One was a big black guy, though not quite as tall as you, thick and bullish like a heavy-weight bodybuilder, bald except for a braided silver ponytail, silver mustache and eyebrows, perpetual snarl. He spoke softly, but had a voice that sounded the way you'd imagine God would sound if he was pissed off at you, only twisted. Did I

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mention he had a thick Scottish burr? Kind of a Sean Connery thing going on. The other was a woman, drop-dead gorgeous with perfect golden skin and green eyes. A body like a stripper on steroids. Oh yeah, and waist-length purple hair. Purple, right down to the roots. Really. And she had what looked to be pewter gothic finger armor on all her fingers. Dragon skulls with dagger teeth. She spoke with a weird accent I couldn't nail down, but it sounded vaguely Slavic, maybe Czechoslovakian."

"They said they were members of your 'family,'" Brazil concluded, raising a questioning eyebrow at Quinn. "And that it was very important that they spoke with you. We, of course, initially denied we knew you at all, but they didn't see our response as acceptable. The white haired, black Scotsman in particular was a little cross about the denials. They got a bit unreasonable after that..."

"I'd say. To punctuate their request, they then pulled very large guns on us and made sure we knew the safeties were off. Then the big guy very calmly explained how long, and how painfully, it would take us to die if we didn't quickly get word to you," Carstairs said.

"So do you know these posh prats?" Brazil demanded.

Quinn drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. He momentarily closed his eyes as if in pain and then let his normally impassive features flow into an expression of regret.

"Olympians. And they're the type who hate dealing with humans. The woman is very likely Princessa Marketa Richterova while her companion, actually her husband, is Doctor Sir Upton Farraday. They are among the oldest, and most powerful, of the immortals comprising the eleven hundred and they are Judges of the Tribunal. The chauffeur you mentioned is, I think, Virgil el Aziz, a Moroccan."

"A Moroccan named Virgil? Judges of the Tribunal?" Brazil repeated.

Quinn nodded. "They are knights of the Eon-Kings, also called The Quincunx, who are a council of immortals assigned to enforce the laws of my kind. Those laws were codified by The Prime, the very eldest among Olympians. The Judges are relatively autonomous police with powers to bind and hold Olympians they consider renegades to the strictest adherence to Olympian code."

"This is about what happened in New York seven months ago, isn't it? That thing with your fellow immortal, the Hillebrandt woman. That thing that prompted you to introduce us to the Castellum Maleficus over at Number Nine," Carstairs said.

"Maybe. Could be a lot of things. But, in the short run: Yes," Quinn answered.

"I take it, they're not happy about her demise," Brazil said. "They have

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questions and they're demanding answers now."

Quinn nodded slowly.

"Is there some particular reason they didn't just dial you up or come drop by on *your* doorstep? I'm finding it more than a little odd they came looking for you through us," Carstairs said.

"Long ago I set up some...security measures...that prevent other Olympians from monitoring my comings and goings," Quinn answered hesitantly.

"Really," Brazil said. "It was always my understanding, and that would also be the understanding of most Moon-Chosen, that you immortals are a tad antisocial, mostly solitary, with your society having only the most rudimentary of governing structures. Yet this 'Judges of the Tribunal' stuff would indicate there's some greater authority that makes it their business to keep track of your escapades. Interesting. And this leads me to believe that most the time you're working outside the parameters of approved Olympian involvement with humans and you *don't* want them to know about it."

"The somewhat narrow goals of the eleven hundred can be very limiting to those of us who see the bigger picture," Quinn admitted.

"That's your version of it. I would imagine they see it a lot differently," Carstairs said. "Perhaps they're concerned about the damage loose cannons could do to the fragile balance of power between UltraKin, vampires, and humankind."

"I'm hardly a loose cannon," Quinn said stuffily.

"So you say," Carstairs said, not letting Quinn off the hook. "But I think you have to admit that you'd hardly be considered a team player, either. My concern right now is that you haven't totally alienated yourself from your own kind. I'd hate to think that just by associating with you, Brazil and I could be considered co-conspirators, threats or targets."

"You can trust me when I say that Doctor Farraday and Princessa Richterova couldn't be less interested in either of you."

"In other words, you're in really big trouble with the Powers-That-Be," Carstairs said.

"The phrase 'in trouble' is putting it very mildly," Quinn said. His manner was much more reserved and far more grim than normal. Quinn's doleful attitude disturbed Carstairs and Brazil to a greater degree than any outburst of frustration or anger would have done.

"Naturally," Brazil commented as he rubbed his forehead.

"So what're we going to do about this?" Carstairs prompted.

"We' aren't going to do anything. I suggest you two just conduct yourselves as you normally would. If and when Doctor Farraday and I cross paths, and I've

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no doubt he'll eventually find me, we'll see what happens."

Brazil couldn't keep himself from asking. "And if the worst happens?"

"Things get messy," Quinn said.



Waiting had become second nature to her.

She was standing at the edges of an expensive arboretum that had fallen into a decade of disrepair, peering into the weed-overrun interior of the ramshackle greenhouse. Her pale hazel eyes were covered by scarlet-lensed sunglasses as she surveyed the remnants of the nineteen acre botanical gardens, noting the ivy and kudzu twisted into thick shrouds around the cracked and dirty neo-classical statuary that dotted the tiered landscape past the greenhouse promenade. She was standing with her left hip jutted out, her hands stuffed into the pockets of her black leather motorcycle jacket, her right foot slowly tapping an arrhythmic cadence, as she watched a flock of starlings flutter about the overgrown garden.

She didn't like starlings. They were noisy, vicious little things. They were vampire familiars.

She was an extremely petite brunette woman with an hourglass figure defined by the lean muscularity of a gymnast or platform diver. She wore black and gray denim camouflage pants tucked into black lace-up biker boots, and purple lipstick on her bow-shaped lips. Very "hard rock," avoiding looking at all trendy, and yet there was something unattractively unapproachable about her, something a little dangerous.

Her name was January Ulrich and she had just turned ninety years old three weeks ago. She hadn't celebrated her birthday with anyone other than her cat, a one-eyed, twenty-five pound, black short-hair tomcat she had named Griswald. An outlaw and a social reject, most of her friends were either dead or on the run. January's few surviving family and relations had gone to her funeral eleven years ago, thinking she was dead. Biologically, she *was* dead. But they wouldn't have understood that. It was best the way it had turned out. They didn't need to know what had really happened to her.

They didn't need to know that people mostly referred to her now as "Cold Janey."

"*Blackbird, blackbird, where do you go?*" she recited softly as she watched the shadows within the arboretum. "*I go to steal dreams and hide them in the snow...*"

Once upon a very dark time, January Madison Ulrich had been inducted into the secret sisterhood of Bloodwitches, the oracles and shamans of Moon-Chosen society. She had surrendered her humanity and tethered her biology to the arcane

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technology, mutagenic treatments through chemicals and cellular implantation, of wampiriii alchemical science. Too late, she had learned her mistake. Too late she had learned what murderous things she was expected to be a party to as a Bloodwitch. And too late, she'd learned that Magick, actual Reality-altering, physics-defying sorcery, demanded an awful price from its practitioners.

"Blackbird, blackbird, whose dreams do you bear?" she whispered. *"I bear the dreams of sinners and the nightmares they share..."*

Her normal human lifespan had been extended fivefold. Her immune system, like her muscular vitality, was freakishly robust, able to adapt to or ward off almost any infectious disease or virus known to medicine. But the downside of that was that Cold Janey had lost both her sense of smell and the more sophisticated range of her sense of touch. Her skin had become dense and hard, like cold marble. Flawless as an alabaster sculpture, she had become deadened to sensation. She could sense physical pressure and feel the high ends of heat or cold, but gentler tactile sensations, like a kiss or a caress or even the refreshing relaxation of shower water pouring over her skin, were entirely beyond feeling. She was cut off from the world of simple touch, a prisoner of her transmuted invulnerability. She had no one to blame but herself. She had willingly subjected herself to her fate in exchange for a power that wasn't truly hers to control. She had unwittingly volunteered into servitude as a slave to the Apollyonu.

And like most slaves, she had ultimately rebelled and thrown off the yoke of control. She would not be dominated. She'd fought back. Violently.

"Gotcha!" she hissed as she saw the first of two shadows separate themselves from the gloom at the rear of the fractured greenhouse.

Nostrafeggi. Stragglers she'd seen separate themselves from the larger pack of cast-off, gangbanger wampir, unaffiliated with any of the major Gather-families, that she'd been tracking. She'd found them.

These pale, repellent creatures were a minority amongst the Apollyonu, an aberration. Nostrafeggi, known more popularly among the Apollyonu as The Broken Ones, were that rare breed of wampir afflicted with a triangular, elongated face and the sallow gray skin of the classic silent movie-variety vampire. They were violence-prone and psychotically impulsive. Often they were sickly creatures, afflicted with a mysteriously non-lethal and non-crippling form of a congenital disorder called Proteus Syndrome, evidenced by unchecked skin growth and atypical bone development. Yet despite their gnarled and bent appearance, they were often marvels of motion and grace: gargoyles with extreme acrobatic skills. They were the embarrassing secret face of the sophisticated Apollyonu culture.

"That which we kill, we own, in Death and Beyond" was the Nostrafeggi

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creed. It was adapted from a quote from an obscure philosopher named Constantin Vianu. Born into servitude as the vassal of a local Duke in eastern Romania, Vianu, a hard, dour and unforgiving man, had been forced into an outlaw life and then denied his just due as one of the leading intellectuals of his day. But more, he had been the father of the Nostrafeggi. His death-affirmative, philosophical credo of “That which we kill, we own, in Death and Beyond” served as their rallying cry.

Cold Janey understood and sympathized with their plight, but, as ever, she couldn't allow herself the indulgence of letting her feelings cloud her professional judgment. Janey was a mercenary private detective and bounty hunter and the hard truth of her profession was that often she was employed to hunt and capture people who, in some ways, were very much like herself.

*“Blackbird, blackbird, tossed by the wind,
bent of wing, and twisted of limb,
Fly to me now, hear my voice,
carry me dreams of bloody choice...”*

In a soft, singsong voice, Janey distractedly finished the grim childhood lullaby that swam through her thoughts while she moved into the arboretum's debris-littered, tumbledown lot. She saw her targets, two young men wearing tattered clothes, in the rose-hued view through her sunglasses, watching their acrobatic leaping and tumbling movements through, up and over mounds of broken statuary, uneven stacks of grimy palettes and boxes, and overgrown six foot high hedges in the arboretum's labyrinth. It looked a lot like urban freeflow running, often called Parkour running, but it was more animalistic in nature. She followed.

Cold Janey moved quickly, her superhuman musculature propelling her like a small rocket through the greenhouse and out into the main park grounds of the abandoned arboretum. It was like a cheetah chasing rabbits: quick as they were, the gaunt, dark-clothed vampire punks had no chance.

In half a dozen seconds and eighty yards, she had far outstripped her Nostrafeggi prey and was positioned directly in their path. Seeing her apparently pop into view from out of thin air startled and surprised them.

“Easy there, fellas,” she said, her hands palm outward in front of her to show she carried no weapons.

It was important she did not antagonize them. As unaffiliated wampir, Nostrafeggi were often harassed, even preyed upon, by the more sadistic and class-conscious of their arrogant brethren. Such cruel experience had taught them that it was wise to assume any stranger approaching them, human or UltraKin, was likely an enemy. While not quite as physically powerful as Elder

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True Bloods, Nostrafeggi were ferocious fighters—the hyenas, as it were, of the urban vampire jungle. Once aroused to violence, their borderline psychotic natures often drove them into hypnotic, trance-like killing frenzies.

Janey, who had endeavored to accentuate her now-natural UltraKin physical abilities since being exiled from the Sisterhood of Bloodwitches, had taken extensive martial arts training and could handle herself against anything short of an Elder or an Olympian. However, she really did not want to engage the Nostrafeggi in combat. It would have been counter-productive and a waste of her time.

She hoped the two Nostrafeggi she had corralled felt similarly.

The taller of the two Broken Ones, mustached and wearing what looked to be a brass buttoned, vintage First World War wool coat, bared his dirty ivory fangs and hissed at her, his thin hands flexed like claws preparing for battle. She looked amused and thought: *Did they really do stuff like that? He's actually hissing. I thought that only happened in bad vampire movies...*

“We know you.” The smaller Nostrafeggi, a young, pointy-faced man with a dirty and tangled long blond mane, snarled past badly-scarred lips. “The outcast Bloodwitch. We’ve seen you before. Some kind of man hunter. The midget mercenary...”

Midget mercenary? “Listen, handsome, let’s not get into the name-calling thing, okay? And, just for the record, I’m sure as hell *not* a midget. It just so happens I need some information and all signs point to the Nostrafeggi having said info. I just want to talk.”

“Talk? No, you don’t,” the tall Nostrafeggi said, aggression infusing his words with implied threat. “You were tracking us. You wanted *us* in particular out of the pack. You working for one of the Sicilian families? Doing some work for the Mob because they don’t want *our kind* in their territory? They told you to lean on Tipton and Downing, didn’t they?”

“Okay, I was given your descriptions and told to find Tipton and Downing, but I’m not working for any Mafia crime family. This is strictly recon and intel for the West Sussex District Attorney’s office and the UCCCF.”

“UCCCF? What in hell do the fucking Feds want with us? We shouldn’t even be on their radar! Why don’t they go after the bigger fish in the Gather-families? *They’re* the players doing the major damage on Borrego Bay streets!” the blond, Downing, groused.

Janey sighed. “Look, I don’t set policy. I’m just a contractor. They wanted me to find you and ask you about this...” and with that she reached slowly into her jacket’s inner liner pocket and pulled out a color photograph. She extended her arm and offered the photo to the Nostrafeggi pair.

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At first they wouldn't take the photo, with Tipton snarling at her as he said, "After all you've been through, you still lie down for them. Why? You were a Bloodwitch, one of their oh-so-sacred Oracles, but they turned on you, betrayed you, tried to murder you and yet you do their bidding—for money. *Money!* That makes you just another mercenary. Yet, they look down their noses at us Nostrafeggi because we steal from them and from their asshole organized crime partners. Un-*fucking*-believable!"

"But you *do* steal. A lot. And all the time. I don't judge *you*. You really shouldn't judge *me*," Cold Janey responded defensively despite her attempts to stay professionally detached.

"He's not judging," Downing said, "he's just pointing out what should be obvious. You don't need to be doing this crap. Walk away. To hell with the police, the D.A., the UCCCF, and all the Lords and Masters in the Gather-families! Let them clean their own toilets."

"Things aren't that simple. There's more to this than you know," Janey said. "Please. Look at the picture."

Tipton grabbed the photo and looked at it briefly, his dark, beady eyes narrowing for a split second. He stared at Janey with renewed venom as he then passed it to his partner, who took one look at it and made a disgusted face while he muttered, "Well, fuck me..."

The slick surfaced, blue-gray page was a spectrothermically-enhanced, enlarged photograph of the Waldgrave triplets.

"The Waldgrave Sisters: Karine, Louisa, and Marie-Germaine. They're Verrigotta," Tipton said flatly. "We got nothing to do with them other than they occasionally use us as delivery boys to and from their vig-drops in the industrial loop, just past Japantown."

"There are *four* women in that picture. Either of you recognize that last woman?" Janey pressed.

"You mean the smaller one, looks frail, the Uninitiate?" Downing asked, using the vampire term for human being. "Naw. Never seen her before. She's meat, anyways, why would we care?"

"She a friend of theirs or a victim, you think?"

"Don't know," Tipton said, "don't need to know. She's not one of us is all we can say. The Waldgraves work with all kinds of people when it suits them. Uninitiates can be useful in their line of work. They do a fair amount of stuff with the Mob. She could've even been the job they were on."

"Okay, you don't know her. Then back to the triplets. What are they doing working with a Russian mobster named Beluchienko? Does he take a percentage of their protection racket income?"

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Tipton shrugged while Downing said, “How the hell would *we* know? We told you: we’re delivery boys. They don’t share the details of their economic distribution with us.”

A deeper, colder male voice spoke from the shadows to the east of the Nostrafeggi and Janey. “Perhaps not, but Anatoly Beluchienko used you two to spy on the Paymar Park Gang’s comings and goings a couple days prior to his attempt at intercepting a delivery of some special goods at an abandoned cannery over on the Barcastle Docks.”

Quinn.

At the sound of The Adversary’s voice the Broken Ones dropped the aggressive stance they’d maintained towards Janey and slowly, cautiously turned around. Quinn stepped out from the dark under the edge of a nearby gazebo. He was dressed in his normal attire, having changed out of the tactical combat gear he’d worn at the cannery raid, and his voluminous black leather coat flapped in the damp morning’s breeze like the wings of a vulture unfurling. At his side he carried a long, black lacquered spear-like weapon, an ancient war-pike with twin razor-sharp heads, and he opened the front of his coat to show he carried his twin Smith & Wesson Sigma automatics in their underarm holsters.

“Damn,” Tipton whispered.

“Dude, this is not what you think it is...” Downing said, raising his hands into the air. Tipton followed suit. They were careful not to make any motion that could be construed as threatening.

Cold Janey, on the other hand, was grinning, her eyes sparkling happily.

“Q,” she said breathily.

Quinn looked annoyed. “Put your hands down, idiots, I’m not the police and you’re not being arrested. Answer the lady’s question.”

The Nostrafeggi duo relaxed, but only marginally.

“Rumor is the Russian has been taken into the fold, not embraced or puppeteered by a Blood-Master exactly, but accepted into a kind of loose partnership with the Verrigottas,” Downing offered. “Which is an incredibly unusual thing, since neither Dame Arathyssa nor Pasternak the Elder are renowned for tolerating intervention from the Italian Mob, or from humans in general, in their affairs.”

“So why would they deal with him?” Cold Janey demanded, again taking the helm of the questioning.

Tipton shrugged. “Don’t know and don’t care. It’s not Nostrafeggi business and it’s not likely that knowledge will put any money in our pockets.”

Janey nodded. “Okay, so where were you two going when you broke off from the rest of your group back before you knew it was me following you?”

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They stiffened, obviously reluctant to answer. Quinn shook his head. "Let's not make this unpleasant. We're asking politely. You know damn well that we don't have to ask you at all...I could just brainjack you and rip it out of your skulls when I invade your mind, which would fry your nervous system, by the way..."

"Damn," Tipton muttered.

"You said that already, playboy," Cold Janey quipped.

"Vestremaglia's Paymar Park Gang are meeting over at the New Euphrates restaurant, in the back, at the outside tables, he's got a jones for Indian food you know, and we were going to spy on the meeting and bring back any decent info to sell to Beluchienko," Downing said reluctantly.

Janey tossed a glance at Quinn, who shrugged and made a dismissive gesture with the hand that carried the imposing war-pike.

"So go," Janey said to the Nostrafeggi.

They looked at her blankly and then back at Quinn. He returned their stare disinterestedly.

"Go," she repeated.

In a flash of sinuous motion, the pair quickly vanished around the towering labyrinth hedge. As she glimpsed their rapid departure, the childhood lullaby again played though her mind...

*Fly, blackbird, glide away now,
into the darkness, 'cross the broken bough,
Take wing, blackbird, and sail away,
return me a nightmare some other day...*

When they were out of sight, she became acutely aware of the distance between her and Quinn. She strolled slowly over to where the towering black man stood.

She sighed and smiled crookedly at him, then said, "So I guess we need to talk, huh?"

Quinn's only response was to raise an eyebrow.



The darkness embraced him. It spoke to him.

Its voice whispered a promise of murder.

The Rector, Elias Skorne, peered into the labyrinthine depths of his domain, a natural cave three stories deep and a quarter mile wide under the earth, next to an underground saltwater river, fed by the ocean two miles distant. He felt the chill remnants of the passing storm permeate the usually stuffy and warm depths

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of the area he called The Hold.

Solitary, but never truly alone, he worked with eight other Rectors, all men of learning and toughened by lives bereft of luxury. They toiled within the Basilica, beneath the base of the massive kurgan called Purgatory's Crown. Here, in The Hold, the light dimmed as it reached some places in the multitude of bookshelves housing the words of madmen, poets, and prophets. It was as if the ideas in those books leached the brilliant vitality out of the light.

Here in this place the secret history of the World was kept, entrusted to The Rectors of Sonneillon, who was fabled to be one of the Lords of Hell, principally the Demon of Hate. Sonneillon was fourth in the Order of Thrones, liberated celestial beings who, according to the mythology of the Old Testament, were angels of the Third Order and had once carried the throne of God. Sonneillon was one of The Fallen and The Order of the Rectors were his minions on earth.

On earth he had once, in modern times, manifested physically. They'd called him The Dark Man.

Sometimes Skorne despaired that the others of his Order, his family of ideologues, had forgotten about him and his comrades, that they chose to see The Hold as an embarrassingly backwards reminder of where they had once been as an organization, a throwback to their unsophisticated roots. But then things would happen in the wide world around them, the world Up There, which would inevitably draw them back to The Hold to see what wisdom there was to help them weather those changes.

This was the place where battles were won and lost. This was the place where weapons of the mind were honed to become ever more powerful than before.

This was where the spirit of The Dark Man was fed and made strong.

The secret history of the world slumbered unremembered and mostly undiscovered in this collection of dank granite caves, caves they had named the Basilica, beneath the streets of the bustling city of sheep.

This was the heart of the Lost Sons of Purgatory, the place where twenty-three wealthy serial killers kept their dire journals, diaries of their bloody exploits, chronicles of their heinous crimes against Life Itself, going back across the many decades. It was a place where lists and lists of the names of slaughtered victims were kept, a place where endless descriptions of random lethal depravities were collected for the future education of members new to the macabre brotherhood.

He loved it here. At times, one could almost hear the ghostly spectral screams of the hundreds of tortured dying victims, as if the screams escaped from the pages of the journals, blown through The Hold by a random gust of dry

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stale air. Sometimes it reminded him of his own youth, when he wandered the world above, cunning and virile, stalking his prey, enjoying each night's depraved games of cat and mouse with the local police.

Some of his colleagues thought he was a zealot. Others thought him a madman. Still they all deferred to his superior knowledge and experience down in The Hold. He was First Among the Abandoned in this place, the eldest living Rector, the most bloody-handed of any who had ever been assigned to the archives of the Society.

The Elder Brothers of the Lost Sons knew him for what he truly was, they knew he was like them: unrepentant and still hungering for the kill.

Now, though, there was an event coming, something colossal in the works that would forever change the history of the murderous brotherhood.

The Lost Sons of Purgatory were soon to come into possession of one of the undisputed great works of madness and destiny: The Sigil, a stone tablet condemned for all time as the inspired work of an angry and dark visionary, a fragment of a damned and forbidden larger work that was, so far as the Vatican was concerned, a true example of Evil Upon the Earth.

There was another more popular name for The Sigil. It was sometimes called The Seal of Abominations.

It was coming here, to this place...soon. *They* had foretold it. *They* had promised to make it so. *They* were the blood-drinkers, the ages-old allies of the Lost Sons, beholden to the Lost Sons for protecting them during the those long, bleak, weak decades when they'd first come West from their underworld necropolises of the Eastern seaboard. Lost and sickly, prey to crusading hunters who'd followed them from Europe, and embattled by the angry Native Americans who recognized them as semi-human predators, the Nocturnal People had entered into a pact with the black coven of Satanists who'd traveled secretly with the wagon trains to the California territories. The Lost Sons of Purgatory, educated but amoral men, had always been blessed with an abundance of mercantile riches, so they were able to secretly care for the blood-drinkers without rousing the suspicion of anyone with the wherewithal to oppose them.

In exchange for helping the Moon-Chosen gain a firm foothold in northern California, the Lost Sons were promised the secrets of The Sigil, which had been stolen by the Native Indian tribes, but returned by a turncoat warrior to the nightrunners.

Destiny, as always, rested on the fire of passions burning in the blood.

Elias Skorne couldn't wait. On the day it arrived in the vaults of The Hold, he would be released once more to mingle within the stream of Life coursing through the world Up There. He would again be free to revel in the joys of The

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Kill. He would bathe in the blood of the unsuspecting.

The darkness inside him whispered to the shadows enveloping him as he walked: *Sonneillon be praised!*



They were still angry with him, he could tell through the normally personality-free mediums of their email and text communications. Their messages were briefer, much more terse and clipped than usual. It was as if they didn't trust him with more, didn't trust him to act on those instructions in a reasonable manner. Cowards.

They thought he was out of control. Idiots. They were the Lost Sons of Purgatory: out of control and off the map were the *natural* states of affairs for them. After all, they *were* a confederacy of ritualistic multiple murderers. And he was anything but "out of control," remaining as precise and cautious as ever he had been.

He wasn't out of control. They were losing their edge.

Nelson Brightmoor had done a lot of traveling the last few days and it was beginning to wear on him. He'd taken a flight out of San Francisco to Louisiana, but he'd decided to drive back to confuse anyone who might decide to follow a paper trail indicating his whereabouts. He'd traveled a convoluted and meandering journey of twenty-two hundred miles in two days since leaving New Orleans, regrettably a pale and broken shell of what it once had been after the hurricane devastation of Katrina. He drove to California, towards Santa Cruz. Travelling mostly through Texas, most of it at night, when the heat still sizzled up from the cracked asphalt, he tasted exhaust and burnt oil on his tongue, a reminder from the stop he'd made at a gas station that was actually more of a dilapidated lean-to. Everything people said about driving through the desert was true. A person actually could hear the buzzing of the telephone cables strung alongside the road, and the rippling heat rising off the pavement created strange vistas of city skylines that were actually twice as far away as they seemed. Everything smelled like it had been baked lifeless.

He'd found the hostile environment exhilarating after the humid, dreary wetness and urban collapse he'd left behind at the Louisiana border.

Regretfully, he'd had to leave that place in a hurry, because of what he'd done. The terrible thing he'd done to the Perrineau family.

Back in Louisiana was a small, unincorporated township of seventy traumatized people who were probably still wondering what had happened to the Perrineaus. Two rambunctious boys, a Mom with her own online business as a

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medical transcriptionist, a Dad who worked construction at the Municipal Water Plant, a grandmother in a wheelchair, a ne'er-do-well drunk of an ex-brother-in-law and a one-eyed hound dog named Megan. They had all lived in a two story plantation style villa that had been converted into four bedrooms with a tiny illegal in-law unit built into what used be a two-car garage. There'd been a tin tool shed around back, and four acres of muddy, loamy land next to a bog that had completed the sum total of the Perrineau estate.

Brightmoor had watched their movements off and on for six weeks as he'd traveled to New Orleans and the surrounding towns of Kraemer, Thibodaux and Metairie. He'd observed their mindless, ant-like doggedness of routine. Brightmoor had shot a lot of film on his camcorder of the Mom as she cleaned house while the kids were off at school and while the brother-in-law took Grandma to physical therapy at the clinic some sixteen miles away. Brightmoor watched. And even when he wasn't there, hiding outside their home, he was there in spirit. Watching movies of them each night. Mentally replaying the films in his memory while he was at work. Reviewing all the habits of their daily routines that he'd observed. Wonderful.

When Nelson Brightmoor had slaughtered them all, it had been better than he had imagined. It had been an explosion of blood, screaming, tears and begging, as they'd fought and wrestled throughout the house, glistening guts hanging out of ripped torsos and little broken child bodies twitching in widening puddles of redness on the dirty floor. Inside of two minutes, the interior of the home had reeked of coppery blood, fear sweat, urine and offal. The serrated-edged blades of his twin eighteen inch machetes had easily ripped and torn through flesh and shattered bone as Brightmoor, a six-foot-five-inch former collegiate power lifter, had ruthlessly driven the blades into his victims, the thickly corded muscles of his arms warming to the explosive exercise. In three minutes, he had been drenched in the gritty warmth of their spilled blood.

In five minutes every member of the Perrineau household had been rendered nearly unrecognizable by the unrelenting savagery of his attack.

He had then, basking in the afterglow, crossed over to the Side Beyond, a deeply personal and special place inside him, where mediocrity and boredom never visited.

It never lasted long enough.

Generally, he would have enjoyed a week away, by himself, reliving the experience, touching the talismans he'd taken from inside the death house and smelling the scent of the Side Beyond on them, but they didn't let him this time. The Lost Sons had called. They needed him back. They'd discovered what he'd done to the Soames girl, their precious, supposedly untouchable Soames-spawn,

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and they had decided that he'd made a serious mistake, something beyond his usual, seemingly reckless predation activities, decided he'd done something *really supremely fucking wrong* this time. The Rector, the oh-so-important Elias Skorne himself, had personally recalled him to the foggy, windswept northern California coast. The Rector had suggested that he'd put the entire fellowship at risk. They demanded he help put things right again. Cowards.

They needed his edge.

The unkempt Oldsmobile Delta 88 sedan roared up the California coast towards the city of Porto Manessa, carrying respected antiques dealer Nelson Roy Brightmoor to where his terrified wife and daughter dreaded his return.



Even the scents of cumin, saffron, chili pepper and ginger, principal ingredients in Chef Mohander Ramesh's latest lamb and curry creation, couldn't erase the stink of human corruption from the air. Gian-Carlino Vestremaglia sat across from a gaunt, angular man in a conservatively cut business suit of funereal gray color and the aging gangster swore he could smell the fragrance of decomposition wafting from him.

The man smelled faintly of dead things.

The hawk-nosed man was named Lowenthal and he was a senior field agent working the Organized Crime Task Force through West Sussex's FBI office. Lowenthal was grim and unpleasant, a veritable vulture in human form. Moreover, he was as dishonest as a law enforcement officer could be: Vestremaglia had been paying him a secret monthly stipend for nearly twenty-three months as motivation to keep the Paymar Park Gang's more lucrative schemes off federal radar.

Worse than all that, though, was the fact that Lowenthal was closely tied to the priesthood of the Lost Sons of Purgatory. He acted as their eyes in Borrego Bay, reporting all he thought pertinent back to his psychotic masters in the wealthy resort community of Porto Manessa.

Modern crime was nothing like it was a mere thirty years ago. Everything was straight-forward then in the West Coast La Cosa Nostra: narcotics, gambling, prostitution, stolen goods, and the occasional contract assassination. But these days that wasn't enough. The Columbians and the French were heavy competitors in the narcotics trade while the Hong Kong Triads had successfully infiltrated the Pacific Rim to vie for dominance in the skin trades like sex slavery, prostitution, and pornography. The damn Triads had made major inroads into control of illegal gambling in the region, as well. But none of those problems were so severe as the ones Gian-Carlino had inherited as he'd taken the reins of

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the empire after his father's murder.

Now he'd learned to deal with a darker, more unpredictable breed of criminal.

Gian-Carlino Vestremaglia was resigned to dealing with freaks like Lowenthal and the Lost Sons—in many ways, they were no worse than Borrego Bay's Moon-Chosen vampires. Unlike the vampires, the Lost Sons were still physically human and that was a boon in making enforcement of treaties and agreements more manageable. After all, even for the Mafia, it was tough to intimidate and boss around an almost bulletproof being that could bench press the front end of a truck.

Still...dealing with the Lost Sons of Purgatory always left Vestremaglia, a lapsed Catholic of many decades, feeling like he needed to run straight to church and go to Confession.

"What happened this morning at the cannery?" Lowenthal coolly demanded. "Everything should have gone smoothly. We had all the prep-work down, paving the way for you to take the package from the Russian with minimal resistance and mess. I thought your man in the D.A.'s office was on top of things."

Vestremaglia bit back on venting his anger, reluctant to test the unstable partnership between his organization and the Lost Sons, but unaccustomed to taking guff off anyone he didn't recognize as an equal.

"He didn't expect the Feds to get involved. Once they were involved, there was damn little he could do to insert himself further into the investigation without arousing suspicion. And for sure he couldn't predict they'd pull in an outside contractor like Mr. Q."

"The Lost Sons need to know more about this 'Mr. Q' you mentioned," Lowenthal hissed.

"You're FBI. Pull it outta your own damn files. I'm not anyone's private detective agency."

Lowenthal hissed and shook his hatchet-shaped head. "You know what I mean. What's the real story? Sure, I can supply facts and dates about Montgomery Quinn's military service record and his government Intel associations, but people like him have flagged dossiers: you don't get to look into his past without someone noticing you looking. My asking too many questions could create problems."

"Look, the guy's scary, okay? He's rich, he's connected, he's independent, and he's UltraKin. He has the goddamn fang-faces walking on eggshells and hiding in their coffins whenever they know he's around. He's a law unto himself. If he figures someone needs killing, then that person generally winds up dead. The Old Guard in La Commissione say to leave him be: he's poison to us. Over the

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past four decades, he's waxed nearly a hundred wiseguys, just here in Borrego Bay. Our attempts at reprisals have resulted in disastrous retaliations. There are rumblings he's left a trail of bodies in New York, London and San Francisco, all made-men, and he's got goods on us, heavy stuff with names and dates, that he'll release to the Feds and Interpol if we cross him. Messing with him costs us, big time. So mostly, we're content to leave him as the bloodsuckers' problem."

"Why don't the UCCCF shut him down?" Lowenthal queried.

Vestremaglia leaned over the tabletop separating him from the gaunt federal operative. "I dunno. For that matter, why haven't *you*?"

Lowenthal's face wrinkled into a mask of extreme displeasure. "Someone in Washington is acting as a guardian angel for the man. Someone powerful. But it's not out of friendship. They're protecting him out of need. They're afraid of him."

"Yeah, I thought it was something like that," the gangster grumbled. "So what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing's changed. Get The Sigil by any means necessary. Keep it out of the hands of the nightrunners as long as you can."

"And if I do that for you?"

Lowenthal smiled frostily. "Then our business will be done. The Lost Sons will no longer interfere in the dealings of the Paymar Park Gang nor will we ever again insert ourselves into your personal life. After thirty-nine years, the Vestremaglia family will be free of us."

"I'm holding you to that," Gian-Carlino growled.

Those words concluded the meeting and Lowenthal rose from his chair, leaving the aging mobster alone at his table in the rear of the Indian restaurant. Vestremaglia watched Lowenthal's thin figure recede towards the front lobby and then out the door to the street. He left a snaking wisp of decomposition riding the air behind him.

The guy wasn't normal. He just wasn't.

Gian-Carlino looked forward to the day when he would again be a stranger to the monsters who haunted his city.



She returned to the land of the living feeling like a complete stranger to the world.

The last thing she remembered before the onset of a black, womb-like nothingness was the smell of her own flesh cooking accompanied by her screams echoing off concrete walls.

Time had passed since then, she suspected, a few days perhaps. She couldn't

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explain how she knew, but she was somehow certain that the moon had risen at least twice since her shattered mind and tortured body had shut down.

During that time she dreamt, her mind feeling not entirely her own, as if someone or *something* else were riding atop the images that haunted her private world between sleep and wakefulness. Memories and fantasies seemed indistinguishable from one another. Some moments she felt possessed of two consciousnesses: one was recognizably herself, while the other was an alien, raw thing possessed of a sleeping savagery that alarmed her. Wherever she was, whatever was happening to her, was taking place in a mental landscape of blood and hunger.

From dark depths, she swam upwards, and she at last awakened in the grips of a frightening disorientation.

Things were different. She was different. Her body felt strange, ethereal, and yet there was a sense of power and energy filling her that verged on the frightening.

A growing coldness in her chest accompanied a disorienting sense of unreality as her eyes roved around the bedroom in which she'd awakened. She was lying on a soft mattress in a large four-poster bed, under a brocade comforter, wearing a cotton nightgown, her skin smelling of a light, citrus-scented floral perfume. The room was sumptuously furnished in an eclectic neo-classic style dominated by a bronze, copper and burgundy palette. It had a vaulted ceiling painted with Italian Renaissance frescoes and the window set into the far wall looked out upon a vast well-manicured garden.

That didn't match up with the memories of her last circumstances. She had been a prisoner trapped in a concrete and stone cellar. She had been dirty and drenched in sweat. She was being burned alive, one piece at a time. She was slowly being dismembered by a trio of human monsters.

The awful thing that had been nagging at her from the back of her mind suddenly became her centermost thought:

I died.

How could this be?

"Nice of you to come around. We worried you would never wake up, which is a rarity, but it does sometimes happen." A female voice, a calm and soothing contralto, spoke from the western side of the room, nearest the multi-paneled mahogany door.

She wasn't alone in the room, a frightening realization given the fact that she had not sensed their presence at all. Three tall women were there with her: one standing at the Lido-styled vanity and the other two sitting in damask-upholstered, Regency era chairs at a small kingwood reading table. They were three of a kind, very alike in their slender, athletic builds and their Brunette good

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looks. Sisters. She instinctively didn't like them. There was something threatening about them, something sinister, and they wore the unease they inspired in people like a fashion accessory. If anything, she had the sense that these women would have been amused to find that they frightened her.

Memory asserted itself: in a flash of understanding, she abruptly recognized the true nature of the women in the room with her. She knew what they were. Once, before she'd begun to pry into the dark places that haunted the underworld of the sister cities of Borrego Bay, she would have thought that what they were was impossible. But she had learned different and that knowledge had forever changed her. She had come to realize that the world was far larger and far darker than she'd ever dreamt. That knowledge, and her own reckless surrender to curiosity, had led her to unintentionally deliver herself into the hands of homicidal madmen. *She knew...*

She knew they weren't truly human.

"Do you understand what I was saying? Do you know who you are? Your name?" the woman standing at the vanity asked with an air of growing irritability.

"Brooke Soames," she managed to croak past lips that felt wooden and numb.

"Very good," one of the women sitting at the reading table muttered. "I hate it when they wake up dumb as vegetables."

"Where am I?" Brooke asked.

"In a second floor bedroom in the east wing of a mansion in West Sussex's Dodd's End district, a house on an estate known as Ravenshearth. You are the guest of a very old and very reclusive family of considerable influence and some notoriety in the community. This mansion is on a bluff overlooking the southern tower-pillar of the Harbor Bridge," one of the seated women replied as she examined her black-painted nails, "We are, for all intents and purposes, quite secluded from the city."

"*West Sussex?* How did I get up here? What happened to me?" Brooke demanded, working hard to keep an edge of growing hysteria from her voice.

"You were captured and tortured and slowly dismembered by some very, very bad men."

"That's not what I mean!"

One of the women raised an eyebrow, her icy gaze sparkling in the room's dim light. "Oh, but I think it *is* what you mean. You want to know why it is you aren't lying dead in a cold puddle of your own blood, staring blind-eyed at the torn pieces of meat that were once you..."

"What happened?" Brooke repeated quietly, dreading the answer.

"Happened? What do you *think* happened?" one of the triplets said, mocking her confusion.

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“You’re still clinging to your former self,” another sister, one of the seated women, said, “You’re still trying to interpret your surroundings in a linear frame of reference, trying to assign a normal human order to your new point of view. But even as you try, your brain rejects it. Your consciousness is operating on too many levels far too quickly for you to process the information. *Let go*. Things will become much clearer when you let go.”

Brooke raised a trembling hand to her face as she said, “The air tastes funny. I can feel its weight on my body, but my body feels like it’s detached from my mind, like it’s a separate vehicle unto itself. And it’s like I can feel colors, and touch sound, and I see heat... I’m anxious and upset, but I can’t feel my pulse racing. I can’t feel my heart beat, but there’s a fire coursing through my veins. And my muscles and skin feel supercharged, like flexible steel. Have I lost my mind? Am I hallucinating?”

The three women looked at one another and then laughed with one voice. The humor they displayed was unkind and derisive.

Brooke Soames blinked rapidly as her mind drew to a deduction that courted madness. “Oh my God. No. *No! You bastards!* Tell me you didn’t do to me what I think you’ve done? *Tell me!*”

“Well, that depends,” one of the darkly beautiful, yet repellent, brunettes said teasingly, “I mean, if we tell you, will you decide you honestly would have preferred to wake up with your limbs burnt off and your skull peeled of flesh? Because that’s what would have happened if we had decided to simply revive you. The pain would have been unimaginable, unendurable. You would have been nothing more than damaged meat with the remnants of a dissolving consciousness. Is that really what you would have wanted? No, I don’t think so. I like to think we’ve done you a tremendous favor!”

The woman standing at the vanity tilted her head to regard Brooke as she said, “Welcome to the family. You’re one of us now.”

Brooke Soames recoiled as if she’d been punched hard in the chest as the realization blossomed in her mind.

Then she screamed...



“Since when did you start working for the West Sussex District Attorney?” he asked her, his voice stern as steel.

Cold Janey had known this was coming the moment Quinn had emerged from the shadows of the derelict greenhouse on the arboretum’s grounds, but she’d hoped he would let it pass. The last time the two of them had met, he’d been

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protecting a murder witness from both the UCCCF and from the Moon-Chosen and the situation had been dire. Since then, as the case had revolved around the Sisterhood of Bloodwitches, she had been rethinking her role as a free agent on the periphery of the uneasy balance between Chaos and Order in Borrego Bay. She had spoken briefly with Quinn, who had advised she remain in a neutral position, not aligning herself with any faction operating in the criminal netherworld of the sister cities, and she'd mostly taken his advice. He was important to her as a mentor and his opinion was valuable as an outside moral compass. But her stance as a non-aligned participant hadn't felt right, hadn't satisfied her need to feel part of a greater community. Quinn had hinted that her need to belong would eventually be her downfall, since as an outcast and an enhanced UltraKin-mutant, she couldn't trust other people's loyalties to her. She eventually became a mercenary of sorts, her morality and sense of justice not totally determined, yet definitely influenced, by the size of her paycheck. She had known Quinn wouldn't approve, but she'd thought he would at least understand.

They were in a restaurant off the lobby of a pricey hotel near the Financial District, sitting away from the entrance, in a booth by a window.

"Since when did *you* start working with the UCCCF?" she countered.

Quinn sighed and shook his head.

"January, dear, I've been doing this, in one form or another, for a very long time. There's very little about law enforcement or covert intelligence work I haven't experienced first-hand. I know how these people use other people, how they see field operatives as resources, nothing more than tools to get a job done. I know how to read between the lines of what they say. Hell, I've even been guilty of using their tricks myself. But I'm, for lack of a better phrase, 'built' for this kind of work. You're not."

"I may not have your range of abilities, but I've got a trick or two up my sleeves," Janey replied calmly. "And I can go pretty hard when I need to. You know that. I'm not some newbie off the street. But I do have to say that I'm very, very flattered you're worried about me. You know, to be fair, I worry about you, too."

Quinn looked uncomfortable, remembering Janey's persistent, undisguised and unqualified attraction to him.

"And if you want, you could spend a little more time telling me about how you're 'built,'" she said sweetly, batting her eyes in mock-innocence.

Janey Ulrich often presented a bawdy public persona: an intelligent, vivacious woman ready to assume the role of sexual aggressor. It was a sad charade for the most part, given the sensory affliction that limited her physical interaction with the surrounding world. She was a petite, sexy, mannequin with

Joseph Armstead

unfeeling flesh literally cold as ice. When she flirted with him, Quinn would often play along, allowing her a moment's fantasy of a possible intimate rendezvous between them.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, pint-size, you couldn't handle me on your best day," he said around a long-suffering sigh.

"Well, if I'm doomed to fail, I might as well fail big," she quipped.

"Stop. And don't change the subject. I want to know why they've got me working on this Brooke Soames case when they already hired you to work it."

Cold Janey allowed a pained expression to cross her delicate features. "Oh, that. Well, it might have to do with where the few leads I've turned are pointing"

"And where's that?"

"The Brackett Academy in Porto Manessa."

Quinn blinked. "*The Brackett Academy?* Really? The Brackett Academy as in the birthplace of future state governors and future Fortune Five Hundred CEOs and Supreme Court Justices for the past three decades? Terrific. Interesting doesn't begin to describe this."

"The very same Brackett Academy that spawned the career of the head of the UCCCF in Washington, D.C. You know, the guy who wants you and all other Olympians declared enemies of the state—or dead."

"Tell me about her parents?" Quinn prompted, ignoring her comment.

"Father's alive, an ex-patriot Brit, but estranged and very remarried, lives in Genoa, Italy. He was an international banker, brokered a couple of huge deals with the collective Arab Emirates back in the mid-nineteen-nineties. A recurrent cholesterol problem came close to blowing his aorta out and he packed it in. Became a consultant and still sits on the board for a couple of large financial organizations. Mother's alive, but is constantly in and out of one of those expensive European Betty Ford Clinic clones. 'Substance Abuse' and all that. In reality, the mother is rumored to be a schizophrenic with homicidal tendencies. But don't completely write her off. Mom is on the board of both Sony Entertainment and Farris Pharmaceuticals, the people who took mood-management drugs to middle class households through their TV commercials. The parents only speak through their attorneys, apparently Mom had a serious wandering eye and a libido to match, and the girl hated dear old Dad with a passion, probably because he walked out of her life and left her in the care of a schizoid junkie slut."

"What kind of friends, if any, does our missing Ms. Soames have?" Quinn asked from one side of his mouth.

"Brackett Academy Ruling Aristocracy. They're the best, the brightest and the richest. These people are a breed unto themselves. They're born into money, power and influence and they know it. They're generally pretty easy to dislike for

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the most part, but that's not the case here."

"Oh? And what *is* the case here?" Quinn asked past jaundiced tones.

"Well, for one thing, they appear to be genuinely distraught. They seem to really care about the missing girl. She's their friend and they want her found."

"And the other thing?"

"They may be seriously bent, or, if not bent, then they're seriously compromised. One of them has managed to get their name put onto the UCCCF's Anomalous Cases-Moonwatch Predation Collaborator List. None other than the son of one Anatoly Beluchienko. The proverbial 'bad seed' becomes an even worse seed."

Quinn's attention piqued. "His son? And involved with the Moon-Chosen? Shit."

"Porto-fucking-Manessa," Janey commiserated.

Quinn smiled ruefully. "Well, my dear, whatever it is the D.A. is paying you, I can promise it isn't nearly enough."

"Road trip?" she suggested, already knowing the answer.

"Road trip," he agreed humorlessly.

"So," Janey began slowly, "do you think there's any chance Brooke is still alive?"

Quinn thought a long moment before answering, and, as he did, he looked at the passersby on the street outside the restaurant window. They were, as ever, unaware of the cosmic game of chess being played around them.

"Hell, no."