

Channeling the Vampire

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Channeling the Vampire is vampire, action, and horror fiction. A New Age spiritual channeler channels an ancient vampire and unleashes a deadly form of vampirism. A psychic investigator uses his skills to track and destroy the new powers of evil.

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CHAPTER 1: POSSESSION

The plane landed, roaring down the foggy runway. A red glare coated its wings, forming a curtain of heat distortion. Minutes later, two tall, dark men stood out in the bland crowd of passengers streaming through the gate. They were striking men; both wore casual suits and were in a hurry, trying to beat the airport rush.

The tallest man turned right, forcefully brushing the second man aside. Jon Chandler rubbed his shoulder as he regained his balance. Anger tightened his brow. Being a channeler, he was disappointed. He couldn't predict the dumbest everyday events. He felt like shouting a few choice curses at the rude giant moving quickly ahead of him, but the sudden roar of a plane made words impossible. Jon halted, edged over to a post, and massaged the lower orbits of his eyes. He collected his scattered thoughts, obeyed the press of the crowd, and moved on.

Twenty minutes later, Jon carried a single flight bag as he walked along slowly under the bright metal ribs of the new terminal building. He felt weak as he made his way to a splash of neon bulbs that marked the entrance to a restaurant. Jet lag had killed his appetite, but he had a burning thirst to quench.

The taller man, a guy named Len Wilde, had continued on in a hurry and was already racing across the city in a cab. Amber sunset reflected in the lenses of his dark glasses; grim determination showed on his face; to him, it seemed always this way when he was rushing to battle the supernatural. Len's past was etched in the dark windshield behind him; his future burned in the reddening sky of the distance. It was a grim premonition. Shaking his head, he barked some directions at the cab driver.

The cab sped to the lakefront and into an aura of twilight that slowly deepened to a sinister shade of purple. Streaking to an off-ramp, the cab found its way into a wasteland of half-abandoned warehouses. The slump-shouldered cabby gave Len a bemused look, noting that he was about as big as Conan the barbarian and not the sort of guy he could hassle. He drove past a no-trespassing sign as Len commanded, and stopped in the center of an empty lot. Then he grinned as Len handed him a fifty and told him to keep the change. Popping out, Len turned away from the cab and paced across the rubble-strewn lot.

An uncanny sixth sense became a supple tiger, pushing Len on; he approached a fence of patchwork old boards and, with a heavy kick, sent it crashing down. Instinctively, he began to run toward an ancient, char-blackened warehouse that stood in the twilight like something at the end of a time tunnel. Clouds over the lake were hurrying darkness to the waterfront. Len knew he was probably too late; if so, the shadows of the warehouse interior would be the cloak of a vampire, lined with the silver of mesmerism and the red of blood.

A large rusty lock held the time-battered door shut. Len studied it with a fierce eye; he had no time for picking or prying, so he rushed up and threw his shoulder into it. The door heaved inward, creaked, and popped its fatigued hinges before slamming down in the dark interior. Gray gloom and warm musty air engulfed him, but he didn't slow down; he moved swiftly, his nostrils flaring at a rank odor that reminded him of rotted toadstools. He got through a maze of stacked crates to a huge central room. There he stopped dead in his tracks, and creeping darkness and shadows exploded into a vision of bats in his mind. He listened and heard the moan and creak of hinges.

A red subterranean glow spilled from the lid of an ebony coffin, running thick in the gloom like blood haze. The light gleamed hellishly on Len's glasses and sweat-slicked face, but he remained silent, holding back the icy terror rising in his mind. He knew the consequences of failure were death and damnation, and with that in mind, he opened his case and calmly set it on the floor, keeping his senses razor sharp as the massive square-shouldered figure of Baron Arbore rose from the coffin. Again, a premonition of the end entered Len's mind, and this time select fragments of his past flashed in his soul. Death had its grip on him, and it made him even more determined; he had to take the Baron into oblivion with him to succeed.

Erect in the glow, the Baron was stunning – moon-bright face and cloak of darkness, he wore the animal power of night and conveyed it with eyes of fierce blue starlight. He studied Len, the hammer and stake in the open case at his feet, and was unafraid.

Using strategy, Len remained statue-still as the vampire stepped gracefully to the floor. Baron Arbore moved forward, a picture of supreme confidence; he was certain he had

mesmerized this agent of the psychic enemies. He would make him suffer, like the last man who tried to stake him, over on the Aegean Coast.

The Baron's heels clicked coldly as he halted. He stood firm and looked Len squarely in the eye, then he maliciously slapped his face, slapped it so hard that any other man would've gone stumbling across the room. Yet Len's head only turned slightly as his glasses snapped and flew off among the crates.

His eyes uncovered, Len turned his head back and faced the Baron. Triumph that had lit the Baron's pupils turned to snarling fear on his face. He could see that Len wasn't mesmerized. Len had blind eyes - eyes filmed with cataracts and doom.

Quicksilver fast, Len's knee shot up, and the Baron felt pain electrify his groin. A hard right hand followed, catching the Baron on the temple as the pain in his groin worked to double him over. The force of the blow sent him skidding back a meter on his heels. Turning sideways, Len moved in. He seized the back of the Baron's neck, then bolted forward, keeping a tight grip as he slammed him face-first into the floor.

A power of levitation sent the Baron flying up and Len tumbling over backward. The Baron floated to the rafters, and before Len could roll out of the way, he soared down and slammed knees-first into his chest and breadbasket. Instinctively, Len seized the vampire's neck and held on with an iron grip as white flashes of razor-sharp pain ran down the scale to become a dull intestinal throb.

The Baron's nails were untrimmed and deformed by death growth; he used them as claws, tearing great gashes in Len's neck.

Calling on hidden strength, Len worked his fingers into the Baron's throat, turning cartilage into pulp and muscle into purple-black lumps.

Levitation sent the Baron back up, and this time Len held on. They hovered in mid-air, and the Baron's eyes filled with agony as he felt his neck crack and snap.

Blood froth spilled from Len's open throat. An invisible cord snapped, and they came down, the Baron's flailing legs and cape sending a tower of crates spilling across the floor.

As he got to his hands and knees, the Baron realized he couldn't raise his head; it lolled on a broken neck his supernatural powers couldn't immediately repair.

Len also got to his hands and knees, and he could feel a warm blanket of blood on his chest; he'd already lost too much, he was weakening, his strength being fast sapped away. Sensing the Baron's position, he scrambled numbly to him, with a burst of adrenaline, hefted him over his shoulder, and rushed the coffin. He threw the Baron the last few metres and he thudded back in place in the coffin.

At first, the Baron sank like dead weight. His arms and legs began twitching as he tried to get up. He could do nothing with a broken neck and shattered spine, and then he saw Len - a gorgeous, blood-soaked vision and a nightmare holding a stake high. Using the last of his energy, he tried to transform into a temporary spirit form, and as his aura began to brighten, the stake came down and drove straight through his heart.

The stake remained firmly in place as Len tumbled to the floor. The coffin automatically creaked shut. Len's muscles shuddered as he took his last few gulps of air, and he could see visions of his a to come flashing out of a wonderful wall of light.

Death trolled with many nets, seeking to capture the vampire's spirit. The Black Sea Coast, the Carpathian Mountains, and medieval towns passed before the Baron's mind as

colored ashes of memory. His last vision was of a remote monastery he'd destroyed in his youth, then, finally, his body fell to dust.

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Jon Chandler exited the airport terminal building and stepped through a veil of dust. A cab swung in like a gliding car on a circus ride, stopping only for a moment before speeding off with him in the back. The restaurant had helped, Jon felt better, and it was good to know he would soon be recharging his spiritual batteries. The highway unfolded smoothly, and he watched the faceted towers of Toronto close around him; cubes of glass and steel alloy in the last haze of sunset. As the cab rolled on, night lights began to cluster and shine amid the first of falling twilight.

A short clip and Jon Chandler's cab reached its destination: the Church of the Crystal Millennium, a popular New Age church with two broad sweeps of curved roof that almost touched the ground. Long shallow steps ascended to a court, broad oak doors, and an enormous stained-glass facade. The parking lot was bedded with colored gravel and glittering with mica bits.

Jon gave the manicured grounds an approving nod. Checking his Rolex, he found that he was fifteen minutes late; fashionably late - he'd timed it right. One of his secrets was to avoid early arrival. As a man of mysterious powers, it wouldn't do to be loafing out front or chatting with the ushers. All his chatting took place in the later hours, when people had developed a solid faith in his powers.

Kicking up gravel, the cab drove off. Jon mounted the steps leisurely, and before he reached the top, the doors opened, and his old friend Allan Rampa stepped out. Allan had arranged and promoted this night at the Church of the Crystal Millennium. Jon was one of a number of spiritualists who were often brought to Toronto by Allan. As always, great pools of understanding filled Allan's brown eyes. He had an Eastern look, with a close-shaved head and a big silver loop in his right ear.

"I hope your flight wasn't an energy drain?" Allan said.

"I'm a bit off, but well enough to get by. How's the crowd? Is it fitting for an opener?"

"Yes, but they're of a very dull order. About what you would expect for an opener. It always has to go out by word of mouth. News that you can really make things happen. Then the crowd gets excited."

A small crowd was seated, and the quiet air meant Allan had opened with meditation. They went up the aisle in silence. There would be no applause as this was a spiritualist audience. Two burly ushers appeared from behind a burgundy curtain and took Jon's jacket and bag as Allan took the podium.

"Mr. Chandler has arrived late as his plane was delayed," Allan said. "I hope people won't irritate him with pointless questions."

His simple introduction complete, Allan stepped down and joined the crowd, leaving the stage open to Jon. Jon stepped up with an open-handed gesture and looked at the crowd approvingly. These were well-dressed people, many of them business people. Huge splash-of-color paintings on the back wall created a warm atmosphere. He detected the gentle scent of lemon grass. Most exciting was the crowd's reddish aura; it meant energy, and he needed it in a bad way.

"Tonight," Jon said, "I'm going to channel Sekhmet, an ancient Egyptian god. The method will be open channeling. Feel free to question Sekhmet."

A young man with a thick braid of red hair immediately stood up. "This is fraud," he said. "I'd believe it if you were channeling a spirit. But a god? Everyone knows that gods, especially ancient gods, are imaginary. If Sekhmet never existed, how can you channel him?"

Jon Chandler didn't appear at all surprised; he expected skeptics to come forward and answered calmly. "Because the people of ancient Egypt believed in Sekhmet, he came to exist as a being living in their higher moral mind. You could say that Sekhmet is a mind-made god, because the collective minds of men created him. But even so, Sekhmet was and is real, and he has tremendous knowledge that he can impart."

Silenced by the answer, the young man sat down. People began to shift in their seats, whispering and nodding. Hungry faces - admiring, amazed, maybe even a little startled. Jon began to relax. He wasn't going to channel anything; he was a drainer, not a channeler. Once he'd drained enough of their energy, the people would hallucinate, demonstrate glossolalia, all sorts of things, never knowing it was the result of being weakened and not the result of spiritual contact.

A man wearing a sparkling turban rose to ask a question, and he was waved back into his seat by Allan. Putting a finger to his lips for silence, Allan made small circles with his left hand to suggest that a period of trance was beginning.

Jon closed his eyes, and relaxation moved as blue phantoms in his mind. Deftly, he slipped out a flat-faced puller crystal that he kept on a silver chain around his neck. Slowly, he raised it and then began moving it in small, widening circles over the top of his head. This opened his crown chakra to energy, but in the way a whirlpool opens, functioning only to suck things down.

Opening his eyes, Jon saw the people as energy entities rather than bodies, a scene of floating colors and ghosts. He worked his power smoothly, and ever so slowly, one color - red - began to separate and drift in the haze curls, moving toward his crown and crystal.

As Jon began draining them, the people slipped into a dreamlike trance. They placidly watched his smile flicker with the emotions of gratitude, relief, love, and revelation one would expect to see on the face of a man filled by the spirit of eternal energies.

It was going as smoothly as the lifting of gossamer veils in a breeze. Jon was receiving the youth-giving energy he needed, and the people were passing through phases of harmless hallucinatory imbalance and false memory. Moved, Jon stepped forward and opened his arms, swallowing the energy of total fulfillment from the glowing entities bobbing before him. Satiated, he closed his eyes in bliss.

And when his lids sealed, a massive coffin closed over him. He found himself in darkness, total night, the complete absence of energy. He wasn't asleep, nor was he dead, but a dream still swept over him.

In the dream, he wasn't himself; he was somebody else. He was Titus, a young Roman soldier leading his men down a snowy trail on a plateau in Transylvania.

This was a time as ancient as the rock-castle mountains rising above the plateau, and as young as the cerulean sky above. It was a time of great victory; they were conquerors, and they were men so brave they'd left battering rams, great catapults, and dead kings behind as they rode inland across cold territory no other men would challenge.

Suddenly, the peace was broken; there was movement and a flash of red on the downward slanting trail. Titus signaled his men. Hooves clattered on the snow-blown rock. The din of spurs, armor, and swords echoed faintly as the horses charged down.

Titus knew without a doubt that this was the man they were hunting - a wild man, a peasant dressed in sheepskin who had brutally murdered two Roman soldiers.

The coats of the horses and men billowed up in the bitter wind, and a gust howled through the mountains like the voice of a demon as they thundered to a halt.

The wild man hadn't tried to flee. He stood calmly on the trail. Unlike other peasants, he had no axe or pitchfork. He relied on his bare hands, and the fear inspired by his tangled hair and the thick blood frozen to his lips and beard.

Titus locked his gray eyes on the man. He was a devil if ever there was one, and he would die like one. "In the name of our Roman Emperor Trajan, you are under arrest," Titus said.

The wild man stared ahead with glazed eyes and didn't reply.

A wave of Titus' hand, and two soldiers dismounted and moved forward to seize the prisoner. Snarling like a beast, the man stepped back and bared his teeth, revealing two huge fangs.

A terrible shiver of fright and cold wracked Titus' bones as he watched his men close in. "Use your swords," he commanded as the man raised his arms to resist.

There was no way to subdue him, and wounding him seemed necessary, so the first soldier swung a stroke that caught a raised arm and cut the man's hand off.

It fell in the snow, and blood oozed from the stump, yet the wild man showed no emotion; at least not for several seconds. Then he let go with a wicked howl and burst forward, beginning a savage fight with the soldiers. He came in close and fast, taking two more sword slashes to the body, but he wasn't stopped - he struck out with his arms, blood flying from his stump, splattering the men as they went down. He stopped to howl again, the men cringed beneath him, and Titus was about to dismount. Then something stopped him; it was the stump - he could see it glowing, healing like it had been touched by magic. Titus pulled himself back up on the saddle, then his horse reared and neighed; he knew a nightmare was beginning. What he didn't know was that it could last forever.

The dream ended in a void of absolute terror, and it gripped Jon, freezing him like polar winds. He saw a stake flying down, blood spattering up, and the doomed eyes of the vampire panning the peaks of the Transylvanian Alps. Smoldering with death and the grave, the eyes searched the void, then they began to fade, but before they were gone completely, they saw Jon Chandler and the inviting emptiness of his soul. They returned with regained strength, and their stare consumed him - rapacious eyes, brimming with hunger and lust, and they were Titus' eyes.

Falling to his knees, Jon tore the puller crystal from around his neck and began to claw madly at his sweating face. The spirit of the vampire descended as a sword of fire and a smothering shroud. Jon's flesh felt cold and dead. Wails and moans swept the audience. People stood up, collapsed, and tumbled in the aisles, drained to near death as their vital energies were sucked into the ghostly pulse of blurred wings that had swallowed Jon.

Awareness returned, and Jon felt the mind he was channeling - a mind of brilliance, refinement, and evil. It dominated him completely with its superior intellect, like a trap closing over his free will and soul. For a moment, Jon struggled spiritually, and it was a moment of such devouring horror that he collapsed and sank to the floor. Adrift in waves of confusion, his mind slowly drowned in darkness.

Jon rolled and ended up face-up on the floor. Pandemonium swept the room as people awakened and succumbed to deranged inclinations and strange hunger. The vampire looked out of Jon's open eyes, realizing that the body had been weakened to temporary paralysis by the transfer.

"I've managed to enter into coexistence with this peculiar and powerful spiritualist," Baron Titus Arbore thought. "It's a new life and certainly better than being dead. A strange arrangement, perhaps, but it might have hidden advantages. Chandler feeds on these desperate people in a new way, and they throw themselves at him. I hope this young fox has a palate for wine."

CHAPTER 2: THE PSYCHIC

A tall blond man walked down the center of a dust-blown Texas highway. A healthy specimen, he was unaffected by the blazing badge of sun and the fact of being far from home. Yes, he saw bright lights in the sky in addition to the sun, and it wasn't heat stroke. He always saw lights; they carried him on, down many roads, so that his life had been a long journey. Mike Wilde got around; his face could be a face in any town. Not that he looked familiar, but because he was a stranger and truly a little strange. Few men identified with Mike or wanted a pal like him, but many people had come to love him despite the odds.

The journey had begun in his teens. On a black day, he'd begged his pal Kelvin not to go out in his new Corvette. A vision had warned Mike that Kelvin would die if he took to the road, but he still went out, and he did die. The power became a curse; he went from the handsome captain of the soccer team to a young recluse, a guy who read theology and collected comics and butterflies. He knew when someone liked him and when someone didn't. He couldn't help knowing when he could pick up on people's thoughts. It wasn't like the fantasy stories where a guy gets ahead using his psychic powers. The effects were profound, reaching the roots of his personality and soul. Yet Mike preferred it that way; he didn't think the world should be an easy place where he was king.

Approaching a bend in the road, he saw dust smoking over a small desert rise to his left. A Jeep appeared on the crest, sped around some chaparral, and headed down toward him. Mike frowned, a grim frown, and he unconsciously began to grind his teeth. He'd hoped they'd forget and let it go, but that wasn't the case; it was never the case. Fools were always fools.

Dropping his pack on the roadside, he put his hands on his hips as the Jeep pulled up beside him. Two men with sun-reddened faces, both over fifty, grinned at him arrogantly.

"Thought you'd stroll out on us, Wilde?" said the man with the badge, named Sheriff Lee.

"He's filled with those fairy doubts that add up to make a man a coward," said Jack Samisen, the guy riding shotgun.

Mike shrugged. "I rented my psychic services to the town, saying I'd help bring a killer to justice, but you guys want me to help you ambush him."

Jack gestured forcefully with his fist and rifle. His eyes looked like buttons about to pop. "That monster slit my granddaughter's throat and drank her blood. So I'm going to bleed him, an eye for an eye."

"I know you can't control your need for revenge. That's why I walked out. As far as bleeding him goes, I'd say it looks more like you're going to dismember him. That rifle must have been made for killing dinosaurs."

"It's a Westley Richards Large Game Rifle," Jack said. "Imagine being hit between the eyes by the head of a hammer traveling at the speed of a rocket, and you'll know how it works. It's my guess that a man with no head would bleed quickly."

"You expect me to help you do that?"

"You'll cooperate, or we'll make you cooperate."

Mike looked to the sheriff.

Sheriff Lee shrugged. "You know the way it is in small towns."

"Yeah, I do. I've worked for many small towns. At first, everyone thinks I'm a fake, but after they get to know me, it's okay. I'd say the key is this: they're all honest. They all have ideas about what they'd like to do with killers, but they still go by the law. Guess that leaves only you two to play God."

"Shut up!" Jack said, his sun-creased face puckering. "This heat makes me feel like killing you as it is. Now get in the Jeep and do what you're told."

Picking up his pack, Mike got in reluctantly and kept quiet. The sheriff drove off, and the Jeep began cutting a miles-long trail in the dust. Grit settled on them and sanded through their parched lips, fouling teeth that were already on edge. In time, their scorched faces grew ugly with brooding. Mike began to figure that maybe it was the desert. If you did wrong in the desert, you'd end up a bleached skull. He could see where hot sand had seeped into Jack's head and coiled like a burning snake, calling for vengeance against the despicable man who had killed his granddaughter.

It seemed like the dust would bury them. Jack took a slug of whiskey and looked to Mike. "This better be the right direction."

"It is."

"How do you do it?" Jack said, eyeing him with suspicion.

"It's a unique ability - like you have the ability to stay alive while guzzling rotgut whiskey in the desert. When I know, it's usually different. Powerful visions, or else I see bloody hands or a trail of blood. This time, I see a face, and we're driving straight for that face. Maybe now you understand how strong my stomach has to be as I have to look at you and him."

"I have to be sure he's the one," Sheriff Lee said. "There can't be a mistake on this one."

"I'd like to talk you out of it," Mike said, "but I know the evidence will be there at his hideout."

The heat burned on the tabletop land, and the drive became so numbing and monotonous that when a sun-bleached shack appeared, even Mike suspected a mirage. The sheriff was quick to note a battered pickup, one with unpainted bodywork on the front fenders. No doubt about it, it was the one he was looking for.

Jack took a strong slug and studied the shack. He spotted the pickup and knew they had the killer. In his excitement, he nearly swallowed the bottle. Mike glanced at him and saw whiskey spill on his shirtfront. Jack coughed hard as the booze hit, but managed to recover before the Jeep came to a stop. He popped out to the ground like he'd been propelled by a refined ejection seat. With the big rifle in hand, he charged the door.

"You keep out of the way, Wilde!" Sheriff Lee hollered as Jack fired a round at the closed door. "I have to cover that idiot!"

A giant's fist went through the door, and the rest of it shattered like rotten wood in a hurricane. Sheriff Lee and Mike bounded from the Jeep together and ran all the faster when they heard Jack's yelp of triumph.

They stepped through the splintered doorframe onto warped floorboards that creaked underfoot. The inside of the shack stank like animal piss, foul humidity rising and clinging to them. A sallow, scrawny man with ropy muscles had been surprised while sleeping. He sat up on the bed, hugging his knees, dazed, sleep still in his sunken, bruise-ringed eyes. Jack kept the rifle trained on him while Sheriff Lee seized him roughly and looked him in the eye. Pushing him down and throwing a knee into his throat, the sheriff pinned him on the bed and cuffed his hands at the front, purposely locking the cuffs painfully tight. With the prisoner under control, the Sheriff took a brief look about.

"You crazy bastard, Jack!" the Sheriff said as he stepped back. "He was sleeping with a rifle under his bed. You almost got it."

"You shoulda had an eye open, boy," Jack said. He turned to the sheriff. "Might've been better for him to get me, because what I'm gonna do isn't pretty."

Mike remained by the door and watched as the sheriff snatched up a Ruger shotgun from under the bed. A Taurus laser-aim handgun was in the top drawer of a burn-scarred bureau, next to some loose photos of young girls in various states of undress and distress. The sheriff held the pictures up like a poker hand, and when Jack saw them, he leaned in and whipped the killer on the temple with his rifle barrel. Groaning, the killer tried to protect his face. Spittle dripped from his chin.

Working more like a burglar than a cop, Sheriff Lee ransacked the shack. He heaped the stuff on the floor. In one drawer, he found a camera, which he threw down and stamped to pieces. As he emptied a closet, he found some papers in a box and looked them over carefully.

"He uses several names," the Sheriff said, "but his real name is Joey Lucan."

"There's no need to kill him," Mike said. "Look at the evidence you have. You've nailed him for mass murder. He has weapons, photos, and articles of clothing. Down here, he will be executed. The families of the victims need to see a trial in order to get closure and settle their grief over their loved ones."

"Shut up!" Jack said. "We can see. We can see that society has paid enough without putting in the cost of a trial. A wolf's grave is all a wolf should get. But just to be fair, I'm going to give this boy a hearing. Now let's begin with the questioning."

"Fuck you, like I fucked your daughter," Joey said venomously.

Jack whipped the rifle barrel and cracked a couple of Joey's teeth.

"Surely you're not going to let him do this?" Mike said to the sheriff.

"Just a minute," Sheriff Lee said, raising a hand like he was going to swear to something. "I don't want Mike to see this. I'll take him and Joey's guns out to the Jeep. Mike is useless as a witness against us because he's a crazy psychic, but it's better for him not to see any details."

"If that's what you think is best," Jack said. "I'll just screw with his head a bit until you get back."

Reluctantly, and holding Joey's Ruger in his right hand, Mike followed the sheriff to the Jeep. While the sheriff unloaded the Taurus, Mike checked the Ruger. It was fully loaded. Now was the time for a showdown if he wanted one. He glanced at Sheriff Lee and saw that he had a knowing lizard's eye on him. The sun flared up and sent down soul-bleaching heat. A showdown just wasn't sensible. The sheriff, Jack, and Joey were three ornery rattlers; you could gun them down and nothing else. They could never be trusted under the gun. All three had gambled big and wouldn't go down without making desperate moves. If there was going to be a loser, it was better that it be Joey Lucan. He'd earned a wolf's grave, and maybe even a torture pit in hell.

"Why didn't Jack just shoot the creep?" Mike said, unloading the Ruger. He said it for more reasons than the sheriff knew; in his mind's eye, Mike could see what was happening in the shack. He didn't want to see it, so he tried to keep it out of focus as much as possible.

Jack was punishing Joey, getting his revenge. He beat him about the head and shoulders with the rifle butt, and then he went over to the heap of stuff by the bureau. He sifted through the photos and found a blurry one of his granddaughter. Tears welled in his eyes, hate and pain warped his face; trembling, he reached down and grabbed a stiletto. For a moment, Jack's eyes were as sharp as the stiletto, then he stuck the photo on the point and jabbed it toward Joey. The photo fell off and glided to the floor, landing face up. Joey's gray eyes fell on it, sickly, as if it were the ace of spades.

"You're going to answer some questions," Jack said coolly. "I want you to feel good while you're talking, so I'm going to plant this stiletto between your legs. I'm sure it won't bother you much, such a fine incision."

Joey kept quiet, his scraggly head drooping down and his eyes on the photo. Even though he was a monster, he couldn't hide his shame. Like all criminals, he hadn't expected to get caught.

"Yeah, look at it," Jack said. "I want you to know why you're dying this way."

"I'm sorry. I never thought about what I did until now," Joey said, hanging his head, choking bitterly on the words. "It always seemed like I had the right to do it."

This was truly what Jack wanted; the confession of a shamed and beaten man, about to die painfully under the merciless hand of his superior. Bizarre understanding and hate grew in his eyes, like he was looking down at Joey from another planet. Joey's words were food for revenge, and Jack couldn't help listening to those words. He relaxed his guard and held his rifle off to the side as he moved up close.

And as he did, Joey suddenly came up with another stiletto he kept in his boot. Thrusting forward with his cuffed hands, he planted the thin blade in Jack's breadbasket. He twisted and worried the handle, slashing an opening in the intestinal wall.

A razor of blood and death flashed in Mike's head, and he jumped from the side of the Jeep. Jack cried out hideously and dropped his rifle. Joey went to his knees after the gun. Sheriff Lee didn't know what was happening, but without hesitation, he joined Mike in dashing for the shack.

Sheriff Lee didn't want an unarmed man getting in his way; he managed to knock Mike aside and get ahead. Readying his shotgun, he slid in the sand and came around by the busted door. He saw Jack collapsing, holding the knife handle and a mound of bloody innards with both hands. Joey was rising, trying to manipulate the huge Westley Richards rifle and having difficulty because of his numb hands and tight cuffs.

Sheriff Lee hesitated for a moment, then the truth of what he was seeing set in, and he fired his Remington. Joey's head disappeared in thunder, and the Westley Richards went out the far window with the blast. A shower of blood and bone splinters went with it and sprayed painted a pile of lumber as the bent and broken rifle skated in the sand.

Mike had tripped and rolled in the dirt, but now he was up and watching as Sheriff Lee silently entered the shack. The sheriff heaved up the contents of his stomach, fell to his knees, and began to weep. He was between two corpses; one headless and spilling dark blood, and one flat on its back, a ghastly, hateful expression locked on its face.

Mike should have expected the ending, though he'd had no premonition of it. A feeling of self-loathing hit him; he hadn't dealt with the situation properly. He'd tried to take an easy way out. As he cursed himself, the entire scene began to blur, and a vision unfolded in the pool of blood by Joey's headless corpse. "No!" he yelled, not wanting to have a vision there among the dead. But the blood turned to light, and the corpse gained a head. It was beside an ornate coffin, and it was his brother, Len. He was dead, his body being eaten by rats in a warehouse.

Mike fell to his knees, joining the sheriff, but he didn't weep. A great need possessed him; he had to move on, get to Len, and give him a decent burial. The thought of his unburied body was another gnawing rat that ripped at his conscience.

Rising, Mike looked at the sheriff with disgust and went out to the Jeep. A few minutes later, Sheriff Lee emerged, his face ashen. He walked up to Mike.

"I suppose you'll talk and get a major inquest going on this?" the defeated sheriff said.

"It wouldn't benefit anyone. I don't have the rest of my life to spend testifying. Especially now when I have business in Toronto. Jack bought his own tombstone, and Joey bought his own ticket to hell. You can say that Joey came up with a knife and got Jack before you could stop him. I'll say it was so."

"Guess Jack's a hero," the sheriff said, shaking his head. "A dead one. I never should have listened to him. The problem is you owe too many people favors when you're elected."

CHAPTER 3: FIRST CHANNEL

Jon Chandler felt vigor rising from a pearl within; his body hummed like a tuning fork, only with energy and not sounds. He'd been rising to a peak since early morning when he'd leaped from his bed at St. Michael's Hospital and signed himself out in front of a shocked doctor. Outside the hospital, he'd decided not to resume with his planned speaking schedule. Instead, he phoned some movers and shakers in the local New Age scene and had Allan arrange some flexibility in his bookings.

Marilyn Atkinson, an overweight admirer of Jon's, had booked him a complimentary suite of rooms at the Royal York Hotel. The gift wasn't unusual; Jon loved luxury, and so many things were handed to him that he assumed everything was free. However, the plush suite wouldn't see much of him. He'd be keeping on the go, and now he was cruising in a chauffeured limousine on his way to Marilyn's for tea and a lucrative semi-private session.

Doric columns fronting a mansion passed outside the tinted windows of the limousine. Houses in this exclusive neighborhood were lavishly designed. It was like cruising in an

ultramodern fairy tale; even the classic designs had a brand-new feeling. Jon loved houses, rich landscaping, opulent interior decorating, and all material things. Although he never consciously admitted to it, his quest for spiritual meaning had become complacent materialism and junkie fixes of crystal energy. Nowadays, he believed more in commercial charisma than in divine charismata. Jon bled people for money as he bled them for life force. Gold, jewels, even sports cars rained down on him. He pumped much of his wealth into his estate in Vancouver and a wife he rarely saw. His marriage was a marriage of convenience, not that he was gay; he was fickle, preferring brief affairs with infatuated ladies. Husbands often greeted him with an immediate jealous eye, and it was always so much better to put a friendly arm over the shoulder and talk about his wonderful wife.

If Jon knew anything, it was that he should be frightened of the being locked inside him. He could see it there, a dangerous, hidden observer lurking just below his awareness. Yet he felt good, even euphoric as he watched sun dapples and shadows dance under the willows in Marilyn's driveway. This being, this vampire; it didn't go to work like a demon to terrify and destroy its host. It didn't seem to want him to go screaming for an exorcist. It was avoiding direct confrontation, as if it wanted him to be content and emotionally healthy... at least for the present. Jon contemplated the situation for another moment, and then the limousine glided to a halt. He shrugged his shoulders; he wasn't a genuine channeler, or hadn't been until now, yet this being held exciting possibilities. When it sought communication, he would communicate. He would coax and lure it out, then take slow control of it. If it wasn't inimical, it was power, and it could keep him famous and bristling with energy.

As the limousine deposited Jon on the drive and rolled away, Marilyn rushed down the marigold-lined walk. She looked pasty and plain, wearing a straw hat and a long, loose dress that still managed to look tight as her beefy thighs pressed against it. The red gleam of carnelian caught Jon's eye; it was supposed to be a bringer of joy. Jon thought that perhaps its magic had brought Marilyn her dull husband, Conrad, whose bank account was the real joy bringer.

Marilyn threw her arms around him in a crushing embrace that left him speechless, gasping for air, and she didn't notice her clumsiness at all. Bubbling with silly conversation and enthusiasm, she led him through the house and into the back garden, where two guests were waiting. She mentioned that Conrad wasn't around, and that left Jon especially cheered.

"This is Jeanie," Marilyn said, introducing a slim platinum blond woman. She was young, early twenties, and quite sexy, wearing a red halter dress. "She's a Virgo with her moon in Aries."

Jon took her hand warmly. "I do get along so well with Virgos," he said.

"But maybe not with a Pisces with his moon in Scorpio," said a short man with silvering hair.

"This is my old friend Paul Davis," Marilyn said. "He's wanted to meet you for a long time."

"Ah, a man of fiery contemplation," Jon said with a nod of acknowledgment. "What you lose in friendships, I'm sure you make up in other ways."

"Very true," Paul said.

With introductions out of the way, they sat in white patio chairs, shaded by lilacs, a vine-laden trellis, and a sun umbrella. Jon pretended to admire a bed of lavender flowers

beside him as Marilyn began to tell him about Jeanie and Paul. Jeanie and Paul had become acquainted through a joint interest in crystals. They were also channeling enthusiasts. Paul owned a small greenhouse and sometimes held Sunday gatherings where people toured and watched him talk to his plants. He had a personal name for each one of his hundreds of plants. Jeanie was an artist and a much more interesting person than Paul. Jon noted that she lived alone and turned the fact over in his mind. Keeping his hands clasped, Jon listened as Marilyn rambled on. His attentiveness wasn't just an appearance; Jon studied every client, remembering everything. He valued every piece of information, knowing that an obscure fact used in the right way could often be the key to a person's trust.

When Marilyn ran out of words for Jeanie and Paul, she turned her attention to the previous night's channeling session and Jon's hospitalization, mentioning that although she hadn't been in attendance, word had gotten around. Jon was fast becoming a cult hero.

"It must have been a new being or energy you channeled," Marilyn said. "Some people reported fantastic things."

"It was my first contact with a very unusual being," Jon said. "In fact, the being is a vampire."

"A vampire!" Jeanie and Marilyn cried in unison.

"How exciting," Marilyn said, beginning to bubble.

"Exciting perhaps, but is there any value in it?" Paul said.

"I don't know," Jon said. "I was hoping you people would know."

"Of course, there's value in it?" Jeanie said. "The wisdom of a vampire could be invaluable. They're very old beings. Imagine how much universities would pay to have history verified by someone who was actually there."

Paul remained unconvinced. "A vampire is a lower being compared to Sekhmet, who is of the highest order. This vampire could be a harmful and negative development if it is turning Sekhmet away."

"Nonsense," Marilyn said. "Sekhmet is a dead old mummy. A vampire is worldlier and better able to advise people of a sensual nature."

The women's reaction pleased Jon. He'd already written Paul off as an oddball and not worth any investment of time. He decided to pursue it further and see just what magnitude of attraction a vampire had.

"It was an accident. I intended to channel Sekhmet, but instead, some kind of window opened in the spirit world, releasing this vampire from its purgatory. It knocked me off my feet."

"It could be dangerous," Marilyn said. "Alisha told me about the bizarre effect it had on the audience: possession, illness, mad raving, bleeding from nonexistent wounds."

"Quite a number were hospitalized with me, and there was an unfortunate case of self-mutilation. I think the dramatic effects were the result of the first contact. You should never channel before an audience unless you have the being under control. No one is in tune enough to have immediate control. Now that the initial clash of energies has taken place, I should be able to channel the vampire smoothly."

"Perhaps you can touch with the vampire now?" Jeanie said. "Keeping in mind that we are experienced people and not unbalanced like the spectators you get at the open

meetings."

"I can try, but I'll likely want some money for health bills incurred," Jon said. "Right now, I know little about the vampire. I've gathered that he is about as old as Rome, and he changed his title to baron sometime after the Romans created the European country of Romania. I could do some open channeling with my receptive crystal, that's if the three of you aren't afraid?"

"I'm not afraid," Marilyn said.

Jeanie smiled. "Nor I," she said.

They looked to Paul, and he did look afraid, but he nodded, prepared to go along.

Remaining seated, Jon opened his collar and lifted out his puller crystal. A placid expression developed on his face as he admired the violet sheen of light reflected by the clear stone. When he looked up, his mental state had visibly changed. Jeanie and Marilyn were enveloped by yellow auras, a favorable color of aura, life-giving, and sharing. Blue and green, the aural colors of healing and wisdom were the dampers that could seal his chakras. A faint blue tint was present in Paul's aura, but it wasn't pronounced enough to have any effect.

Going through the opening motions with the crystal, he opened his chakras to energy. After some initial disorientation, he began to feel a gentle infusion of energy drifting to him from the others. His mind cleared, and he thought of what he might say to Jeanie, knowing he couldn't be obvious with Marilyn and Paul looking on. At last, as he prepared to fake contact with the vampire, it became unnecessary; he suddenly found himself speaking in a strange voice.

"Why have you disturbed my rest? I am a traveler of the endless night. I know of spirit worlds, crystal millenniums, even of nether worlds, the past and the future."

Silence descended, birds stopped singing, and the breeze vanished. Only Jeanie could muster the courage to speak.

"Are you the vampire?"

"I am Baron Titus Arbore of Brasov. Some call me a vampire. I call myself a man of refinement."

"How old are you?"

"I am eternally young." A strange smile crossed Jon's face. "You don't believe me, I see. Yes, the truth is my body has crumbled. Mr. Chandler is quite alive and, by comparison, as refreshing as rose water. His looks could be more Mediterranean, but I do enjoy his health and even some of the new fashions. His new continental haircut is nice."

Paul found the courage to speak. "So you're a thief, stealing his body. Sekhmet was more honest."

The Baron's anger lit Jon's face. "If you call me a thief again, mention Sekhmet again, or even speak to me again, you will die!"

A shade of red rose on Paul's face, and he pursed his lips, holding back words. He looked to Marilyn and Jeanie, and then back to the Baron. It seemed like he might scream, then he popped up and fled, running madly through the garden and out of sight in the trees.

Jeanie giggled. "That seems to be the end of him," she said.

The Baron laughed heartily. "It will be if he continues to try the patience of spirits from the other side."

Marilyn cleared her throat. "Tell me, Titus, how will you satisfy your need for blood while you are in Jon's body?"

"Ah, a question I was expecting. The truth is that the need for blood is a childhood thing, for young vampires. I'm very old, and long ago, I learned to feed on crystal energy. The Carpathian Mountains are home to some of the most potent crystals in the world. I spent many summers up in the caverns just enjoying nature and inner peace."

"Really," Jeanie said. "We're crystal enthusiasts as well."

"Then we can talk at some other time. Right now, Mr. Chandler seems to want his body back. You should put out the news to the New Age people that I will be available as an expert in all areas of the occult. I do desperately need something to keep me occupied."

"Definitely," Marilyn said. "We will put the news out."

Sudden confusion washed over Chandler's face, and the Baron's distinct expression vanished. Having come back to himself, Jon stood up and stretched his muscles.

"All this has drained me," Jon said. "The Baron left me aware of his message, which was interesting, but the Baron should keep in mind that I am the foremost expert on crystal energy. There will be plenty of other evenings in which to channel the vampire, so for now I'm going to return to my suite and rest."

Jeanie was unable to conceal her excitement; she rushed over and stuffed her card in Jon's front pocket. "You must call me when you feel better. I'm not far from your hotel."

"Have patience," Jon said, feigning weakness. And as he said it, it occurred to him that patience was a virtue he'd have little of when it came to dealing with Jeanie. He hoped the Baron wouldn't get in the way. Thinking it over, Jon felt the Baron was a liar, calling himself an expert on crystals. He was sure he could teach the Baron a lesson or two when it came to precious stones. Jealousy pinked his cheeks; it was disheartening the way the women preferred the Baron to him.

The baron rested in a new coffin, deep in layers of the mind and an underworld cloud. Above him, Jon Chandler's life drifted like a dream.

A crystal earring glittered in Jon's left lobe as he stepped out of the Royal York Hotel. He felt refreshed after bathing, and his new dark suit gave him a polished look. The afternoon session hadn't weakened him; he'd lied to Marilyn because it was his policy to never give the customer too much in an early session. A first meeting was essentially a baiting session, so the vampire would have said about the same thing even if he'd faked it.

Sunset flame streaked the office towers. The evening was too picturesque to spend at the Royal York or in the surrounding business district. He was heading for a trendy area of town that was also Jeanie's neighborhood. He moistened his lips with anticipation; creamy thighs were in his mind. An artist like Jeanie would be easy to charm and great in bed, but he felt it was too early to call her, and he had another appointment anyway. He managed to find an outlet that carried Crystal Millennium products and the new spiritualist paper. The paper was all he purchased, and with it in hand, he looked for a certain deli.

The place turned out to be a block from the magazine store, but the man he was supposed to meet hadn't arrived. He went in and ordered a salad and milk. Sitting at an empty table, he nibbled at his food, odors of corned beef steaming around him. Meat he didn't include in his diet; he liked it, but it wasn't popular in the circles he moved in. He also believed it to be unhealthy and a source of cancer.

A quick browse through the news lifted his spirits. The Toronto scene was still strong. Filled with career optimism, he flipped through a music magazine, stopping to speed-read an article by an old cyber guru. The message was - get blasted but avoid all visions of a religious or theistic nature. Jon chuckled, thinking that these guys were hopelessly dull like robots. They wanted to expand their minds, but what were they open to when they were blind to anything of a religious nature? In Jon's early days, he'd enjoyed the real religious vision, and he supposed that even now he was closer to Huxley than he was to zapped-out atheists. In a way, it was sad. He felt he'd begun with a better vision than drug gurus and most of the new spiritualist people. At some point, a point he couldn't quite put his finger on, the vision had slipped into a materialist dream.

As he closed his paper, his client entered the deli. Jim Gresham was slim and blond, a well-dressed business type. Jon supposed Jim was exactly what women were looking for when they advertised in the dating pages for a businessman. All the right qualities were there: stability of mind combined with exciting interests, a social drinker, a good dancer, and so on. Even so, Jon found him uninteresting and easy to read.

It was a good thing, too, because his job was to read him. Jim Gresham paid top dollar for advice; fortuneteller-type advice on what was best for his future. Jim also had his hang-ups. He was the owner of a computer software and AI company, and he felt it necessary to keep his spiritual side a secret.

Predictably, Jim ordered a corned beef sandwich and a coffee. He sat on the chair like it was made of glass, glancing around and giving only a nod for hello. Anxiety showed on his face. It was obvious something was troubling him.

Jon immediately reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're having trouble with your car. I can feel it."

"You're on the mark as usual," Jim said. "The beast is in for repairs. Engine trouble. I was involved in a nasty fender bender this morning."

Jon nodded sagely. The simple fact that Jim was late indicated car trouble, and, of course, Jon relied on facts, not supernatural powers.

"Despite it all, I'm doing fabulously well," Jim continued. "So, with that said, I suppose you're wondering why I demanded to see you?"

"There are life changes in the stars for you, and since you're a big investor, it might mean acquiring new companies or real estate."

"The stars are right," Jim said, his blue eyes dilating with mild amazement. He leaned closer, seeing charm in Jon's cynical smile. Charm that someone with a clearer head wouldn't see. "It's a possible life change, politics. A major party is trying to recruit me as a candidate."

"There's every reason to go ahead with it," Jon said. "You have a positive image and are driven to accomplish. You'll need spiritual advice during your campaign and after you're elected. Now that I think of it, we never discuss politics. What are your aims?"

"As you know," Jim said, "party names are just banners to run under nowadays. There are no ideological platforms. There are only populist politicians and a few men and women with rare vision. I hope I'm one of the latter. I see myself as a proven corporate leader and innovator, taking leadership ability into the political arena."

"You will be successful," Jon said. "The stars and your outlook say so. You're practically a born politician. You have that degree of honesty and sincerity."

"You really think so?"

"Yes, I really think so?"

An hour passed, and Jim Gresham faded with it into the dead twilight of politics. When Jon stepped out of the deli, dusk was deepening to murky night in the alleyways. The night-lights were brightening to a blaze, and he saw fine silver lines in the air. It seemed weird that he'd been brooding, wondering why he'd lost personal vision, because he had vision now, and a grand purpose directing him. He stopped; night magic turned to laughter in his throat, and in that moment the switch became complete. Jon Chandler became Baron Titus Arbore.

Across the road and down a ways, people were streaming along a broader avenue. Fashionable people from the very young to those much older. Attracted by the bustle, he jaywalked over the road and turned, letting his mind record the motion of Jon Chandler's body. Chandler's coordination, health, and brain balance were items he found close to perfect.

Smiling pleasantly, the Baron plunged into the crowd. The street was well lit by topaz-tinted streetlights, and that, combined with Chandler's bright vision, forced him to squint. He examined Chandler's memory as he moved along past street vendors, bucksters, spare-changers, and teens. Soon his focus fell like a spotlight on Jeanie. He took her card out of his pocket. Her place was somewhere nearby. It would probably be polite to phone first, but surprise visits were always so much more romantic, and he was anxious to see what he could do with Chandler's body. It wasn't exactly the perfect instrument for vampirism, though it responded well to his appetites.

A small white convertible cruised by as he stopped at a cross street. He watched it park out front of a radio station. A thin man hopped over the passenger door, his long hair flying as he ran into the station. Feeling the need for a car, Baron Arbore ambled into the glare out front of the station building.

He studied the car, noting it was a Viper, then stepped onto the road and went around to the driver's side. He pulled out Jeanie's card and waved it at the driver. Turning from the wheel, he looked at the card. The guy was a teenager, the sides of his head were shaved, and a spray of maroon was on his front locks. He frowned at both Jeanie's card and the Baron.

"Do you know how to get to that address?" the Baron said. "It's somewhere close to here."

"Five blocks west, right two," the kid said. "It's a building that's hard to miss."

"How about giving me a lift over there?"

"Are you kidding. Do you know who it is I'm driving? This is a huge promotion, so get a ride somewhere else."

Eyes widening, brightening, and gaining a sapphire-blue glow, the Baron tapped the kid on the shoulder. The kid turned back to him, froze for a moment, then amazement washed over his face and his lips began to tremble. Squeezing the kid's shoulder lightly, the Baron watched as a look of admiration replaced his confusion.

"Maybe you should lend me your Viper for a few days?" the Baron said. "I'm sure your boss won't mind walking."

"Sure," the kid said. "He can walk. He's nobody anyway, just another superstar. My address is in the glove compartment. Try to have it back in a week if you can."

Chandler's driving skills weren't all that great, but they were better than the Baron's lack of skill. The feel of the Viper was low-slung power, like a tiger ready to spring, and it

added to the Baron's natural feeling of strength. He cruised down the road grinning, not bothered at all by the heavy traffic. Jeanie's address turned out to be a Fantastic Sound Warehouse, and it was fantastic that so many garish signs could be supported by one boxlike old building. Instinctively, the Baron parked facing away from the lights. At first, he thought he had the wrong address, then he remembered the kid saying it was hard to miss. As he glanced in the mirror, it dawned on him that she probably lived on the upper floor. The card was for a home address. An artist; it clicked in his mind. She needs a place like a big attic to store her stuff, and what could be better than the top floor of a warehouse.

A pair of mirror shades sat on the dashboard, and the Baron put them on before getting out. He'd found that too much neon glare caused disorientation. The glasses cut the light to a comfortable level. Reaching the cover of the building and soothing darkness, he pocketed the glasses. Some ferns grew in pots in the side alley. Inhaling a fresh lake breeze, he came to a fire escape and went up its broad steps. A metal door was at the top, and it looked like it had once belonged to a bank vault. There was no bell, but there was a ghoulish knocker. He knocked hard, guessing the door was soundproof. Instead of the expected thuds, it boomed resonantly. Within moments, the peephole darkened.

The door opened slowly on well-oiled hinges. Smiling, Jeanie faced him. Soft white light haloed her, and she wore a strapless red dress that accentuated her figure and the cream of her skin. Her rosebud breasts had the Baron almost drooling, and he became unsteady as lust mesmerized him.

"Ah, you came," Jeanie said, "and as the Baron. How nice."

"I thought you were in need," he said. "In need of spiritual advice."

She replied with devilish eyes and led him inside. Her place was as large as he'd imagined. It had nice dark corners and rafters. The predominant odor was sandalwood. Her hips swayed lightly as she took him to the paneled-off area that functioned as her living room. Excitement lifted him like a grand slam when he noticed that he was her only guest.

Dusty hardcover books and art objects cluttered the room, but there was still plenty of space and lots of seating. Despite that, Jeanie sat in a small love couch and motioned for the Baron to join her. The way things were going, it was like being in a romantic play. He didn't want the director to have a chance to alter the script, so he walked straight over and sat.

He hugged her closer than was necessary, and she encouraged him more by taking his hand and brushing it softly. His self-esteem demanded that they at least engage in some preliminary conversation, so he reached over to the coffee table and picked up a crystal skull. Surprisingly, the jaw clicked open as he lifted it.

"It's genuine Aztec, isn't it?" the Baron said.

"Close," Jeanie said. "Actually, it's a Mayan crystal skull. A benevolent spirit inhabits it."

"Really, have you spoken to it?"

"No, but I thought you might," Jeanie said. "Maybe you can find out how it really feels about me?"

"I could, and perhaps later we can find out how some other spirits feel about you."

"That would be exciting."

"Let's give it a few minutes then we'll see if we can conjure them."

Jeanie got up, went over, and picked up a long pole on a workbench. The Baron could see that it was carved from top to bottom like an elongated totem pole. Detailed painting had been done on the raven-like top figure.

"This is the piece I'm working on now; it's also delicate in its present state," she said. "I want to put it up. I wouldn't want a flux of psychic energy to snap it."

"Good idea. I wouldn't want to see it broken because of me."

"Would you like a drink?"

"Yes, perhaps I'll try some of your Western liquor."

"I have brandy and dark rum."

"Rum would be good. A drink should help relax us. I plan to use spiritual hypnosis tonight."

A dim aisle in the clutter led to the kitchen, and Jeanie went down it and into the gloom. The Baron bided his time studying the Mayan skull, fancying he could see a distorted face in the flashing glitter of the crystal. He knew there was a spirit of some sort trapped in the crystal, but it didn't really interest him. Remote spiritualism wasn't his game. Flesh and blood, desire, the appetites and passions of the body were what he savored.

Rum shone darkly as two glasses glittered in the gloom. Jeanie appeared, passed him his drink, and carefully sat beside him.

"How about a toast to your vampire friends?" she said, her eyes reflecting the glitter of the skull.

"A toast to their blood. We wish it to age another thousand years," he said.

"Sure, why not?" she said, and they clicked glasses and downed the rum.

Jeanie had poured triplets of the rum, and it had its effect. Their conversation grew effervescent. The Baron nearly forgot what he was there for, and time passed like a spark in dark amethyst, the haze of the liquor putting Jeanie in his hungry arms and his carnal memory back in place.

He nibbled on her earlobe then moved down the curve of her neck, kissing skin that glowed warmly like firelight. An ocean of blood pulsed sweetly beneath the surface. He was about to lose control and sink his teeth in when she ran her hand up his leg. Chandler's physical desire was still latent in his body, and it rose, took command, and forced the Baron to satisfy its lust. He lowered the top of her dress and began to kiss her breasts as she caressed his head and neck.

Jeanie became fully aroused. She pushed him away, stood up, and swept off her dress. She wore no underclothes, and the perfect curves of her flesh were a potent aphrodisiac. Sliding back down, she opened his pants and began to stroke his erection. Moaning pleasantly, he was unable to stop Chandler's body from following her lead.

After peeling off his clothes, the Baron took her to a Mexican rug in the center of the room and returned to kissing her breasts. He did what Chandler would do, moving down with his kisses, pleasantly amazed by the delicate invitation of her pink orifice. Jeanie moaned, and he was as content kissing her there as he would be with fangs in her neck.

Intercourse came naturally, with the Baron wanting gratification more than the somewhat prolonged act Chandler would prefer. She moved with soft, wet thrusts beneath him, and a minute later, he exploded into orgasm. He looked directly into her eyes. Climax gave his eyes the shine of damp bloodstones. Energy flowed to her as

sexual mesmerism; her moans and movements grew wild. Something in Chandler's memory told him to use the crystal, which he still had around his neck.

Maintaining penetration as she writhed, he used the crystal to open his chakras. Their rhythm was temporarily broken, and there was a moment where they stared at each other in surprise, then a river of energy splashed like blood from her to him, sending him into a second state of orgasm. It was already more than Chandler had ever achieved, but it wasn't enough for the Baron. As she shrieked, clawed, and bled energy to him, he dammed it up.

A death climax took her, and he lost control and released the flood. A wave of energy broke along force lines, like a shattering crystal, and exploded into her. The Baron was thrown off by the charge; he tumbled onto the rug, rolled onto his knees, and saw her twitching and gasping like an epileptic, barely visible amid a brilliant red aura of energy.

The aura grew in intensity, thickening into a haze, then condensed into drops of blood. Her eyes fluttered randomly, and a drowning gurgle slipped through her clenched teeth. The blood formed beads in her body; beads that glittered like a million tiny jewels and worked to enthrall the Baron. He crawled to her and began to lap up the blood and the tremendous energy stored in it.

Mesmerized, Jeanie remained in a dream state, unaware that her life force and soul were being licked up by the same tongue that electrified her with pleasure. As she died, she had a smile on her face, even though her body looked like it'd been delicately pierced by ten thousand fangs.

CHAPTER 4: THE WAREHOUSE

Mike's business in Texas had ended without an uplifting moment. He soothed himself by believing fate had acted to claim Joey Lucan and Jack; fate and a gruesome claw had pulled them through a graveyard doorway. Aside from that, there was only so much justice he could bring into a brutal world. Sympathy for evil, stupid men could only be a worthless emotion. It was best to say they got what they got and then forget the rest, but life is cursed, as few things are truly forgotten. Instead, he had another skeleton rattling in his closet, two more scarecrows on the field of his soul, and the good life was a little harder to gain. Without a doubt, his brother Len had been stronger. Len would have thought Joey and Jack were agents of the big-world enemy. Mike wished he could believe in such an enemy.

A chain of murderous events, and now Sheriff Lee was a silent, taciturn man, working to close things up like a funeral director. The sheriff had believed in vigilante justice and now knew there were consequences to every act.

Not many words had been exchanged on the way to the airport, and now that they were pulling in, Mike realized that he was going to walk away without saying any sort of genuine goodbye.

He did walk away and stepped into the terminal, feeling glad he was finally on his own. Once he was on the plane, a darker bank of emotional clouds settled over him. Flash visions of vicious rats tearing at Len's corpse began to torment him. The plane droned on through purgatory, and he found it hard to hide the problem. One passenger got himself moved to another seat, and people nearby eyed him warily. Ordinary people were afraid of a man who developed sudden, horrified expressions and covered his face with his

hands. Fortunately, the flight attendant assumed it was a fear of flying, and that helped him get through the flight.

Mike tried to let his mind drift to better things; he had a wife and daughter in Toronto - Alice and Annie - and they still loved him. Len's death was tragic but not a surprise. He'd lived on the supernatural razor's edge, taking big risks every day. Mike had always feared that he'd bury Len while they were still young. He'd even bought insurance to cover a funeral. That was a few years ago, and Alice had completed the payments on it.

Alice would always be an angel to Mike. If she couldn't live with a moody guy who had strange psychic experiences, a guy who wouldn't mature and settle into a steady job - well, that was understandable. He knew she was a stable mother, and she never treated him with contempt or held up his faults like dirty laundry in front of Annie. No doubt, Annie suffered some emotional damage because of his long absences, but at least she didn't suffer the additional torment of seeing her father as a villain.

The plane hummed smoothly toward the Toronto runway, a silver omen gliding over the suburban expanse of North York. Tremendous relief came with the touching of the wheels to the tarmac, but it was temporary because Mike despised crowds. Gritting his teeth, he restrained himself from rudeness as he moved with the air-terminal crowd. He believed in loving his fellow man, but it would be easier to love others if they'd keep at arm's length.

Mike grabbed a cab and was falling back to relax in the seat when he realized he wasn't sure of his exact destination.

The black cabby looked him over. "Few drinks on the plane, man?"

"No," Mike said. "I don't need a drink to look like this. I suppose you expect me to know where I'm going, as most people do?"

"Most people goin' nowhere. Don't matter what they know."

"You come from the same school I do. Okay, take me downtown near the waterfront. I'll find my way from there."

The cabby drove in the same way some people play Snakes and Ladders, hitting some of the lucky ladders. Eventually, he got downtown. Mike popped out at the rear by the garage section of a building, figuring only an odd cabby would drop a fare there. He'd been taken for a bit of a ride, but there was no sense wasting time arguing. He walked swiftly out into the gray light of day.

It had rained, and now the streets were steamy. Working his way through the side streets below the old Chinatown, he headed for the waterfront. A sixth sense guided him, and whenever he got far off the track, a depressing, lost feeling came over him. He looked suspicious, out of place, cutting across abandoned rail lands and under freeway pylons. It was territory that even bums usually avoided; maybe it involved trespassing, but it didn't matter. He went where the trail led.

A structure like a corpse, Mike thought when he saw the warehouse, its blackened brick and long unused stack. He'd seen castles brought stone by stone from Europe, and the warehouse was similar, only it was a hellish factory, brought brick by cracked brick from Industrial Revolution England.

The stack dropped a hangman's hood shadow. He slowed his pace as he came to the broken door. Damp, rancid air touched him as he entered, and enough light filtered through the chinks for him to see the tumbled crates and dry goods spilled across the floor. A few more steps, and he heard the squeal of an angry rat. He'd stepped on it, and

it darted from underfoot. There was a chorus of squeals as other rats joined in. His eyes fell on the coffin and the rodents scampering around it. He didn't have to look to know where the body was. A lump formed in his throat, and he gulped, feeling a horrible ache in his taut neck muscles. Without investigating further, he turned away and went back outside.

Mike had a friend in homicide - Detective Jake Skagway. He decided to call him and get matters cleared up officially so he could go ahead with the funeral. His pocket phone was out of power, so he had to pound the pavement again, a long kilometer to a greasy spoon restaurant, where he bought a coffee and used the house phone. Mike liked it that way, as he didn't use his phone much. He could be tracked via a phone. Powered-up mobiles were like your address in your front pocket, telling snoops where you were. Jake wasn't at home, so he had his answering service forward a message. From experience, he knew that Jake would get the message and be out in a few minutes.

Jake Skagway arrived alone, grim as a mortician in his undercover care, a dusty black Chevy. He wasn't in a hurry and got out slowly, his face serious. His body hulked big, like the warehouse. He'd been a linebacker with the Toronto Argonauts in his younger days. His look was that of a mean guy, but his personality was more that of a harmless bear. If necessary, he could subdue the craziest of punks using nothing beyond standard police tactics. Detective Skagway was a fan of old movies and not-so-old mystery books. He enjoyed tough-guy stuff as fiction, but in everyday life, he preferred people with an easygoing nature.

Mike eyed Skagway's rumpled suit. "Life has been hard on you, or are you trying to look eccentric?"

"I suppose you think the baggy jacket is for hiding an old Dirty Harry .44," Jake said, managing a brief smile. His grin was funny, letting most of his teeth show. "Truth is, our budget is down, and the murder rate is up. I'm a mess. I barely have time for a shower."

Mike read Jake's fortune in the deep creases on his forehead. "Are the killings organized crime?"

"No. Creeps are on the up. Lunatics who kill their wives, kids, and friends or innocent bystanders. It'd be nice if they'd only kill themselves. The Chief calls it culture rot, a growing subculture of morons who try to solve problems with murder. Your wife walks out, so the answer is to gun her down with a G11 military assault rifle. If your dog disobeys you, shoot him with a canon. People can't face problems anymore. They can only go nuts."

"It's meanness more than madness. Happiness is getting rare, and the mean streak is showing through. If you don't understand that you can't keep yourself in check. My brother never had a mean streak. I guess you think he had a dangerous streak. I know you two didn't agree on much."

"He was taking the law into his own hands. I don't agree with that." Jake's brown eyes dimmed as his brows eclipsed them; a serious look Mike knew well.

"I didn't exactly agree with it myself."

"You're sure no one is inside the warehouse?"

"The body has been in there a while, and the guy who murdered him is dead, too. Look in the coffin."

"There shouldn't be any coffin. I just ran a check on this place. It's used as a warehouse. There should be crate appliances - toasters and stuff, and some dry goods from China. I

suppose the next thing you're going to tell me is the guy planned on dying, so he brought his own coffin with him." The detective held up his hand. "Don't answer. Wait here while I investigate."

Frustration and humidity on his brow, Jake Skagway lumbered into the warehouse. Mike heard his heavy footfalls resounding, along with the squeal and scrabble of fleeing rats. There was a bang as the coffin was opened, and then Mike sat on a pile of broken concrete slabs for the next twenty minutes, his head swimming with ugly thoughts.

Stepping back outside, Jake lit a cigarette and puffed with an unhappy look on his face.

"I thought you quit smoking?" Mike said.

"When I find a body, I smoke and think about it. It's the only time I smoke. Smoked half a pack this month."

"Ugly in there isn't it?"

"I'm used to the ugly part. It's how it's described that gets me. What will I put down? That you had a hunch your brother was dead and lying in this out-of-the-way dump. The dead guy in the coffin killed him, only all that's in the coffin is an expensive costume with a stake driven through it. The socks, shoes, underwear - everything put together so it looks like someone was wearing a suit, then vanished out of it."

"The man in the coffin was a vampire. One so old he disintegrated to nothing after Len staked him. Len must've died of injuries he got in the scuffle."

"Now you know why I hate you, Mike. You always come up with cases from The Twilight Zone. I can't put in a report like that. I'll leave out the coffin. It's just an article that happened to be in the warehouse. Likely, it'll turn out that Len died of injuries he got in a scuffle, so I'll say he was slain by criminals importing drugs. The coroner's report will outline how he was killed. You'll have to wait for him to release the body for burial. You'll also have to stay in the city."

"If that's the way it has to be," Mike said.

"It can't be any other way."

Mike knew Jake believed him, and he also knew the gears were turning in Jake's mind, trying to churn out a reasonable final report. As expected, Jake kept the investigation routine and held him at the scene as a parade of police specialists examined the site and the body. When Jake mentioned DNA tests, Mike couldn't help wondering what sort of results they'd get from the contents of the coffin. After about an hour, he was driven from the scene to the downtown station for questioning. Five more hours crawled by before he was finally set free in the chilly back parking lot of the police station.

Death and murder, Mike found both to be energy-draining vampires. If a friend or relative turned up a corpse, grief would come in like a haymaker, and when you got up, your head still spinning, the police would be there asking an endless chain of tricky questions.

The bone-numbing aspect of the investigation, the stabbing emotional pain that came with questions that could only mean you were a prime suspect, the totality of it all slammed down on Mike, leaving him feeling like an aching mound of old flesh. He didn't want to phone Alice or pop in on her while he was in a state of nerves, and the thought of telling her and Annie that Big Len was dead made him shudder. Annie had been very close to Len. Working on their own, his feet took him through a blur of lights and scrapers to the Holiday Inn. He rented a room, ordered an appetizer and a strong beer,

and turned on pay TV. A haze of memories drifted in his head while the blue twinkling of an old Elvis movie passed easily like a tranquilizer.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, and it worked like magic, taking his thoughts back to his boyhood in Carrying Place, a tiny village on the edge of Lake Ontario in the eastern part of the province.

Len was returning home for the summer that year, meaning Mike would be reunited with an older brother he knew little about. He honestly couldn't remember much more than Len's big eyes as he'd been taken away by an ecumenical society in the early years. Odd disabilities got Len sent to a special school in the Peloponnese. Other schools, regular, private, and special, wouldn't take him.

Heat ghosts were in the air over the soft highway, the fields were scorched to the color of brown sugar, and in that dead landscape, Len's arrival was more than odd. A sleek black sedan came gleaming out of the sun, rolling up a dust cloud and crushing paper-dry weeds as it rolled over and stopped on the shoulder.

The sun was mirrored in the windows, and Mike couldn't see the driver, but the horn honked, and a huge bronze teenager wearing enormous dark glasses was deposited on the roadside. The vehicle crept off without further fanfare, disappearing up the road like an important thief.

Mike's feelings of awe and amazement were so strong that he couldn't move. He stood like a scarecrow watching a handsome, muscular youth stride up the driveway. His hair had the luster of a raven, and the scorching heat that withered everything else worked to energize him. It didn't seem possible that this could be his disadvantaged brother. If no school would take him, where were the bandy legs, the gibbering mouth, and the incredible spastic condition?

Len was the picture of health, and he walked up confidently, clapping Mike on the shoulder with a hand of iron. "How goes it, little brother?"

The reunion progressed normally, and by the time lunch was finished, Mike had forgotten Len's supposed problems. Len became his brother, plain and simple, even his weird glasses grew familiar and ordinary, like the jam/jelly sandwiches they shared.

Later that afternoon, when they were out at the point, the subject of disabilities came up. Mike was watching ring-billed gulls out on the water, and when he turned back, Len had his glasses up and was massaging the orbits of his eyes. They were open, but they were blind and white with cataracts; white as the wall of the lighthouse towering behind them.

It startled Mike. He nearly fell into the water. "You mean you're blind?" he said.

"Inoperable cataract tissue in my eyes, but I'm not blind. I see by motion awareness. The world I see is different."

"That doesn't sound like a disability."

"It's the rest of the world that's disabled. I ended up in a special school because of it. Parents won't let their kids associate with a child that has an abnormal form of vision, and schools for the handicapped don't want kids with handicaps that make them superior."

Mike tossed a stone, trying not to look too shocked or interested. "So all the other kids at your school are like you?"

"They have their own abilities. The monks don't call them disabilities."

"Your teachers are monks?"

"Yeah, and they're a lot better than you would expect. Our school is a 6th-century monastery. It's near the straits at Daphni. An area that's scary because of the ancient ruins in the countryside."

"So what will you be when you graduate?"

"Don't know. I take odd courses and training. Right now I'm taking one on vampires. I suppose I'll graduate as a man who doesn't put his trust in society or the world. The world didn't have a place for me, and I'll never forget that. You're normal, so you'll probably never understand."

Only it turned out the other way round. Mike wasn't normal, and he, too, graduated as a man who placed no trust in society or the world.

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Mike woke from a dream of a pouncing mountain lion and saw a golden mane of sun in the window. Yesterday's gloom had lifted, but he couldn't see where today held promise. He picked up the phone, ordered breakfast, and picked through his suitcase for clean clothes. After a shower and a bowl of cornflakes, he got on the phone to Alice. A sinking feeling hit him as her mellifluous voice filled his ear.

"I thought you were way down South?" Alice said, not sounding too thrilled by his sudden return.

"I was, and some law enforcement people down there paid me real dollars for a change. Don't get too happy about it because I'm here with terrible news."

"Let me guess. You're in jail again. Or maybe one of those nutty clients of yours is coming after us again?"

"It's much worse than that. My brother, Len, has passed away."

"No! How did it happen?"

"Here in Toronto. We think it was an accident. Jake Skagway is investigating. We won't know for sure until he finishes his report."

Alice gulped and sighed. "I'd better keep Annie home from school."

"You'll tell her?" Mike said. "I mean, use a mother's touch. Before I get there."

"I think you should, Mike. You're her father, and he's your brother. Act responsibly for once in your life."

"Come on, Alice. I don't want it to look like I only come around to break her heart. She might think I'm somehow responsible, and you know I can't bear little-girl tears. The whole thing has been a draining experience. I suppose we knew it was coming. With Annie, it's different. She won't believe it. Besides, I can be a buffer. After she's cried some, I'll get there and cheer her up."

"You're cruel, Mike. That's what you are, and selfish. Never mind, I'll be the bad guy like always. Besides, you'll probably upset her even more if you do it. Don't arrive and try to throw her a birthday party. It's the death of a loved one, so behave accordingly."

"Sure, I'll behave. Thanks, Alice."

Mike did behave, and he did cheer Annie up; at no time did he wish he had broken the news himself. Alice was better at that sort of thing, and she was no longer peeved about it. There was an odor of mothballs as she fussed with some of his suits. Annie was still in

her nightgown and had fallen asleep in his arms. He could feel her tear-sticky face gluing itself to his neck, so he shifted her position.

Mike gazed out the bay window. The privet hedge, flower-lined walk, and neat yard could fit with any suburban home. It was the old maple tree that made him feel fine, because a front-window maple had been there in his childhood home in Carrying Place. Home nowadays was only a fleeting feeling. Everything seemed to disappear in a well of time behind him. His parents were gone, and the old house was gone. Len was gone, and his wife and daughter were emotionally distant. He was acutely aware that nothing in life lasts.

Alice's blond locks were tear-teased on the right side from Annie's weeping. Alice always wore light makeup, but today she hadn't had time to put any on. She seemed serious and severe without it, like when she wore some, it painted away her problems. Today, her feelings were hard to read. Mike guessed her to be more grief-stricken than was immediately apparent. Usually, she let her feelings hang out, but since it was his brother, she was likely trying to avoid upsetting him.

"You're going to have to decide," Alice said as she pulled the plastic off a suit.

"Alright. Phone your minister. Len always called himself a Christian, though he never went to a local church. Your denomination can bury him here. It's better than letting an order of monks bury him overseas."

"I want his plot to be away from the Catholic section. You know how I ..."

"Please, Alice, I don't want to hear a speech about the pope and his Mafia of male chauvinists."

Mike's raised voice caused Annie to mumble and begin to awaken. He pushed her hair back, then looked out the window and saw Jake Skagway driving up. He lifted Annie high in the air, then dropped her back to his chest.

"It's time to see Mommy, kiddo," Mike said.

Alice put her hands on her hips and turned to the window. "I suppose that's Jake Skagway here with more news."

"It is," Mike said as Annie came to life as a bundle of knees and elbows in his lap. "I want to talk to him in the yard. You know his habit of being frank about all the horrible details."

"I really don't want Annie to hear all the horrible details. That's a lesson I learned when Ruffles died. I think my curiosity died the same day Ruffles did."

"I wanna see Big Jake," Annie said, struggling free of Mike. She scrambled to the window and waved, prepared to go out.

"You'll have to stay in for now," Mike said. "I have to talk to him first. You can come out after."

Detective Skagway looked clean and pressed. His brown eyes were alert. He had no objection to talking outside, so they stood in the shade of the maple tree, with a view of the sunshine and the perfectly manicured neighborhood. Lush, with a hot, lazy breeze, the summer day was placid. The odor of fresh-mown grass lifted Mike's spirits.

"We'll probably report that Len died in a scuffle with thugs. What he was doing at the warehouse, we don't know."

"You drove over to tell me that?"

"Not just that. There's more. It turns out the coffin is a museum piece. The costume in it doesn't respond to dating tests. Nor is the dust identifiable as that of a human corpse."

"I'm not surprised."

"I know it's rotten to trouble you now, but I need to solve the mystery. We'll pay you to aid in the investigation."

"What's to investigate? I told you how Len died."

"Not just Len. It's a young woman, an artist I'm talking about. She got turned into Swiss cheese - bloodless Swiss cheese. The corpse is covered with fang-like incisions. It might bear some relationship to Len's death."

"What gives you the feeling?"

"Both deaths are bizarre. In my mind, that relates them, and there is a weird vampire angle in both of them."

"I'd have to study the crime scene, but to be honest, I can't see how I can help."

"The victim, Jeanie, was into new magic and the occult. You know a lot about that scene. She also did some crystal healing. I remember you saying something about magic stones."

Mike pulled a silver chain up from under his T-shirt, and a pale orange chunk of coral dangled from it. "This is a protective stone; there's a stone for nearly everything."

"Maybe a crystal rabbit's foot would've saved her."

"I see you're not a believer in stones, but you won't have to be. Give me a minute. You can talk to Alice and Annie while I get dressed."

They went inside, and Mike went upstairs to dress, leaving Detective Skagway with his arms full of Annie and his mouth full of explanations for Alice.

". . . so Mike is being paid for this?" Mike heard Alice saying. He came down the stairs quietly, guessing that Alice approved of his involvement because it was murder and his role was classed as a real job. If he were to announce that he was going out on his own, just to help the investigation, then that would be juvenile, and Alice would start counting the reasons for him not to go on her fingers.

"He'll be working for us in his capacity as an expert on the subject of magic stones," Detective Skagway said. "It's a standard consultant's fee."

"Bring me a magic stone," Annie said as Mike stepped into the living room.

"That poor lady was killed by magic stones," Alice said. "I don't want Annie to have any."

"You worry too much," Mike said.

She shot him a skeptical glance. "I want to talk to you alone, before you leave."

"I can take a hint," Jake said, heading for the door.

Alice watched it shut. "Your brother died. You shouldn't be risking your life. At least someone in your family should be left alive. Don't do any more than acting as a consultant."

"Len didn't believe in moping about, and I'm being paid for this. I'll be with the police, so it's all quite safe. It's people who are sure they're safe at home that die."

"Maybe this magic stone stuff will backfire on you, all while you think you're safe with the police. I've never really trusted police."

"That's because you were a petty criminal when I met you."

"I was not."

"You smoked pot. I met you at a festival, remember."

"If you were so clean and perfect, you wouldn't have been there. It's not illegal and never should have been."

"I couldn't avoid being there? It was on the farm next to my parents' place in Carrying Place. You forget so many things; you sure weren't afraid to take risks back then. You almost killed me with smoke."

"I didn't guess you to be a weird psychic. You looked normal and not hypersensitive. You didn't even know it yourself." Alice frowned. "It's amazing the way you go back years to get something to justify your risk-taking now."

Mike grinned, and Alice's eyes went a little glazed, like she was trying to see their past clearly. She smiled, stepped up to Mike, and hugged him.

"You're right," Mike said. "If this case turns out to be too risky, I'll drop it. It would be better for everyone if I stayed alive for a while."

CHAPTER 5: SKULL VISION

In daylight, the FANTASTIC SOUND WAREHOUSE lacked flash. It was an ordinary dilapidated structure. They cut through the lot without really noticing it. At the side of the building, a humid breeze drifted from the lake, carrying the odors of shoreline mud.

"It's not like she didn't play it safe," Jake Skagway said, gesturing with a big hand to the vault-like door at the top of the metal staircase.

They went up and found the door open a crack. A husky, uniformed officer swung it open the rest of the way, and the clanging of their heels echoed into silence as they halted. They looked carefully at a pentagram and a large number seven painted in gold neon on the inside of the closing door.

"Does that keep spirits out or lock them in?" Detective Skagway said.

"The pentagram suggests a person interested in occult magic," Mike said. "Seven is the number of the mystic seeker. Seekers are supposedly people of a brighter nature who see life from a more enlightened perspective. It's a sort of self-description she put on the inside of the door, like a signature. From it, I would draw that she was a stable person working with the occult."

"Then why are all of her friends and acquaintances weird? They don't show much logic while under questioning."

"They may appear illogical. They wouldn't think in the way a detective would want. Not at all."

They stepped inside, and Mike showed he could also appear illogical by first looking up at the rafters. The back portion of the huge apartment was a sort of museum or junkyard. Shelved items, objects on the walls and ceiling, and heaps of art objects made a complex mosaic. Mike's eyes drifted to a dusty alcove; on its shelves were seashells, rock crystals, rare coins, papyrus scrolls, a shrunken head, a hideous mask made of fossilized fungus, and blown-glass items. A leaded-glass cabinet containing tiny, freakish,

ebony statuettes was to the left of the alcove. Books scattered across various shelves made up a small library.

Two uniformed officers remained in the apartment. They were on guard duty as the preliminary investigation was complete. Jake ordered them to sit on a couch near the door, then stepped ahead into a living room separated from the rest of the apartment by dark paneled screens. A marked section of the floor indicated the body's position.

"Believe it or not, we've gone through most of this stuff," Detective Skagway said. "No fingerprints other than hers have been found in the back section. There's nothing here that could have been a murder weapon, as far as we know, but we don't know what the weapon would look like exactly. She does have some antique torture tools in here. I'm waiting while an expert at headquarters sketches out models."

Mike turned his gaze to the Oriental panels that served as kitchen walls. "I thought you said you found fang marks?" he said absently.

"Thousands of marks, and we've learned that she had a male visitor. He had a drink and left prints."

"I can't see how you need me, not if you have a major suspect?"

"Suppose we discover the identity of the suspect. We still have to show how he killed her. I want you to tell us what kind of black magic ritual he was performing. Once I piece the puzzle together, I can nail him to a cell wall as an occult maniac."

"I see," Mike said. "She really was into stones. Just at a glance, I can see pieces of amber, carnelian, sodalite, agate, and clear crystal. The crystal wand on the end table is for magic. It cuts psychic bonds. A laser wand, it's called. She uses these phantom crystals to talk to her plants."

Detective Skagway's eyes brightened as he took in the information. "Why don't you talk to her plants or whatever it is that you talk to and ask how she got killed?"

"Plants can't communicate. Not in a sense where they would answer questions."

"How about talking to this?" Detective Skagway said, lifting a crystal skull. "Ask it whose fingerprints we found on it?"

"I can try. Crystal skulls come from various parts of the world. Often they are ancient and spirit-possessed. There is also a thing called crystal memory."

"What's that?"

"Events can get impressed into the molecular structure of a crystal; a memory that can be recalled by a type of psychic reading."

"Go to work. Maybe some of those fang marks got impressed in it, or enough for us to find the weapon."

Mike took the skull and admired it as he sat in the love seat. He placed it on his knees and held it firmly with both hands. Staring straight ahead, he looked like a daydreamer or a person absorbed in a movie. He was aware of Jake's skeptical gaze, and he knew that the detective didn't really care what method he used as long as the needed information clicked out of his mind. His usually firm jaw fell slack; his eyes gained an opalescent gleam. A light trance took him. Faint emanations of violet light rose, and his eyes widened into pools as the light intensified, giving the skull a pulsating aura.

At first, the effect caused mild discomfort, and then the pulse became blindingly painful. It staggered Detective Skagway; he tottered, then he suddenly went to his knees. Mike

also went down, and both men felt their arms become black wings, fluttering wildly. It was a hallucination. A vision opened: an ebony spear flying. The spear whistled through the air and struck a palpitating heart on an altar. A shower of blood exploded and blossomed into a whirling kaleidoscope of color, leaving them helplessly watching as their feet sank into smoldering volcanic lava.

Fire consumed them, and they burst out of it into rushing wind. Their vision slowly cleared, and they found themselves on their knees on stone steps. A vast, terraced pyramid angled to the earth below. They were near the top, and the view was breathtaking, dizzying. They rose, with Mike carrying the crystal skull, cradling it in his hands. A man with glowing bronze skin appeared at Mike's side and began to lead the way over the top.

From the top, they began to descend into the heart of the structure. Loud chanting drifted to them, and after a moment, Mike realized that it wasn't chanting, but a language of thought flowering in his mind. Rich expression, ancient in its semantics. Only one sentence was comprehensible - Tezcatlipoca, our golden king - and it was a repeating theme carrying a glorious resonance.

Tezcatlipoca; Mike knew it had to be the name of the bronze man leading them. The man was a king, shining with gold and emeralds, resplendent with feathers and a garland of flowers, and even his sandals were gold and crusted with gems.

A soothing fragrance of spice and incense hung in the air, but it began to fade and grow dull as they descended into the gloom of the temple. In the lower reaches, the atmosphere was humid like fetid breath. A taste of burnt and decaying flesh settled on the tongue. Gem-encrusted idols appeared, their menacing faces glaring down at an altar.

As they approached the altar, half-naked priests emerged from billowing smoke, seized Tezcatlipoca, and dragged him to a stone of sacrifice. Jake stumbled up beside Mike, and they looked on helplessly as the priests stretched Tezcatlipoca out, tied his ankles and wrists with leather thongs, and began to cut open his chest with an obsidian knife.

With his bare hands, the chief priest parted the wound, and it gaped wide, revealing a glistening mass of organs. Fluid gushed over white, violet, blue, and scarlet tissue that wriggled and squirmed around a large, swollen heart.

The blade began to cut smoothly around the heart. As the priest pried it up and turned it, Jake began to totter. Suddenly, with his face electrocuted, the chief priest squeezed the heart, savagely ripped it out, and held it high as a dripping offering for the demon god Huitzilopochtli.

Mike felt Jake's heavy arm as he grabbed him to keep from fainting. Sickened, Mike supported Jake and listened as the priest recited some magic words. A look of evil deliberation came over the priest as he stepped up to a brazier and threw the heart down to sizzle and palpitate on the coals. Coagulating blood ran like slime on the walls. They could see that the priest's hair was blood-soaked and matted.

Jake Skagway slumped and dropped down next to Mike. The emanations returned, pulses of violet light washing away the vision. Jake found himself back in the apartment. He was on his knees, sweat-soaked and staring directly at Mike and the skull. Mike was still in a trance, and now the skull bore the transparent image of Tezcatlipoca's face.

It was a noble face. A flash of its eyes brought Mike out of his trance. The lips remained set, yet Mike heard a voice; it was a clairaudient voice, taking place in his mind in the universal language of telepathy.

"As you have seen, in the year 1504, I was the glorious boy-king Tezcatlipoca. A king for one year before I was sacrificed to the demon god Huitzilopochtli. There were better times in my life than the end of my life. It is unfortunate that the skull remembers only evil things."

"Why do you inhabit the skull?" Mike said. "Did the priests cast a spell?"

"No. Because I died willingly as a sacrifice to a demon, I was sent into the skull. A purgatory allowed for me because I had shed no blood. The skull also sees the fate of the idol priests, but if a man were to see it, he would wither and die."

"Do you know why I have contacted you?"

"Yes, to ask about the woman, Jeanie."

Detective Skagway could also hear the clairaudient voice, and the mention of Jeanie excited him. He tried to speak, and as he did, he found himself bound by a type of magic. A distortion of sound and air rushed out of his lungs; he could form no words. Winded, he almost collapsed. Grasping his throat, he stood up and took clumsy steps back, and then he stood still. He found that there was no problem as long as he didn't try to move or speak. Off to his side, the two uniformed officers lay where they had fainted dead away.

Mike glanced at Jake, then turned his attention back to the skull. "You saw Jeanie's killer, or at least the skull must have absorbed it as it does other events of an evil nature."

"I no longer watch the acts of cruel men, but as you say, the skull has absorbed it. The skull is a gate to purgatory, always looking at wicked deeds."

"Can you draw out the name of the killer for us?" Mike said. "In return, we can help you in some way."

"The killer is a vampire, Baron Titus Arbore, who has taken spirit form and entered the body of a spirit channeler named Jon Chandler. The favor I ask in return is that you put the skull where it is warm, silent, and dark. A place where I can sleep and forget myself in dreams."

"We'll do that for you. Can you give us more? Maybe show us how he killed Jeanie?"

Tezcatlipoca's projected face vanished; an intense violet aura remained, then strobed. Brilliant rings of astral energy washed over Mike, and he saw a vision of the past. Detective Skagway's pupils widened despite the light.

A tall, dark man with feral eyes and a rugged yet sophisticated face stepped out of a crenellation in a parapet and strode into the misty night. Castle walls towering beside him exuded moisture, lichens, and slime. Mist rolled and obscured the scene, and when it blew away, the man was crashing down into a coffin. Then Len and the stake came down on him.

They were back in the apartment. A lurid red flash suddenly lit the center of the room, and a naked and possessed Jon Chandler flew out of it and scrambled on his hands and knees. An ancient and depraved form of bloodlust tore at Jon's face, giving it a hellishly wicked appearance in the condensing light. A blood mist was settling on a writhing naked body, and it was Jeanie. Jon crawled to her and began licking up blood as the vision became too hideous to bear.

Jake Skagway trembled, and his body went iron stiff. Watching a horrible crime and being unable to stop it was more than he could stand. It was like something was tearing at the fabric of his soul. He had never encountered a character so sick, a vampire fiend,

and a revolting pervert. The fact that Jeanie, although near death, seemed ecstatically willing, disturbed him so much that his horror became shaded by emotions of disgust, jealousy, and fury. Jake bared his teeth; it was the expression of a man who had to watch even though what he was watching was driving him insane.

Finally, the vision faded, and Detective Skagway's emotions were cut loose. He fell to the floor like a man shot in the chest and remained there unconscious.

Mike's expression remained clear; no disgust, loathing, fear, or sadness. He had never suffered from sexual confusion or weird desires, and he viewed death as everyone's fate. He had an ability of detachment that others lacked. While most witnesses couldn't accept what had been done to the victim, he tended to agree with Plato, who had believed that what a killer did to himself in becoming a monster was far more terrible. He stepped over and rolled Jake into a more comfortable position, and then he took a purple sack from a shelf, slapped the dust off it, and put the skull inside. He drew the string and toyed with the ends as he waited for the others to come around.

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CHAPTER 6: THE SPLIT

Old habits die hard, and the embers of a man's lust never smolder out. The vampire's spirit had put him aglow with bloodlust, but Jon's appetite for the usual crystal-transmitted energy refused to fade.

He stepped gingerly off the escalator and avoided the dark interiors of a row of expensive restaurants, heading instead for the main food court. There he bought milk and a wilted Caesar salad and sat by himself at an acrylic-surfaced table by the window. He wasn't hungry as his appetite was off. He was there to meet Allan.

Folding his hands, he gazed meditatively at his salad; the amber of sunset fell on him as he pushed the food away and opened a burgundy portfolio. His new itinerary was inside on a neatly printed, thin sheet. He slipped it out of the slot, thinking that Liz had done a good job making arrangements. Liz was an admirer of Jon's who had offered secretarial services through Allan. She was young, a surgeon's wife who filled the lonely hours with crystal magic.

It took a moment for the sway of Liz's ample hips to pass, and then the first typed line spelled itself across his mind. If Allan had completed the arrangements, he would begin channeling the vampire tomorrow afternoon. His ad was already out in the New Age Weekly, and Liz had booked the Unitarian Church on Dixon Street for the first meeting.

Looking up from the portfolio, Jon saw Allan, and he didn't look at all mystic or Eastern today. His dark suit was executive all the way. He had the look of a captain of industry who had come down to the ship's mess for an inspection. But Jon wasn't fooled; he often wore authority like a coat, too. Allan had once said, "If the devil can appear as anyone, then so can a saint." In Jon's order of things, Allan was no saint. No doubt Allan's mission in life was to change the world in some way, and in doing so, he appeared as so many characters that it was hard to pin down exactly who he was. Perhaps his real self was a vampire of sorts, in a coffin of its own. The key to the coffin was in a name, because Allan Rampa wasn't his real name. Rampa was his business name.

Allan sat, folded his arms, and spoke calmly as sunset light flickered on his face. "I've confirmed the dates. There's big interest out there, but much of it is in the vampire and not you."

"I am the vampire," Jon said, "because I control him. He is intellectual property that I own."

"It's not all legitimate interest. People want to see someone with real power, and with the vampire baron, you have demonstrated that. Keep in mind that whatever they might say, power is all they're into. There are kooks, too. Every crank in the city wants something from the vampire. Last in line are crooks with money who see a possible investment in you. Be wary of grand propositions. Don't sign anything."

"I'm no fool, Allan."

"I can do a better job for you business wise than anyone at the meetings can. My backing is solid, and I know excellent investors. That's why I'm down here in the polished sheikdom. One of my new things is arranging speaking engagements for people who appeal to business audiences. Right now I'm on the way to listen to a top economist explain how the world financial system is going to spiral and then collapse."

"Will it collapse again?"

"Not completely. It's in everybody's interest to restructure so that more countries and institutions are wealthy. Playing on fears and using sensational methods are holdovers from television evangelism. It puts frightened people in your lap where you can do what you want with them."

"What do your business speakers want?"

"Usually nothing other than paying admirers, a fat fee, and book sales. Most are anyone-can-make-a-million swamis. Some have visions of a new order."

"I guess I have one thing in common with them," Jon said, a twinkle appearing in his eye. "Tomorrow I start collecting my fat fee."

"That's right," Allan said, rising to his feet, "so keep the vampire in his coffin until then. I have to be off. See you tomorrow."

Jon watched Allan make his way to an escalator. His eyes went back to the portfolio. He savored the beauty of his program for a couple of minutes, then grinned before his mood grew unsettled. Sunset was becoming a time he hated. Sharing his person with a vampire spirit was frightening enough without this new twilight personality he was developing. It was like he was neither himself nor the Baron, but a shadow blend of the two. He would try to think of what new interior decorating he'd like to have done at his Vancouver estate and would become filled with memories of European castles and a dislike for all modern things. Even his musing concerning women had become tainted, along with his pride. Jon liked to pride himself on having bedded better women than any other man, but for every beauty he could call to memory, the Baron would send up a rival memory of some sixteenth-century princess, French goddess, or doll from the beach at St-Tropez. If he tried to comfort himself with memories of boyhood, mingled memories of the Baron's Roman boyhood would make Canada seem like a quaint foreign land. Music was impossible to enjoy when the Baron had a taste that dated back centuries. Titus could rival Beethoven and other composers in knowledge and taste. Every contemporary song Jon favored was destroyed as it played, and he understood how technically impoverished it really was. Rather than listen to discs or the radio, he found himself sitting in silence with a classical orchestra from the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam playing in his head.

Jon thought European philosophers of the Baron's period, especially the nihilists and anarchists the Baron admired, were half insane, inferior men who, for ridiculous reasons, considered themselves superior. And of course, a clash occurred because Titus hated

North American philosophers. Ralph Waldo Emerson, being the philosopher the Baron particularly despised. Jon knew the Baron thought of him as a gypsy or peasant, and that was especially distasteful because he couldn't deny it. Titus could speak elegantly in the European romance languages, and he had a solid knowledge of art. He could comment on almost every painting in the Prado; the works of Goya being his area of expertise. In comparison, Jon could speak a smattering of French and understand only pop art. There was also a craving for foods he'd never tasted, delicacies from the Baron's long memory - on and on the cravings went until it was hard to eat.

The Baron's superior knowledge of the occult was also maddening. Jon found himself seeing through most of the books he had believed to be classics. Previously, Jon had known of much fraud, and the Baron's smarts were telling him that nearly everyone in the modern world was either dishonest or hopelessly deluded. Sure, there were good people into earth magic and other things, but Jon couldn't wash away the feelings of contempt the Baron had for them; it all carried over, and it was all unsettling.

It occurred to Jon that the Baron might be at work, slowly dismantling his personality, but if that turned out to be the case, then two could play at that game. Mostly, it seemed like the Baron was bored and tormented him for sport, or perhaps his memories tormented the Baron, and the Baron was getting even. No matter, Jon figured. The Baron was the worst sort of blackmailer; one that got right inside your head and worked to make you obey his demands. And the blackmail was working because Jon couldn't think of any way of getting rid of Titus Arbore. He wasn't going to talk anyone into driving a stake through his heart, and an exorcist would drive out his special powers of energy absorption. Going ahead with his channeling of the vampire act was the only option he had.

Ready to leave, Jon picked up his salad and was about to dispose of it when the wilted tomatoes oozed blood. He set it aside and massaged his face with his left hand while pounding the table with his right. His sudden, bizarre behavior attracted the attention of a security guard, who began to walk over. Then, as Jon was cursing the Baron under his breath, he became the Baron.

Looking up, the Baron found himself in a food court with a hostile security guard approaching. His mood and the ace of spades had a lot in common; he gave the guard such a fierce look that he turned on his heels and walked quickly away. Contempt was what he had for Jon's wilted salad and the common place he'd selected for dinner. Chandler faked class, but he was blander than a hamburger. Living with him would be forever painful, and it looked like it would be forever. He'd wasted megajoules of energy on a mighty effort to control Chandler's mind. It ended in vain. He'd managed to torment Chandler and himself. At a few terrible moments, he was being assimilated into Chandler, so he quickly withdrew. Now that he thought it over, he figured Chandler was the furtive sort who would be quietly devouring your thoughts while you thought you were killing him. A low-life and leech who knew ways of cheating that had never been thought of before. It would be best to work with him for a while longer, maybe play on his preferences, and convince him that he had to sharpen up his lifestyle and travel more, preferably to Europe and Asia.

Putting thoughts of battling Jon aside, the Baron loosened his mental net, hoping to come up with a victim. In the trash of Chandler's brain, there was one lovely picture. "Yes," the Baron said as he remembered the lovely disciple Liz. Speedily, he went through Chandler's brain like a set of files. It took almost no time to gather the necessary information.

Another ugly habit of Chandler's was his traveling about the city without a vehicle of his own. The borrowed Viper was kilometers away, sealed in an underground lot as damp as the base of a castle rock. Leaving in a hurry, the Baron drew suspicious eyes from the security guard. He brushed past him and went down an escalator, ending up in a vast mall. Finding an exit, he went out on the street. Taking deep gulps of air, he turned onto the downtown strip. Neon signs blazed like painful fireworks, so he turned at the first side street and headed off under a fuzzed meteor shower of streetlights. The sight of leggy girls entering a bump-and-grind bar tempted him; it would be short work to take care of the frowning giant accompanying them. The prettiest girl wore gingham bloomers and a scarf tied into a bra top. She wasn't his style. Too cheap. They were all too cheap. He preferred the sophisticated ladies of the day and, in general, thought the streets the property of uncouth maniacs. There were his nights of desperation, of course, but he usually suffered memory lapses at such times, which made life easier. If there was a tragedy of man, the Baron figured it was that he was a hunter by blood and a civilized gentleman at heart. He didn't see himself as solely a hunter or predator. Rare days of reflection and enjoyment of philosophy, literature, music, and art made him live on, and life was much more than bloodlust.

Titus knew human history existed as a well of terror, more terror than achievement. Some people delivered terror, others were born victims - he was neither. He'd taken terror into his breast and controlled it, transformed it to supernatural strength. Even the best of mortals were forced to stare with revulsion at their own cruel hands and wonder what controlled them. The force of evil was beyond them; they were its instruments, and they were nothing. A vampire had power, control, and was the true master or a master of darkness, towering over the earthly pits of wretched murderers and uncivilized monsters.

He began to realize that Liz's place was far off. Across town. Stopping on a quiet corner, he considered flagging a taxi. After rejecting the idea, he did a partial spin, thinking he could get there by the power of the night. When nothing happened, he grew angry and snarled. He'd forgotten he was in Chandler's useless body. It occurred to him to try combining his abilities with Chandler's. Stepping over to a phone booth, he took the crystal out from under his shirt and jacket and circled it gently, opening his chakras. This time, he willed an outflow of psychic energy instead of an intake. Nothing seemed to be happening, and the flash of the crystal attracted a passing police car, which slowed and U-turned back in his direction. Filled with frustration, the Baron prepared to explain himself to the police, but that never happened. An officer motioned to him from the passenger window, but the Baron became as transparent as crystal and vanished like a ghost, shooting into the darkness, leaving behind a sprinkling of gold dust and phosphor.

While the two amazed police officers searched the shadows of the corner, the shattered fragments of a rainbow descended on the east suburbs. Luminescent gold and a blazing halo showed near a newspaper box for a moment before it flashed into the negative, and the Baron walked into view. He strolled through the neighborhood, the distant look of a stranger on his face. Before long, the wind picked up, and he heard a strong rustling of leaves. Ahead was the column of poplar trees that screened Liz's L-shaped suburban house.

Reaching the walk, the Baron stopped to inhale the fragrance of a tulip tree. A perfect evening, he thought. Jade tints of decadent romance were in the air. He was certain Liz's husband was working a shift at the hospital. No doubt, she was feeling an empty ache in her heart, and was ripe for some of Chandler's cheap lovemaking. Why should she settle for the scraps some spirit channeler could offer when he could show her real enchantment?

Titus felt that Liz was much more interesting and beautiful than Jeanie. He admired the metallic flecks in her trusting hazel eyes. She wasn't an artist, but she had charisma and warmth, a wonderful person to be with, especially thrilling was the way she answered the door wearing only a halter top, sandals, and a tropical-print bikini bottom. Liz took the Baron's hand and held it softly. He knew she had an affectionate nature, so he didn't assume the gesture to be leading.

"Jon, you're just in time," Liz said. "I'm about to do a ceremony of self-awakening."

"Good, we can do the ceremony together," the Baron said as she led him inside.

Liz took him into the kitchen, and as he sat at the table, she went to one of the two fridges. She opened it, and he saw it was full of beverages. Bottles, cans, and cartons, but nothing containing alcohol.

"What will you have?" Liz said.

"Lemonade will be fine," the Baron said.

She filled two frosted glasses with pink lemonade and sat at the table with him. They sipped the drinks, and he forced a smile as the lemonade trickled down his throat.

"I guess I won't be seeing much of you with the hectic schedule you have?" Liz said.

"Once I get started, there won't be a moment of peace for me."

"We can do the ceremony in the basement. Dave might overreact if he were to arrive and surprise us in the living room. He's insanely jealous. He sees everything from a suspicious slant."

"You should try to get him in for therapy," Titus said. "Extreme jealousy is a form of wife abuse. We should try not to upset him. I'm sure it's the strain of his work. It weakens him spiritually."

They chatted more and finished their drinks. Liz took him to the basement. It had a convenient rear exit that would be useful should Dave return. The Baron glanced at Dave's open study, which was quaint, having a stag's head, an antique Springfield rifle, a fish tank, and a matted-off area with weights and other sports equipment. There was a leather couch, an armchair, and a stack of sports magazines, but nothing indicated he was a doctor. His den was an escape from medicine. In the Baron's view, Liz had married a jerk. A doctor destined to be something would always be surrounded by his work.

Turning his gaze back to Liz, he saw that she was already across the room, taking a book from a shelf. Her half of the basement stood in sharp contrast to Dave's. It contained crystal clusters and bar clusters, a pole hung with jade masks, a pentagram painted on a black wall, shelves of New Age books, incense pots, daggers, bowls full of rings and talismans, stars, and astrology symbols painted on the ceiling. There wasn't any furniture other than a legless ebony table at the center of the room. A moonlike paper lantern hung over the table. It looked like Dave was the average dull Canadian male whose wife happened to be a witch.

Book in hand, Liz dropped down on the carpet in front of the table. From the Baron's perspective, she was innocent and foolishly trusting. If he didn't take her as a victim, the scum would eventually get her. A hot flash reddened his cheeks. Feeling warm, he took off his jacket and hung it on a brass coat tree. He still had his shoes on, so he kicked them off. He felt lightheaded; walking on the white rug as if it were a cloud, he went over and sat with her.

Her large chrome-coat book was open at an illustration of a unicorn that might have been drawn by a child. The details of a magic ceremony were on the opposite page. The Baron hated unicorns and all fairylike creatures and beings, being the opposite of Jon Chandler, who, of course, liked them.

Liz turned to the Baron. Concern came into her eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?" she said. "You seem to have a fever."

The Baron cleared his throat. "I think I sat down too fast. I'm fine," he said. "Let's get on with the ceremony."

Liz nodded and smiled. "You look like you swallowed a hot chili pepper. Okay, turn and face the wall with me. We'll begin by entering a state of meditation."

The Baron turned and nodded. A bare expanse of carpet was between them and the black-painted wall.

"Watch the pentagram and let your thoughts become a blue world," Liz said. "Blue jade, splashing blue waters, ice and sky."

Titus' thoughts were closer in color to the black wall, and there was little chance of them becoming anything as harmless as splashing blue water. He tried his best to play along.

After several minutes of sitting cross-legged in silence, Liz rose and pulled the lamp chain. Darkness fell, and a wooden match flared. She lit four candles and placed them near the wall, then turned to face the Baron; moving gracefully, she returned to the table, picked up a crystal wand, and began tracing a pentagram on the floor. The pentagram had a phosphor glow, and its light mingled with shadows from the guttering candles to make an interesting play on her bare legs. Her skin had a beautiful luster, her form was perfect, and her movements were liquid as she began a slow dance around the pentagram.

Dim light and her easy motion soothed the Baron. He gathered that this was her way of creating the magic circle. His eyes mirrored candle flame as he watched her end her dance and step into the circle. She beckoned for him to enter, and magic came upon him. Liz grew to a bright vision, the image flaring in his mind. A naked angel, she was drawing him forward. He rose and walked to her in a state of trance; it was the first time he'd forgotten to mesmerize a lover and the second time he'd been mesmerized.

They embraced and went slowly to the floor, their lips hot and sensuous, their tongues probing like fire. His mind lifted on a summer storm, and he felt himself responding to her touch and caress; she had him in control with the hunger of her flesh, taking her own pleasure from his desperate need. A wave of passion consumed him, and he found himself without clothes, mounting her. She arched her back, lifting her pelvis and large breasts as she forced penetration, then it was black magic as an orgasm exploded. It seemed unending, his muscles were firm and pulsing, and his organ throbbed like hot, melting steel.

They separated for a moment, then his lips fell to her hard nipples, and she heaved softly under him. He listened to her quiet moaning and knew that he had poured his energy into her. He was weak; bloodlust curled his lips to a snarl. Finally, he lost control and went for her neck, biting deep.

At first, she fell back in submission, and then she screamed and began to struggle ferociously. Tearing her neck as he pulled back, the Baron spat out some blood. It wasn't working; he needed the crystal. He lifted himself and shoved her down. The crystal was still around his neck; he seized it and began to rotate it, trying to open his chakras.

But he was unable to complete the motions; she slashed out with her nails, ripping them across his chest. Blood welled and streamed from the wounds. Angered, he fell on her savagely, gouging strips of flesh and tendon from her neck.

It became a black nightmare of thirst and splashing blood; he tried to drink, but he couldn't get enough, and what he did get he kept choking back up. He got to his knees, crimson streaking his face and neck. Beneath him, Liz's dying body shook.

Terrible weakness put cold hands on him as he looked at the corpse. Dizziness sent the candlelight reeling round him. He collapsed. Drained by his own iniquity, he fell into oblivion.

A flash of icy pain struck, and then Jon Chandler awoke to the grotesquery of the deed. The metallic taste of blood was rank in his throat. He pushed himself up, feeling the warm, lifeless body beneath him. He wasn't sure who it was or where he was; the face was shrouded in blood. A scream of anguish cured his choking, and he raked his eyes with his fingers. But it was futile; his irritated eyes saw only more splotches of red, and not even blindness could spare him.

His chest heaved with hopeless sobs, and he got up and stumbled away from the corpse. Jon moved around the room in a state of confusion, knocking over bowls and candles. With a vicious swipe, he tore down the paper lantern, then he saw the stairs and decided to run up them. At the top, he found the shower and jumped inside. He shook like a leaf, unaware that he was cleansing himself of blood with a rush of scalding water.

His hurried movements were taking place in nightmarishly broken, slow motion, and like Hades, this place took forever to flee. The suit and shoes he put on weren't his, but they had to wear them because he was afraid to go back to the basement. Something unspeakable was down there, he couldn't remember what, but his teeth chattered at the thought of it. Then he remembered he had left his wallet down there next to a corpse.

Madly, he plunged down the stairs, seeing dungeon walls, rats, and cobwebs instead of Liz's basement. A fat, morbid eye hung in the air above the corpse and his discarded clothes. Lurching forward, he scooped up his bloodstained suit, and then he fled, the flesh on his back crawling from the breath of a pursuing demon of conscience.

Deciding to escape by the back way, he slid the patio doors open. With the wind rushing through the poplars, a car pulled in at the side. Jon caught a flash of headlights and heard the engine shut down. Freakish spasms of terror overcame him, and he fell, shaking, to one knee. An echo of footsteps sobered him, and he ran unsteadily for the cover of a hedge.

Jon was so shaken, he wished he could bury himself, anything so that he wouldn't be seen. He cursed the light of the moon as he fled through the backyards, his bloodstained suit fluttering as he ran. It was painfully obvious that he had failed. He'd acted to drive the vampire spirit out of his body, acted from a dream state when the Baron's bloodlust was strong. The Baron would have committed the perfect crime had he not interfered. The possible consequences of his foolishness made him shudder.

CHAPTER 7: BODY WORK

Ragged black patches of trees and shadow ran up a steep slope to the vacant boulder-cobbled lot where Detective Skagway's car was parked. A sprinkle of stars and the lights

of a few high-rise buildings twinkled in the indigo sky. The sweetness of a summer meadow carried on the breeze. They could see nothing but a tunnel of velvety darkness as they moved farther down the path. It was so quiet that the ringing in their ears replaced the usual buzz of crickets. The signs were unmistakable; without a doubt, they were on track.

They passed some Scotch pines, an exposed root looped over Detective Skagway's foot, and he went crashing into the brush. Mike backtracked up a steep portion of the trail and glanced around quickly. He suspected an ambush, but he could see nothing.

Jake had skinned his knuckles, and his knee ached. "Shit!" he said. "This is dangerous. We'd better use the light."

Relieved, Mike hurried back down the path. Skagway loomed out of the darkness like a bear. "No light," Mike said. "There could be a lookout. Probably not, but maybe."

"You don't seem too sure. Maybe we should go back. I have more important things to do than blunder around in the dark. If she's not here, there's no use wasting time."

"She's nearby. I feel her presence. She's like a crawling corpse, half-alive and in an open grave. There are odors of disinfectant and fresh earth."

"This whole damn ravine is like an open grave. I hope you're right because I'm sore. If I had a dollar for every useless psychic that led me on a wild goose chase, I'd be retired."

"Two hours ago, you were desperate for help. Things sure change fast."

"Nothing's changed. I'm still in trouble. I can't report that a corpse walked away from us. If we don't recover it, we'll have to suffer the humiliation of having to say it was stolen. If that happens, I'll probably have to start looking for work as a security guard."

"There's much more at stake than your career. This is a new form of corruption and vampirism."

"I hope the corruption doesn't get much worse than what we've already seen."

"She's getting stronger, preparing to move again. What I feel is an empty mind, suffering, and animal instinct."

Detective Skagway threw his arm out. "Hold it a moment. I see a light."

Both men stopped and squinted into the darkness. It was hard to tell if it was a light or a firefly. Pushing ahead and around a bend, they reached the end of the path. An open meadow was in front of them, and it bordered on a graveyard. In the graveyard, a faint amber glow rose from the ground, casting eerie beams through the stones.

Jake's doubts disappeared, and Mike studied the graveyard, looking for human figures hidden among the stones. Seeing none, he followed as Jake led the way through crab grass and weeds to the cemetery fence.

"It's an open grave," Mike said. "She's inside and fairly strong, but we can handle her. It would be an interesting study to observe her changes and see whether she slowly develops a more lifelike appearance. We can't afford to take that chance, though. I believe this is an imperfect form of vampirism and that all she'll ever be is a type of bloodthirsty zombie."

"I like it better that way. I mean, they should look like what they are. They shouldn't be beautiful. She was a pretty woman, you know, but after the vision of her death, I have mixed feelings. I have too many hang-ups when it comes to sex. It's her crystal wand I have with me. I figured it would make a good stake."

"I hope so, as in time she could get too strong to stop."

It was easy work getting over the low fence. They moved on with Mike keeping up his concentration. Jake dragged his feet; he was reluctant, not really wanting to see the creature in the open grave. When they were within a few yards of the grave, there was a sudden blaze of white light.

"Stay back!" Mike said.

Plunging almost headlong, they ducked behind the statue of an angel. Peeking around, they saw her fly up out of the ground. Trailing corona discharge, she rose to the lip of the grave. A power of levitation held her inches above the earth. Unnatural decay had ravaged her flesh; she dripped worms that were as bright as jewels. Vitreous glitter showed in skeletal eye hollows, and a swollen emerald tongue protruded from shriveled gray lips and puffed cheeks. Tiny ruby, pearl, and turquoise maggots fell from her moldering flesh as she took a step forward.

Mike turned to Jake; the detective was shaking like a child. "I'll tackle her," Mike said. "When you get an opening, stake her. Don't think about it, just do it."

Blazing with full colors of evil, she began to advance. Mike couldn't wait any longer; he charged from behind the statue. She didn't retreat; phosphor slime dripped from her as she took a final step forward. He hit her hard, driving his shoulder into her midsection and taking her tumbling down at the side of a grave. He had her on her back, and as he rolled away, Detective Skagway followed through, pouncing down to drive the sharp wand through her chest. She hissed, half of it human vocals and half of it gas escaping from a corpse. Jake rolled free, and radiant gore flew from flesh erupting around the wound. As the body hardened into rigor mortis, its radiance began to fade.

"She'll be at peace now," Mike said.

Jake was grim-faced. "Peaceful enough for me to return her to the slab," he said, dusting himself off. "Now comes the hard grind. We've got to smuggle this thing back."

"It sure won't pass as a normal corpse."

"I don't care what it passes as, as long as there is a body there, I'm safe. You'd better stay here and guard it while I go back to the car and get the body bag."

Jake walked off through the tombstones and vaulted the fence. He ran through the dark field toward the path, in a great hurry to bag his prize.

Mike took a seat on a square tombstone and looked up at a slice of moon knifing through blowing white clouds. Something wasn't quite right; he hadn't told Detective Skagway, but he still sensed a malevolent presence. A presence other than the dead creature on the ground. Fearing the consequences of dropping his guard, he stood up and turned, slowly scanning the cemetery grounds. It was a somber scene. He almost convinced himself that nothing was there, then he detected movement, someone walking through the stones, headed away from him. His eye caught a faint gleam of light, and he realized what it was: the shine of moonlight on a bald head. Someone had been watching and was now headed for the main gates. Mike didn't want to chance abandoning the body, and the person wasn't headed in Skagway's direction. He knew this wasn't a chance observer but someone who was either involved or wanted to become involved.

Jake returned speedily with the body bag. He was drenched in sweat. "Let's get to work," he said.

"Slow down. You'll give yourself a heart attack. Someone's been watching us. A bald person. Any ideas on who it might be?"

"No. Maybe another cop or a security guard. If so, we might be in trouble."

"It's not a cop. It's something creepy, and I don't like it."

"Okay, but let's take one step at a time. First the body, then Chandler, and our new bald pal."

Bagging the body proved a revolting job. They did it silently and stoically. No one disturbed them on the arduous journey to the car, so they guessed the observer had been alone and afraid of them. Jake drove off with his confidence restored. Closing the vampire case was now possible, provided he didn't get caught using illegal tactics. Mike didn't believe anything to be possible or impossible. He'd taken Jake's advice; one step at a time was how he'd handle the case.

They came off the freeway and cruised slowly through the downtown streets, headed for the big slab - the morgue - which was around the corner from police headquarters. Since Jake was a cop and didn't have to worry about being pulled over, Mike guessed that he was driving slowly out of fear of getting in an accident with the corpse in the car.

They turned left off Elm Street, and the slab loomed ahead; the place was a towering, morbid structure, a lot like the world's biggest tombstone. Cruising in at the rear, Jake went down a ramp to the underground entrance. There, he was met by a security guard who told him a morgue attendant would be down in a few minutes.

"I'm sick of silence," Mike said, switching on the radio. A nasal love song blared, so he switched it to a jazz station.

Jake glanced around; he looked like a thief stuck holding hot goods at a checkpoint. "This Jeanie corpse, is it a new kind of monster, or has this type of plague happened before?"

"I collect books on monsters, legends, and fairy tales, but her kind isn't in there anywhere. The Haitian zombie is close, but it is only a human vegetable created by the houngan witch doctor by administering poison derived from various fish. I suppose she was a vampire. One without a mind or proper healing of the blood."

The attendant showed up, and he was a lanky, nervous young man. "I've found your missing body," Jake said. "There was a mistake, and it got delivered to the crematorium. They damaged it."

"You're kidding?" the attendant said, frowning.

"Nope," Jake said. "We'll put it back on ice, and you'd better keep quiet about it. If there are any questions about its condition, tell them nothing. It could jeopardize my investigation. They could even decide to blame you; it's happened that way before."

"Blame me, don't worry, I'll keep my mouth shut," the attendant said. "I know they suspect me of moving it. How it got moved, I really don't know."

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Annie dashed between the heaps of boulders and looked out at the waves. Mike followed her every move; his animated eyebrows revealed sharp intelligence, not just parental worry.

Algae-tinted water broke into foam as it rushed against the rubble stone wave. Although the day was sunny, the wind at the point was strong enough to deliver some rough stuff. Retreating from the surf, Annie scooped up a stick and climbed a dry boulder. Loose, blowing blond curls and an overlarge dress, she resembled one of her dolls. Closing her eyes, she smiled blissfully. A punch of wind suddenly sent her dress flying up, causing

Mike to dash over and sweep her away before she could become a victim of the slippery stones and waves.

Annie giggled as though no bad thing could have happened, and Mike swung her around, laughing with her.

Alice frowned, and a burst of wind kicked up her hair like it did the waves. "Come on, Mike. Let's go back and rejoin civilization. I don't know why you had to come out here. You know it's too dangerous for Annie."

"I like it here," he said, watching Annie twitch her freckled nose as though she smelled dead fish. "This kid was born in a blizzard. She loves taking chances. She's like me."

Alice sighed. "I take no chances. Let's go back to the picnic area and have some lunch. The beach is much calmer there."

"When I'm big enough, I'm going to skydive onto the beach," Annie said. She ran ahead toward the boardwalk.

Mike grinned as Alice pursued her; she lost a sandal after a few steps and fell in the sparse grass at the edge of the beach. She got up quickly, and Annie dashed back while she brushed sand from her bare legs and shoulders.

"Mommy skydived!" Annie yelled, skipping around her.

"Mommy's lucky she's only wearing a bikini," Alice said, "or there'd be sand in everything. I want you to stop teaching her that stuff, Mike." She gave him a fierce glance. "I'd rather have a quiet daughter than a little daredevil."

They reached the picnic area and spotted Jake Skagway strolling over from the parking lot. He walked under the willows with a distant expression on his face. Mike knew it meant he was thinking and probably about something unpleasant. Jake used his face as a blank canvas to hide his emotions, making him the opposite of Alice, who revealed everything.

"Let go, Mommy!" Annie yelled, and Alice realized that the sight of Jake had disturbed her enough to cause her to squeeze Annie's hand. She let go, and Annie immediately dashed off to Jake, who picked her up like a feather.

Jake's hair was wind-combed and free of hair gel, which was unusual, and he wore a short-sleeved shirt and light summer slacks, also unusual. Mike figured Jake had some charm working for him, since he could make Annie laugh even though she disliked most men. Jake came up to the table, put Annie down, and brushed the front of his hair with his fingers in a way that made it look like he was tipping an invisible hat. He ignored Mike and looked to Alice. "Len's funeral was one of the best I've seen, and I've seen many. You did well, arranging on such short notice."

"It was a headache, but funerals are important."

"Are you on holiday?" Mike said. "I hope you're not investigating a crime here on the beach?"

Jake laughed. "The guys I'm hunting don't do much windsurfing. Just thought I'd lighten up, it being summer and all."

"I hope you arrest somebody soon in that vampire stuff," Alice said. "I'm afraid the killer could be after Mike."

"We're looking at a suspect, and that's what I want to talk to Mike about. Don't worry, this suspect isn't stalking anyone. We are stalking him."

"We can discuss it briefly," Mike said. "Come with me. I'm going over to the food hut for a takeout order."

"Get maple ice cream for Annie, and a vanilla shake and fries for me," Alice said.

They headed over a stretch of sparse grass and sand to a boardwalk that swung around to the beach canteen. The lake breeze and the cool shade of pines and willows made talk of murder and vampirism seem unreal. Other people strolling by obviously hadn't a care in the world. If the sun held a harsh secret, it kept it under camouflage.

"The problem we have now," Jake said, "is that if we arrest Jon Chandler, we can't convict him of anything."

"Why not? I thought you had prints?"

"Yes, but we can't hide the condition of the body, and no mortal man like Jon Chandler could have done unexplainably horrible things to it. The forensic evidence is bizarre to the point of being unbelievable. The defense would simply put up a plausible theory of what happened to her - maybe say she was a victim of a weird industrial accident - and it would make sense to the jury."

"So what do we do now?"

"We track Chandler and grab him when he goes for another victim." Jake raised his eyebrows. "But once we get him, I'm not sure what we do. We have to wait and see. He won't be hard to follow. I've got a copy of his speaking schedule."

They turned off the boardwalk at the food hut and waited for a blond woman with a full tray to ease out of the way. Mike glanced at Jake, a question in his eyes.

"You're thinking about our bald friend," Jake said. "I found out who he might be. Jon Chandler is being promoted in Toronto by a bald man named Allan Rampa."

"I've seen mention of him in spiritualist papers."

Jake grinned. "I figured you'd know of him. What his role is, well, I'm not sure. He brought Chandler in to channel gods or some such thing, but instead, he came out with this vampire stuff at the first meeting. Rumor is that weird supernatural stuff happened at that meeting."

"It's an easy picture. Allan has been on Chandler's heels. He wouldn't witness a genuine supernatural occurrence and let it slip past him. He'd want to investigate everything. I don't think he is actually in league with Chandler. Allan would have his own dark motives. He must know everything. He's a threat to our investigation."

A space opened at the counter, and Jake waited while Mike put in his order, then he bought a Coke for himself. A teenage short-order cook sizzled a batch of fries, and Jake looked to Mike.

"Maybe Allan had something to do with the theft of the body," Mike said. "I doubt it rose and escaped on its own."

"If Allan is breaking the law in a criminal attempt to gain occult powers, then we have a handle on him. If he gets in the way again, we'll confront him with it and silence him. If he's in the power of the vampire spirit or Chandler, then it'll be a different story." The detective took a big sip of his Coke. "It's sure to be messy if the case is bigger than Chandler."

"It is bigger than him. This vampire is much bigger. He has the power to command an army of crazed admirers."

"Then our goal is to block him before he gets too big to stop."

Fries, milkshakes, and a cone in hand, Mike followed Jake back to the boardwalk. "What do you think of Alice getting back together with me, like really back together, where I find some other line of work?"

"It's sure to keep you out of trouble. Alice is the kind of woman who gets better, not older, which is good for you since you tend to slip into a pattern of immaturity."

"You've been talking to her too much. You sound just like her."

"What about Annie? A little girl shouldn't grow up without a strong father."

"Yes, but the world has changed. There are so many single parents now. I think I need the right mix of the traditional and the new. It would also help if I could be a normal father and not let myself be drawn away by strange happenings."

"I don't mind some of the new myself. On the police force, the equipment gets ultramodern, but most of the people have the same old balls attitude that should've gone out fifty years ago."

"You're already somewhat new. If you were one of the dinosaurs, you wouldn't be able to make that observation."

"Dinosaur is the word. On the force, all your years up to retirement are a battle against dinosaurs. Yet crime never faces extinction. It's every new generation of cops that eventually dies."

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The Unitarian Church on Dixon Street had an unassuming look that seemed to fit with people who believed more in a spirit world than a glorious heaven of angels. The crowd gathered out front wasn't quite as plain as the church-"incredible" was the word that best described their appearance.

"It's an outdoor session," Mike said, squinting into the sun as they rolled up. "There's Jon Chandler, and it looks like a demonstration of crystal healing."

Jake felt it would be better to watch from a distance and not jump directly into the crowd. He pulled under an ash tree shading the south side of the parking lot, a spot where they had cover and could see and hear everything.

Jon Chandler was obviously in a state of possession. The Baron could be seen in his every aspect: the clever and condescending attitude, the stern and intellectual facial expressions, and the sheer power he had over others. He was standing under large willows that had grown so close together that they provided deep shade. Dark sunglasses shielded his eyes, and his face and hair had a faint glitter from crystalline particles in a thick ointment-and-jelly he used to protect himself from the sun. Since Chandler's body wouldn't decay as an undead body would, Mike figured the Baron's fear of the sun was mostly psychological.

A blond woman lay on a red blanket in the grass in front of the Baron. She wore sandals, a red mini, and a plastic breastplate that left her arms, back, and shoulders bare. Mike recognized her as Alisha, a spiritualist fanatic who changed religions like she changed dresses. Crystals of various types were spread on the grass, aligned toward Alisha, and, with movements more deliberate and posed than Chandler's, the Baron was tracing patterns in the air with a crystal wand.

Filaments of mildly radiant, multicolored light began to flow from the crystals. Rootlike, they extended to Alisha's pale-green aura. Her fingers, toes, and eyelids began to pulse,

then her leg muscles twitched, and she began to float up off the grass.

The levitation continued, and she came to rest six inches above the lawn and fell still, barely breathing.

The Baron gestured broadly. "This is crystal healing through levitation. Her blood systems are finding harmony, and cancer cells and viruses are being destroyed."

"May I check the levitation, to convince doubters?" said a young Oriental man whose outfit was like something from Emperor Ming's closet.

"Definitely," said the Baron, his manner that of a successful magician.

Moving up and dropping to his knees, the man panned his hand under the body. Then he got up and checked above her. Finding nothing false, he looked to the Baron and the people with satisfied amazement and stepped back.

"Five minutes in the levitation state is all that is needed," the Baron said.

Mike turned to Jake. "The Baron is now taking over from Chandler in the daytime. If he is now the dominant personality, it means the eventual end of Chandler."

"Wait. What's happening?" Jake said, seizing the keys and the wheel. "Something's gone wrong!"

Though the car had good shocks, they could feel the ground rumble, and the emanations seemed to come from the Baron. Visibly shaken, he stumbled, dropped his wand, and threw his hands to his face. A wave knocked the crowd off balance. The sod was rolling, and people were dropping. Lines of bright light twirled as the crystal energy vanished, and Alisha dropped back to the grass.

Natural sounds rushed back in, birds began to sing, the sun broke out of a cloud, and people began to get to their feet. Before long, they regained their composure.

Alisha also recovered, and she shot to her feet and faced Jon Chandler, who had regained control of his body. "What happened?" she said, a sensual pout on her face.

"The Baron has left us, and I am back. This outdoor demonstration is complete, we'll move to the regularly scheduled session inside."

Turning on his heels, Jon hurried weakly down the walk to the church. His complexion was wan despite the heavy layer of ointment. His stunned audience stood silent for a moment, then people began to break away and head inside.

Jake Skagway waited patiently with Mike while the people entered. It was a crowd that didn't include Unitarians. The group was colorful; the hip element of the channeling movement. Young men who wore leather, earrings, talismans, tattoos, unusual hair colors, and facial jewelry were common, and some women looked outright sleazy, with teased hair, heavy makeup, flesh-tight slacks, miniskirts with zippers at the rear, rings, bangles, and ankle bracelets. This was Jon Chandler's new Baron crowd: people interested in the decadent aspects of beings from outer space, vampires, and the weirdest of the channeler's weird.

"What do you make of them?" Jake said. "Are they fashionable people or just people with bad taste?"

"That guy in the leopard-print pants and neon fishnet shirt is definitely a loser," Mike said, chuckling. "Looks like a mixed crowd of neophytes and the more electric element of the spiritualist movement."

"What do you mean by electric element?"

"They tend to look like counter culture or anarchist people, and many of them are. To them, spiritualism is a super drug. They want altered states of consciousness, new perspectives. They don't put a boundary between good and evil, but see the spirit world as a whole that contains both heaven and hell. Many are attracted by the darker elements."

The confusion that had been in Jake's gaze vanished. "Jon Chandler is a darker element. He's channeling that vampire willingly to exploit a bunch of groupies. He deserves everything he's going to get."

"Chandler might think he can control the vampire," Mike said, "but the truth is he is possessed. Vampires have to overpower all of their victims because, in the end, none of them are willing. I'm not saying that Chandler is innocent. Innocent people rarely get possessed. Chandler was open to evil beings because his mental states entered their realm. His guilt stems from his desire to use his powers and others in purely selfish ways. I've never been a fan of channeling. It's too risky. Beings that enter you are sure to leave you warped if not mad."

"If Jon can live for one minute with what he's done, then he's a killer," Jake said. "I'd like to grab him and choke him."

"Keep yourself in check. He's just one more creep in the long line of creeps you get to deal with. I'm surprised you have any feelings left for monsters. With me, the psychic contact disturbs me enough that I always hate them."

"What do you do when you feel the sick lust of a monster? Don't you run the risk of becoming as sick as he is? I mean, like Chandler, he was already sick before the vampire entered him?"

"He used his powers selfishly and made them sick. When I see visions of a monster's mind, I'm always acutely aware of how mad and evil he really is. Some experts say killers are quite ordinary. My experience shows the opposite. You'd be shocked if you ever saw how warped their minds are."

They emerged from the air-conditioned car into a humid blanket of heat. The sun blazed overhead like it was about to shoot fire on the heathens that worshiped Jon Chandler's vampire instead of it. Mike knew Chandler's followers were older than they were new. Chandler was a living Moloch, and his followers were dancing in the fire, offering their firstborn children as charred incense. Like Jake, Mike couldn't understand people who would seek the wisdom of a vampire. If their souls were white, it was the white of bleached bones in a desert. Their gods were no more than circling vultures, and their thirst for knowledge was like the thirst of people in heat delirium and a thirst that would swallow blood, thinking it to be water.

They entered behind two leggy brunettes with pageboy-like hairstyles and a lot of zircons. The entrance hall was plain with a registry desk and valueless artifacts in glass wall cases. The session was underway, and the two women entered the hall directly. Jake cased the foyer but found nothing of interest. There were no ushers, and no one was loitering outside.

"I thought Allan Rampa might be around," Jake said. "Let's go in."

Slipping in, they took seats at the back so they could see the entire crowd. The air was cool and had a jasmine fragrance; Mike immediately noticed the red aural haze emanated by the crowd. Usually, he didn't watch auras; he guessed that the presence of Jon Chandler had tuned him into it. Chandler was moving across the stage, his motion choppy like that of a puppet being directed by an amateur. This wasn't the Jon Chandler

of the vision; his face was drawn, and his cheeks were sunken. It was obvious that he was struggling with the vampire. He took a chair at the front, facing the crowd. A violet aura, like the sheen of clear crystal, appeared around him.

"I apologize. I'm not quite myself," Jon said. "I'll take some questions now, but no more that rely on cosmic memory or psychic powers for an answer."

A plump, turbaned lady spoke up as Chandler pointed her out. "I'm not clear on this. Why are you weakened and not strengthened? Is this vampire feeding on you?"

"It's a test of strength. The Baron is not cooperative like other beings I have channeled. I intend to channel him at will, and to do this, I must break him. He is also doing his best to break me. I expect it will be several days before I am in full command of him."

A handsome man dressed all in leather spoke. "You don't seem to be facing reality. The Baron is the naturally dominant personality. You are going against the spiritual order. Keeping in mind that you are a much less important person, you should submit willingly. It would be a service to humanity."

Jon's expression grew pained; it was obvious that, because of his vain nature, it had never occurred to him that people would side with the vampire. "I am the channeler," he said. "The Baron should only live as he is focused through me and in the way that I interpret his being. I have priority because he is dead. Giving him some of my life is enough."

"The Baron should live, not you!" yelled a man with a long Oriental braid. "His superior nature justifies it! Your motive is obviously greed!"

The statement hit Chandler like a blow. He trembled uncontrollably, and his teeth began to chatter; then he fell from the chair to his knees. His hands fluttered to his throat; he pulled them away and held them out, palms up, staring at them as if they were cursed. He began to speak in a deeper, baser voice. The voice of the Baron.

"If you want to help me take full control," the Baron said, "then leave now and return at the next scheduled meeting. Jon Chandler draws the energy he needs to fight me from you. He has betrayed the spirit world and himself; he has a gift, a power of channeling, but he uses it in the lowest way to steal life force from people. He's an addict and of no use to anyone. Starve him, and he'll be fully under my power."

The voice died, and Jon Chandler collapsed, sobbing on the stage. The people became excited, and the air thickened with whispering. Some nasty comments were directed at Chandler, and people got to their feet. No one wore an aura of pity. Loathing was the universal feeling, and there was also a sense of promise and a belief that much could be gained if they aided the vampire.

Chandler's sobbing broke, and he lifted his tear-stained face. "Wait, I have more to say!" he cried desperately. But no one would listen. Buzzing angrily, stamping their feet cruelly, the people began to move toward the exits.

Mike had been caught off guard, and Jake hadn't expected such a sudden end to things either. They looked at one another, trying to decide what to do."

"We'd better get to Chandler," Mike said. "There's no other way to stop the Baron from striking."

Jumping to an aisle, they moved against the crowd, and some shoving took place as nasty people tried to force them back. Scowling faces threatened violence. It became apparent that they weren't going to get through.

"Get out of the way, we're ushers!" Jake hollered. "Clear the church, as the Baron said!"

People began to stream around them, and Jake threw his bulk forward. Mike felt the anger pressing in on him subside, and he fell in behind Jake. They weren't even halfway down the aisle before they saw that it was too late. Jon Chandler was escaping. He'd crossed the stage and was ducking through scarlet curtains to an exit. A gust of wind blew the curtains up as Jon went out the door, and beyond the fluttering, Mike saw him pulling out his keys for a quick grab at his car that would prevent easy pursuit.

CHAPTER 8: ON THE RUN

Even in bright sunlight, Jon Chandler's face was ghostly white. Dark pouches showed beneath haunted eyes. He ran toward a borrowed sports car he'd parked in the reverend's space at the back of the church. Anxiety, confusion, and fear charged his brain to the point that it felt like it was going to explode with several aneurysms. He was now certain that two men couldn't exist in the same body; the flesh couldn't take the transformations, and the inner conflict carried nerves to the breaking point.

At the car, he jingled his keys and took a hurried look around. He suspected a police stakeout, he suspected Allan Rampa of following him, and he suspected cultists were on his tail. Every nut in the world was probably after him. Most of all, he feared the two big men he'd seen charging for him in the church. He was certain their intent was evil. A view along the side of the church showed him nothing other than the angry mob streaming out the front doors. It was fortunate that no one was at the back.

Sliding behind the wheel, he powered up, but with the front drive jammed by the mob, he was at a loss about where to go. He had no time; the two big men would be out and after him in a few moments. Spinning the wheel, he hit the gas, drove out of the lot, and through a hedge of pine scrub into a neighboring parkette. Roaring over the grass, he forced some sunbathers and kids out of the way. Tearing up sod, he went up an incline and down a footpath to enter a side street.

A distorted picture formed in his mind. The two big men had been hired to hunt him down by friends of the victims, or else they were cops. It was amazing that he hadn't been questioned already. It was also amazing that no reports of Liz's death had come out. Eventually, they'd trace his connection to Jeanie, so it was a race against time and the Baron. He wanted to flee the city, but the Baron wouldn't allow it; the vampire was breaking him down, using the fear of arrest against him. And why should the Baron care? If arrested, the Baron would simply wait for an opportunity to escape. For now, he could bide his time and cause Jon to miss planes and vital fixes of energy. If it continued, he'd have to submit, give over complete control to the vampire, or else fall into the hands of the law or other hostile forces. A feeling of self-loathing came over Jon, and it was because the vampire had to know he was a coward to break him with such tactics.

A conglomeration of muscular aches added up to one pulse of pain, so that Jon's body felt like a huge abscessed tooth. His thirsty tongue seemed permanently swollen, and he could feel his head pulsing with the pounding of his heart. Weakness was making his flesh pallid wax and webbing his eyes with veins. Rushes of agony swamped his thoughts. He pulled into a mall parking lot, put his hands to his face for a moment, then lifted them and started as he saw the face of the blond man staring from the windshield. The face vanished, but the probing eyes remained for a moment. Gnawing terror hit him; he couldn't tell if his sweaty body was hot or cold. Now he knew the blond man was using a strange psychic power to track him; his giant companion could have abilities,

too. Jon saw them as bloodhounds at his heels, hunting him like an animal. From nowhere, an idea for ditching them popped into his head, and feeling a little better, he drove away.

Detective Skagway stared at a flattened bush and tire tracks in the grass while Mike stood with his hands on his hips, looking at the clear sky. "See anything in your crystal ball?" Jake said.

"I just got a picture of Jon Chandler in his car. He looks like a man who has found the dregs of the world."

"If you have a bead, let's go on it. I want to get him before he does something crazy."

They hurried to the front and found it jammed, cars parked askew and blocking passage to the street. The vampire's fans congregated and conversed in small groups. Taking the wheel, Jake slowly drove around back, ignoring people who shouted and banged their palms on the hood. He spotted Jon's tire tracks and followed them through the park. Amazed, people stepped out of the way. Mike got a feeling, and it told him to turn right and go up a side street.

Something moved in the shadows in the corner of Mike's eye, something tiny and black. Bat wings or a centipede's legs, he wasn't sure, but it was his road map to Chandler and the Baron. The summer day belonged to the tanned and elegantly slim women walking to the beat of their iPods, to the skateboard and roller kids that raced out at the lights, and to the street-corner gangs with boom players blaring out alternative and hip-hop music. Jake and Mike were distanced from it, almost like ghosts, ephemeral as flashes of light at poolside. Only unreal people could be hunting a vampire and a spirit channeler, and that was okay with Mike because he could handle unreality that Jake couldn't. Mike saw each day as ghost brief and quite impossible. He had never anchored his world down, and for that reason, he could be on its boundaries, watchful of the little consensus reality humans defined. Watchful enough to see Jon Chandler moving in the corners.

Jake was flustered. He sped down the summer-holiday streets, oblivious to the beauty of the banner day. The trees were crowned with emerald and gold, but he saw the distorted faces of monsters in the shadows below. He had vision like Mike, but in his case, it didn't lead him anywhere.

"It seems ridiculous," Mike said, "but the direction I keep getting points to the warehouse where we found Len."

"We can check it," Jake said. "He might have a reason for returning to it."

"That's the bead I keep getting, even though I know something's not quite right about it."

A closed-in feeling and unnatural nervousness came over Mike. He rolled the window down, and as they came up from under the expressway, they were washed by the lake breeze. Mike found it refreshing and drank in its energy. He imagined it to be a better form of energy than the stuff Jon Chandler drank.

The warehouse appeared, and it hadn't gotten any better; it looked like a towering piece of rot, crumbling now that it had sucked in its last musty breaths. Their wheels rutted into gravel and busted-up concrete as they rolled into the lot. Someone had been there. There were no cars, but the fire department's seal had been taken off the doors, and they'd been forced open.

Jolting to a stop, Jake grabbed a briefcase from the back, and they were off, dashing for the warehouse. They stopped at the door, fearing an ambush when they stepped into the

dark. Jake had a Beretta pistol in a cross-draw holster in his belt; he drew it and flashed it inside the door. There was no response, so he drew it back and took a peek. He saw nothing, and nothing happened, so they charged inside.

Moving quickly, they took cover behind a post. It was dim and dusty, a tomblike atmosphere. There weren't many places where Jon could be hiding; the building had been emptied completely during the investigation. In a few days, it would be condemned and on the city demolition list.

Mike tapped Jake on the shoulder, alerting him to a faint amber glow in a doorway on the far side of the building. Making as little noise as possible, they hurried across the cracked concrete floor and looked inside. The drop of a pin probably would've caused Jake to fire a defensive round, but what they saw was a glowing crystal and its silver chain hanging from a nail embedded in a grease-scarred wall.

They entered cautiously. The only other object in the room was a bench. Mike ducked down and glanced under it, then held up the flat of his hand to indicate that no one was there.

Jake took a deep breath; the sound of disappointment was in his exhalation. He shook his head as he opened his case and took out a small linen sack. He put the crystal and chain inside and drew the string tight.

"He's nowhere near here," Mike said. "He charged the crystal with his energy and planted it here to throw us off the trail."

In a world of bright sunshine, Jon could barely see. He parked the car and stared at Marilyn's house. In his drained mind, it was as black as a cinder block. Not a trace of energy came from it; it smoked like ice. That meant no one was home, there were no easy victims for him to feed on.

Opening the door, his hand moved like it was made of rusty nails and chain links. The pain he experienced was that of an arthritic old man. As he got out, a low growl in his stomach told him that the hunger was greater than the pain. When he looked at the lawn, gardens, and trees, his visual awareness was of everything dead: curled leaves, busted branches, dry twigs, and the wormy corpse of a field mouse. Other than that, he saw mostly shadows, the rustling leaves made a dancing carpet of them, and as he moved furtively under the willows, making his way around to the back, the shadows flew at his eyes like ashes. He stepped around the darkest patches of shadow, watching them flow past like corpses in a Stygian river. This was the bottom, completely drained; he could barely remember who he was.

As sucked dry of emotion as a zombie, he drifted to the patio. The only light he found there was the glitter of a crystal. He picked it up and froze, staring at it with blank eyes.

In time, and he had no idea how much time, there was a beam of light. The world existed as a coffin and had opened a crack to reveal a star. Moving through the yard and along a tall wooden fence, he came to a cedar hedge. Through a gap in the foliage, he could see a woman. She wore a bikini and was sunbathing on a checked blanket by a swimming pool. She was the star, fantastic, gently pulsing, turquoise. She shone, granting existence to her surroundings, making them an island of beauty and reality amid an ocean of night and nothingness.

Unendurable thirst swept him up, and he blundered through the bushes. The woman heard the noise but looked in the wrong direction. He was on her before she saw him. She had time to scream once. His attack was fierce and relentless, and he saw showers of fiery blood as he battered and gouged her with the crystal. As she died, he absorbed

some of the raw energy escaping from her, and then he felt bloodlust and the Baron taking over. He knew now that the Baron had succeeded; the Baron had turned him into a ravening animal, the crudest variety of vampire.

A mask of Aztec jade appeared, gained human eyes, and a fiery halo. It rose like a kite on a wind of energy, its features twisted from hate uncoiling behind the eyes. The mouth gaped, and a scream that was neither animal nor human emerged. The vision shook Mike. He seized the dashboard and yelled. "Hurry up, for God's sake! He's killing someone!"

"Hurry to where?" Jake hollered. Keeping a hand on the wheel, he grabbed Mike's shoulder and shook him. "Give me an address, something to go by!"

"Chandler has a friend named Marilyn. That's what I pick up. Go there."

"Shit, it'll take fifteen minutes to get there."

The car came outfitted with a siren, and it shrieked in the summer air as they topped the speed limit and tore up soft asphalt. Mike remained silent, stern, and morose. Detective Skagway's lips were skinned back over gritted teeth. They came out of the last turn to Marilyn's suburban home, holding tight like it was the last round on a gut-wrenching ride. Jon Chandler hadn't bothered closing the gate, so Jake sped straight in and hit the brakes, spinning in a half circle to avoid a collision with the Corvette.

"Keep going!" Mike shouted. "Drive to the rear."

Keeping precarious control of his car, Detective Skagway drove onto the lawn and tore up a flowerbed on his way to the backyard. He stopped with the grill against a birdbath and ripped the keys out. Mike was already ahead of him; having popped open the door, he was racing for a space in the hedge.

Jake followed and was on Mike's heels by the time he reached the hedge. They spied the corpse immediately, a heart-sinking sight. Appalled, they moved closer, glancing around nervously, checking for any movement that might be Chandler. With great reluctance, they took a closer look at the body.

"Oh, my God!" Jake exclaimed. His eyes glazed over with shock. "Her head, what did he do with her head?"

The color drained from Mike's cheeks. Blood floated on debris in the swimming pool. He looked to Jake and nodded grimly.

Jake looked at the spreading slick, then he covered his eyes. "Where is he now?" he said, breathing the sentence through clenched teeth.

"I get a shadowy picture of him. Very vague," Mike said. "He's somewhere to the north of here, moving on foot. I can see water, a pond. I see Chandler. He's in a coffin, and that means the Baron has taken complete control."

"Okay," Jake said. "I'll radio in on the body, and we'll head out after the Baron."

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Sunset's amber deepened, and twilight tinted the water. It was a postcard evening in the reservoir lands, or it would have been had the Baron not been present and in a disheveled state. A long run down back lanes and through parks had left him rank with the odors of sweat and blood. A stalker, he moved through the maples toward a spot where the huge park opened on a suburban back street. Beyond the trees, people strolled on the apron of grass by the sidewalk. He found himself unable to focus on them. Stopping, he tried to piece together his disjointed thoughts. His mind drifted like a

dark cloud, one made of the essential vampire's reminiscences he needed for survival. It was a consequence of using Chandler; he knew Jon's body and brain would continue to eat away at his personality. He'd damaged Chandler's constitution so much already that it was hard to bear the effects. He felt a general state of malaise, monstrous confusion, dizziness, flashes of rage, and bloodlust. With it came temporary loss of identity and moments of complete emptiness. He was probably closer to being a rabid animal than to being a human being.

His vision filled with grime, then cleared, and he saw a woman jogging toward him. Ivory limbs, a halo of long blond hair, red short-shorts. Looking at her was a pleasure, and he stared, forgetting to obey the impulse to pounce. She passed by, a white flow of motion, and turned, going down a wood chip path into a forested area. As she disappeared in the screen of foliage, pain hit him like splinters of glass, awakening him and giving him the energy he needed for pursuit.

Jake saw the speed bump too late, and its grind and thump almost sent Mike through the roof. The car shot over a hill, then coasted down into a picnic area. The scene was idyllic, sunset glory reflecting on the waters of the reservoir as the day cooled with a gentle breeze. There were a few cars, people walking dogs, roller skating, playing catch, cycling, and strolling. The evening light gave people an unnatural beauty. It didn't seem possible that any of them could end up minus a head.

"We're near him," Mike said. "The next problem is how to handle him?"

Jake pulled in on some baked, bare earth by the water. "We haven't time for plans," he said. "Let's just get to him before he gets away."

Twilight haze dusted the treetops. The blond woman jogged on, following the wide circle the path made through the park. Behind her, the Baron limped as he ran on stiff legs. Poisonous sweat soaked his clothes, his chest muscles were thick bands of pain, and his neck muscles were tense like guitar strings. A distorted vision of the woman and his hunger drove him on. At times, he wasn't sure if he was seeing her or smelling her, and it didn't matter as long as the healing red fluids of her body promised to end his pain.

The patch of forest broke at a clearing; she plunged off the path into deep grass and jogged to a mound at the center. Reaching the clearing, the Baron saw her stop at the mound and turn to begin the run back. Ducking behind a fir tree, he picked up a large flinty stone. There wasn't time for a struggle or mesmerism; that sort of action was difficult and would come later when his strength returned. For now, he wanted a fast recharge and the satisfaction that would come with it.

He was ready to pounce as she passed on the path, but she didn't make it that far; when she was halfway back from the mound, her right foot hooked into some vines, and she squealed in pain and surprise as she stumbled and fell. Getting to one knee, she groaned, cursed, and rubbed her ankle. Knowing that she wouldn't get away with a bad leg, the Baron rushed out of the firs, his face a gruesome leer as he limped toward her.

She was focused on the leg and didn't see him at first. When she did spot him panting and running desperately toward her, she pulled a rape whistle from under her blouse, blew it, and tried to limp away. She wasn't nearly fast enough, and she ended up glancing back in horror as the Baron pounced on her.

Jake and Mike were headed in the direction of the clearing. The sound of a whistle turned their jog into a mad dash. They burst out of the maples on the west side of the clearing just as the Baron was taking her down. Although Jake was an ex-football player, Mike was the faster runner. Yet even Mike had no chance of getting to her on time.

"Stop it!" Jake yelled as the Baron grazed her temple with a blow.

Quick as a rattler, the Baron flew up, leaving the woman to roll and moan in the grass.

Jake considered using his gun, but Mike was in front of him, and there was a chance of accidentally blasting the victim, so he decided against it.

Mike continued to sprint as the Baron readied his stone. The vampire would go for his head, hoping to bust his skull, so with that in mind, Mike ducked aside at the last possible moment and raced past.

The Baron had moved forward to take a strong swing at Mike. He saw that Jake was almost on him, and he drew back. He couldn't turn away from such a big opponent.

Using the Baron's predicament to his advantage, Mike stumbled through a tight half circle and moved in to seize him from behind.

Jake slowed some, giving Mike time to get a grip on the Baron. Now the vampire was unable to use the stone, but Jake couldn't stop; he'd forgotten to check his old football instinct to tackle. He hit them with a solid offensive rush, and all three men tumbled hard in the grass.

Mike was lucky; he'd been thrown free of any tangle, and the Baron had cushioned him from most of the bone-crunching blow. Yet the Baron wasn't out; he snapped to his feet like he wasn't even hurt, and he didn't try to run. Instead, he faced off with them. The Baron obviously believed that only the aggressor could be the victor.

"Avoid his eyes!" Mike yelled.

Ducking his head, Jake advanced like a bull, grappled with the Baron, and forced him to the ground. With a loud snarl, the Baron pushed up and, through a feat of great strength, flung Jake off.

As the Baron sprang up, Mike stepped in and connected with a hard right hand. The Baron staggered back and then countered with a flurry of punches that knocked Mike to the grass.

A dust devil and thunder were in Mike's head, but he managed to get up quickly. Jake was already up and charging the Baron, only he didn't connect because the Baron moved right at great speed, so fast he vanished like a ghost, and Jake was left running at nothing.

A purple blur was in the corner of Mike's eye; he followed it to the woman and saw that she'd limped away and was on her knees, weeping in a patch of weeds. His vision cleared; if the Baron wasn't attacking the woman, he knew where he had to be - behind him. Throwing himself to his knees, Mike turned. The Baron's arm and a stone whistled through the air where his head had been.

Scrambling between the Baron's legs, Mike managed to escape further blows, and the sight of Jake returning distracted the Baron for the moment Mike needed to push up and knock him from the rear.

This time, Jake caught the stumbling Baron and drove a hard fist into his breadbasket. As the Baron doubled over, he was hammered on the jaw by an elbow, and more organ-crushing blows struck his torso. Throwing the Baron upright, Jake moved under and lifted him; he held him over his head and slammed him down. He landed flat on his back, and the big detective came down, driving his knees into his neck and shoulder.

Jake thought the vampire was finished, but it was only a moment before he felt teeth sinking into his leg and jumped up and retreated.

Hissing viciously, the Baron got up, but he was weakened, blue in the face, and barely able to stand. Mike decided not to wait, moved in from the rear, and got an arm lock on the tottering vampire. It took all of his strength to hold him.

Jake rushed in and began to pummel him with body punches, a storm of blows no man could withstand, and the Baron didn't withstand it; thickening blood oozed past his bruised lips, then red light spilled from his eyes and enveloped his body.

Thinking the light to be a deadly trick, Mike and Jake backed away quickly. The vampire remained standing, and blood continued to pour, making his shirtfront a gruesome tongue in the intensifying glow. A rainbow of aural colors began to form around the Baron, causing Mike and Jake to retreat further, then, in a final blaze of energy, the Baron collapsed to the grass. The body twitched violently as the rainbow slowly vanished.

Amazement had replaced fear on the woman's face. She limped over. Mike and Jake had momentarily forgotten her; they stood staring suspiciously at the corpse. It withered rapidly, taking on an unnatural appearance. In moments, all signs of life vanished, and the face dropped its pained expression.

"He looks like he's made of blue rubber," Mike said.

"So is he dead or not, Mike?" the woman said.

"I think so," Mike said.

Jake pulled a small leather pouch from his pocket and removed a clean linen handkerchief from it. He soaked it with isotonic water from a small bottle and stepped up to the woman. "Turn your head while I clean the cut," he said.

Mike stared at the woman as her wound was washed. An innocent face took shape as the blood streaks melted. She was familiar, but he couldn't quite place her.

"It's a small cut that bleeds a lot," Jake said. "You have to be checked for skull fractures."

"How did you know my name?" Mike said.

"We went to the same high school."

"Now I remember. You're Donna James."

Jake took a small bottle of pills from his pouch. "These should kill the pain," he said.

Donna swallowed two of the pills. "I see you haven't kept out of trouble, Mike. What is that guy, or what was he?"

"He was a form of vampire. It's an unusual situation to say the least. I'm afraid you'll have to keep quiet about what just happened."

"We should call the police," Donna said. "If creeps are around, nobody is safe."

"I'm a police officer. Jake Skagway from homicide. As far as we know, this is the only vampire, and we can't make any statements concerning him. It would cause panic."

"Uh-oh, I hear people coming through the woods," Mike said.

"Take Donna back to the car," Jake said. "Reassure the people. Tell them she's all right, she just fell while jogging. I'll stay behind and take care of the body."

"Whoa! Not so fast," Donna said as Mike scooped her up.

Mike headed for the trees. People were shouting and crashing about. Though Donna was in his arms, his mind wasn't on her; pleasant thoughts of Alice and Annie came to him.

He thought about hanging around for a year and getting closer to Annie. He didn't know if he would ever have a truly healthy relationship with Alice, but what the hell; his world had never been perfect. If the world were perfect, Jake Skagway wouldn't be back by the mound doing what he was doing.

It was an unusually light body, and Jake dragged it around the mound with ease. Taking a Clip Mate knife from a small sheath on his belt, he began to fashion a wooden stake from a fallen branch. He completed it swiftly, hearing Mike talking to some people as he worked. He glanced around and spotted a culvert and a small stream over in the trees. The culvert was almost completely hidden by ferns, sumac, and scrub evergreens. He figured it was a good spot to dump the body.

The stake whistled down, and in purgatory, bright light washed the spirit of Titus Arbore. Darkness and death followed. Jake also saw light, darkness, and death; he'd never felt better about a corpse. He didn't even feel like smoking this time.

Finished, he dragged the corpse over the weeds and stuffed it in the culvert. He dropped the sack containing Jon Chandler's crystal next to it. Stepping back, he made sure it was out of sight, and then he turned and headed for the car.

Jake came out of the trees and walked along the reservoir shore. A curtain of darkness fell on the silver water behind him. He knew he looked to be in very rough shape. Donna and Mike were already in the car, and they didn't look much better.

"Did those people give you any trouble?" Jake said as he got behind the wheel.

"No. Just some guys that heard the whistle," Mike said. "I told them Donna injured herself and whistled for help."

"We're done with the Baron," Jake said. "The body is stashed. We can grab it later when no one is around. Then our vampire problem will be over."

"Good," Mike said, "let's get Donna to the hospital for a check."

Exhaustion turned to elation in Mike's mind as Jake drove off. Donna also felt better; she managed to get a laugh out of Mike by bringing up an old high school nickname. They stopped at a sign, the streetlights came on, and then they pulled away, not noticing another light that had just ignited, an evil light flashing in deep-set eyes. Moments later, the man got out of his car, determined to find Jon Chandler or his remains.

Chapter 9: THE BOOK

The sunshine held steady and brilliant like the aura of a summertime goddess dappling the Toronto Islands. Out on the water, Mike found the islands much as he remembered them. The same now as they were years ago. If anything had changed, he had. Back then, he'd been an unemployable young man with visions but no real plan for his future. He'd studied the great philosophers, reading in the bird sanctuary. Today, he had no time for philosophy, but he did have confidence in himself in the face of a future arriving too fast, swifter than visions or plans.

Energized, Mike closed his eyes and pumped his legs harder as the paddleboat surged forward. He was hurrying for shore and away from a yacht cruising up the channel. The honking of geese and the hum of a plane drifted over from the island airport. A steady lap of waves kept his legs moving. Annie's excited voice rose beside him with the shouts of teenagers near the shore. A gull screeched, and he opened his eyes as it dive-bombed in to snatch a piece of bread from the water. Swallowing as it flew, it circled to return.

"Thief!" Annie yelled as she tossed some bread chunks over toward the geese. "The gulls steal everything," she said. "Even hot-dogs. They eat wieners."

"They may eat more," Mike said, "but they probably die sooner. It's better to be like the geese and eat less junk food."

"You can't buy anything here but junk food. That's what mom says."

"She's probably right."

They slipped into the shade of some shoreline willows as the boat approached a long wooden dock. A fair built on the model of a tiny town gleamed in the sunshine across the channel. Annie's eyes were fixed on the cable cars gliding over the town. Pony rides were visible at the far end.

As he turned the boat in toward the tie post, Mike spotted Jake and Alice standing by the ticket booth. The glare pinched Jake's face, adding a false expression of suspicion. It was like he'd seen a body bobbing out on the waves. Sunglasses failed to hide Alice's troubled frown; she obviously thought he'd taken Annie out too far in the channel.

An attendant stepped over to help Annie from the boat, but Alice brushed him aside and took charge before he could reach her. Mike stepped to the dock and waited as Alice removed Annie's life jacket.

"I thought you couldn't make it before four?" Mike said.

"I didn't have to wait for the ferry. Jake got us over in a police boat."

"I want a ride in the police boat," Annie said.

Mike raised his eyebrows. "What's the emergency?"

"No emergency. Jake needs to talk to you."

Mike grimaced as Alice hugged Annie excessively. It was like he'd taken her over Niagara Falls in a barrel or something. Turning away, he walked over to Jake. "Looking for Chandler's body out there in the water?"

"Might as well be looking there. I can't find a trace of it anywhere else."

"Only two things could've happened to it. Somebody stumbled on it and moved it, or Allan Rampa got to it and took it."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "Allan took it. How can you be sure of that? Where would he take it?"

Alice came off the dock with Annie tugging at her arm and leading her like she was one of the ponies she'd soon be riding. Mike and Jake walked behind as they followed the walkway to the bridge. They were in the fairgrounds before the subject of Allan Rampa came up again.

"Have you found Allan Rampa?" Mike said.

"Not really. It was like tracking a ghost. He had an expensive apartment at Harbourfront. Now it's empty, and I couldn't find the movers who took his stuff. He left no forwarding address. Just about everything in his background is mysterious. He does most of his business under another name. I talked to some of the New Millennium people, and they wouldn't give me anything. But don't worry. I'll find him eventually."

Breezy weather had eased in. They ambled up to the cable ride, pausing to watch cars of sea-green and cherry gliding in on the platform. Metallic flecks in the paint showed as

sun dazzles. Alice's face softened, becoming more childlike, and Mike breathed a sigh of relief. If her mood was lifting, she wouldn't pick a fight over Annie.

"You take Annie across on the lift," Mike said. "I'll walk over with Jake."

"Okay," she said, but she didn't go up for tickets. She stood waiting.

"What are you waiting for?" Mike said.

"For the end of your talk on this Allan guy. I want to know if you'll be roaming all over the city, at all hours of the night?"

Mike looked to Jake. "I don't think I'll be roaming anywhere. All I can draw is a blank. Nothing comes to me concerning either Allan Rampa or the missing body."

"That's good to hear," Alice said.

Mike nodded, but he knew it wasn't good to hear. More like it was too good to be true. He wasn't sure if someone was blocking him psychically or if, unconsciously, he just didn't want to know anything. Either way, there could be nothing good about the disappearance of Allan and the loss of Chandler's body. Being blocked was okay for the present; it would allow him some time with his family.

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THE MILLENNIUM TRANSMISSIONS

Allan Rampa ... A BEGINNING

Earlier this summer, I dreamed of dense mist blowing out on the lake. It remained at the ends of my mind in distant imaginings. I went to my penthouse window and watched it lift and swirl. A hypnotic effect; I lost my grasp of time and felt a terrible weakness of body and mind. The mist and its vapors fell into a vortex spinning down, pulling in all energy and leaving my body and bones pale as wax.

Drained, I staggered to my mirror and choked at the sight of my yellowing flesh. As strange as it may seem, I was there reassuring myself that I was a human being, not some other alien life form. Memories of lives I had lived on other worlds were confusing me. That such a state could be anything other than the onset of madness or serious illness didn't occur to me at the time. I began taking deep breaths, my chest heaving mightily as I tried to suck energy, life, and perhaps my sanity back into myself. All I got was stale air and feelings I couldn't shake. I could feel the parts of my body: my chest, my cheeks, my legs, and they felt like lumps of dead wax. I was so empty I knew I had no soul. I knew that I'd never had a soul. There was nothing but a thread trying to hang on, and the thread said, I am Allan Rampa. I am not mad. Said it repeatedly until finally the thread snapped.

I heard a dry wind heaving in dead foliage. A black pit punched through the sky; I believed the force of the earlier whirlpool had brought down the whirlwind and the pillars of heaven. Endless empty vacuum was bleeding life from the Earth. Fangs of a cosmic beast were sucking every vision dry.

Out of this altering of reality came realization. It was the grim truth; nothing was being sucked from the planet because the Earth was a lump of nothing to begin with, as men are nothing without souls. Something was being given; it was the meridian of history, of the human effort, and a time when we would be given what we had never owned - a soul.

Something beautiful was floating into focus. It was much greater than mortals, and I didn't know if I would survive to see it. I was disintegrating. I was shattered into crystal fragments and wisps of mist. Then that something began to help and to make me whole. It looked out of my eyes, and they were bigger than galaxies. When it spoke, its voice was a steel cable running through me.

"I am an entity in the eternal ether. I am the end of the path of darkness. I am you a million years from today, and I have returned to grant you a soul."

With the message came illumination and well-being that I had never known before. It was beyond meditation. It was beyond spiritualism. It was the mist of life flowing in my heart and the beginning of a New Age and Millennium.

Two days passed, and the feeling stayed with me, rising and falling until I finally realized that I had to get up from my kneeling position, wash, eat, and go for a walk. I satisfied the needs of my body swiftly and efficiently, and once I had worked the stiffness out of my legs, I went out.

The elevator whisked me to the street. I found it was daylight, but a different kind of daylight from the usual. All light beamed from a great amber wheel that had replaced the sun in the sky. The wheel was rotating as it moved swiftly northward, and the desire to follow it swept me up. Miraculously, a white Ford convertible was parked by the curb. No passengers or driver were inside, the door was open, and the engine was running. After a moment's hesitation, I leaped in and drove off in pursuit of the wheel.

Waves of power electrified the road ahead of me, and traffic was swept aside. Cars, trucks, and buses were eased to curbside like they were toys. Using the horn, I warned pedestrians to move out of the way, and the power remained as I hit the freeway heading north. I roared onward, tearing over hot asphalt, a blaring siren of the gods.

The city was no longer important. I left its buildings behind like they were yesterday's tumbled dominoes. Exiting the freeway, I plunged into green countryside, passing frame farmhouses, sagging barns, and miles of zigzag cedar-log fencing. The car had a balloon-like motion as it raced up dusty roads into forested areas. A warm amber fire was in the treetops and in my eyes. It was the light of the promise of the spiritual transmissions to come, and as genuine as a vision in a crystal ball.

When the wheel stopped revolving and took up a stationary position in the sky, I was driving up a pot-holed road into a clearing. Out of reverence for the light, I stopped the car and silenced the engine. I watched, my face aglow, as the wheel descended over a giant birch tree in the center of the clearing. I heard the scorch and sizzle as it burned its shape into the dew-soaked grass, then it vanished, and normal sunlight poured in on the scene.

In a trance, I walked slowly into the charred circle. As I stepped up to the birch tree, I knew I was under an all-seeing cosmic searchlight. A multitude of alien voices rose in my breast, softly as air bubbles in water. They were speaking of so many matters of great importance at once that I couldn't possibly begin to remember them all. I was desperate to write some of the messages down so there would be a record, but I didn't have a pen or paper.

One voice grew in volume, and it told me to turn to the birch tree. I did and noticed huge strips of bark peeling from the trunk. I set to work and found that the bark peeled away easily, each piece taking the shape of a parchment scroll. I made a stack of scrolls, then I listened for the voice. A medley of voices coursed through me, and out of them

came understanding. I took the crystal from around my neck and prepared to write on the scrolls.

The voices were growing clearer, and I looked up as I waited for them to reach perfection. Out on the edge of the clearing, the white pines had bent and touched the ground without pulling up roots. Their branches braided together to form a circle, protecting me from all intruders.

It was there in the grass, surrounded by starflowers, rattlesnake ferns, chokecherries, and the beautiful voices, that I wrote the first of THE MILLENNIUM TRANSMISSIONS.

I channeled the entire multitude of voices, and their messages emerged from the tip of my crystal as a laser beam burning into the bark. As I wrote, I felt the birth of my soul, reincarnation. In the end, as the signals grew weak, a final voice told of more transmissions that would come to me in the future. It commanded me to take up residence near the sacred ground and establish a Cult of the Millennium. It warned that a period of supernatural occurrences had been ordained for the lands near the sacred ground, and that when they ended, the remaining transmissions would be given.

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Just as I switched my headlights off, I thought I saw quick movement in the bushes at the back. It was something hurrying and fluttering, and it was there and gone swiftly. Perhaps it was one of the night's illusions, a ghostlike play of bushes in the wind, but I thought not. I'd been doing enough creeping around of my own at night to know what lurks in the dark.

As I opened the door and got out, the poplars rushed with wind that strengthened until the leaves were hissing like the reeds of woodwinds. It turned into such a punch of air that the car door was thrown shut, and I fell to one knee against the fender. The wind looped through with force a couple more times, then died, leaving a faint phosphorescent highlight on the house.

Other people would've thought they were witnessing a supernatural event, and I suppose my New Age acquaintances would imagine that some demon god of the Philistines was seeking vengeance. I knew better; years of diligent study were guiding my senses, combined with second sight born on a day long ago when I first witnessed the golden signs of the occult. I knew the phenomena were a mere beginning. A much greater supernatural event was about to take place.

I was visiting Liz Kanter because I believed Jon Chandler's vampiric half, the Baron, might arrive. His presence nearby would certainly account for any strange happenings. At that time, my intention was to talk with Titus at night when his powers were strong and perhaps make him an offer he couldn't refuse. I believed Jon Chandler to be the main obstacle blocking my plan; his vanity, his go-it-alone approach to everything showed him to be a person who wouldn't want to share power... and he would have to in order to participate in, even help found, the cult I had in mind. Common sense led me to favor the Baron. He was the superior man of the two; he would be more inclined to listen to reason, and with his seal of approval, I could forge ahead.

It was beautiful to think of them as it is now; our New Age religions in array and joined with the delicacy of wisdom, the petals on a rose, but a red rose and one startlingly radiant in contrast with the midnight robe on which it would be pinned. In the New Age, we have taken the best of everything and let the deserving pass away. Jesus Christ has been redefined, Wicca has been renewed, the stars are our healing, and the glory of the aliens has touched us. Our divine attributes unfold like a holy scroll. Yet try to point to a

foundation, a great mystic rock supporting us, and you will find that there is none. Which is why I am providing one.

A coexistence of light and darkness, the hideous entwined with the beautiful, a religion that has resolved man's conflict with himself and the supernatural, is a wonderful idea, and it is the idea behind the Cult of the Millennium. A religious body that shields and nurtures its friends, the vampires. In return, the people of the New Millennium share in the powers of the blood. And there is an answer, a reconciliation of Cain and Abel, a new Eden and a new order of blood and man.

I knocked at Liz's door, and there was no answer to the bell. Several agonizing minutes passed, and I was scarcely able to prevent myself from bursting through the lock. Fortunately, I knew that the very future depended on me and that a small mistake could crush the grand dream like a butterfly. I went back down the walk and over to the car. In the cover of darkness, I glanced around. Seeing no one on the street, I stepped behind a lilac bush and hurried to the back patio. Curiously, the door was open and banging in the wind.

On entering, I saw no immediate signs of disarray. I called out Liz's name and was prepared to say that I had entered, thinking something was amiss, if her husband happened to surprise me. There was no answer, but incense smoke hung in the air; it was obvious that someone had just been in the house.

Rusty bloodstains on the carpet came to my attention, leaving me startled for a moment. A curious sense of caution took over. I must have looked like a dumb hound dog as I followed the stains to the basement stairs. Mutated thoughts similar to those before the onset of sleep began to slip through my head, and before I realized it, I was in the basement staring at Liz's corpse. It was a ghastly vision; a maniac's measure of blood was splashed across the white carpet. The place was a warlock's slaughterhouse, and the mutilation was severe. She was obviously the victim of some form of misbegotten vampirism.

I have always despised blood and torn flesh, along with rituals that require viscera, so if I stared long or smiled, it wasn't in enjoyment of the abominable but in realization of the possibilities. Could I save her, had enough of the powers of the blood passed on to make it worth it? It didn't take much thinking before I realized I had to try. Immediately, I saw how difficult it would be to get away with the body and not be traced.

No sooner did I begin to formulate a plan than it vanished into the face of a turn of events. There was a creak on the stairs behind me. I spun around and found myself face-to-face with Dr. David Kanter, Liz's husband. He was at the bottom of the stairs, and his surprised expression was breaking to horror; he tried to scream, but he could only move his lips in silent agony.

His mouth opened and closed a few times like he was drowning, then he rushed me and had me by the throat before I could think to put up a defense.

"You killed her! You butcher!" he screamed as his fingers dug into my flesh.

Prying his hands from my neck, I forced him back. He stumbled and went down on his knees. Drawing back, I cracked my palm across his face.

"Come to your senses, man!" I yelled. "Look at me. Blood is everywhere, but my suit is clean. I found her like this. I didn't kill her."

As a doctor and plastic surgeon, David certainly had the reasoning ability to grasp that I was innocent. His faculties returned long enough to stave off his violent tendencies, then he fell to weeping. He tried to crawl over and embrace the corpse, and I had to restrain

him. A cold and reserved person, I have never been good at consoling the grief-stricken, and I must confess that the next few minutes were trying. David's endless sobbing disgusted me more than the sight of Liz's gashed throat. I ground my teeth while pretending to be concerned and caring.

"My little Elizabeth, she was all I had," he said repeatedly.

Although I didn't nod my head, I had to silently agree. As a person, he was undistinguished, one of those lumps of male flesh that becomes briefly rugged in youth, entraps a beautiful woman in marriage, and then sinks into blandness.

David's sobs grew choked and began to fade. I assumed he'd practically managed to get his heart in his mouth. At that point, I seized his fleshy cheeks, looked into his eyes, and said, "How would you like to see your little Elizabeth alive again?"

His face twisted, and he glared at me like an angry lap dog, then he shoved my hands away. "How dare you make cruel jokes, you bastard!"

"She is the victim of a vampire," I said. "If the powers of the blood have passed on to her, she might survive. With our help, she could be your beautiful Elizabeth again."

"That's not possible," he said. "I'm a doctor. I know."

"And you know me," I said. "I'm Allan Rampa, and I don't lie about these things."

"You mean she might survive, but as a vampire?"

"Perhaps only partly a vampire."

The way David's eyes brightened, a faith healer might have touched him. "How can we tell? How can we know if she'll live?"

"I know what to look for, but it may be too soon for signs to be visible. Get me a pair of rubber gloves, and I can check."

Mad hope suddenly filled him, giving him great strength. He dashed up the stairs with his arms bursting in front of him like a man about to fly. I heard the front door slam twice, then he was thumping back down the stairs with his medical bag in hand.

"Do you fear disease?" David asked as I slipped on the gloves.

"No. I just don't want to get blood on my hands."

We approached the corpse, and I squatted on my haunches. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see David wince as I positioned the head. I opened her mouth wide, pushed the tongue away, cleared her throat, and peeled back her upper lip. The signs were distinct: her tongue, throat, and the inside of her mouth were opaque white, a thick, bloodless mucous membrane, except for her gums above her front teeth. They were bleeding lightly. Her incisors were loose and could be moved back and forth with ease.

"She has the signs," I said. "Enough of the powers of the blood have passed on for her to recover. What we want to do is speed her rejuvenation. If her flesh decays, she will become a horrible creature."

"Lack of blood and oxygen has killed some flesh already," David said. "We need blood, a gurney, and equipment. First, we'll go to the hospital and get what I need, and then I can pick away the dead tissue, suture the wounds, and try to get some blood flowing into her. She'll be badly scarred, but over time, I can help her with plastic surgery."

With that said, David transformed from a mass of quivering jelly to an invigorated Dr. David Kanter, a surgeon with nerves of steel. Together, we went to the hospital, and once

we had the equipment, we turned his basement into an emergency medical facility. Within a day, Liz was beginning to stir.

There was little time for Jon Chandler while I kept a close eye on Liz, but I did have several friends and paid informants watching him for me. I was thinking of using the information I already had to blackmail him, but it turned out to be unnecessary. A friend, Jim Gresham, called from his car to inform me that he'd spotted Jon Chandler, wild-looking, nearly crazed, stumbling down the road leading into the reservoir park.

It worried me; I figured Chandler might be mad, and vengefully so. I knew he was struggling with the Baron. My hopes were that the Baron would emerge victorious so I could get on with my plans. There was a possibility that Chandler might do something foolish; he could possibly leap onto a stake or destroy his body in another manner. In that way, he could cheat the Baron of victory. It made sense to me that a vain man like Chandler would commit suicide rather than lose.

I sped to the reservoir, trying to come up with a plan for dealing with Chandler. It was getting dark, and I initially parked away from the water and under a weeping willow. I wasn't quite sure how to go about searching for Chandler or the Baron in a darkening forest. My thinking was muddled, and as I considered my options, a Chevy pulled up from the reservoir shore. It was the common model of Chevy undercover officers' favor, and as it halted at a sign, the streetlights came on, and I spotted Mike Wilde's blond head in the open passenger window. I knew Wilde was connected with a shadowy organization that worked against vampires and other supernatural beings. His happiness meant the worst, and as I watched them drive off, I felt lightheaded. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, a hopeless feeling rising with them.

I remained parked there, my mood settling with the falling of night. I could hear a ghost of Mike Wilde's laughter, and it angered me. I spat between my teeth, out the window, determined not to give up. If Jon Chandler had been injured, I would have found him. If he had been destroyed, I would recover his body and either revive him or bleed any remaining power from him.

I got out of the car, and in my agitated state, I probably would've struck down anyone who dared question me. I was desperate to do something. If I could have, I would have changed the course of events with brute strength. I ran under the willow and through shrubs into some neat rows of pines. Branches whipped me, mosquitoes descended in clouds, I stubbed my toes on rocks, and I could see nothing. Finally, I fell and crashed through some branches to the duff. I got up, a sweaty mess of twigs, leaf fragments, dirt, and pine gum, and realized that running about werewolf style wasn't a way to find anything.

Calmly, I returned to the car and took my flashlight from the glove compartment. Subtle search techniques came to mind; logic dictated that I go down to where Wilde had been and search the shoreline, field, and woods there. A sense of mission took over at that point, and I began my search filled with new optimism. I believed I would find Chandler. In fact, the odds were against even a search party finding anything, but I felt I was above the odds.

Hours later, those odds were higher than the stars. The flashlight was dimming, and I couldn't concentrate. I brought the beam to a stop. I'd found something, and that something turned out to be a dead garter snake. I kicked it away in disgust and walked toward the shoreline. A slice of moon was overhead, and it was cutting through my brain like a hot knife.

Sitting on a slate boulder, I leaned over, sighed, and splashed my face with water. Cupping up some more, I drank deeply. Looking back at the field, I tried to figure out if I was moving ahead or had been circling and searching the same half-acre repeatedly.

Headlights flashing from a turning car gave me my answer, which was that I had gone nowhere. My car was a short distance away, and, even worse, the lights I saw belonged to a police car.

The police were checking my car. Keeping the flashlight off, I waited. I could hear their voices faintly, but as I tried to listen harder, a chorus of crickets deafened me. As I watched, they cruised over by the shore and parked. They were taking it easy, doing whatever it is police do when they don't feel like working.

If I returned to my car, no doubt, they would decide to get back to work and come and question me. I was in no condition to answer questions, so I decided to cut across the park and get into the residential neighborhood, where I could flag a cab.

I couldn't use the flashlight, but there was enough light from the sky and the moon. Following a line of trees, I went into the woods and worked my way through to a clearing. At the center of the clearing, I stopped at a mound for a rest, and there I saw a light.

At first, I thought the police were out and looking for me with flashlights; then, as my heart sank, I realized the light was flashing in a rainbow of colors.

Advancing warily, I came to a stream and worked my way up to a culvert and the source of the light, which, amazingly, was a crystal. It had spilled halfway out of a small sack, and from memory, I knew it was Jon Chandler's crystal. Scanning the culvert further, I saw his body.

A glance told me he was dead. Working swiftly, I dragged the body out along a streambed. A stake had been driven through the heart, so solidly so that I had difficulty extracting it. I threw the gore-soaked stake into the stream, then I paused and inspected the corpse. Rather than being ugly in death, Jon Chandler looked strangely peaceful. Bruised and swollen as he was, he wasn't repulsive; death seemed to agree with him.

I didn't agree, though. I looked at the crystal for a moment, then I placed it on his punctured heart, hoping its healing powers would be of help. The crystal scintillated brilliantly, and the colored dazzles cut and seeped into the wound.

For some unknown reason, terror struck me then, and I ran off and hid in some gooseberry bushes. In the sky above, white clouds like elongated fingers obscured the moon. I watched them, believing they were misty omens. My nerves steadied, and I went back to the body. It was far from healed; the crystal had sealed the chest wound, but nothing else was changed. For a second, I thought I saw a saintly nimbus above Chandler's bruise-yellowing face, and then I began making plans for the body. I could see that the moon had healed the body somewhat, but not nearly enough to make much of a difference.

Plans and plans, but none were sound plans. I couldn't carry the corpse to the car with the police lurking in the lot, yet every moment I waited meant further decay. If I moved the body and came back, I would risk encountering Wilde, as he would no doubt return for the corpse.

For a first step, I carried the corpse a few hundred yards and set it down next to a balsam fir. Putting an ear to its chest, I detected the faintest of heartbeats and became cautiously elated. A power of sciomancy came upon me, and a vision of the future took

shape in the shadows. Jon Chandler, a beautiful priestess, and a cowed multitude were looking down on me, directing my actions. Opening and clearing the body's mouth, I pressed my lips to it and filled the lungs with air. Though it was a bloating corpse, I found the touch of its lips to be as sweet as the kiss of a saint.

My efforts at resuscitation failed; I couldn't restart the lungs. After some time, I gave up and cradled the corpse in my arms, rocking it gently as the last of its air whispered out like a blessing. I brushed Chandler's hair back as a lover would. He was the hope of mankind, and I feared I couldn't save him. Tears formed, and I wept as if it were the crucified Jesus in my arms.

Then I heard a siren and beams from a bubble flasher lit the woods. The police were racing away from the reservoir, heading for a distant emergency.

I was certain the task ahead would be a back breaker. Getting the stiffening body back to the car wouldn't be that easy, but when I moved it, I was filled with great strength. The white clouds blowing in the sky seemed to belong to my mind, and I felt powerful.

In less than ten minutes, I was by the car. I felt distanced from my fouled body, events seemed to be turning my way, moving ahead with an easy perfection, and the removal of the body would have gone off well if it hadn't been for an old woman walking her dog. She'd been out of sight, under the willow tree, waiting as the dog emptied its bladder. She threw her silvered head back and screamed hoarsely, sounding more like a witch whose pet toad had been squashed than a frightened woman. Her calico mongrel took to barking and dancing ferociously in the air at the end of its leash.

"Wait, I can explain," I said.

We stared at one another. The fact that there was no honest explanation for carrying a corpse around in the wee hours of the morning was obvious. Hatred and revulsion showed on her face as she began to cower and retreat, pulling the snapping beast with her. Fearing she was trying to get my license number, I dropped the body gently and snatched up a sizable stone. I hoped the action would cause her to flee swiftly without looking back.

Instead, she released the dog, and my attention went to it as I prepared to bash it with the stone. The mutt burst past me like I didn't exist and began to tear at Chandler's leg. It wasn't doing much other than damaging his pant leg, so I took advantage of the opening and dashed up to the old woman. I struck her with the rock, knocking her unconscious. I tossed the stone into the trees and turned my attention back to the dog.

Coming up behind him, I seized him and pulled. He was savagely worrying at Chandler's shoe, but I managed to yank him back. He bit me, squirmed out of my grip, and ran back to the unconscious woman. The sight of her took the fight out of him, and he began to whimper and lick her face. Not wasting any time, I stuffed the body in the back and drove away quickly.

Dawn was breaking as I arrived at the house. Chilled flesh and exhaustion cloaked me, so vacant was my mind that I nearly began unloading my corpse-like companion in full view of the neighborhood. I caught myself and breathed a sigh of relief; some fabric of common sense was still in me. The curtains were drawn, and the house was veiled in sleep. I assumed David was in the basement at Liz's bedside and unaware of my arrival. I cut over the lawn, headed for the front door, and I felt like half a corpse myself. I supposed it was how a wino would feel, deadened reflexes, looking at the morning through eyes burning with blood filaments. The shadows were a deep, beautiful lapis lazuli blue, and the sky was a blossom pink, making me think of hell as a rare beauty

one could appreciate. My arm nearly creaked with pain and stiffness as I reached for the bell, but my inner resolve was above pain. I figured an hour's sleep and a shower would have to do as I had a business meeting to attend.

David opened the door, folds of suspicion on his brow. "What happened? You look like a crazy bum."

"Unlock the garage," I said. "I'm bringing in a new patient, and I don't want it to be noticed."

He held up his hands. "No new patients. I agreed to help only Elizabeth."

"But this is Jon Chandler. We've got to help him. He's nearly finished."

"Jon Chandler! Get him out of here! I'll take no responsibility for him. You weren't followed, were you?"

He wasn't going to bully me; my arm shot forward quickly as my temper flared. I seized his throat; his eyes bulged with disbelief. He resisted lamely; I could see he was too much of a coward to fight back.

"You're not in a position to argue," I said. "What you've already done is enough to put you away forever ... understand?"

I released my grip, and he nodded, then he kept nodding like he was an idiot who'd just realized how deep in he was. My gaze held no sympathy; he'd made his decision. He was too cowardly to live without Liz. If he expected roses to grow from his cowardice, he deserved punishment.

I slapped his face. "Get to it, man! Open that garage door and give me a hand."

Within an hour, we had Chandler under care in the basement. We were fortunate; he was the same blood type as Elizabeth, and we had enough. A slow transfusion was being administered to him, and we were monitoring his vital signs. Like Liz, his brain waves were an epileptic storm while his metabolism was a mere scratch above death. His face had become a gray-yellow bruise, while his eyes were swollen shut and his lips were puffed to monstrous size. I pulled back the covering and checked his chest; a volcanic eruption of purple-red scar tissue was healing over his heart. All in all, he was a gruesome sight, but a pleasing one. From experience, I knew that even ordinary mortals could recover from fairly hideous states, and I assumed that Chandler's blood powers would eventually become active and heal him more quickly.

Liz rested on a rollaway bed beside Jon. She was feverish and muttering as though in a nightmare. She hadn't regained full consciousness yet. Her face had healed and was alabaster pale. Her inheritance of supernatural beauty was taking over, or trying to. David's suturing work on her throat had created swelling and scarring like dark lightning bolts. Other parts of her body were mutilated and scarred as well. The manner in which David had removed areas of dead tissue and sealed wounds had caused me to doubt his skills as a plastic surgeon. I could only hope that vampiric healing and future operations would correct his errors. On the bright side, Liz showed strong signs. Her fangs were already well developed.

David was somewhat calmer, having accepted his fate. "The point I'm still not clear on is their vampiric inheritance," he said. "Why do you keep questioning what powers Liz will have? Could it be that she'll remain normal and have no thirst for blood?"

"She'll likely have a taste for it. Not a craving. She will drink it ladylike - like wine. Jon was possessed by a vampire, but he wasn't fully a vampire, so I can't be sure about Liz. Except that she will be a priestess in my Cult of the Millennium. Chandler was staked

while two spirits inhabited the body; the Baron was driven out while Chandler's spirit took refuge in his crystal. When I placed the crystal on the wound, the spirit reentered, and healing began. Jon had some powers of his own, and the powers he received from the Baron would've remained in his blood. He may never be able to use them fully. Only the Baron has the experience to command them fully, and he is gone."

"I have one last question," David said, his expression hopeful. "Will Liz still love me?"

"Of course she will. She'll know you saved her, helped her become a goddess, and love you all the more for it."

A shower and sleep improved my disposition, and I was off to the heart of the financial district to settle a land purchase and clean up some other matters. I'd been extremely fortunate in that when I set out to purchase the sacred grounds and the surrounding lands, I found that I already owned much of the territory. There was one additional parcel I wanted to pick up, a parcel that had been on the market for 15 years.

Parking in a downtown lot, I got out and smiled at the structure of gold-tinted glass towering over me. My dreams for the Cult of the Millennium had come true. I had my vampires, and I owned the land. I soared up to the clouds in my mind and in the elevator. My lawyer, George Drake, met me in his fortieth-floor office. I signed the papers and left, the proud owner of Burchell Lake, an Ontario ghost town.

The town cost almost nothing, and I wasn't worried about money anyway. I had money, Chandler had money. The ghost town I planned to have repaired as a residence for cult members. The priesthood or elite members would reside in another abandoned estate I owned. It was just outside of town. Repairs had been made here and there on the estate over the years. I had toyed with many ideas for it and had built some structures on the grounds, but I had never found a use for it. Then the Millennium Transmissions happened, and it became invaluable because of its location.

To David's credit, he procured an ambulance. It had been out of service for a while, but it was still adequate, since all we really needed it for was the trip to Burchell Lake. In the musty gloom of the garage, we transferred Jon Chandler and Liz to the ambulance beds. David went in and sealed up the house while I secured the passengers with canvas straps, then we were off on our way to the Millennium.

I took the wheel, mainly because I didn't trust David's driving. I was thinking that there was no room for foul-ups when Chandler began screaming in agony. Narrowly missing a Pepsi truck, I pulled over to the curb and stared daggers at David, whom I assumed was responsible. He was; he'd opened the curtain so he could look out the back as we drove, and a beam of sunshine had swept in on Chandler, reddening the skin on his face.

"Close that curtain, you idiot!" I snapped.

He did, and Chandler's face relaxed. I remained silent, watching as Chandler drifted back to the sleep of the undead. David trembled with embarrassment as I eased out from the curb and headed for the freeway.

In a summer heat wave, the city dropped behind us into a lake of haze, and we began a clip of freeway that passed some toylike bedroom communities, houses set neatly on small hills. Buildings shrank to colored boxes, and we hit a long blur of mixed forest. The faster I drove, the slower we seemed to be going, until finally the unchanging scenery made the world seem stationary. David mumbled a warning about police helicopters, which I ignored. I knew the police wouldn't stop an ambulance.

The forest broke at a hamlet, then a small town. We were beyond the reach of the city now and passing into tiny communities, all of them similar, whether they called

themselves villages, towns, or, in some cases, laughably small cities. Regency and Gothic houses and a heck of a lot of white paint, maple-lined streets, town halls of brick and stone blocks, clock towers, people fishing in roadside streams or loafing on Main Street.

Gambrel-roofed barns, hay rolls, grazing cattle, and horses separated the towns, and many more paved roads lined with modern country houses and mansions had been constructed along the rivers and lakes. Farmers still had most of the land, but they were outnumbered by people who had purchased new country homes. Many city people had discovered that it was cheaper to buy a mansion in the country than it was to buy an ordinary house in the city. I was one of those people, only my estate wasn't newly constructed, though it had seen some renovation.

Milford was the last town before Burchell Lake. A small town of 6,000, it had a rustic look. After we passed through it, we were in ghost country. As far as I knew, there was one other man who had an estate near Burchell Lake, and other than him, there weren't even squatters or Indians. Back when Burchell Lake lost its industry, it had died all the way. Mines have ghosts, and towns that rely heavily on mines end up ghosts.

The road into the ghost town was mostly dirt. It had been gravel over crumbled asphalt originally, but the stones were spread thin now. Blue weeds choked it in sections, and it was canopied by maples. At some bends, fallen branches and rotted logs bursting with wild flowers made it little more than a cow path. It probably would've been closed long ago if teenagers and rowdies hadn't kept it open with their drunken excursions to the lake. The rowdies also gave Burchell Lake the distinction of being the crime capital of the county, even though no one lived there.

We cruised through the town. It had an eerie feeling even in bright sunshine. The windows of the bleached buildings and houses all gaped with darkness and were fanged with jagged glass. An exhalation of cobwebs and rotted curtains led the mind to imagine twisted wraiths roaming within. Sagging porches, half-fallen swings, old wells, piles of discarded furniture, and the weeds and vines creeping over everything created a mournful effect. Even the sunlight was a suspension of time, deep as old amber.

Dead as the place was, I was optimistic concerning it; hard-working cult members would have it in shape in no time. Installing running water would be expensive. Phone lines, computers, and other connections with the outside world, I didn't want in the town. Isolation and mind control are two things I have never believed in, but to get in touch with the nature gods, the cult members would have to be alone.

The road to the estate was winding and pot-holed. I went up it at a snail's pace, burning with fury because I'd paid good money to have it fixed. Some brush had been cleared, and that was all. Deep tracks from the transports were still evident, meaning I was partly responsible for the damage. I'd ordered a number of extremely heavy objects trucked in.

At last, the estate appeared, almost buried behind hemlocks, black willows, and poplars. Portions of it were shrouded in ivy, but turrets, gables, and columns were visible along with the sparkle of windows. A rubble-stone wall ran alongside the road, keeping the grounds out of view. A big iron gate was hinged to two imitation Toltec stone warriors. The entire gate affair had been installed recently. I admired the mighty stone totems as I drove in. The drive was oval, and I followed it, viewing the trimmed lilacs beneath a front picture window and geraniums dripping with blood-red blossoms along the walk. High up in a dormer window, a face appeared, then vanished as I turned onto a narrow drive that led around back.

The grounds at the rear of the estate were immense, stretching off to the forest on one side and a cedar bog on the other. One hundred yards from the house, I'd planted a grove of widely spaced maples, named the sacred grove. At its heart stood three Doric columns, a massive lintel, and stone staircases. The structure was a partial reconstruction, built as a likeness of the ancient palace of Minos on Crete. The chambers beneath it were to be the home of the vampiric members of the Cult of the Millennium.

I parked and switched off the engine. Getting out, I stood in the shade of the mansion and waited. Shortly, my groundskeeper and handyman, Jackson, came out a rear service entrance. Jackson was large and bony; a distortion of his body and features as a whole gave him an Oriental air, but he was really of British descent. He had no real intelligence, yet he was clever in every way other than the philosophical. Right and wrong were whatever the boss said they were, and it was that quality that I liked about Jackson.

David hopped out. "Well, we have a servant. Maybe it'll be comfortable here after all."

I frowned and stepped up to greet Jackson. David would find out who the servant was soon enough. Thinking it paramount that we get our patients to the safety of their chambers, I set my mind to work, considering how to keep them out of the light. I decided to bring their coffins up and place them inside.

As I was pumping Jackson's hand, he gave me a confused look. "You've brought the people for the grove?" he said, as if they were plants or statues. "The holy people?"

"The holy people," I said, then I clapped him on the back, and my head filled with the joy of a dream come true.

CHAPTER 10: GHOST TOWN

Danny Waters gazed out the front window of Jack's Pumps & Billiards. Cornfields rested in the warmth of summer. He felt just about as idle. Across the highway, a weeping willow swayed in the steam of the muggy afternoon, and like it, he wouldn't move voluntarily. Guitar music machine-gunned down the long hall from a brand-new chrome-grilled jukebox at the back. Rigged surround sound cooked in his head. His long dark hair and body swayed slightly with the beat. As the song came to a screeching halt, two green-blue pickup trucks skidded into the parking lot.

Danny turned and hollered into the din. "The Bay Boys are here!"

A small gang of teenage boys who'd been playing pool and video games answered the call by putting away their cues and access cards and shuffling up to the window. Outside, five Bay Boys had gotten out of their cars and were smoking cigarettes and weed and talking in a circle. They were ordinary in appearance, wearing torn and faded jeans, sloppy T-shirts, baseball caps, short hair, and some had earrings.

Danny looked to Joey. "They want either dope or a fight."

Joey tossed his head, throwing back ragged blond hair. "Neither, because I know they're selling some strange Dust. And they never fight before dark."

"Maybe they came back to get even," Danny said. "With Jack, I mean, for barring them from this joint."

"No," Joey said. "They got their own hangout, and it's a lot classier than this dive."

A fist of dust drifted by on the hot summer wind; the huddle broke up, and the biggest Bay Boy, a guy named Freddy Woods, singled out Danny and waved for him to come out.

A blast of controlled distortion and fiery metal notes came out the door with Danny. He walked up to Freddy, careful to keep his look bored and unconcerned. "What's up? You pop by to hear some real sounds?"

"Not to hear that metal shit, especially the stuff you guys play." Freddy shoved the guy beside him. "Put on one of our new tunes, some hip-hop maybe."

Davey obeyed, leaping in the cab of the pickup with the agility of a monkey. A crash of percussion followed, and a line was drawn. Danny had a wall of metal backing him, and Freddy had a tower of drums and vocals.

"Thought you guys hated Milford?" Danny said.

"We do. We're on our way to Burchell Lake. Heard from the Skids that some weird Satanists are moving in out there."

"They're what you call the New Millennium Gang," Danny said. "Only a few of them are around, so far."

"A few of them are enough for us to pound out. You can come out and watch them get it if you want."

Danny nodded. He knew Freddy didn't like to do his own bragging. He wanted someone else to make him a legend, telling how five or six Bay Boys stomped hell out of a couple of scrawny Satanists. "Some of us might be popping out later. Beating on a couple of them isn't much good, though. Word is that a whole cult is moving in. It's that Rampa guy. The one with the stone monsters for a gate. He's bringing the cult in."

"Really," Freddy said. "I had a look at his place, it's done up pretty neat. He must be loaded, like my pop. What do you figure he's up to?"

"We're the nearest family to him. That's why a couple of church people came up to talk to my mom this morning. They say this Rampa guy owes a big debt to a New Age devil, so he bought Burchell Lake and gave it to Satanists. Milford town council wants him out of there, but technically, he's the mayor of Burchell Lake."

"Burchell Lake is Bay Boy property," Freddy said. "We'll defend it, like the warriors of God, pounding out the devil worshipers."

"I don't know if it's worth a fight," Danny said. "We'll always be able to use the lake, and the Satanists aren't likely to complain about our music. They know about growing herbs and probably new kinds of dope, too. It's that church congregation that blocks us from loafing downtown or playing our music. You know what their biggest worry is? It's that we'll get into orgies with these New Millennium chicks and spread AIDS."

"Girls, I never thought about that," Freddy said. "What we'll do is start by pounding out any guys out there. When we meet their girls, we'll apologize and tell them we'll bring beer for any orgies they have."

"Sounds fine to me," Danny said, although he privately thought Freddy had rocks in his head.

"So we'll see you out there?"

"Yeah, later we'll come out."

As Freddy and his boys tore off, Danny and the pool hall gang shuffled back inside to discuss the issue. It turned out the rest of the guys weren't partial to following Freddy

anywhere, and especially not to Burchell Lake.

"It's a trap," Johnny said as screaming guitar notes climbed like a vine on the stone wall behind him. Deep lyrics about suicide caused him to think. "I bet the Bay Boys are carrying. Freddy has a pistol, a Colt 2000. He pointed it at me once."

"I don't think they're planning on doing any shooting," Danny said.

George spoke up. "Maybe we get out there, and the cult people are gone, then the Bay Boys ambush us."

It was Arty who cinched it. "Look at it this way. The Bay Boys wanna be black, or they wanna be bad. They're wannabes no matter what they wanna be. Imitating some old, dead gangs of idiots from L.A. and Toronto, they're followers, and we'll be more followers if we follow them around."

"I'm going out with Joey, anyway," Danny said. "Somebody has to take a look at these Satanists. We'll take the dirt bikes in case we have to escape."

Red bled in the sky, tinting the haze trails revolving from the hot sun. Danny and Joey roared along a forest trail on their dirt bikes and emerged by a floating sedge meadow at the edge of the lake. A quarter mile more, and they were in a clearing. A pigeon hawk soared overhead, and moths got in their eyes. Coming down the trail between the forest and the cedar bog at the edge of Allan Rampa's property, they came upon an enormous stone wheel in the grass.

They stopped. "What's that?" Joey said.

"Someone hauled it over from the mansion," Danny said, pointing to a trail in the grass. "The way it has chunks broken off it and patterns that look ancient, I figure it's a marker. It marks one of Rampa's sacred spots. The church crowd is already afraid of his sacred spots, saying they're spots where demons appear."

"Uh-oh, here comes Rampa's loony servant," Joey said, nodding to the distant figure of Jackson. "He's a big sucker. If the Bay Boys pick a fight with him, they'll probably end up buried under this wheel."

Ripping up grass and earth, they roared off and followed a faint bush trail down to the outskirts of the ghost town. Since they wanted to approach unnoticed, they parked behind a collapsed mill building and set off on foot for the center of town.

Strains of guitar music came to their ears and rose in volume with the breeze. It was heavy alternative rock, a new tune, and not the sort of music the Bay Boys would play. The vocals lifted to a haunted howl, and the destructive slamming of the guitars seemed to fit with the crumbling town.

If people were moving in, there were no other signs. Hawkweed, burdock, shrubs, and fallen branches choked the side streets. They passed buildings thick with rot and moss and a shed so shrouded in climbing poison ivy that it could easily be mistaken for a small rise.

Spikes and rusty nails studded a pile of rotted timbers blocking their path. They went over a heap of broken red bricks and found that the rubble had been cleared from Main Street and stuffed in the alleys. A neat cleanup job was underway. Only last week, the street, which was the town's only paved road, had been pocked with huge potholes. Now it was spread with a thick layer of gravel.

The music was coming from down around the bend. The old town hall crouched there at the heart of town. Danny took the lead, noting that the cult of Allan Rampa had only

been working on fixing up Main Street. Warped boards and petrified shingles had been removed, and new planks and posts gleamed like white teeth on some of the buildings. Fixing up the town hall first was the natural course to take; it had space for a large group, and since the church steeple had tumbled, the hall clock tower was the only real landmark remaining in the town.

Staying in the shadow of the building walls, they came to the corner and halted. Cautiously, they peeked around. Freddy, the Bay Boys, and a gang of greasy-haired Skids were sitting on new benches placed in the parkette out front of the town hall. It was an odd sight; the stone face of the hall had been blasted clean, and flowering weeds and wildflowers grew in patches across the parkette, almost like the work of a gardener. Cars and trucks were parked in a circle, and the loud music was coming from big speakers in the back of a truck belonging to the Bay Boys. They had beer, but it didn't seem like much of a party; the boys were all sitting, toking and smoking and giving the refurbished hall gloomy glances.

"The Bay Boys won't hassle us while the Skids are here," Danny said. "Let's go down and see what's depressing everyone."

"It's obvious," Joey replied. "No one to beat up."

Gravel crunching like toast underfoot, Danny and Joey walked down the middle of the road to the park. Freddy spied them immediately and walked through the weeds to meet them. The Superman crest on his T-shirt didn't suit him; he looked more like Bizarro.

"So what's the score?" Danny said.

"Score is that the Satanists might be hip to our action," Freddy said. "We're waiting to see if any show. If any do, then we-- He picked the blossom off a tall buttercup and crushed it in his hand.

"Did you search the hall?" Danny said.

"Nope. It's dark in there, and the Skids say that Satanists are backstabbers. If they got half a chance, you'd be hit from behind and spiked to a cobwebbed wall."

"The Skids are scaring them off with that music," Joey said.

Freddy shook his head no. "That's not what they say. The music is supposed to draw them to us, like moths when they get dizzy and come into your headlights to get squashed."

Danny frowned, "It won't work. Boring drumbeats, flute playing like the pipes of Pan, or weird chanting is what would draw them."

"My brother's got a tape of chanting Cree Indians," Freddy said quickly. "I wish I had brought it along. Wait a minute, I got an idea. We can do some chanting."

Spinning on his heels, eyes alight, Freddy hollered at the others. "Turn off that shit music! All right! Everybody! There are a couple of Satanists around somewhere, 'cause Armando saw them earlier. What we're gonna do is make a circle, dance, and do some Indian chants. If Satanists are here, they're sure to come out and join us."

Some of the Skids looked at Freddy like he might be crazy; others knew he was crazy. Maybe it was his Superman crest, but they still obeyed him and converged to form a circle at the center of the parkette.

"Get your filthy hand away from me," Freddy said as Davey tried to hold his hand. "There will be no hand-holding, just dancing and chanting. Get over to the truck and put on that

new drumbeat I mixed.”

Sunset's blood-red sky had purple at the edges, and twilight was already giving birth to grotesque shadows. Hoods of darkness crowded the alleyways, and it was impossible to guess which were illusions and which might be real Satanists. The music player in Freddy's truck began to blare, a steady beat, and the boys began to dance, chant, and howl like Indians. In the beginning, they were little more than a shouting mob, but as they danced, self-hypnosis took over, and their voices began to blend into a theme.

Sweat beaded their faces, colored like shades of Indian corn in the twilight. Most of them were high, getting off on refining their howls and chants into sensible disorder. They didn't notice the moon rising or how quickly the night was falling, and they were unaware of the river of mist creeping out of the forest and gathering in the streets.

Ten minutes raced by, and the chant reached its crescendo, then the beat ended. The boys stopped and looked around the circle, checking to see if any Satanists or possibly the devil himself had joined them.

“Hey! We called up a spook fog!” Danny hollered. “Look at that!”

The circle broke as they flung sweat from their foreheads and staggered out to look around. Mist ran in patches, wisps, and tentacles through the whole town. In places, the last beams of the sun cast eerie gold columns against the purple-and-black palace of early night. Only the parkette was clear, and, surprising as the situation was, the boys were unconcerned. They saw no devils, so they began to mill about, popping open tins of beer and lighting weed and cigarettes.

Things were settling; no one was expecting anything. Davey went over to Freddy's pickup and turned on the headlights. The beams cut through the mist, obscuring the town hall, and revealed someone standing on the steps.

“Hey!” Joey yelled. “It's a Satanist!”

They all turned to the hall and saw the figure illumined in the beams. The face was obscured by shadow, and they assumed the person was a man. He wore a hooded black robe with flared sleeves, tied with a rope braided from blue, white, and red strands.

Chanting, dancing, weed, and the spooky mist had drained the boys of fight, except for Freddy, whose temperament was sadistic. “Come on over for a beer,” he yelled. “We won't hurt you. We were just about to drink a toast to the devil.”

The hooded figure said nothing; mist swirled and tunneled in the headlamp beams. The other boys began to whisper to one another as Freddy took some slow paces toward the steps.

An owlish cry echoed from the woods, and then there was loud stamping, sounding like feet pounding the floor at a concert hall.

Freddy spun around. “Davey, shut off the music!”

“I'm not playing any sounds. No one is.”

The pounding continued and grew in volume; the sound of a marching host; enough pounding feet for an army of thousands of Satanists to be coming out of the dark.”

“Let's get out of here!” hollered one of the Skids.

Shadows in the mist transformed to Satanists in the boys' minds, and the warm glow of beer and dope became a hair-raising charge of fear. In panic, they broke and ran for their vehicles.

"Wait, stop!" Freddy yelled. "It's a trick! The Satanists are playing a disc to scare us!"

Doors slammed, engines growled, headlights came on, and tires booted gravel as the Skids and some of the Bay Boys fled. A minute later, only Freddy, four Bay Boys, Danny, and Joey remained. The hooded Satanist also remained, unmoving in the funneling mist by the steps.

"This is bullshit!" Freddy yelled. He dashed to his car, snatched his Colt 2000 pistol from under the seat, and headed back to the steps.

"I don't like it," Danny said to Joey. "If Freddy shoots that guy, it'll mean big trouble."

"He's bluffing," Joey said.

"Come down here and drop that hood!" Freddy commanded, waving the gun.

The figure in black had turned and was ascending the steps. Stopping, it turned and came down. At the bottom of the steps in the bright headlights, the hood was pushed back. Lustrous dark hair spilled out; it was the face of a beautiful young woman; her skin was glowing white, and her lips formed a cherry heart. It was Liz Kanter's face.

Freddy whistled long and loud. "Don't be shy, baby. We'll give you what you want. Say, why don't you open that robe and show us what you've got?"

Danny looked to Joey and whispered. "Keep back. It's a trap or something. Freddy is forgetting that someone had to be playing that music; there has to be more of them watching."

"Gotcha."

Liz spoke, her voice a silky invitation. "I need someone to help me undress." She undid the braid rope fastening her robe and gave them a quick flash of her breasts before closing it back up.

Freddy nearly keeled over. The other Bay Boys, Danny and Joey, couldn't believe it was happening.

"Go over and take her robe," Freddy said to Davey. "Put it in the car for now."

A panting parody of teenage lust, Davey scooted over. Freddy glanced around, trying to make sure no male Satanists were lurking in the mist. He saw a million ghosts, none of them quite real, and when he turned back, Davey had come to a halt in front of Liz. He stood there like a statue.

"Don't just stand there! Take her robe!" Freddy yelled.

Davey refused to move, and Liz opened her robe wide. Everyone strained to see, but shadows, glare, and Davey blocked their view. Only Davey saw, and he came to life with a scream, one that was cut short by Liz's hand, which shot out and caught him by the throat.

Davey was short, and she lifted him so his legs dangled and kicked at the air. Pulling him close, she clamped her other hand over his head and twisted it around like it was a light bulb in a socket. Vertebrae popped loudly, his eyes bulged, and a bloody tongue snaked out of his gaping mouth. There were stunned gasps from the boys as she dropped him in a heap on the cement.

The Bay Boys ran through the weeds and mist swifter than ghosts in flight, turned on their engines, and fishtailed off down the gravel road. Freddy was the only Bay Boy who remained with Danny and Joey, who were taking quiet steps backward into the darkness.

"You killed a member of my gang!" Freddy screamed hysterically. "No one kills a Bay Boy!"

Freddy shook all over. He raised the Colt and fired, hitting her in the chest area with a slug. A wet sticky hole exploded in her robe, but she didn't collapse. With his free hand, Freddy rubbed his eyes, then his face firmed up, and he smoked four more bullets into her. The slugs ripped down her chest and belly, splattering up blood and gore like licks of bursting mud. She staggered back and hissed, but she didn't die.

One bullet was left in the clip, and she was advancing. Freddy took careful aim with his shaky hand. The hammer struck, and a bullet smashed into Liz's forehead. It took a chunk of scalp and bone right off, leaving a section of brain exposed.

She went down on her knees. Freddy grunted with satisfaction, then with horrified amazement. A milky substance was gathering in the wound, bubbling as it sealed it.

She bowed her head as if in prayer, then she cast off her robe and rose. Her skin glowed white, and huge purple-black scars showed. Scars jagged as lightning bolts; she looked like the victim of an axe murderer come back to life, and she was advancing.

Danny and Joey remained rooted to the spot, and they were both too frightened to choke out words. As they watched, she suddenly took off with a power of transvection, flying through the air to Freddy. Freddy stumbled to one knee and put up his hands to block her, but she landed in front of him and swept his hands and the gun away.

She seized Freddy by the throat, and her long nails cut into the flesh, slicing cartilage, muscle, and tendons. Her expression cold and wicked, she stared directly into his fear-widened pupils. He was still breathing, and watching, transfixed, as her nails worked like scalpels. Skillfully, she plucked out a large vein, the jugular vein, and she worked it into a loop without damaging it, then her nails cut more flesh, and she squeezed out his two carotid arteries.

Her lips curled back in a snarl, revealing fangs, and in a calculated movement, she used a crooked nail to sever all three veins. Blood spurted into her mouth; she forced Freddy down and sank her fangs in deep. His body jerked and squirmed, but her lock on it held.

Freddy fell limp and dead, and she continued feeding, making gross slurping noises and sounds of guttural swallowing.

Having seen enough, Danny and Joey fled into the misty night, praying they wouldn't run headlong into more vampires. They were off the cleared road and on lumpy, split ground that seemed to shift underfoot. Tall weeds rose before them, appearing out of deep shadows and heaps of trash. Side streets and alleys were blocked and whited out; the ghost town had become a looming hazard, jutting with treacherous decay.

Not wanting to get caught up or spikes in their feet, they ducked back to the open road, flying half a block through gravel before coming to a wreck. A truck lay in the gravel; the Skids had rolled it there and abandoned it. Its faint shine made it an outsider in the dust-coated town.

They halted for the barest moment and were about to dodge left when a shift in the patches of mist alerted them. An unknown something sparkled with rainbow colors and slithered with a hideous fluidity. It was long and arched, insect-like and more of a ghost than real.

But it was real enough to send them stumbling back, and like a strong wind, fear sent them scrambling around and past the pickup. They never glanced back to see it skittering in the stones behind them; sprinting with the energy of bandits, they

swallowed up several blocks, finally coming to a safe halt under a moldy slab of overhanging roof.

The silence cut to the bone; trails of fog drifted through crouched, broken buildings, but most of the mist had thinned. Ahead, the street was a dim corridor dead-ending at a wall of night.

In their haste, they'd lost their bearings, and were trying to guess their way to the bikes. As they studied the street side, shadows coalesced farther up the road. Bubbles of red floating on the gloom caught their eyes, and they stared as a robed group appeared.

Initially, the sight inspired amazement more than terror. The road seemed to cast an illusion of medieval times and a group of monks.

They hesitated, unsure whether to escape or greet them, and after several moments, it was something odd about their gate that branded them as dark forces. Their walk was lifeless and as measured as the beat of a metronome - a dead march. To greet them would be to approach witches, specters, or the walking dead.

A lone figure walked in the lead, dressed in a wine robe, the hood thrown back. Vague features gained detail; it was impossible to tell if it was male or female. The eyes were glowing ochre, and if the nose wasn't in shadow, then it was no more than a gaping hole. Vines and weeds were matted into its hair, and saliva of slime and blood oozed from its lipless mouth.

Danny and Joey looked at one another, and they didn't waste any words. Spinning on their heels, they ran into an alley. Leaping, climbing, using any handholds and footholds available, they made it through the obstacle course of rubble. The alley opened on a small field of weeds, and they could see the old mill building on the far side. Moving swiftly to the back of the mill, they reached their bikes. Danny paused to vomit, and then they started the engines and roared off, both of them silently swearing to stay away from Burchell Lake.

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Danny Waters rested in the shade of a cottonwood in the front yard of the stone mansion his father had purchased fifteen years ago, back before a shattered local economy had drained the lifeblood out of nearby Burchell Lake. Down the road, a dark Chevy sedan kicked up dust as it approached. Danny spotted his pal Joey in the passenger seat and Nathan Sharp at the wheel. He figured Nathan Sharp looked exactly like a Nathan Sharp; tall and handsome, but with a foxlike face that made him the sort you wouldn't trust with your girlfriend. Nathan's eyes were gray; his hair sprinkled with silver on the short-cropped sides and black at the widow's peak. Although Nathan was a Mounty, he was rarely in uniform. His everyday clothing served as a uniform; he always wore dark trousers, a blue shirt, and a Western tie. His gun was an old Taurus police revolver that had as much polish on its exterior as it had metal. He shunned newer weapons like Tasers and pepper spray.

Nathan blasted the horn as he drove up the steep driveway, and Danny popped up and went out to greet him. Burchell Lake remained a fright zone. Nathan wouldn't be able to deal with it, but Danny knew he had to warn him.

Joey got out quickly, his face a tense mask. He was obviously very uncomfortable. Danny had told him Nathan would be difficult if given such an unbelievable story.

Nathan got out slowly, acting about as official as a cowboy stopping in at the saloon. He didn't have his notebook in hand. He left it on the dash, and Danny took that to mean he hadn't believed any of Joey's story.

"Thought your hair'd be white, Danny," Nathan said.

"How's that?"

"Mine would be if I saw the stuff Joey's talking about."

"Don't worry, I saw it."

"You boys are bad actors. I should charge you with mischief. Sending me out to view a body that isn't there."

"What about blood? You should have found blood?" Danny said.

"What would blood be evidence of? It would just mean that Freddy and the boys were fighting out there."

Having no answer, the boys shrugged in the face of Nathan's supreme confidence, then the front door burst open and Danny's fifteen-year-old sister, Lana, dashed out. She was followed by Danny's father, Morris Waters, a dark-complexioned, stocky man. Morris was about as rushed in his manner as Nathan. He came down the walk slowly while Lana ran ahead.

Lana beamed, her smile full. "Freddy had his throat ripped out," she said. "He'll never call me sugar boobs again."

Nathan laughed. "Don't count on it. I think Freddy is around somewhere."

"Here about the vampires, Nathan?" Morris said.

"Yeah, but I'm surprised there was nothing on the radio," Nathan said, alluding to the fact that Morris Waters owned CLBQ, the Milford radio station.

"Oldies, country music, and local news, that's what my listeners want," Morris said. "I'll be in trouble if I start a vampire scare and it turns out to be nothing."

"So, you don't really believe in the vampire?" Nathan said.

"I believe something weird happened to Freddy and Davey. I'm not sure what. Guess it's up to you to find out."

"Not really. They've only been gone three days, and Mavis Beasley says she saw them last night at sunset, walking along the old Burchell Lake rail line. The whole thing may be a clever hoax. I think the boys got dope from some of the cult people and are reporting hallucinations."

Danny looked to Joey and raised his eyebrows. It was clear that Nathan would be of no help, especially if he believed Mavis Beasley, who regularly reported UFOs.

"Hmm," Morris said. "If that new cult is into drugs, you'll have to investigate."

"It's not my territory," Nathan said. "It's not anybody's territory. There's no tax money to pay for police work there. The Milford police, the provincial police, or Mounties, whoever happens to be passing through, police Burchell Lake. I received a letter from Mr. Rampa, the new mayor of the town, saying he is fixing it up for his religious colony. They are New Age Wiccans according to the letter, and they sometimes hold outdoor ceremonies to honor the nature gods. It's all legal, so once reports start coming in about Satanists in the woods, we'll just phone Mr. Rampa to verify that it's a religious ceremony."

"I don't know what to say about the town on my radio shows," Morris said. "It wouldn't be fair to attack the new people, but my regular listeners are mostly Christians, so I can't say anything good about cultists. I'm sure there'll be trouble from people who want the Wiccans out."

"Trouble means the town council comes to me," Nathan said. "Right now, I'm working with the Milford Police, investigating that new nudist colony up near Cedardale Beach. A bunch of reverends and councilors are upset, so they have us peeking through the bushes, hoping we can make some arrests. That's one reason I'm not rushing into this cult business. I know the council will have us out there in the woods soon enough."

"I see," Morris said.

"By the way," Nathan said. "I passed Lucas Wickens on the road. He says he can find Freddy by following the birds."

"Ornithomancy," Morris said. "Lucas claims a medicine man taught him how to track people by watching the patterns of birds in flight."

Nathan grinned. "I call it a wild goose chase."

"Maybe the Indians invented it as a way to make learning about birds fun," Lana said.

"You're probably right," Morris said. "We can go out with Lucas, but if we find Freddy, it'll be luck and not birds."

"Freddy always was for the birds," Danny said, "but we still have to find him and see what really happened."

"You can call me and report your findings," Nathan said. "Right now, I have to take off and hunt nudists."

Danny, Joey, and Lana watched Nathan turn off the drive to the highway and disappear under the canopy of maples. Joey and Danny felt at the mercy of forces beyond their control. Something evil was happening, and the forces of law and order couldn't see it to deal with it. People tended to see only their own kind of evil, so Danny knew it was a matter of finding people who knew of this kind of evil. They were turning back to the house when a flash of sunlight on chrome caught their eyes. A bicycle was moving down the highway.

"Here comes Lucas," Lana said, "on his bird-watching bike."

"He sure couldn't follow any birds in that old Ford of his. It sounds like a bucket of bolts in a paint shaker when he starts it up."

The deep-tread mountain bike climbed the Waters' driveway easily. As a cyclist, Lucas was an obvious dilettante. He was overweight, and Danny figured that his various bulges would have earned him the nickname Lumpy at any high school. He was much too old for high school now, and other than his tropic-palm shirt, his most noticeable characteristic was that he was balding and trying to hide it by combing a huge shank of hair over from his temple.

Lucas came to a halt and put the bike on its kickstand. His head shone, waxed by perspiration, and his hair fell in a big wet lick on his left side. Pulling out a handkerchief, he dried his forehead. "Is Morris here?" he said.

"He heard you were coming, so he went inside to change," Danny said.

"Good. I guess you're all coming out with me?"

"Sure. Why not?" Joey said.

"What we find may not be pleasant," Danny said. "And we'll have to be careful."

"Really," Lucas said, his eyes shining like coins. "You're warning me. Now there's a switch. You wouldn't want to know about some of the things I've led the police to."

"I guess it's you who's leading them on their search for nudists," Lana said.

"No. I hate nudity. Couldn't stand to watch it," Lucas said. "You should get dressed, little girl. You put me in mind of a nudist. Bare legs can be a bare invitation."

"In your case, Lucas, bare legs are a bare invitation for birds to nest," Lana said.

Morris emerged from the house. He'd changed and was carrying a canteen and a can of bug repellent.

"When we find the corpse, we can drive the flies away with that," Lana said.

"I'm not quite that morbid," Morris said. "I brought it in case we get near swampy areas."

Lucas took a small canvas pack from the carrier of his bike and opened the flap. "I have a snake-bite kit, super energy chocolate, salt tablets, you name it. This roll-on bug repellent is the best. That spray does nothing."

"You'd think we were going on a safari," Danny said. "I go out in the fields all the time, and I've never needed a survival kit."

"It's different when you're young," Lucas said. "Get a little older, and you can't take chances. When I was twenty, I would have found Freddy by running every trail between here and Burchell Lake."

Danny turned and squinted into the sun. He smiled, certain the only running Lucas did when he was younger was to escape bullies like Freddy. His moment of amusement faded, and a milky haze was forming around the sun. It was the sort of humid sky that came with the hottest days, and with the mercury already well up, it was going to be a sticky meltdown in the fields.

Lana giggled, causing Danny to look back at Lucas. He'd taken a forked stick, a divining rod, out of his pack, and was looking down it like a surveyor getting a line of sight. "This is no time for fooling," Lucas said to Lana.

"I know what she's giggling about," Danny said.

"What's that?" Lucas said.

"One time, this guy named Allen Getty came over with a divining rod, and we went around with him looking for water. Then Dad came home and told us that this whole area is honeycombed with underground caves and streams. If that guy's rod worked right, he would've found water just about everywhere."

"I see," Lucas said as Lana giggled some more, "only I'm not looking for a well dig. I use this rod for following the lines of flight. When you track birds, you have to be accurate."

"There's something to sight on," Morris said, pointing to the dark shape of a turkey vulture wheeling in the sky to the south.

Lucas stiffened, his movements unwinding slowly as he followed the vulture with his divining rod. It spiraled up and went out of view in the haze.

"We go this way. Turkey vultures don't usually come up this far, so it's a rare sighting and important," Lucas said, pointing in a direction about thirty degrees to the left of where the vulture vanished.

"Your line of sight is sure different from mine," Danny said.

"I know the angles," Lucas said.

"That's odd, a vulture being up here," Morris said.

"They're not all as uncommon as you might think," Lucas said. "We're a long way northeast of their territorial band. They venture up here sometimes. Vultures are a great bird to follow, especially when you're looking for corpses."

"Maybe it found Freddy's corpse," Lana said.

"I hope not," Lucas said. "I don't want this vampire stuff to be true. I heard about a town in Mexico that was destroyed by a nest of vampires. The exterminators went in and killed everyone with fire."

"You mean there are people who exterminate vampires?" Danny said.

"There are people who are experts on them," Lucas said. He stopped and rifled a side pocket of his pack, coming out with some dog-eared business cards. "I have the cards of some occult specialists here."

"Could I borrow those cards?" Morris said. "I might want to talk to some of those people. Maybe even interview them on the radio if the situation gets worse."

"Sure," Lucas said, handing Morris the cards.

Morris looked at the top card; Mike Wilde was the name on it, and there was a list of strange happenings he had investigated.

Lucas got himself prepared and then led the way as they set off in the direction of the turkey vulture. Moving in a single file, they went down the rise to an open field. There they fanned out in a V-formation with Lucas as the lead goose, and their aspect was more that of country people out for a walk than a search party. Perhaps they should have been looking for bodies in the crab grass instead of the sky, but as it was, they were being led by a stick and a bird.

An aerial view of the territory would show a patchwork of clearings and forest leading up to Burchell Lake; at the end of the first clearing, they came to snowberry bushes, rowed at the edge of a forested tract. The vulture never wheeled back out of the haze, so they gave up on it and went down a trail. Evergreens towered overhead, sunbeams made heavenly spotlights in places, and the cool shade was home to some mosquitoes. Although blackbirds and finches darted by, Lucas never tried to sight by them; he just marched ahead dutifully until the trail opened at another field.

It was a meadow, fragrant with the ferment of summer greenery and undulating with tall weeds. They moved through islands of wild carrot and goldenrod to a sea of clover. Golden-winged warblers, meadowlarks, wrens, gray jays, and monarch butterflies were bursting with song and flitting in the rising breeze. Lucas began to follow flight paths, trying to get a direction, and he looked silly, halting here and there to track a lark or jay with his forked rod. Sometimes Lucas would cup his hand against his brow and gaze off to the far end of the meadow, his expression mystical, as if he might have spotted the lost continent of Lemuria, cradle of all civilization, out there somewhere in the heat shimmers.

The journey had been mostly without conversation, mainly because no one wanted to interfere with Lucas' supposed powers of ornithomancy, but now Lucas raised a hand as a signal for discussion, and they gathered in a huddle.

"The direction I get is to the closed CNR tracks," Lucas said. "That's where Mavis says she spotted Freddy."

"Amazing," Danny said. "You must have been tracking one of Mavis' parrots?"

"Don't get smart," Lucas said.

"Look," Lana said, pointing to a small cloud of blackbirds descending on a distant trees.

"We have a powerful sign there," Lucas said. "Let's move."

Lucas began to pace across the clearing, his hips slashing from side to side like a speed walker's. The others followed, and they came to a thick band of saplings at the edge of the trees and pressed through to denser brush. Thorns bit at them as they made their way to the open woods. Bright sunshine and a body of water sparkled at the center of the trees.

Rather than Freddy, they found a pond ringed by yellow birches. Blackbirds chirped frenetically in two oaks on the far side of the pond. The scene itself was idyllic. Two swans were afloat among lily pads in the clear spring-fed pond. Dragonflies hovered near the shore.

"Maybe they're hiding underwater, breathing through reeds," Lana said.

"Guess we're on the wrong track here," Lucas said. "We might as well head over to the tracks."

Using his divining rod or his mental maps, Lucas didn't say which, but he led them to a trail that took them over to the abandoned tracks. They went over a ditch, up to the rotten ties, and began to stroll down the rusted, weed-covered tracks. It was hazy on the line, and they couldn't see far; in many places, it was only the grade that revealed they were on an abandoned rail line. It didn't seem at all likely that Freddy or Davey would come walking out of the haze. What seemed likely was that the hunt was a waste of time.

An old supply shack appeared at the side of the tracks. It was dilapidated, with opaque plastic sheets tacked to the windows. Some streaks of paint revealed that the structure had once been fire red, though now it was mostly bleached gray wood.

"If a couple of boys wanted to hide out near Burchell Lake, this would be the perfect place for it," Lucas said.

"Not really," Morris said. "There are many abandoned buildings, some of them a fair bit better than this shack."

"Come on, we'll take a look," Lana said. "They may have been in there."

Hopping in a single file across a tiny ditch, they left the tracks and walked up to the shack. A rusty lock was on the door, but it wasn't fastened. Lucas took command and was about to open the door, then he looked back to say something to the others and saw a flash of black in the sky.

"Hey," Lucas said, "I think our vulture just flew over. You, people, check the shack. I want to see if I can sight him."

"If the vulture is here, it must mean the shack is the place to check. This is the end of the line," Danny said.

"That's not my feeling," Lucas said as he walked away, staring up at the blurred sun.

Morris looked at Lucas, shrugged his shoulders, and stepped up to take off the lock. Rust coated his fingertips as he removed it. Frowning, he dropped it in the dirt and paused to clean his fingers with a Kleenex. The door creaked open, and some flakes of rust showered off the hinges. A putrid smell leaked out, and Morris peeked inside; enough light was shining through cracks and the open door for him to see something repulsive on the floor. Partly because of fright, and because Lana was behind him, he slammed the door shut.

"You don't want to see what's in there, Lana," Morris said.

"Come on, Dad. Don't play games," Lana said, then she wormed around him, pulled the door open a crack, and squeezed inside.

Morris threw up his arms. Lana screamed, fell back, knocked the door open wide, and scrambled out. Gagging from the foul odor and gasping at what she'd seen, she bent over and held her knees.

Danny and Joey didn't hesitate. They rushed into the shack and glanced around. Their eyes fell on the carcass of a large animal on the plank floor. Closer inspection showed that it had been a white-tailed deer. Now it was desiccated, spotted with mold in parts; its legs were shriveled into unnatural bends like blackened pipe cleaners. Toadstools grew on its sunken belly. A powerful, earthy stench like the rot of an open grave radiated from it.

Morris entered, carrying a long stick he'd grabbed outside. He prodded at the carcass, and the skin cracked like parchment, revealing crumbling flesh and gray mold. There were no feasting ants or maggots.

"What do you make of it, Dad?" Danny said.

"The blood has been drained and the head taken. Looks like the work of Satanists, people who use blood and skulls for rituals of some sort."

"What about vampires? Would they take animal blood?" Joey said.

"I don't know. Let's ask Lucas," he said. He turned, looked out the door, and saw only Lana.

"Where's Lucas?" Joey said.

Lana pointed to the woods. "He's gone off in search of his vulture."

Danny stepped back out; he'd had enough of the foul odor. Gazing at the woods, he saw heavy mist rolling in the trees. Thick as dry ice at a concert, it whited out nearly everything. "If Lucas went far, we may never find him," he said.

Morris stepped out. "It's clearer by the tracks. This mist is a ground creeper. We can go over by those boulders and wait. If we go in after him, we'll only get separated and lost."

While his eyes had been on the sky, Lucas had unwittingly walked into the fog, and even when he did notice it, he paid it little attention. He could still see his turkey vulture; it was a black streak appearing now and again just over the treetops. He couldn't quite make it out, but it had to be a vulture to dive and soar as it did.

A short walk took him to a limestone bluff. The crater below was mist-filled, but a solid path led to the bottom. He guessed that it was a spot where an open-pit mine had been abandoned after a minimum of excavation.

Lucas thought about returning for the others before heading down. It came to him that they might be afraid of the mist, and he saw a black streak swoop down into the crater. Fascinated, he started down the path, figuring the others would have sense enough to wait for him at the shack.

The dark bird streaked by again, and this time he recognized it - not a vulture at all. It was a bat as big as a vulture.

The idea of a bat with the wingspan of a vulture caused Lucas' flesh to crawl. He decided it was unwise to follow such a creature. He stopped, and as he did, he heard a low growl

at the top of the bluff. A bear or a wolf, he didn't want to confront; keeping his steps quiet, he headed down the trail.

Toward the bottom, the trail grew hazardous. The rock was damp, slippery, and trickling with water. Massive chunks leaned precariously at the edge where wide fissures had ripped the stone. Whole sections of rust-colored rock had tumbled in places, and at other points, the edge looked too crumbly to trust. It narrowed to a ribbon, then a thread as he crept along. His heart began to pound so wildly he was afraid it would shake him loose, and even when the trail widened slightly, he kept using handholds. There were fossil shells in the rock, which was no longer limestone. Only the top shelf had been limestone, and this new rock had a slick slimy feeling that touched him with the mist so that it seemed like enormous damp hands were on him. It was like being in the grip of some creature's tentacles at the bottom of the sea.

It became more than he could bear; he was trembling and feared he would slip. Taking his divining rod out of his belt, he tossed it down. It disappeared in spreading streams of mist and clattered on stone. It had only fallen a scant few meters. Heartened, he gathered his nerves and completed his descent.

At the bottom, he sat on a block of glacial rock and caught his breath. He wondered what had possessed him to make him enter this crater; it sure wasn't common sense to search for missing persons in blinding mist. The sun was a red smear above, the mist shifted before him in curtains, veils, and fragments of lace, its smooth dance revealing nothing other than jagged heaps of rock and some shrubbery.

Lucas' jaw settled on his flabby chin, and a glum look saddened his face. He'd been trying to build a name for himself, trying to work his powers of ornithomancy into a tiny business that would pull in some extra bucks, allow for free travel, and grant him the prestige he'd always craved. Now he was lost, trapped in a mine crater. His plan had backfired miserably. Certainly, he'd been anxious to help Morris Waters find Freddy, because Morris owned CLBQ radio, which could give his career a big boost. All CBLQ could do now was make him a laughing stock, the joke of the county.

His emotional misery and the clamminess combined, making him dizzy with anxiety. He groaned, sounding like a man with an abscessed tooth, then his eyes brightened; a curtain of mist had dissolved, and he could see big timbers and a tangle of mountain maple shrubbery. The squared timbers were supports for the mouth of a mineshaft.

So it was more than an open pit. Tunnels existed. Perhaps the two big birds hadn't led him astray; two, because he still believed it was a vulture he'd followed initially. The bat came with the mist. There was a good possibility that Freddy and Davey had come down here and managed to get trapped in the mine shaft. Perhaps they'd been following the bat. If he could locate them or their bodies, he'd still have a claim to fame when he was rescued.

Euphoria dispelled feelings of personal loss; Lucas stood and approached the mineshaft. The bat had likely gone in there, but bats weren't dangerous, and he must have gotten an improper view of it in the mist. It was likely much smaller, just an ordinary brown bat, which was a common fellow in Ontario.

Pushing through the bushes, he inspected the timbers, at first tapping one daintily. The wood had a solid knock, and there were no rock falls at the entrance. Taking a flashlight out of his pack, he clicked it on and entered.

Lucas experienced an immediate drop in humidity; it wasn't misty or dusty inside, and it was comfortably cool. A shaft, neatly cut and angled, ran before him. He took a few

cautious steps and came to some char on the floor. It was from a recent small fire. He poked at the ashes with his foot, then shone the beam farther down the shaft, finding it clear but narrowing.

There was no doubt in his mind; he could picture the sequence of events. Freddy and Davey had entered the shaft and then gone in too far, where, through carelessness, they'd likely been trapped in a rockfall. If the collapsing stone hadn't crushed them, starvation and hypothermia had done the job. Pressing ahead, he figured on locating the bodies or the rubble covering them, then he would wait for the mist to clear and either make his way back up or wait for help. If he had to spend the night, that was okay, as he was safe in the shaft and had water and energy chocolate bars.

The walls became cave-like and rough as he moved down the narrowing tunnel, so much were his thoughts hopeful fantasies that his powers of observation declined and he suddenly found himself tumbling over some loose rocks and into the void. Seizing a knob of stone, he broke his fall and pulled himself back up. Lying on his side, he shook the urge to scream out of his head. His arm had nearly been wrenched from the socket, and an enormous scrape burned on his left leg.

Checking the flashlight, he found that it worked; fortunately, it'd been fastened to his belt. So that was it, the shaft suddenly ended at a sheer drop. No doubt, Freddy and Davey hadn't been lucky and were now at the bottom.

Flashing the beam about, Lucas saw the end wall and a hole that fell away, nearly a sheer drop. Looking down, he could see a rounded stalagmite but no corpses. The mineshaft had met up with one of the limestone caverns that riddled the underground in the Burchell Lake area. Lucas had been in some of the caverns before; he knew they were ancient and had been formed by the acid action of water on limestone. Once in the caverns, you would eventually come to an exit, the best way being to follow the streams that were still running.

The drop was too steep for Lucas, and now wasn't the time for broken bones. He decided to go back and wait for assistance. He could tell the others that Freddy and Davey had been horsing around in the mine and died in a fall.

Wincing, he drew up his stiff leg and found that flexing it didn't remove the soreness or help the terrible burning of the scrape. He picked around in his pack for some ointment, knowing that if it didn't help his throbbing shoulder, he wouldn't be able to climb. As he was removing the cap, he heard a low growl. "Oh-no, the beast, whatever it is, has followed me," he thought.

More growling and echoes of it moved in the dark. His scalp lifted, and he could feel hair prickling where he had none. He lifted the flashlight and swept the beam down the shaft, illuminating an approaching man. He could make out a Superman crest on the man's T-shirt.

Lucas couldn't grasp it; a human being growling like a rabid animal, and then he raised the beam and understood. He saw Freddy, but he wasn't human anymore. Large, crooked fangs protruded from a face that was birthmark-red and popping with purple veins. Yellow slime filmed the eyes, yet Freddy was aware of Lucas' presence, blood hunger being his new vision.

The hopelessness of the situation sank in; Lucas felt urine trickling down his leg. Freddy shuffled closer, and it became apparent that the source of the growling was a hole gashed in his throat. More than the fangs, the gangrene-rimmed pit, and the guttural noises issuing from it terrified Lucas. His eyes were glued to it until the last moment

when Freddy was leaning and drooling over him, and then Lucas simply lost his fear of falling and pushed himself over the edge.

Lucas' clothing caught on the rough wall, breaking his fall, and the drop wasn't quite sheer, so the friction of the slide slowed him. He was thrown across the cave floor, and the flashlight shattered as he rolled. He slipped in and out of consciousness and nerve flashes. Finally, he came alert. His left wrist pulsed horribly, and he found it to be a bruised and broken lump lolling at the end of his arm. Shock was killing the pain, and surprisingly, his legs worked.

He stood up, knuckles of pain pounding all over him, and he could feel a Cyclopean lump on his forehead. After a long, dazed moment, he realized he wasn't in total darkness. There was a faint phosphor glow down the cavern. He hoped Freddy hadn't tumbled down after him; listening carefully, he detected angry hissing coming from above. Without hesitation, he moved down the cavern toward the light.

The narrow passage opened onto another section of the caverns that was ballroom-sized. Despite his battered condition and pain, he looked with amazement at the brightly colored stalactites hanging from the high ceiling. Flowstone knotted the floor and walls with patterns resembling worn carvings or relief work. The light radiated from clusters of calcite crystals that were somehow charged and growing in star patterns on the walls and ceiling.

Pale green, blue, and white, the sparkling lights followed lines of rotation that were enough to inspire belief in UFOs. Shadows of the stalactites also spun, forming crisscrossing rows of fang shapes that Lucas found disturbing. Freddy had killed any taste he had for fangs.

He began to cross the cavern, and then he stopped, having spotted an enormous ebony stalactite. He looked it over and found that it wasn't a stalactite at all. It was a bat hanging with its wings folded. Its size was startling; he stepped back in awe.

A voice echoed in the gloom. "So you like my pet".

Lucas jumped, turned, and saw a man approaching from an arch in the wall off to his left. Flashing crystal lights and jagged shadows obscured his face, but he looked clean and human, nothing like Freddy. His suit was dark and elegant, and he wore a medallion with a gold image plated on it.

"Who are you?" Lucas said.

"A question I often ask myself," the man said. "You can call me Chandler."

The man was odd, a slight foreign accent woven in with his smooth Canadian voice. It was a voice you could trust. "I'm injured," Lucas said. "Can you help me?"

Jon Chandler's face came into view, and Lucas squinted, trying to be sure of what he was seeing. At moments, the face was classically handsome, and at other moments, a sneering corpse - withered and scarred, with bruise-ringed eyes. The eyes were compelling, burning with bright energy.

Forgetting his pain, Lucas began to shake. "What is this place?" he said.

Holding the medallion in his palm, Jon stared, apparently seeing something in the depths of its shine. "A man once asked me that in Constantinople. I was a Roman then, and I told him it was no place for a Greek. It wasn't; the Turks put out his eyes. Perhaps this place is a sanctuary, a shelter for the disadvantaged, the crippled, and the deformed. Call it your new home, where water is everywhere with burning thirst."

Lucas stared, taken aback. This madman thought he was old enough to have been in Constantinople, and that the caverns were a home for the crippled. "You are very wise, Chandler," Lucas said, hoping to humor him. "But I still need to get to a hospital."

"Death is nothing to fear," Jon said. "I channel the dead and know. Nevertheless, if you want healing, I can provide it. Look into my eyes and be healed."

Lucas felt so weak he was ready to believe anything, accept any medicine, even if it came from a madman. He let Jon's gaze swallow him, and the cavern became a pit he was tumbling in. For some moments, he felt only the falling motion, and then a vision came to him."

His eyes fluttered open in the sunshine, and the air rushing into his nostrils told him the time was ancient. He found himself beside a Tuscan column in the court of a Roman palace. It was the top of the Palatine Hill, and he was gazing down at the cityscape known as the Roman Forum. His eyes were all-seeing, and he was viewing the Coliseum, right into its depths, to a man chained there in the gloom. He was naked and streaked with dried blood, straw, and sweat. His face was in agony from thirst, and the thirst was for fresh blood. Lucas was acutely aware of the man's pain.

The stench of animals was overpowering, as was his fear of the sun, and the sun was rising fast, like a bronze gong waiting for the hammer of doom. Stiff legs began to move, plodding through straw, urine, and dung. A whip lashed out, and the man screamed as the pain bit his back. Terror was like a fire growing, a nightmare materializing in the sunbeams. Rough hands seized him and sent him stumbling out into the burning heat. He staggered, beasts leaped on him, a frenzy of claws and teeth. Blood-misted air strengthened him, and he tore at the animal flesh, struggling till there was nothing left but screams and his burning throat.

Emerald light whirled from the pupil of an eye, a medallion flashed gold, and Lucas found himself back in the cavern. Everything began to spin at tremendous speed, and he felt like the axis of a wheel being forced to explode outward. His energy and life force were lost in the shadows that were ripping him like knives.

Opening his arms wide, Lucas obeyed a compulsion to look up, and as he did, a stalactite broke loose and plunged down. It ripped across his neck and smashed like an icicle to the floor. Blood gushed from his open throat, and he collapsed, falling backward as deadweight. Another stalactite broke loose; an ebony one - the bat - and its wings opened as it did a slow-motion float to the body.

The huge bat perched on Lucas' chest, wings pulsing gently. Soft sucking sounds echoed in the cavern as it fed on his bleeding throat. Chandler stepped up and watched; he toyed with his medallion, his eyes went blood red, and the flash of lights slowed, leaving only pools of blue and shadow.

CHAPTER 11: THE FAIR

Dear Mr. Wilde,

Your business card is one of several cards I borrowed from my friend, Mr. Lucas Wickens. Originally, I was going to consult some experts to get some information on vampirism and the occult, then Lucas himself disappeared while leading a search for two missing teenage boys. He vanished in a tract of misty forest near Burchell Lake.

In your line of work, you would have heard about Burchell Lake. Since you know Lucas, perhaps you have seen the town. I should mention that it is no longer a ghost town. A New Age guru named Allan Rampa has purchased the town and the land surrounding it for his new Cult of the Millennium.

In a very short time, a number of strange events have taken place: people have gone missing, teenagers have reported seeing vampires, strange mists have come and gone, and other weird happenings have occurred. Burchell Lake has always been noted for ghostly happenings, but as a longtime resident of the area, I can tell you that these recent occurrences are much more substantial, troublesome, and frightening. There is an air of the sinister to it all.

Local law enforcement officials are not investigating because they believe the events are hoaxes. Traditionally, ghostly reports from the lake are ignored. There have simply been too many of them over the years.

I phoned Mr. Rampa and found him to be secretive, argumentative, and quick to accuse the county people of religious persecution. He did say that his cult is taking new members and that now there is only a small group of members. Most of the people around the town have been workers involved in reconstruction. When I requested a tour of the town and his estate, he refused, saying that no tourists or trespassers would be allowed at this early stage of cult growth. He also has sacred spots he wants respected. I advised him to keep the spots secret, or they would be the targets of teenage pranksters. Of the two teenage pranksters who disappeared, he says he knows nothing about them.

I should mention that I am the owner of CBLQ RADIO in Milford. My family home is a stone mansion near Burchell Lake. There is plenty of room for you and your guests should you decide to investigate. I did try to phone to discuss the work and your fee, and I was surprised to find that you prefer to do business by mail or in person. So, as your wife recommended, I have dispatched this note. I am not an emotional person, so I doubt you will get any certain psychic feelings from this letter. Your wife did tell me that you prefer letters because they allow your unfettered feelings to screen out undesirable clients.

At present, I have kept reports off the radio, as I don't want to give Allan Rampa cause to sue the station. I need someone who can investigate immediately. If you are busy with other work, let me know so I can find someone else. I have hired a private investigator from Thunder Falls; his name is Jack Stillson. Mr. Stillson is now at work guarding my home and property. Investigating supernatural occurrences is beyond his scope; he doesn't know where to begin, but he will be available to assist you should you arrive.

As I said, I need someone immediately. If you want the assignment, you can begin in Toronto. Mr. Rampa is there now, attending the Psychic Fair. You might get an understanding of what he is doing by looking in on one of his lectures at the fair.

Sincerely yours,

Morris R. Waters

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Mike folded the letter and looked up as he stuffed it in his shirt pocket. Branches of a weeping willow swayed lightly in the breeze; soft sunlight spilled through, creating easy feelings. Annie had all but disappeared in the long grass near the polar bears' grounds, and he was about to call her back when she returned on her own. He wished Alice had

come, but she'd had other things to do. Alone with Annie, even at a busy place like the zoo, he felt like a single parent. It was a feeling he didn't enjoy, and he supposed it was how Alice felt when he was off on a sojourn. Being completely alone was okay, but being alone with a kid made the rest of his life seem lonely. He wasn't quite sure whether it was the single-parent feeling or being closer to Alice over the last few days that was having an effect. Maybe he was becoming physically addicted to her. It was also possible that this time he'd really changed and was starting to need a wife at his side. Mike shrugged his shoulders as he watched Annie dash under the willow; it was only normal. Wanting to go places with your wife and daughter was a sign of maturity. Wanting to hang out with the boys forever was a classic form of immaturity; half of the men he knew had failed to mature. He'd always been a little different because he liked loneliness and the road. Alice had him believing in his immaturity when the truth was that it had to do with mental instability. He hoped the years would bring him lasting stability of mind.

As Mike got up from the bench, Annie reached him and leaped into his arms. He lifted her and was enjoying the fragrance of baby shampoo in her curls when he saw Jake Skagway coming down the path from the monkey cages. Here was one of the boys; Mike nearly laughed at the thought. The kind of trouble Jake could come up with was more than the boys could handle. If Jake wasn't one of the boys, Mike wasn't sure what he was. He didn't play the macho man or act like a fishing buddy. Maybe he was more of an avenging angel, cast down from heaven, nasty, with nosy eyes that spotted Morris Waters' letter from across town. And of course, he was here to push him into the haunted waters of Burchell Lake. What else were angels for?"

"Polar bears aren't blond," Annie said. "That black man over there calls them blondies. Smile for the camera, blondie. That's what he said."

"To the bear?" Mike said.

"Yeah, to the bear."

"Well, they're what you call snow blond," Mike said.

"Don't lie!" Annie said. "There is no such thing as snow blond."

"Well. What do we have here?" Jake Skagway said. "A little girl who's scared of bears."

"I am not," Annie said, turning her face to give him a bold pout.

"The men in her life are bears," Mike said. "She's not afraid of them once she has them tamed."

"I'm getting as tired as a bear," Jake said.

"Working on another murder?"

"What else. This time it's an unexciting case involving a drugged-out creep who murdered his girlfriend."

"I guess Alice told you about the letter from Morris Waters?"

"She didn't mention any letter. I just wanted to tell you that Allan Rampa has surfaced."

"I know. I think you should read this."

Jake took the letter. Annie shouted at another little girl over by the polar bears and ran off. As Mike tagged after her, Jake sat on the bench and read the letter.

Mike returned and found Jake shaking his head. "It's not good news at all, is it?" Mike said.

Jake frowned. "I came to tell you about the cult and the new property Rampa bought. He ran his other businesses under another name. That's why it was hard to trace him. These New Age people start little companies, and when they're through with them, they fold them up like houses of cards. Allan was into many New Age scams. Now he has capital and is operating on a big scale. He's written a book, THE MILLENNIUM TRANSMISSIONS, which is a Bible for his new cult. If Morris Waters' letter is accurate, then it's obvious that the new cult is a cover for vampirism. I think we'd better go over to the fair and see if we can find out more."

"Yay! Let's go to the fair!" Annie shouted.

"Sure, let's go," Mike said. "But I bet this Psychic Fair isn't half the show Burchell Lake is."

This year, the Psychic Fair was down by the waterfront, scattered along the parks and buildings of Harbourfront. The long drive from the zoo gave Mike time for thought, or as much thought as was possible with Annie's chatter and his eyes on the road. His rented car handled well, and the weather was diamond bright. Still, he was uneasy about driving. Something ugly twisted in a womb of ooze at the bottom of his mind. He took an easy route and kept right in case he had to pull over. ESP mental states could be a problem if they occurred while he was behind the wheel.

A bridge took him over sets of railway tracks. Turning he cruised along the downtown waterfront. He found a parking lot across the road from the fair, got out, and stretched. The zoo had failed to tire Annie; she looked at the stalls and displays with excited eyes. A small crowd moved under breezy banners and fake arches of painted cardboard. Most were strolling between two buildings of green-tinted glass that were home to the indoor part of the fair. The outdoor patios held small food pavilions and stalls painted with mystic images and papered with brilliant posters. Overhead, a tiny plane trailed a sign, and higher up, a jet chalked the blue dome of sky. The lake and sailboats were in the background. Faint strains of offbeat music, the tinkle of crystal, and drumbeats carried over the road with the noise of the crowd. The day was so sunny and festive that even the trashy weeds sprouting in the parking lot seemed colorful.

A man on a bed of nails held the center of the sunshine. A crowd circled him, and the largest spectator was Jake Skagway.

"Okay, there's Jake," Mike said, catching Annie's hand before she could run for the road.

"It's a people zoo," she said.

"That's it," Mike said as he carried her across the road. "We're going to check on the predators."

Mike smiled as Jake suddenly glanced around; it was amusing to imagine Jake picking up some psychic abilities. They joined him, gazing at the turbaned man on his bed of nails. Much whispering took place among the spectators; it was as though they were afraid to startle the man.

Annie didn't whisper. "He's got plastic doll skin, that's how he does it!"

Some people laughed and stared. "Let's take a walk," Mike said to Jake.

Jake nodded, and they ambled away toward an alley of booths and stalls. At the first booth, Annie called a crystal ball a big marble and the lady holding it a teacher with a wig. The man at the second booth wore black, and Annie believed he was a robot capable of lying. The third booth had a mauve backdrop painted with falling meteors. Its occupant, a silver-haired man dressed in a frock-style coat ablaze with fluorescent

meteors. A white Persian cat with a jeweled collar sat beside him at the counter. Annie loved cats and immediately crept up to try to get its attention.

"Most of the people here are fooled by this occult stuff," Jake said.

Mike furrowed his brow in thought. "The people here believe in nearly everything, no matter how ridiculous it is. There's a cheap side, and a deeper side hidden behind it."

"What about Allan Rampa?" Jake said. "Is he cheap or deep?"

"Off the deep end. He threw out his humanity. He worships dark powers."

"I grabbed a brochure when I arrived," Jake said. "His presentation begins at four in one of the indoor auditoriums."

Not wanting to miss the presentation, they took a shortcut between two booths and followed a walkway lined with scrawny trees. It led to the building's back entrance. They went inside and followed a polished concourse as cold as a fridge. Speakers played soft piano music. A broad spiral staircase led up to a second level where posters behind plate glass announced the presentations taking place in the three auditoriums.

The Cult of the Millennium was in auditorium three. Following an aisle carpeted in sea-green past some windows that gave a view of the harbor, they came to the entrance. A huge poster was tacked on a bulletin board next to the doors.

Cult of the Millennium was printed in semicircular, stylized type around the face of a fanged woman wearing a necklace of human heads.

"She looks like a maniac," Annie said.

"It is a strange choice for a poster," Jake said. "I expected Rampa would have a poster of himself, glorifying his powers of transmission."

"The woman is the Hindu goddess Kali," Mike said. "A demon goddess that destroys other demons and represents the dark side of the human soul. Rampa's people wouldn't necessarily equate her with vampirism. They see her as a being that channels evil in a positive way. Allan Rampa is coming across as someone who represents the darker powers."

"Yes, that's it," said a man in a dark suit emerging from the auditorium. "All our images are for the initiated. We're taking new members, but only people with knowledge of the occult. We're an elite group."

"I see," Mike said. "Are you one of the key members?"

"I'm Ali Reba, in charge of the cult's operations here in Toronto."

"There really isn't much of an operation?" Jake said.

"We're growing," Ali said. "We're a worldwide group. At present, our strength is in the cosmos and not in numbers." Ali checked his cell display. "It's time to go in. The presentation is about to begin."

Bored, Annie fell into a tired trance. Mike scooped her up, and they went inside. He figured Ali was right for the job, slim and a friendly sort, wearing a single pearl earring. He resembled a well-known movie director and was pale and sickly-looking, almost like a vampire.

The auditorium had a clamshell shape, and Ali led them to seats halfway down, then went up front and joined Allan and a woman with golden-blond hair. She wore a long, colorful print dress, an elbow-length blouse, and a scarf in her hair. Her drop earrings

were made of tiny bones and shells, and she had her hand on a model of a town that'd been set up on the table in front of her.

Allan studied the audience. He seemed content with a half-filled auditorium. If he noticed Mike and Jake, he didn't seem worried by it. Mike felt certain Allan was aware of them, but judged them as two more people to be fooled. Allan's brown eyes were glassy with either enlightenment or madness, and his hair was still close-cropped, which was the best style for a man partially bald. His single silver earring and crude good looks put Mike in mind of a movie pirate. In costume, Allan could pass as one of Henry Morgan's cutthroats.

Behind Allan, a banner poster said JOIN US FOR BELTHANE. An Easter Island-type statue of a distorted human form sat to his right at the end of the table. Huge globe lights shone above Allan, and a number of people in the audience appeared ready to believe anything if Allan said it was so.

"What's Belthane?" Jake whispered.

"An outdoor pagan ceremony," Mike said. "It has to do with witchcraft."

With great care, Allan adjusted a microphone he didn't really need in such a small auditorium. With equal care, he swept his gaze over the crowd, finding most of the people to be young seekers with privileged smiles and flashy clothes. The crowd included a smattering of older, wealthy entrepreneur types.

"Let me begin by introducing Janet Flare and Ali Reba," Allan said to light applause. "Ali is our man in charge in Toronto, and Janet is our first international representative. I chose them because they share qualities of enlightenment and are open-minded. As the brochure mentions, this is a presentation and not a reading or discussion of The Millennium Transmissions. It's for the initiated, meaning people who have studied the transmissions. I'm not really a preacher looking to convert people. Only those seeking a new way will find it, and it is not hard to find. Our new colony at Burchell Lake is the home of that way, but members do not have to live at the lake. As Janet will tell you, we are an international group. Burchell Lake is our number one concern now, and this presentation will be mostly about it and our accomplishments there."

Allan was cut off by spontaneous applause, and after a few moments, he continued.

Annie had drifted into sound sleep, and Mike had to admit, to himself at least, that he'd also be sleepy if it weren't for what he knew about Allan Rampa. He'd heard too many speeches about new religions, and since they all ended up as dead-end cults, it was hard to believe in them. And with Allan, he knew he was lying anyway. The cult was mostly a front for something else.

Contrary to his introduction, Allan went into a long talk about The Millennium Transmissions, taking time to point out sacred locations on his model. To follow, he went into a detailed description of what the finished town would be like. It was all there in the model. The cult, or Allan, wanted people with money to invest, specifically people looking to create a cradle for religious alternatives. There was a special invitation to New Millennium people with small businesses to shift to Burchell Lake."

Jake's interest in the boring presentation never waned. Mike knew he was looking behind the slick words for Allan's real intentions. On the surface, there was nothing wrong with Allan's grand dream; if he wanted to pool his resources with others to revive an Ontario ghost town, who could knock that? Preachers who feared the devil would oppose Allan, but the government sure wouldn't. They'd probably give him tax breaks galore just for reviving the town.

When Allan's speech was complete, he began taking questions. Questions that made it apparent that people were buying his pitch. Mike could see the future clearly; Allan Rampa, his cult, and the town were destined to grow.

A willowy black man with a star pattern trimmed into his hair rose and spoke. "Will there be incentives for herbalists to do their own farming?"

"There will be subsidies, but I don't know how much money will be involved."

The next question was posed by a very businesslike man with an aquiline nose and probing spectacles. "Does your invitation extend to Scientologists?"

Allan frowned. "Only groups that will recognize the authority of the Burchell Lake Ecumenical Council are invited. That may exclude Scientologists."

Allan's gaze shifted to a woman wearing a shimmering gown and hair that looked like plaited silver wire. "There is a problem with the idea of an ecumenical council as far as Wiccans are concerned. It is a fact of history that witches are always persecuted by religious bodies."

"We are aware of that, and our constitution will guarantee Wiccans council posts and grant certain veto powers."

"I'm a second millennium Christian," said a man of Hindu appearance. "Our experience is that joint councils with Wiccans and Naturists will work."

"Thank you," Allan said.

Near the end of the session, Mike managed to squeeze in a question. "Yes, the man with the little girl," Allan said. "You have a question?"

"Are you aware of Burchell Lake's reputation as a place of ghostly occurrences?"

"Yes."

"A magazine has asked me to investigate a haunting and some ghostly happenings near there. If I do decide to go up, will your people help me or block me?"

"We won't block you," Allan said, "but we won't help you either. We're tearing down haunted buildings. The old ghosts will have to move, and we really don't need troublesome sprites. We have our own guardian spirits, and they will be the new atmosphere at Burchell Lake."

"You seem to feel that anyone who goes up will decide to take the plunge and join the new community," Mike said. "What gives you so much confidence?"

"It's not confidence, it's vision," Allan said. "I have transmitted a vision of cosmic importance."

As Allan turned to address someone else, Mike began to tune into a vision of his own. A globe over Allan's head flashed, and shadow and glare began to ghost, giving the auditorium an unearthly cast. The scene changed, and Mike found himself standing in a shadowy courtyard. Romanesque columns and arches framed a twilight view of a city and a wide river. He believed the city to be Budapest and the river the Danube, and except for a patterned walk immediately below him, it was a blackened wasteland - shattered buildings, heaps of rubble and concrete broken almost to dust. The destroyer was a monster that could only be World War II. The only movement was some dim, ragged figures on a side street and three other men wearing the greatcoats of soldiers.

Turning, he saw that the courtyard emptied onto a dusky, cobbled alley. It was a gray vista, and he wasn't sure if the shapes he saw piled against the walls were sandbags or

corpses.

A man dressed in full Nazi regalia came out of the darkness, his high black boots clicking loudly on the stones. Some of the last shifting glare of evening lingered on his face, which was hawk-like and splotched with birthmarks as unsightly as fungus. A death patina encircled eyes filled with malice. The strap of his hat cut right into the flesh of his chin, and he grinned like a devil as he continued his approach. Mike shivered; he experienced confusion as to his own identity and stared blankly as the man halted, clicked his heels, and gave the Nazi salute.

The man's fangs suddenly showed, and it became clear that he was Jon Chandler. The eyes were distinctly Chandler, and they'd gained some of the distant look that meant possession by the Baron. This Chandler was new and old; he was the dead Baron and a new form of vampire.

Bars of shadow obscured the face, and Mike's eyes filled with colored glare and blind spots. The auditorium reappeared. His body tickled, a sudden spasm, and he felt Annie awakening. He nudged Jake with his elbow. "Let's go," he said. "We've seen enough."

Unnoticed, they made their way out of the auditorium, and the doors sealed behind them, silencing the debate. Mike put Annie down and pinched her cheek. "Want some ice cream?"

"Yeah, ice cream," Annie said.

"Let's cut over to the shops," Mike said. "I've had enough of the fair."

Exiting at the side, they took a canopied walk to the water's edge, and Mike bought Annie a strawberry cone from a vendor. Farther along, they came to a restaurant with an outdoor patio and sat under a sun umbrella.

"A large Pepsi," Mike said to a waitress whose breasts were nearly bursting from her tight bra top.

"The same and a club sandwich," Jake said, looking beyond her, pretending he might be noticing gulls on the railing and not her breasts.

"The Baron can have his Europe," Mike said, thinking of the vision. "I'm a Western man all the way. French fries are as exotic as I get."

"Maybe we'd do better to eat European style," Jake said. "Annie is picking up our terrible eating habits."

"I don't know about setting examples like that," Mike said. "Annie will end up being a reflection of my guilt."

"I can't get out to Burchell Lake right away," Jake said. "What do you think you'll find out there?"

"Jon Chandler."

"You think he could be alive after what I did to him?"

"Allan somehow revived the corpse. You destroyed the Baron with the stake, but Chandler reclaimed his body. He retained some of the Baron's memories."

"What would Chandler be like? Has he come back as a monster like Jeannie did?"

"No. He has his own powers and some of the Baron's. I'm not sure exactly what condition he is in. There would be brain damage, and his mind couldn't be anywhere near normal after his union with the Baron. I want you to come out to the lake as soon as you're free. I'm going to need all the help I can get."

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Dr. David Kanter listened to the lift groan, the sound of metal grinding to fatigue against the stone. He was in total darkness, and he had a nightmare feeling that he might get trapped in the elevator, but regardless of the sound, a light showed through a crack as the contraption thudded to a halt, and the door opened when he turned the handle.

He pushed his cart of medical equipment into the stone corridor and set it against the wall, then he removed his white smock and folded it neatly. Sunlight streamed through iron scrollwork in a window set in the massive oak door at the end of the hall. Although it was cool, it was so damp that he was perspiring. He wiped the sweat from his brow and glanced around. The place was as wet as a sewer, and the dimness made the rough walls look like relief work. The only object of note was a skull fastened to the door. It was fanged; the skull of a puma, and it gave him the creeps. Trying not to focus on it, he walked on silent feet to the door and used a huge key hung on the wall to open it.

David stepped out into the summer sunshine. He was a touch gray and haggard, and his brown eyes were dull with the sepia of age. His checked shirt had a cheap cut that brought attention to his growing paunch. He scratched his chin; it was certain there were vampires around, but he wasn't quite aware of the invisible one that was draining his own years. The country hadn't made a country doctor of him; it hadn't done much for him at all.

He was at the back of the reconstructed ancient palace that marked the heart of the sacred grove, and he had just come up from Jon Chandler's chambers. An aisle of tall grass canopied by maples ran before him, and out beyond the trees near the perimeter of the grounds, he could see Jackson standing beside a square pillar of stone. The pillar and the neat rectangular hedge beside it put him in mind of a war memorial, but it wasn't that; it was a marker Allan had just built in honor of cosmic beings.

Jackson spied David and began to walk over. His big, bony form gave the appearance of a man approaching swiftly when he was really only walking at a normal pace. David didn't want to bother talking to Jackson. Jackson was an idiot as far as he was concerned, and he couldn't bear much of his hungry look. He would rather let Jackson take the equipment back to storage alone than be constantly devoured by those eyes. It was hard to guess what Jackson's weird gaze meant; it was like the gaze of a man who saw a rotten seam in him he couldn't see himself. He suspected that Jackson had hate and treachery locked deep inside, a hunger that marked him as a low-breed human.

Moving along the quarry-stone wall, David came to a path that wound through the grove and back up to the mansion. Light haloed the tops of the trees, and the effect was calming. He was always a bundle of nerves after being in the chambers, and not because of Jon Chandler, who was peacefully asleep today, but because of the horrible creatures that lurked farther down in the caverns. The monsters were the opposites of Jon, who spoke foreign languages and talked of Rome, Milan, and other European places the Baron had inhabited. Vampirism could regress or progress; the lowest form being mad zombies with moldering bodies. Other than Chandler, only Liz had risen with a human face. Usually, she was there to protect him from the monsters, but today she had stayed in the mansion, preparing a surprise for him. He wondered what the surprise might be, then thoughts of the cave dead returned to haunt him. He'd already told Allan that there was nothing a doctor could do for them, and he thought it was ridiculous for Allan to have taken him in there for a look. In quiet tones, he'd told Allan that people usually looked like what they were, so mindless, bloodthirsty risen corpses would always look like that, no matter what you tried to do for them. With Jon and Liz, it was different; they had problems with full healing - one day their bodies would be healed, and the next

day they would be covered with sores and wounds - but they also had the power of illusion and could look beautiful even in their foulest moments.

Coming out of the trees, David walked down a snapdragon-lined path and into the shadow of the mansion. He could see three women loitering by a trellis of red roses next to a small outdoor gallery. Immediately, his best smile appeared on his face. The women had come in from Burchell Lake and were no doubt waiting for Allan Rampa to return from Toronto. Horned images were hand-painted on their straw purses, and they had long, loose hair and wore halter dresses. He knew they had come over from a coven and were taking up residence in the new town. That meant they were his patients as he was soon to be the town doctor.

"David," said one of the women, a beautiful but somber-faced blond. "You're just in time for some herbal healing."

"I'm not much for it, Gwen," David said. "I prefer modern drugs."

All three women giggled like silly girls.

"Nonsense," Gwen said. "We can convert you, follow us, and see."

If they wanted to give a demonstration, it was okay with him. Nodding assent, he followed them onto the grounds. The long tresses flowing over their blossom-white shoulders, their dancer's legs, and the dreamy lightness of their step banished all thoughts of herbs from his mind. As they entered a shady arbor of maple boughs, he found himself trying to walk with a painful and embarrassing erection. To make matters worse, the woman suddenly turned around and looked him up and down.

"This is our corner of magic," Gwen said, her doe's eyes filled with innocence and mild delight. "Cassandra told me this is a special day for you, so we're going to charm you."

"How will it help me?" he said.

Gwen giggled, a sound like bubbling water, and Cassandra spoke. "It's nothing much. We just want you to drink some herbal tea with us, and then we can anoint you with the smoke of laurel leaves."

There was an enormous stone conch squatting in the deeper shade, and David followed them to it. As he rested against it, they surrounded him, dizzying him with their soft perfumes.

Cassandra produced a flask from her purse, and Gwen took out a cup. As David watched, they poured out a smoking liquid. He smiled, as he wasn't afraid of them or their potion. The cup was ceremonial and valuable, fronted with a carving of some anthropomorphic demon god. David judged it suitable for the witchcraft of a female sort that he didn't fear.

"Kiss him, Janey," Gwen said, and lustrous brown hair fell against David's face as Janey kissed each cheek.

Such a lightheaded feeling came over him that he sipped the potion almost unknowingly, and for several moments, as smoke of laurel leaves floated by, he was dreaming on his feet.

Though the woman had stepped back from him, he could feel soft kisses all over his body, and then he heard Liz's voice calling him at the back of his mind. He forgot the woman completely and walked away, emerging from his daydream as he left.

He thought about his work at the estate and decided that it was mostly done. At least as far as Jon and Liz were concerned. They were no longer dependent on the blood supplies

he brought in, and that was good; he'd never liked ordering in so much blood.

Regardless of Liz's surprise, he meant to broach the subject of new quarters, a new house in town. He didn't like her being down there with Chandler and those cave things all the time. It would be better if she had her own private vault. After all, he hadn't saved her for them or Allan Rampa. And he didn't like being around Allan all the time. Allan had an air of illegitimacy, like he'd made his money from cocaine or something ugly. Not that Allan was greedy; he was more of a fanatic, creating a new order. One that would terrify David if it weren't for Liz. It was okay when his wife was wielding the power; he'd even asked her to make him a vampire. Not a cave monster, but one of the few with full powers and full blood. So far, Chandler had blocked it. Chandler didn't even feel Allan was ready for vampirism.

Opening the French doors, David inhaled a mélange of musty odors. It was cold inside and so dark he could barely see. He waited for his eyes to adjust, then he went through a second set of doors to a dining room that was lit by a candelabrum. A gas chandelier began to glow faintly, and he saw Liz standing near an ebony table. She was fairy-tale beautiful, white as snow, both in her lustrous skin and in the lace wedding dress she wore. Her finely carved hips gave grace to her walk, and as she approached, David was hypnotized by the tiny jewels of light in her hazel eyes. Under the chandelier, her dark hair was glossy and caught up with angelic rainbows.

"This is your surprise?" she said.

His plump cheeks became radiant, yet he still felt awkward and undeserving of such a beautiful woman. He wanted to embrace her, but he found himself kissing her hand instead.

"You mean we're getting married again?" he said. "Just like I suggested?"

"Yes, tonight. A moonlight ceremony in the old Baptist church over by Burchell Lake. It will be just you and me, a cult minister and romance."

"This is wonderful. That's the church with the twin spires, isn't it? The one on top of the rock?"

"Yes," Liz said. She took a fluted gold cup from the table and moistened her lips with blood. "When you kiss the bride, you will become immortal."

"Really, and when I rise, I won't be second fiddle to Rampa or Chandler? Then it's great. It's exactly what I want."

"I know. I want you to look your best. You've been working too hard. Go upstairs, take a rest, then get dressed for the ceremony. You're to meet me there at midnight."

Squeezing her hand, he kissed her cheek like she was a fifteen-year-old virgin. "I'll save my best kiss for tonight," he said, then he turned away and headed for the stairs. He was walking on air.

It dwelled at the edge, and the rushing waters of dreams and visions were its sustenance. The face was a warped mask of black agony, mouthing words. Smoke rolled from its scorched tongue, and it spoke in whispers, a thousand voices rising like a choir in woven wisps of smoke. And the language was underworld and evil, the rustling of leaves in a parched throat. There was a forgotten totem standing in black relief against moon silver and a purple grid in the sky. Then David saw the moon, a fanged demon, mouth agape, devouring the heavens as it wrapped the sky in gloom.

Darkness descended in veils of blood-cooling sleep. He heard a running stream, a splashing of something foul and slick, and a lone voice whispering. The doom song of

something hunched in the night thundered, then the whispering returned, and the words were, "The bones of the possible lay scattered in the land of dreams, but not your bones, David Kanter. You are immortal. You are one of us. You will never dream again."

The words crumbled like tombs. A wild dog howled mournfully, and David awoke with a snort. A warm breeze rushed in, then sucked the curtains out the window. At first, his mind was a blank, then he remembered the dream. One of those weird things only dreamland could create, complete with sinister, muddled images and cryptic messages. "Ah, well," he said to himself. "Work too hard, and the first place it shows is in your sleep."

A pleasant carousel of the day's events came into his mind. He checked the time, then flew up and dashed to the shower. Liz would never forgive him if he were late. In moments, he had himself slicked with lather and singing. His pinked body drifted in steam in the full-length mirror, and he jiggled his belly, figuring he would have to take steps to get rid of it now that it was getting so big he had to dress around it.

After patting aftershave on his face, he went back to the bedroom. Pushing aside a button-down shirt, he pulled a summer suit from the rack. There was no sense in going too formal since this wedding was just a lark. Amusement was on his face as he selected a tie with a jagged red pattern that put him in mind of bloody fangs. For shoes, he chose a pair made of expensive crushed leather.

A jewelry box on the dresser held his finest silver cuff links and his Rolex. No sooner was he dressed and combing his hair than he heard a knock at the door.

Answering it, he found it to be Jackson, looking stern and incongruous in a black suit, like some sort of weird Mormon minister.

"Doctor, I have come to take you to the church," he said.

"Yes, of course. I'll be right down."

At the wheel of the car, Jackson looked more like a sentinel than a chauffeur. His eyes had a gleam that was about as comforting as knives. Yet David was in high spirits; Jackson was no more than dark scenery to him. The fragrance of wildflowers and rank odors from the bog were in the air, and it was all as sweet as love to David; he grinned at little nothings as the sleek black vehicle began to roll down the drive. A spotlight lit the gate, and David admired one of the stone warriors as they passed through. Jackson stopped and pushed a button on the wall. As steel and stone clanged behind them, David noticed mist at the crowns of the hemlocks.

The church was outside of town, so there was no need to pass through Burchell Lake. Jackson left the paved highway and drove slowly down the dirt road. Dense deciduous forest crowded the shoulders, the trees giants, leaning and looming in the moon-drenched mist. A long bend took them to the edge of the lake, where David could see a half-sunken boathouse in the fogged water.

Half a kilometer unwound, they were approaching the church. It stood high on a rocky promontory overlooking Burchell Lake. The night air enveloping it was mute, but crisp and clear as though charged by the crosses topping the twin spires. Fading white paint and moisture on the walls still gathered enough light to create a feeling of supernatural power, as if a sentient being were watching over the ghostly waters from a colossal altar.

The road up the promontory was rutted, cracked, and blocked by boulders. Jackson was forced to stop, and David got out. Leaving him at the wheel, he began to make his way on foot. He wondered how Liz had managed to get inside when he knew that even tiny

crosses pained her eyes. It showed how she loved him that she would suffer the torment of passing under those high crosses.

While gazing up at the three Gothic windows over the front doors, he nearly stepped into a wide fissure in the rock. Gasping, he stared down at a flow of brackish water. Hopping over the crack, he kept his eyes on the ground as he picked his way to the top.

Tall grass and burdock hid the front walk from view, but the stones near the front doors were clear and aglow with a carpet of faint yellow light creeping out from the interior. Halting, he stared up past peeling leaves of paint. The crosses didn't hurt his eyes, and he liked them because they were symbols of Liz's love. This was a gloomy old place, but it was heaven to him. Perhaps it was even good for the church to hold one last wedding; the finest wine would be imbibed from the aged vessel, then the vessel would crumble and find rest.

Although the door wasn't locked, he couldn't budge it; the hinges were rusted in place. Liz couldn't have gotten inside unless she had taken the back way. Not wanting to plunge into waist-high weeds and rocky ground to get to the back, he tried the door again. His face reddened, he groaned, and the hinges groaned, a sound that stabbed at raw nerves.

Dust motes swirled in the faint light from candles burning in the vestibule, and he stepped inside and past it. Stopping under an arch, he looked into the main room. It was lit by a candelabra, and its yellow glow was the only thing inside that could be considered alive. Most of the pews were gone, and those that remained were rotten and broken. An old, moldered red carpet marked the center aisle, or what was left of it; rock slabs had risen through the floor planks in many places. The north wall was draped in green fungus, and the altar was battered, with holes all around. No wedding could be held near it.

From the condition of the interior, he was amazed that the place appeared so sound on the outside. And where was Liz? The candlelight was struggling against the leaden atmosphere; he squinted and looked around carefully. His gaze came to rest on the apse; it had been set up for the ceremony, as it was the only spot with sound flooring. He took a couple of steps toward it and saw Liz in the shadows. She was wearing black lace, which made her hard to spot, and now that he saw her, he hung his head. She had been so beautiful in white; he found it a tragedy to see her in black.

Weaving around cracks and rips in the floor, he headed for Liz. Her strange silence and the decrepit surroundings worked to subdue his love; it was now an otherworldly sense of duty driving him on. Perverse loyalty and guilt were the substance of the gloom, and he felt his stomach working on its own, twisting with revulsion at the vileness of this pit of emotional rot.

He wondered what kind of minister the grim character behind the altar was. It was hard to see him; creeping shadows covered most of his face, and he was looking down at a book David assumed to be a Bible. Liz wouldn't have chosen a Christian minister, so why his intense reading of the scriptures?

Warped planks creaked under his feet; he hopped up to the apse level and got a better look at Liz. She was dreadfully pale, her body a black silhouette against a grime-painted stained glass window. Silken hammocks of cobweb hung in the air behind her. Looking to the altar, he could see that it was covered with blood-red splotches, and not only that; it was an altar made of skulls. Gaping death mortared together, the apex of ungodliness. A chill ran up his back to his scalp, his flesh crawling from the touch of an invisible hand. He was getting a better view of the minister, and his appearance wasn't improving. He

was like a standing corpse dressed in a threadbare black suit, his unseeing eyes fixed on the holy book.

David's eyes flicked back to Liz, and she met his gaze. He was held by her eyes, and he could see that they weren't radiant with either love or joy. They were cold and stark. She was as distant as the moon. A reflection of candle flame strengthened in her pupils, and David broke free. But even while he was free, he was filled with a longing for her love and recognition.

He hurried to her. "You don't look well," he said. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all."

"Yes," Liz said, her voice a hiss. "You must have expected better." She took his hand and held it so tight he winced from the pain. "You want a blushing bride, and a Sunday afternoon with a nice little picnic to follow the ceremony. I suppose I've gone and spoiled it all. I'm sorry to say that in this case, the bride is not well because the bride is dead."

"No!" he choked as her eyes stabbed down into his heart. "I saved you. You're not dead. Allan says you're alive."

Liz laughed wickedly, her fangs gleaming. David shrank back as her grip on his hand became crushing. "Let me tell you this: my heart is on fire like the core of the earth, darkness is my prison, and twilight is my warden. There will be no joy, and I will linger forever. You have saved me."

"It was right. I did it for love."

"You did it for love of yourself. You never loved me. If you cared, you wouldn't have let me become what I am. And you are selfish and a fool, trying to carry on as if nothing has changed. So you want me to kiss you and make you immortal, do you? Well, I would be more than happy to give you the kiss of damnation, but I can't because you have already damned yourself."

Tears flowed from David's eyes, and he began to struggle, trying to break her grip, but she slapped him, and the sound rang out as he fell to his knees.

"Minister," Liz said. "This is a wedding. Read us a passage from the Bible and make my husband happy."

David's chest heaved; he was sobbing, and through his tears, he saw the minister's face. It was swollen, dead, and dripping with slime.

"It is forbidden for me to read it," he said. "I am undead."

"Read it! I command it!"

The minister put out a spotted hand and touched the crumbling parchment of the book; then there was a crack, as if the roof of the church were splitting. Flames sprouted on the minister's hands, he stumbled back, and the Bible exploded. Fiery fragments and ashes rained down. David felt his flesh wither and his nerves scream as they touched him.

Liz laughed like a whore. Her eyes blazed and her mouth twisted; her fingers became iron and destroyed his hand, leaving it a pulp of broken bones.

"I'll never kiss you," she said as he moaned, "but you won't need me. You will have new lovers. I'm so sorry, David, I really am, but I'm afraid I will have to leave you here at the altar. Goodbye, dear husband, you've been dumped!"

Leaning into him, she seized his throat so hard he thought she was going to tear it open, but she didn't; she pulled him up and, with inhuman strength, threw him from the apse to land down in the broken pews.

It was a hard tumble; sharp edges and splinters ripped into him, and jutting rock smashed his chin. He began to crawl and moan through the drool and blood on his lips. Not knowing where to go, he went in circles, then he stopped in shock. He could hear them rising. The floorboards were lifting, cracking, and splintering. Corpse-like heads began to appear, and the knowledge hit him like a brilliant flash. He knew Liz hadn't passed the crosses at the front or back of the church. She had entered from below, from the caverns. And these were the cave dead, rising to claim him, to drink his blood and make him a monster.

He was destined to become one of them. Destined to thirst forever in hell. He had earned it. Grabbing a jagged piece of stone, he prepared to bash his head open. Only he couldn't do it. He was a coward.

The stone fell from his hands, and he stared at his shaking fingers. Everything became a blur. Hideous faces were approaching him out of pools of distortion and darkness. Distended limbs, swollen torsos, torn and stinking flesh. Bony, decayed hands bit into his flesh, and he found himself whirling down underground.

The fangs remained bright above him, and they never let him forget what was happening. He plunged into an emptiness that burned, and then he came out of it and saw the candlelight again. Awareness hatched like an insect in his brain. He was on the ground amid the broken pews and floorboards. His blood was pooled around him, and he could hear the cave's dead grunting and slurping as they fed on him. Liz was there on the apse, basking in her cruelty. Now his love was truly dead, and he tried to scream at her, but he found that he had no throat.

CHAPTER 12: MIST

Perception is the latticework of reality, Mike thought, and a vampire is Lucifer dreaming he's a man. He was sure he could solve the vampire mystery of Burchell Lake and find what the others couldn't. Just like when he was a little boy who could find a four-leaf clover when the others failed. Without his perception, the others were blind, he thought, then they came around the bend, and he found himself blinded by glare. Oak boughs were rocking in the wind, and beams were strobing from a brilliant disk of sun. Releasing the gas pedal, he kicked up a dust cloud as he pulled onto the shoulder.

Alice was leaning over the back of the seat, picking at candy stuck to Annie's dress. She glanced at Mike, her frown odd; she'd shaved her eyebrows off and penciled them in, and Mike was still trying to adjust to it.

"Really, Mike," Alice said. "Do you have to stop here in the forest?"

Mike hated admitting to his driving handicap, and like a piece of good fortune, a white-tailed deer appeared in the forest. "You can watch for deer here. There's one now."

Annie jumped away from Alice and scanned for the deer. While their eyes were on it, Mike reached below and picked up his sunglasses.

He drove off, and they caught sight of more deer and a porcupine on the heavily forested stretch of highway. As they closed in on Milford, more farms broke up the trees. The

bucolic scene lulled Alice and Annie to silence, and he had time to think about the task ahead. He'd been hired to investigate, and it was the necessary first step. He knew the case was vampirism and that people had disappeared.

That meant they were victims, and he would have to explain exactly what that meant to grief-stricken families. I'm sorry, Mrs. Woods, but Freddy wasn't quite lucky enough to die. He's come back, you see, and he's very thirsty. Then Mrs. Woods would bury her head in her hands and weep. How could such a terrible thing happen to my boy?

What could Mike really say? It was a question of religion and philosophy of life. Out here in the country, any Mrs. Woods would undoubtedly be a Christian, and if Mike were to tell her the truth, it would go like this. You know how you were saved, Mrs. Woods? Yes, you do, and you probably thought you were rescued from the clutches of Beelzebub or the demons in your well. The old Christians were brighter than you. They believe in the real gospel, not fakery. They knew that we are all equal in that we are all born victims or in sin. Every man, every woman, and every child is drowning and dying. The big world that spat us up is swallowing us whole. Suffering belongs to everyone, not just people in Africa, as you thought.

The genuine Christians were never like those moneyed ministers you watch on television. Those evangelists are as pale and dead as Mr. Chandler is. Their faces are done up with mortician's wax already. Maybe they think they're celebrities for God, but they were born to die just like everyone else. Before their faces twisted up with hypocrisy, before they told even a single lie, the word death was probably on their lips. It's the only word we all know and never have to learn. The trouble with them is that they don't remember much, or even what they want to save you from. They just want to grab more than their share while we're all going under the water. Freddy's problem is that he didn't stay under, but floated back up to suffer forever as a slave reaping for the big killer. I believe Satan is the name you use for him. Only through release can he be spared.

Mike supposed he was getting pessimistic, but it was hard to smile up at a sun that was really a big axe slowly coming down. He couldn't fool himself into believing it was really an angel. Not today. Maybe tomorrow the angels would come.

Milford was the sort of place you'd miss if you blinked, but if you did notice, it was a pretty town. Set at the foot of a semicircle of hills, it had a fast river and a new town hall. The downtown was one tight area of shops, and the residential area contained two high-rises. Mike took note of the police station next to the town hall, but he didn't stop in Milford; he breezed through, wanting to get to the Waters' place and be done with it.

Some small motels, a drive-in, and a racetrack appeared on the far side of town, then they were back in the country, heading up a Vermont-style hill to higher ground that held the Waters place and, farther on, Burchell Lake. It was a scenic kilometer and a half more before the trees broke and revealed Morris' house. Mike glanced at Alice, who was now holding a sleeping Annie, and could see she was impressed. The house was a stone mansion with a matching garage and stable. Perched on a rise, it had sweeping, curved roofs and shutters that spoke of another era. Its eighteenth-century architecture set it right into the ghostly legends of Burchell Lake.

As Mike turned up the drive, a teenage girl with short jet-black hair came out of the front door. Other than her, no one else was out front.

"That would be Lana," Alice said. "Morris said he was worried that she might go snooping around Burchell Lake on her own."

"Did he say he would make all those checks I asked for?"

"Yeah," Alice said. She raised Annie to wake her. "Holy cow, this kid is a sound sleeper." Annie began to rub her eyes, and Alice glanced back at Mike. "He said he'd put his security man, Jack Stillson, right on it. They probably have the information now."

Lana would be naked by the standards of the late Lucas Wickens, but to Mike, she was just a teenager wearing a floral pop top and tight shorts. He poked his head out the window. "I'm looking for Morris Waters."

"You Mr. Wilde?"

"Mike Wilde is my name. This is my wife Alice, and my daughter, Annie."

"Howdy," Annie said, and Alice said, "Hello."

"I expected somebody exotic," Lana said. "Where are your owl eyes and turban?"

"They're in the trunk with my crystal ball," Mike said.

"Everyone's on the back patio," Lana said. "You can come around and meet them. I'll get my brother Danny to carry your luggage up. We have a housekeeper to show you your rooms and help you settle in. Dad hired her last year after Mom died of cancer."

"Sorry to hear it. I mean about your mother," Mike said. He got out and swallowed some country air; it was sweet with the fragrance of grass gone to seed. "Nice place," he said over Annie, who was yelling and tugging Alice around the car. "It's big enough for a housekeeper and a gardener, too. I like the country. City people have let the dead air get between their ears."

"I'd rather be in the city," Lana said.

"Why's that?"

Lana turned and gestured for them to follow, speaking as they cut over the lawn. "There are cuter guys in the city, and there are concerts. Even the radio is bad around here. My father's station sure isn't for teenagers. My brother has a band, but I'm tired of them."

From the mansion's elevated position, Mike could see the surrounding territory; mostly forest, meadows, and misted hollows. There were more pockets of mist than you would expect on such a sunny day. "Your brother was the first person to report a vampire, wasn't he?" Mike said.

"Actually, it was Joey. If you ask them about it, keep in mind that they're scatterbrained. The cops think they were on dope."

"If they were on dope, they would have realized it was a hallucination when the effects wore off," Mike said. "I think they saw what they say they did."

"They saw a werewolf," Annie said. "You can see their red eyes in the woods. You just have to look and look till you see them."

The side yard was walled by lush vegetation on one side and an ivied portion of the stone mansion on the other.

"This way is quicker than going through the house," Lana said.

They passed between two sculpted hedges, turned, and found themselves approaching the patio, a large flagstone rectangle shaded in one corner by a huge lilac tree. It had enough tables and benches to seat a large party. Flower gardens, birdbaths, feeders, and Grecian-style sculpture were at its perimeter.

"Your guests are here," Lana called to her father.

Two men got up from a stone bench. The oldest man, a swarthy, stocky guy, Mike assumed to be Morris Waters. He looked mild-mannered but strong behind the easy facade. The other man had to be Jack Stillson, the small-town private eye. Mr. Stillson was tall, with a strong build and curly brown hair. He wore a shirt printed with palm trees and bright blues and had the airs of an outdoorsman.

"Glad you could come, Mr. Wilde," Morris said, pressing forward to shake his hand.

"Call me Mike. This must be Jack Stillson?"

"Sure am," Jack said, moving in to pump his hand.

Morris turned his attention to Alice and Annie. "Seems like I know you well, Alice. I spent so much time on the phone with you."

Alice nodded and shook his hand.

"What's your name, little girl?" Jack said, looking down at Annie.

"I'm Annie, the werewolf killer."

Laughter made a circle.

Morris turned and yelled, "Danny!" and a moment later, Danny and Joey came through the patio doors.

"I'll get their luggage," Danny said, and Mike tossed him his keys.

"Mrs. Wilde," Joey said, "bring the kid, and I'll get Janice to show you the house."

As Alice moved to follow Danny and Joey, a woman appeared at the doors. She was a young redhead dressed in jeans and a yellow blouse. Freckles peppered her face, but despite that, she was quite lovely. Alice had spoken to her over the phone, and then, as now, Janice had seemed more like a member of the Waters family than a housekeeper.

Mike watched Alice vanish inside with Annie. He turned back to Morris, who gestured for them all to sit. Mike took a white patio chair facing Morris and Jack.

"I was just asking Alice about the information on the cult," Mike said. "She said you might have it already?"

"Jack just brought it in," Morris said. "Lana, go into my den and get the manila folder on my desk."

Lana dashed inside. "Looks like you want to start work right away," Morris said.

"I have a strong interest in this case," Mike said. "How did you manage to obtain the information?"

Jack grinned, revealing a gap in his front teeth. "I went up to Burchell Lake and talked to a few people, telling them I was from Morris' radio station and that we wanted to let the people in the country know about the services available in the new town. They made me a list. Then I went out and got Allan Rampa's groundskeeper to give me a list of the people in permanent residence in Burchell Lake. I told him I was from the income tax department and needed the information in order to mail them refund checks."

Lana popped back through the open doors; her face flushed. She stopped to catch her breath. "Here it is."

Morris took the folder and handed it to Mike. He opened it and looked it over. THE CULT OF THE MILLENNIUM: Founders in Residence - Jon Chandler, Elizabeth Kanter, Allan Rampa.

BURCHELL LAKE: Spirits in Residence - Lazarak, The Beings of the Millennium, Black Elk, Mark Twain, Ramanamantha, Jesus the Third, and Baron Titus Arbore.

BURCHELL LAKE: Permanent Residents - David Shaman, Allan Knight, Elwood Fogg, Violet Cayce, Zina Swan, Susan Avaline, Faith Fairfield, Ra Frost, Shifu Groves, Swami Bawa Hills, J. P. Wing, Alice Moody.

BURCHELL LAKE: New Age Services - Subliminal Programming, Astral Meditation, Wiccan Blood Healing, Lucid Dream Therapy, Oracle Magic, Polarity Therapy, Herbal Healing, Creative Listening, Reflexology, Holistic Health & Vibrational Healing, Radical Aliveness, Crystal Healing & Enlightenment, Crystal Clearing and Charging

BURCHELL LAKE: New Age Stores - Crystal Source Stores, Spirit Guides, Inc., Natural Cosmetics, The Wiccan Gallery of Roses, The Visionary Art Store. A.R. PUBLISHING: Publishers of SPIRIT FLIGHT MAGAZINE and CULT WATCH NEWS.

BURCHELL LAKE: Associations - Sisters of the Blood, Spiritual Psychics Association, International Association of Enlightenment, Brotherhood of the Inner Eye. . . .

Unpleasant speculation clouded Mike's brow as he finished studying the report. He remained silent as he closed the manila folder and handed it back to Morris.

"Does it tell you much?" Jack Stillson said.

"Sure does," Mike said. "Jon Chandler was thought to be dead. He's a vampire. Elizabeth Kanter would be one as well."

"I'll have to see evidence before I believe anyone is a vampire," Morris said.

"We will begin by gathering evidence," Mike said.

"In a legal way," Morris said. "These people can fight back. With lawsuits."

"I have legal methods for investigating," Mike said. "We can start in the countryside. They can't sue us for that. I'll begin this afternoon. I want to put up some ornithologist's nets in the darkest parts of the woods."

"Those are nets for catching birds, aren't they?" Jack said.

"That's correct."

"Our last bird man disappeared," Morris said. "I want you to do things your way, but you'll have to realize that it's dangerous."

"I know it's risky," Mike said. "The nets are the first step. We'll see in the morning if we get any results. If not, we'll try some other things."

"I always go out on bird hunts," Lana said.

"You can come along," Mike said. "I need climbers to help me string the nets."

"Whenever I write a report, I try to paint a little picture of the situation," Jack said. "This time, I'm unable to do it. What's the total picture as you see it?"

"It's simple in its beauty," Mike said. "Or maybe I should say ugliness. We have a strain of mutant vampirism. Jon Chandler and Elizabeth Kanter are the only real vampires now, but I'd guess that the people listed as permanent residents are all destined to become part of the inner circle. Their victims, meaning people they drain and kill in blood frenzy, will become lesser vampires, a ghastly zombie variety. The Burchell Lake setup provides a good home base and reasons for international travel and movement. The town will have many temporary residents when it's completed. Guests from around the world. If Jon Chandler needs a victim, he has an endless supply passing through town. If he

needs to escape, he has money, connections, and safe havens in other countries. Allan Rampa, on the other hand, has his dream. He will be a leader of dark forces."

"If that's really the case, these people will be hard to stop," Morris said.

"Vampirism has never been stopped," Mike said. "That's why it's still around."

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A misted hollow showed at the end of the meadow, and in the haze, the sun looked old in the sky. The heart of the field had been alive with bird song, but now they were approaching silence. The mist is a drug that puts everything to sleep.

Hazy underbrush marked the edge of the field. Mike halted, put his pack down, and waited while Jack and the teenagers caught up.

"Guess we're going into the hollow?" Jack said.

Mike nodded. "We'll go down and string the nets. Looks like a good spot. Nice and dark."

"As soon as you get into the mist, you'll feel sweaty and drained," Danny said.

Mike nodded. "We'll work quickly."

Lana glanced around. "It's weird. The silence makes you sure something creepy is watching."

Joey pointed. "The path is over here."

Scooping up his pack, Mike went over and led them into the mist. The path was steep and sloping, with mud slicks and exposed roots. It soon leveled out, but the flatter ground was littered with deadfalls and loose rocks. Low-hanging branches appeared and eventually blocked the path entirely. They were facing a heavy screen of stunted oaks and ashes. Blowing mist buried the sun and sky.

Mike glanced around, and then he plucked a whirligig beetle from a leaf. He studied it then flicked it away. Squatting on his hams, he watched a mass of carpenter ants on a rotted log. A bird darted overhead, and Mike stood up quickly; it was a wood thrush that vanished quickly and silently.

Jack Stillson moved up close and broke the silence. "If I didn't know better, I'd think I was on a field trip with a high school science class."

"It's like that," Mike said as he dropped his pack. Opening the flaps, he took out two rolls of net. Undoing the end of one net, he unrolled it a foot. The material was dark mesh, but only if you looked at it from a certain angle. From every other angle, it was transparent. "We'll string the nets across that gap," he said. "The climbing shouldn't be too hard."

"Gotcha," Danny said, taking one of the rolls.

Lana snatched the other roll. "I'm faster than Joey," she said as she headed for the base of a tree.

The stunted trees were ideal for climbing; gnarled limbs provided solid handholds. Danny fastened his net, then tossed the roll across to Lana, who caught it and stretched it tight as she secured her end. They began to repeat the process with the other net. A few minutes later, they were out of the trees, mist feathering behind them as they smiled with satisfaction.

Morris and Jack were both wondering just what kind of birds they were supposed to be catching. Before they could ask, a tiny cry came from high up, and a tiny black object

popped in the net.

"We've caught a bird already," Joey said. "Let's check it out."

"Not yet," Mike said. "My plan was to leave the nets overnight, but now I don't think we need to. We'll give it an hour and see what we've got."

"I'd rather wait up in the meadow," Danny said. "This mist is depressing."

"You people go first," Jack said. "I'll take up the rear. I don't want anyone to disappear during this little bird hunt."

Getting up the path, they filed out of the mist into the sunny meadow. Energy poured into them with the light; it was like going through a hole in the weather. Mike turned around; big patches of mist drifted like the fingers of a clever thief, a thief who stole your health. He was sure the ghostly hand was also concealing fiends, protecting them from the sun's light.

Lana led the way to a heap of glacial boulders and a spring. They sat there in the pleasant light of the afternoon, talking mostly small talk and sizing each other up.

"The little guy dreams of being the big guy," Jack said. "The big guy dreams of being bigger. So the point is that everybody dreams, and dreams aren't real. Our hopes are all fantasy. Back when I was a small-town cop, I found that I didn't like real-life people. They couldn't live up to my expectations. So I figured it didn't matter; people from novels could be my heroes."

"Not me," Danny said. "I have real heroes, and I plan on being a real star in an alternative band. Heroes have a gritty side. I hate movie portrayals of rock stars and fictional musicians."

"Huh," Lana said. "Some of those guys you listen to are more fiction than fact. Even their grit is painted on. Everything about them is hype. The music companies practically write them into existence, and they're so messed up they really believe they are legends."

"What about you, Mike?" Joey said. "Who are your heroes?"

"I gave up on heroes. I just try to get by without blowing it. Maybe people who are kind and can keep a level head are my heroes."

"I'm my own hero," Lana said. "I just want to be a teenager."

Once he was back in the mist, Mike thought that maybe God was his hero. Heroes could beat the forces of darkness, and it wasn't likely that anyone lesser could flatten the vampires. But God sometimes had a habit of sleeping in the mist, so maybe he had to listen to Lana and be his own hero. Possibly a dead hero in the end.

Lana let the net drop from her side, and it swung down into Joey's hands. Working slowly from up in the tree, Danny managed to pass down the rest of the net; Jack passed it on to Mike.

A circle formed around Mike and the nets, and he went to work, taking hold of the first tangle. Tugging and twisting carefully, he freed the bird and held it gently in his hand.

"This one is a little brown bat," Mike said as he released it. It flew off, and he went to work on the second tangle, which turned out to be a big brown bat with a wingspan of three feet. Yet it was smaller than the third creature, a flying fox bat with a wingspan of four feet. The wings snapped and hummed, and the fox bat coasted off through the gap. The teenagers looked on, amazed, and Jack was more than interested.

Mike continued to clean the nets, his attitude that of an absorbed naturalist. He plucked out a red bat and held it up for the others to see.

"Now we know the mists are full of bats," Jack said, "but does that really mean anything?"

"Only the brown bats are native to Ontario," Mike said. "The other ones are exotic, from places like South America."

With some difficulty, Mike managed to remove a pig snouted bat. He displayed its vampiric teeth.

"That must be a vampire bat," Lana said.

"It is," Mike said, gesturing with the pulsing bat in his hand. "I'd say we caught about thirty bats, and we caught them in less than an hour. This area is absolutely swarming with bats."

"It's evidence of a sort," Jack said. "Maybe evidence that Rampa imports bats. But we need something solid. A report of mists and bats wouldn't convince people of much, and it wouldn't convince the police of anything at all."

"We'll go for better evidence early in the morning," Mike said. "I now know this mist isn't natural; it is therefore supernatural, and we'll deal with it in that way. Danny, you have large speakers, don't you?"

"Of course. But if you're thinking of playing music to attract the vampires, well, I wouldn't advise it. That's what we did just before Freddy and Davey got it."

"I want to amplify some sounds," Mike said. "In the vampire legends, the creatures have the power to become mist, so I'm going to use the same weapon against the mist as I might use against a vampire."

"Suits me," Danny said. "I'll get out the equipment tonight." The others nodded, and the group washed their hands with sanitizer and returned to the mansion.

Adjusting to new houses was difficult for Alice; she preferred her own home. It was a purely physical phenomenon; her limbs would weaken and tire her mind, giving birth to phantom aches and pains. The first night in a new bed would inevitably bring a kinked neck in the morning. And of course, she'd had the irritation of Annie rushing her around the mansion. As Mike kissed her good night, she was trying to sift through her first impressions of the place, but it was all a dizzying merry-go-round of little events, and it quickly pushed her off the deep end into sleep.

Mike hovered over Alice for a moment; a blend of night light and moonlight cast a soft cream glow on her pale skin. She was especially desirable in her shortie nightgown. If she was waning physically, she remained sexually attractive. Fortunately, he didn't share her weaknesses. He felt good, and he'd likely feel good at dawn, regardless of the strange bed.

After setting his alarm, he walked across the huge bedroom to the open window and looked out at the night. The breeze felt as hot and slow as lizard breath. A hard diamond glitter of stars shone above. A bubble of clear air surrounded the estate, fields, and forest stretched off and found a vanishing point in the mist. The mist drifted, thickening in some places and thinning in others, forming arms of fog radiating from a central bank that hung toward Burchell Lake. It was like a squatting beast with tentacles, and its bowels were the caves and rushing water honeycombing the underground. It was bigger than anything he'd dealt with before, and as he pondered it, the night became a long,

cadaverous face, crawling with a beard of bats and mist. He shivered, knowing he'd need all the help he could get on this one.

It wasn't quite dawn, and Mike awoke, finding Annie and the hard pink plastic of her doll digging into his belly. She was half sprawled across Alice, yet Alice was still fast asleep. He figured Annie had fled a nightmare and jumped on their bed in the dark. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it would sound in five minutes. Deciding it would be better to sneak out without waking Annie, he eased himself up out of bed and tiptoed over to the closet. Some clean clothes were rolled in a neat bundle, and he picked them up and slipped out to the bathroom. His reflection in the brass-tinted mirror didn't disappoint him; he hadn't reached the magic age of fashion - a point where you needed fashion to hide and enhance an aging body - and he still wore nudity well.

Going downstairs, he went around to the dining room, following the breakfast smells drifting in the hall. Janice and the teenagers were already up, the room's country motif surrounding them with morning brightness.

Mike took a glass of apple juice from a tray and drank it. "Everything ready to go?" he said.

"Yeah," Danny said. "The speakers are in the back of Jack's truck. If you want, we can amplify your taped sounds enough to pop a vampire's eardrums."

"Great," Mike said as Jack entered the room.

"Is this whole crew going out?" Jack said.

"Were bats couldn't keep us here," Lana said.

"I'll be here keeping the bats out of the attic," Janice said.

Morris walked in, looking drawn as he gulped his juice. "I don't want any breakfast," he grumbled.

"What's new about that?" Janice said.

"Let's get rolling early," Jack said, swallowing his coffee.

Outside, the hot air was as heavy as pillows, and the sky was pinking. A bank of white clouds formed an enormous rose on the horizon. Mike rode in the truck with Jack, and the teenagers followed in Morris's family four-door. A short tour of some dew-lined dirt roads, and they were at their destination, which was a meadow near where Lucas Wickens had disappeared.

A road ran into the field, and there was a patch of bare ground at its center that looked like a landing pad for Allan Rampa's beings of the millennium. At one time, the bare patch had been a dump for old appliances and other trash, but the health department in Milford had ordered it cleared.

Jack parked at the center and got out. He opened the back while Mike stood hands-on-hips watching Morris' car crawl over the huge ruts in the soft road.

Lana threw her door open and popped out ahead of Danny and Joey. Moments later, they were all standing together, looking across the field at a rainbow in the mist. Its arc was flawed, making it what county people called a devil's rainbow. Behind the rainbow, mist rolled, reaching up to fuzz the sky.

"What now?" Morris said. "Do we play your sounds?"

"We put out bait," Mike said. Walking back to the truck, he reached in the window and grabbed a plastic bag from the seat.

"Gross," Lana said as Mike pulled a zip-lock bag of blood from the plastic.

"Maybe we should put some rat poison in the blood?" Joey said. "That would take care of some vampires."

"No," Mike said. "Poison wouldn't kill a vampire. It would kill some of the local wildlife instead."

"You're starting to give me the creeps, Mike," Lana said. "I don't know many guys who carry blood with them."

"It's just some beef blood Janice got out for me," Mike said. "What I want to do is scout the field and dump the blood over in the mist. Then we'll watch the sun rise and play the tape when we see or hear something."

Dew-soaked grass, tall weeds, and the sodden ground killed their enthusiasm and turned scouting the field into an unpleasant task for all but Mike and Lana. They had both thought to wear leather sandals and shorts. Danny and Joey ended up loafing on a slight incline that was mostly burrs and stones. Morris and Jack didn't get that far; they hung back and watched, keeping Mike and Lana in sight.

Jack had a Star Firestar with him, a miniaturized pistol he carried in a holster against his lower back. The stainless steel gun gleamed faintly as he drew it.

"You think that little gun could kill a vampire?" Morris said.

"It's a gun to do business with. It fires large-caliber bullets, like those from a Colt Python or a Magnum. I don't know what it would take to drop a vampire. Most likely we'll be confronting cultists, and I won't have to shoot at all."

Lana and Mike were deep in the meadow, and Morris yelled, warning them to stay in sight. Ahead, they could see a hunter's bridge constructed of rough-hewn logs. The tinkling of a brook was the only sound.

"What's on the other side?" Mike said.

"Just some scrub and small caves," Lana said.

"Okay, this will have to do," Mike said as he carefully broke the seal on the bag. He swept it over the grass and left a trail of blood glistening with the dewdrops.

They stayed split up. Danny and Morris had gone back to the truck and were prepared to play Mike's sounds. Lana and Joey were talking quietly over in the rocks and thistles. Mike stood in crab grass watching the rising sun burn off some of the mist, and Jack relaxed at the edge of the weeds, his gun back in the case.

Silence was nearly absolute; foliage didn't rustle in the weak breeze, so that left only the tinkling of the brook and the casual whispering of Lana and Joey. Mike was beginning to think he'd wasted their time, but it was the only way since he couldn't investigate at night with people who didn't know what they were up against. He was studying a tiger moth perched on a weed when he heard a splash in the brook. He snapped to attention. It might've been a frog or a fish, but he could see nothing. Keeping quiet, he waited. Something vague appeared on the bridge. The mist was drifting in curtains there, so he wasn't quite sure what it was.

The more Mike tried to see clearly, the more the mist blew like smoke. A twig snapped over near the patch of blood he'd planted. Turning, he raised his arms, signaling Danny, and instantly the speaker banks were alive with sound. Church bells were ringing in the meadow, loudly and resonantly, and there was a violent crack and splintering of light.

As though it had never existed, a patch of surrounding mist vanished. Bats speckled the air, and they swiftly congregated, rose in a cloud, and wheeled off in the direction of Burchell Lake.

While the others were fascinated by the bats, Mike looked to the bait and saw a creature rising from its knees. Blood streaked its face, it wore a cloak of grey-bleached rags, and it was impossible to tell if the sunken features were those of a man or woman. The fangs were unmistakably those of a vampire.

Scorched by the daylight, it shrieked and threw its bony hands over its eyes. Then a cloud cleared the sun, and brilliant beams lanced down. Blisters appeared on its hands, and they burst in tiny showers of blackened blood.

It began to run in torment, hunched and crooked like some deformed, diseased thing from an earlier century. A gaggle of demonic sounds issued from its throat as it stopped and began to stumble toward Lana. She screamed, and Jack fired his Star Firestar pistol, sending a bullet hammering into the creature's shoulder. Bone, rags, and rotten flesh were ripped away, and it tumbled, rolled, then rose. Keeping on the run this time, it headed for the log bridge.

The bells continued to sound, shots rang out, splintering the railings on the bridge, and the creature's agonized screeching continued. Its rags smoked, blue fire licked over its matted hair. Crashing into a tangle of brush, it was gone.

Intent on capturing the creature, Jack sprinted over the sodden turf and came to a winded halt near the brook. The hunk of flesh and bone he'd blown from the creature's shoulder smoked in the grass beside him.

Mike flagged his arms, and Danny silenced the bells, then everyone headed for Jack and the bridge.

Mike got there first. "We won't try entering its lair. We need proper weapons to kill it. And who knows how many there are?"

Lana held her nose; she looked down at the smoldering flesh. It was green and red like rotten meat, going gummy and bubbling. The odor was so strong it was more like something that reached out and molested her than a smell.

Morris arrived, frowning at his dew-soaked pants and the situation. "I believe in vampires now," he said.

Their eyes went back to the smoldering flesh; it continued to disintegrate, becoming a splash of boiling blood. It went dry, a heap of ochre powder that suddenly went up like a flash pot. Only scorched grass remained.

"Our evidence has gone up in smoke," Morris said. "I wanted something to show our local Mountie."

"We're going to set a trap," Mike said. "Call your Mountie and tell him to be out tomorrow at sunrise to view some remains. I'm going to call my friend, Detective Skagway in Toronto, and see if he can bring out some special weapons. We have to stop these creatures before they spread beyond the caverns and destroy the surrounding towns."

"How exactly do we kill them?" Jack said.

"We go in after them, stake them or incapacitate them and drag them out into the sunlight."

"What about Allan Rampa?" Morris said.

"We can't prove he is behind it, and we have to exterminate the creatures whether he is or not."

An elfin maple with a twisted trunk and gnarled branches leaned out over the water. A strip of sand beach and some poplars were beyond it. The phantom railroad, forest, and a CNR trestle were to the north. Ahead, a tongue of mist licked out, clouding a piece of shoreline where some cave mouths opened on the water.

Morris was in the lead, carrying two shovels. Mike and Jack were at his heels, carrying bundles of sticks. Beside them, the waters of the lake gleamed like a mirror. As they'd expected, they were approaching silence as well as mist. Sounds were still drifting over from the clear sunny half of the lake, where mallards, herons, geese, and gulls were active.

They came to a halt at the edge of the mist. Mike dropped his bundle of sticks. "We can dig here," he said.

"Maybe we can get more than one," Jack said. "Hell, we got one in a few minutes the first time."

Mike examined the sharpened sticks, and Jack planted his shovel to lift the first pile of sandy loam. "Those aren't real punji sticks," Jack said. "The real ones are bamboo."

"I know," Mike said, "but with vampires, a pit of wooden stakes is better."

"After the pit is baited and ready, we'd better toss a tree across the entry road," Morris said. "We can't take a chance on someone falling in the pit by accident."

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Although it was at the bottom of the caverns and at the end of a long, narrow tunnel, it could see the light of the moon. Rays lit its mind, and even though it didn't know itself, it knew its god. A god with whispering tongues and voices that mocked, commanded, and cajoled until a throat widened and a long word fell and echoed in the night - Blood.

Stirred by the word, lust began to knit the creature's shattered bones. It sat up, swollen hands slipping on the slimy walls, and with eyes burning red like lit cigars, it viewed itself. It had been human, a man who'd been out hunting. And it had a name it couldn't remember. Black rot and earth fell across its vision, erasing its past life. Rot that was real - the dead tissues of its brain, on fire with a pattern of hunger and hate. A pattern that brought it to life and gave it gifts of thirst and torment.

It wept, it sniveled, whined and moaned, and then it growled and began to crawl upward to the moon. The passage narrowed, and it went hand over hand, tearing away chunks of limestone and sending pebbles rattling down. The agony of thirst would have finished it, left it gagging on its swollen tongue, if it weren't for the hissing whispers and nocturnal songs of its god drawing it up, like a corpse surfacing after a long time underwater.

The sound of dripping water came as slow torture, and in the long crawl, two of its fingers were nearly scraped off, but it didn't give up. It couldn't surrender, but was like a man trapped in a coffin, forced to claw at the lid for as long as he could move.

There were tiny drops of its own blood that hadn't been taken; red liquid that oozed out of the withered flesh and worked into the slime coating the wall. Madness, frenzy, the faint odor of blood drove it to spasms, and it squirmed, struggled, and chewed at the stone.

Then another odor drifted in the night air, blowing down from above: a rich, coppery fragrance, the scent of fresh blood. And it was a power of levitation, speeding the creature along until it crawled out over a lip of stone and into the sand.

Something scuttled in the moonlight. A Milky Way of blood splashed in the sky. Its hand shot out and seized an ugly thing, took it to its mouth where it sucked at it with split lips and crunched it with broken teeth. The taste was bland, the energy faint and vanishing.

A radiant moon burst out of the clouds, sending it to its feet like a man waking from a vivid nightmare. Its eyes ignited, and it saw through swirls of mist. Where the scent of blood was strong, there were burnished moonbeams and showers of red and gold phosphor. Shivers sent it forward toward the yawning pit, and it stopped at the edge, its tongue lolling, then it went over and down to the stakes.

Eight spikes pounded through its withered flesh, the points all missing its heart. It made no sound as one stake had shot through its throat, and it didn't move. A colorless liquid began to drip from the wound as its skin hardened into a husk.

In time, a path of silver moonlight began to twist on the water, and it entered the impaled vampire, moistening its tongue and causing it to twist. It licked out, curling around some of the plasma-soaked mud. Muscles quivered from the power of blood, and it lifted itself from the stakes, then fell back and was pierced again. As the long night passed, the vampire continued to feed on the baited sand at the pit bottom, and its feeding gave it an endless death. There was no escape, and its nightmare of pain was real as it tossed, turned, rose, and fell on the stakes.

Behind it all, terror painted the sky, sending its first terrible warning with the false dawn of four a.m. More than the torture of the stakes, it feared the light of the sun.

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A heat wave had been hiding in the mountains of cumulus clouds on the horizon. It rode in ahead of the dawn. Nathan rode in just after that; he turned up the Waters' driveway and found Morris, Mike, and Jack already waiting for him. Behind them, the moon was sinking like a hot rock in a steam room.

Nathan got out, his blue shirt already sweat-stained. "Should've got my damned air conditioner fixed," he said to Morris. He eyed Mike. "Is this your psychic investigator?"

"I am," Mike said. "The third eye is under my hair."

Nathan's eyes bored into Jack. "What's this I hear about you guys setting traps? You know better than that, Jack."

Jack winced. "Let's see what we got in the trap before we talk about the legality of it."

"If there's anything in it, you boys will be in trouble," Nathan said. "And if this is a hoax, you'll be in even bigger trouble."

"This is no game," Morris said.

A sky of dark, frosted glass showed in the east, and it was picking up an orange glaze as they drove over to check the pit. Nathan frowned severely as Mike and Jack got out to pull away the stumps and branches they'd put out to block regular traffic. Minutes later, they were on the beach, heading for the pit.

"Sure hope we got something," Jack said.

Nathan looked at him with grim amazement. "You mean you guys don't even know what you're trapping? I wish I didn't know about this."

Before Nathan could say more, a bone-chilling cry rang up from the pit bottom; the sound of an inhuman creature in pain. The cry was lawless, so hideous and startling that it made Nathan's badge feel like a useless lump of metal on his chest.

"If that thing gets out, we'll really be in for it," Mike said. "Vampires are stronger than men."

Shadows gained definition, and faint morning light washed into the pit. The rays of dawn worked like lasers on the evil being at the bottom. On the stakes, a skeleton glowed like it was radioactive; bones as bright as neon tubing. Its flesh became a gelatinous mass that oozed and pulsed as it disintegrated and reformed, dropping maggot-like clumps that threw out filaments and pulled themselves back to the main mass. A Mars-red glow lit the eyes, and the brain was a reptilian thing that poked a wagging tentacle out of a hole gashed in the ear.

In an atmosphere of heat and howling, the pit was an entrance to hell. Earth sprayed, and pungent and fetid odors were nearly visible in the steam. They inched closer, ducking back when more earth showered up. Finally, Nathan got close enough for a good look, and the sight gave him such a jolt he ducked back quickly. Mike held his shoulder as he leaned forward a second time.

The creature had broken the stakes around its head, neck, and shoulders, but its torso remained impaled, and its melting flesh glued it to the wood. The morning light was destroying it; bits of its flesh were already flaring on the stake points. The rising steam was part of its decay, and even in this final state of corruption, it could cry out, claw, and hurl earth with skeletal hands.

Nathan's bowels nearly gave way, and Mike was assaulted by psychic emanations from the vampire's exploding astral body. All four men staggered back. Nathan, Morris, and Jack leaned weakly against a boulder while Mike stood and stared, transfixed by the sight of supernatural death.

The morning sun strengthened, and streamers of yellow fire began to shoot up from the pit. A final death cry echoed across the lake, and then the sound fell away to unseen depths. Pale fire rose over the lip of the pit as the creature was levitated by a power of annihilation. Its face shifted to a warped mask, and the fiery contours of its body were in liquid motion. Blood-red fire roared through its burning lips, then it became a sheet of flame and was gone. Only heat and a wisp of smoke remained.

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A damp stone staircase spiraled up, and Jon Chandler climbed it leisurely. At the top, he waited for a granite door to grate aside, then he stepped into the corridor. Glass candles were ensconced at regular intervals, but their light failed to lift the gloom. His private reflections also failed to lift the gloom. One problem was that his personality was fractured, or perhaps split like a cloven hoof. He considered some early New Age methods for healing. As he recalled it, there were seven planes. The first being the plane of recollection, and the higher levels, visionary planes of history and the future. That was the root of the problem; at the visionary level, Jon Chandler didn't fully exist - only the Baron did, but as dead history. Yet, dead or not, the effects were potent and disturbing. He never knew when he was going to flash back to some grotesque moment in history. All would be well if he could channel it properly, but that was difficult.

Perhaps ordinary meditation would work better than the astral sounds meditation he'd been practicing, and maybe it wouldn't work at all. Meditation was really only listening to the inner voice, and he had one composed of the multitudes of history. An endless crowd

really -- moaning as they died of misery and plague ... some of them still screaming for war and blood as they died.

Everything vibrates through the body. If the mind doesn't work for you, it will work against you, so the way to get it working for you is self-hypnosis -- how many times had he sold that old saw to an audience? Too many, he supposed. Yet there had to be something that would get his mind working for him. Self-hypnosis was really self-delusion, and he would never be able to hypnotize the Baron away.

He recalled the words of Ramtha, "Whatever you want, become it totally in feelings. Feel your desire. Become the desire within your being." His simple desire was to be himself and in command of the powers he'd inherited from the Baron. Yet how could he become himself totally in feelings when he should be himself already? Every idea he examined for self-healing was turning out to be a trick mirror, and the dead Baron was always on the other side of the glass.

A solitary figure, Jon appeared on the outer steps. Palatial stone rose behind him, and before him, the trees of the sacred grove whispered in a gentle breeze. Some mist moved out at the grove's perimeter, and because of Jon's aversion to sunlight, he saw it as a blood-red glare. Above, striated clouds of violet slate filtered the sunset. Beams flashed through as Jon descended to an apron of lapis lazuli stones. He could practically see gleaming knives as pain stabbed at his eyes, but the pain was bearable, and his dark glasses were shielding him well. Although the light was falling on his face, there was no reaction, just a slight glitter from the glaze of minerals and crushed crystal he wore for protection. Zina Swann had developed the protective paste for him, and he was grateful. It allowed him to enjoy the twilight. Unfortunately, there was nothing that could stop the pain if he went out in full daylight.

Although he wasn't whole, he supposed he could consider himself lucky. David Shaman had been the most helpful; his astral sounds meditation had been a key to recovery. In the early days on the estate, Jon's personality had been little more than a few ashes of memory, a confused file of the Baron's knowledge thrown in with a few of Jon Chandler's personality traits. Blood feeding helped restore his physical health, but it was really the hours with David Shaman that restored his mind. In vampirism, the body could wither, but certain slices of gray matter were immortal; in regeneration, his brain had been a circle of fire, his awareness caught up in a wheel that turned between Hades and Earth as the forge of the undead opened onto a new reality.

Strolling under a hemlock, Jon considered the scope of his new vision. He wore a cloak of emotions as cold as the tomb he lived in - yet he wasn't all that inhuman. He had his pet bats and sympathy for the cave monsters. Religion was still important; he valued the higher life of ritual and ceremony, and the New Millennium culture was taking over in Burchell Lake. The new Jon Chandler was building a future in spite of his flaws, a world and a priesthood of the strong. He was nothing like the old Jon; the old Mr. Chandler had been no more than a king of decadence and decay, feeding off the wounds of a dying world.

Now there were new ways; New Millennium people like David Shaman, who could help ease the burning and make life pleasant for the undead. Leaders like Allan Rampa were shaping a world that would respect vampires and others with unusual talents. High culture and the religions of blood sacrifice were returning. The colored water in the chalice of Christianity would be poured out on the empty sands of atheism, and a world that had already fallen would be replaced. It was fitting that the monster breed of vampire would feed on the corpse of the old world.

In Jon's mind, there was certainty that the ancient pagans had been right. Religion lost its roots when it tried to reach above them. Man, the animal could only be a predator and a drinker of blood. History's cup of blood would never stay buried; it would always be reborn as a chalice for a religion that would let man feast and satisfy the ravaging need -- body and soul, blood and fire. He opened his hands and looked at their healthy glow. And so it is, he thought. If only a pagan can face the truth, then only a vampire can be a high priest.

Images of Liz slipped across his mind. She had reservations that made him sigh, believing that she'd lost something in becoming undead. Liz had lost nothing; her husband had died so she could be reborn. Weak men are always born to be used and destroyed. She should have poisoned him years ago - put the dog out of his misery. He supposed that Liz's beliefs didn't hinder her, but they made her seem inferior to him. And they would all be his inferiors - always. Only Jon Chandler, the drainer, could make the proper leap to vampirism. He was a natural. The Baron had prepared a way for him, and thankfully, the Baron was now mostly out of the way. Jon now felt that he could have no doubts, no tears for yesterday. If his soul had vanished with his reflection, then it had been nothing more - just an ephemeral thing and a ghost while he was solid flesh and blood. Flesh and blood staring eternity in the face.

Charcoal streaked the sky, and the last of the light formed a fan on the horizon. A glance down the path, and Jon saw Allan Rampa approaching. His stride was purposeful; he had something on his mind, and Jon was prepared to listen. Allan shared the vision with him, so he had admiration for him - he could respect a human who was really a vampire at heart.

Allan wore fringed buckskin pants. Jon knew it meant David Shaman would be leading the people in one of his ceremonies. Jon wasn't much for spirits of that sort, but dancing, chanting, and imagining they had powers was something people liked, especially women, who smothered David with their bosoms and purses.

Common people wouldn't be taking part in any ceremony near the grove, though. It would be partly to lift the spirits of some of the leaders and partly cultural; Allan wanted regular ceremonies to honor his sacred spots, though only the Sabbats and esbats were to be genuine supernatural events. Allan enjoyed playing along, as if his beings of the millennium were real and not just something he'd dreamed up.

Even in twilight, Allan's personal surroundings were evident. When he emerged from the maples, the shadows came with him. Jon was even more aware of auras now, and Allan's was an envelope of gray shadows; an unexciting aura, but one that didn't bring lust to the heart or pain to the eyes. He was an easy person for a vampire to deal with; some other people weren't. Susun Avaline was one of those; she was pearl pale and encircled by globules of delicious red light. Because of that, Jon didn't allow Liz near her. Some tasty morsels he reserved for himself.

Allan's brown eyes brightened as he joined Jon on the sky-blue apron of stones; brightened with what Jon thought might be fear.

"Bad news," Allan said. "I got a letter from the local Mouny, Nathan Sharp. He says the caves around here are full of rabid animals, and I'm to keep my people away while his men exterminate them."

"They didn't say anything about trespassing here, did they?"

"No, and our lawyers have warned Mr. Sharp. Freedom of religion protects us. He can duck into a few caves, but he can't poach or search here."

"How much do you think he knows about the caves?"

"Too much. Mike Wilde has been spotted in Milford. He's probably behind this phony rabid animal hunt."

Jon grinned. "If they go into the caverns, they'll disappear. We can make sure of it by aiding our friends in the caves. This ritual of David's, let's make it more than ceremonial. To do what I want, I'll need a person to use as a blood sacrifice."

"We haven't got anyone extra to use as a blood sacrifice. And there's more bad news. An attorney, Donald Riddick, has arrived from Vancouver. He's back at the mansion, and he wants to see you to verify that you're not brainwashed or being held against your will."

"What kind of nonsense is this?"

"It's because you transferred all your money from Vancouver without explaining why. I told you before; you have to notify your wife."

"Notify her," Jon said. "Don't worry. I'm going to fix her. This Riddick wants to see me - okay, have Jackson bring him out once the ceremony is underway. I'll be present, and he'll see me."

"All right, if that's what you want."

The moon was rising through a fine web of mist. A great horned owl hooted, claiming the night. It was a claim that was short-lived, as a torch flared, bringing total silence. A larger fire ignited, and a crackling blaze dappled a massive pillar of stone blocks. Indian images of a wolf dance were painted on an elk skin, spiked to the stones.

Costumed Wiccans began to dance in the trimmed circle of grass by the sacred spot, and the lead figure was David Shaman. His long dark hair gleamed in the firelight, as did the beads of sweat on his painted face and chest. He was using a dance wand, a forked stick with eagle feathers, tassels, and bands of tiny colored beads, to lead the people in the wolf dance.

Limbs sweeping fluidly, David separated from the others and made elegant patterns under the moon as he moved with his wand. Slowing his dance, he began to chant, asking time to grant him entrance to the land of sacred dreams.

When he judged the magic to have begun, he halted and signaled the others to assemble. They obeyed, but slowly, remaining trance silent as they came together in a circle.

Putting his hands on his hips, David turned his gaze to Faith. She tossed her dark hood back, and blond hair spilled across her painted face. From the folds of her robe, she produced a wooden bowl and a charm pouch. Loosing the string, she poured herbs from the pouch to the bowl, then she began moving around the circle, giving each Wiccan a pinch of the medicine.

Slipping back into her place, she took a pinch for herself. They all swallowed. Choking, vomiting, and convulsions began immediately, and they all fell to their knees, some of them crawling about randomly and thrashing the ground.

The scene remained ugly, and a few minutes later, the purification rite was complete. Sins had been vomited up; their souls were cleansed. One dark-haired woman, Zina Swann, remained on the ground, gagging on her vomit. Judging her to be impure, they left her there to either recover or die.

"Let us anoint ourselves and begin," David Shaman said, looking up to Allan Knight.

Allan nodded and produced his charm pouch. It contained a paste of fragrant powders, and after making the proper gestures and signs, he began to anoint the others. He finished and returned to his place. A redheaded woman, Susun Avaline, cast off her robe and stood naked in the moonlight. Her curves were perfect and ghostly as she held a handful of reeds as an offering to the others.

The circle broke as each person strolled past, taking a reed. Using the fire, they lit the reeds, letting the smoke of the fragrant herbs contained within drift in the air. Out of the sweet burning came visions and knowledge of the sacrifice to come.

After a long hour of stalling, Jackson finally left the sacred grove, leading the lawyer, Donald Riddick, to the ceremony. Ostensibly, his visit was to verify Jon Chandler's willful presence. Jon, however, wasn't quite the same Jon he used to be. Not as far as free will went.

Mr. Riddick was a tall, stern, and practical man who believed in no foolishness, and he fully expected to find Jon Chandler dancing merrily at the moonlit scene of sorcery he was approaching. Riddick viewed Chandler as a fanatic who cheated on his wife and a villain who hoodwinked and brainwashed other people. The idea of him being held against his will in this occult paradise was ludicrous, but his wife had paid the fee, and he would have to see Jon with his own eyes before the job was done.

If the earth were moved, the chanters were practiced enough to do it. It was a wolf dance, according to Jackson, and the twelve celebrants were certainly wolves. A new occult variety. If any one false belief could be called falser than another, then the wolf who preached it would be the leader of the pack. In Mr. Riddick's mind, that leader was Allan Rampa; there was no one falser than he was. No one other than Chandler himself, and as far as he could see, Chandler wasn't one of the costumed people.

Mr. Riddick's face reddened, and he turned on Jackson so fast he hurt his neck. "Mr. Chandler isn't here," he said angrily. "You won't fool me with some costumed geek. This is a despicable hoax, a waste of my time. Action will be taken. I will see to-"

But Mr. Riddick said no more. Jackson's face had lost its airs of idiotic rapture, and he was now grinning. This was foolishness and more, and the shock of it silenced Riddick. He was confused, and he stuttered, then Jackson seized his throat. His hand locked like a steel clamp, he threw the red-faced lawyer to his knees, then grabbed him again and dragged him through the dancers to the pillar.

Jackson's grin became an icy smile, then a grimace as he slammed Mr. Riddick into the pillar. Riddick bounced off the rock and slid, his thoughts spinning in a head softened like a melon. His back scraped against the stone, and he ended up on his knees. Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth, his gasps were weak ones, and he knew this was no foolishness - these people were going to kill him, if he wasn't dead or hopelessly injured already.

With an audible whip of the wand, David Shaman ended the wolf dance, and the people stood stone still. Now the thirteenth person, the leader of the ceremonial coven, was walking over the field. Jon Chandler was the leader, of course, and he was in costume, wearing a cloak of painted deer hide. His approach looked mystic; he walked through sable night - no crickets chirped, no owls hooted, and the members of the coven remained silent and solemn-faced.

As Jon grew near, David Shaman fell to his knees in supplication, offering the forked wand. Authority in his step, Jon moved in, took it, and gave everyone a fanged smile.

Satisfied with the scene, he turned to the pillar and the cowering figure of Donald Riddick.

"You wanted to see me, so now I'm here," Jon said to Riddick. Putting his hands on his hips, he waited for Mr. Riddick's reply, but there was no reply. Terror was there like ice in the lawyer's mesmerized eyes.

"It's good to see the moonlight," Jon continued, stepping closer to Riddick. "And you have sharp eyes we can make use of. It should please you to know that because of you, the blind will see."

Mr. Riddick choked up more blood; he saw a flood of moonlight in Jon Chandler's eyes, and he couldn't guess what Chandler was talking about.

Then, in a fluid movement that looked practiced, Jon swept the wand around and forward and put out Riddick's eyes with the forked end.

Still on his knees, frozen against the pillar with prongs piercing his eyes, Donald Riddick cried out. It was the only truly solid bit of emotion he'd shown in years. The anguished cry of a man who knew he had just lost everything.

Jon withdrew the wand. Blood spurted from the damaged sockets, and lawyer Riddick fell forward and began crawling in circles on his knees. His bloody fingers covered his eyes, and broken sobs and cries of pain echoed in the field as he blindly moved into the long grass.

Now in command of the night, Jon held up the forked end of the dance wand. The sacrifice had been made. His eyes became red as blood as he watched gore drip from the tassels. A vision was contained in the blood, and it put a picture of a thousand morbid eyes in his mind; the eyes of the monsters, his cave vampires. Only now, because of the sacrifice, Jon was their vision, and he could aid them so that they would see and easily kill and feed on the men who would hunt them down.

Jon's face remained cold. He didn't reveal the vision's triumph to the others. Instead, he turned back to Mr. Riddick.

Deep in the darkened grass, Donald Riddick suddenly felt a healing power touch his eyes; a miracle was upon him - his sight was returning. From his knees, he looked up and saw the moon hovering behind a great square tower. The crenelated top wall revealed it to be a castle keep. Getting to his feet, he looked around at a scene that was somber and beautiful. He was in the outer ward of a castle, surrounded by towers, turrets, conical roofs, and a palisade.

A group of colorful people walked toward him through the long grass. A juggler wearing a diamond-patterned coat was in the lead, and he was followed by a jester, a clown, and some ragged peasants.

Amazed, Riddick watched as they came closer, noticing that the peasants were beating the ground with staffs and pine boughs. The juggler quickly took on a sinister air, almost an aura of evil, and several more steps brought his face into clear view. He had fangs, and what Riddick had thought was paint was really blood on his jaw.

Riddick gulped and, without further hesitation, he rose, turned, and fled, running straight through an arched door that led to an underground portion of the castle. Howling followed at his heels, and he was afraid to look back, so he continued on, going deeper into what he now knew was a torch-lit dungeon.

Darkness was descending, and he wasn't sure if it was gloom or if his sight was leaving him. Wet, cracked stone slapped his feet as he moved beside a line of pillars that rose to

high Gothic arches above. It came to him that there was no escape, and then he whimpered in fear as blindness struck him again.

He fell and crawled through slime, not crying out as before, but sobbing and choking through a face of dirt and blood. He was being driven deeper into the pit of his shattered life, and in it, he heard the crazed snarls and huffing of mangled things. A sour stench of rotten flesh began to cut through the reek of his blood, then, moments later, he felt the ripping of splintered hands and the hard bones of the undead. Fangs tore into him, and he knew the scavengers from the grave were on him.

He was too tortured and horrified to know if it would end quickly; he only knew that he was screaming in a dungeon. Tomorrow, he would scream again when he awoke to find that the dungeon was really a cavern. They would be the hungry screams of a monster, resonant with blood thirst.

CHAPTER 13: THE HUNT

Throughout the night, the mist retreated, a living thing creeping back on itself, withdrawing into its shell of limestone. It billowed and rolled at the many cave mouths, resembling whitened lips, and the long caverns were like a throat, coughing haunted echoes through stalagmites and flowstone grotesqueries.

In the chambers, pits, and passages, mist condensed, leaving rainbows on the stone. Tiny streams flowed into pools that were like phosphor eyes in the darkness, their vision a shimmering reflection of all things warped. Outside in the clear sky, bats whirled in tornado formation under the moon, some of them vanishing into the shadows that created them.

A whisper rose in the cavernous esophagus, and it became the low rumbling of the underground. The voice of the higher vampire, Jon Chandler, was hidden in it. Slabs fell, pillars of rock tumbled, shelves of limestone crumbled, and cracks opened. Monstrous things began to stir, obeying the loud command. They were undead, yet they knew fear; it was in the rumbling, and they were terrified of the openings, the doors into the night above. They could sense an unfriendly moon, its light burning as crosses at the arched exits. A sun and a sword of justice were rising, and they knew the hunters had come. Slashing through the subterranean streams, they wailed with anger; soaked through and slime-covered, they burned with thirst. Fire would sear their throats, hot irons would torment them, but they had no choice -- they would kill the enemy or twist on the stake. The blood of the hunters was the only blood.

On the surface, it was a nice summer day. The sun rose like a flare and burned off the last of the mist. Barely a ripple moved on the mirror-smooth waters of Burchell Lake, and from the shore, it resembled a jigsaw piece of silver flung down from the heavens. A water snake broke the surface following the flash of a sunfish. Gulls cried, faint sounds of chorus frogs were in the air, a painted turtle walked on the sand - the wilderness appeared tame.

Mike believed the beauty of nature was serving as camouflage for deadly creatures. His gaze fell on a sandpiper, but his mind was on the killing business. It was obvious that the cave vampires knew of the hunt; their first line of defense showed in that they'd hidden.

Closing his eyes, Mike concentrated on the caverns. An odor like rotten fruit came to his nostrils. He could see unholy things lurking in the damp and dark. A corpse crawled, its

eyes gouged out.

Mike had picked the beach because the cave mouths were large and the passages were wide. According to the maps Morris had dug up at the Milford library, almost all the other passages - and they were numerous - branched off from the main ones that began here. If you looked along the beach or over from the water, you wouldn't see caves as they were camouflaged by underbrush, catbrier, low branches, and sumac. Dark tunnels existed, and they were deadly. Anyone who'd gone out for a late dip in recent days would've found that out.

The sound of a straining engine broke the calm. Turning, Mike saw a Jeep Commander coming around the roadblock and onto the beach. The driver was Jake Skagway, and he looked stern and energetic, like a cop on his way to bust up a riot. Nathan, Morris, and Jack were taking it easy over by the other vehicles, and they also turned to greet Jake.

Mike strolled across the beach, picking up fragments of their conversation. Introductions were complete by the time he reached them.

"So you already know Detective Skagway?" Morris was saying to Jack.

"I do," Jack said. "I've been in Toronto on cases before."

"What sort of cases?" Morris said.

"Runaways. Parents send me up there after them."

"You mean like that Milford girl," Morris said. "The one that got killed in Toronto last year."

"I found her too late," Jack said.

Jake Skagway was preoccupied. He appeared to be ignoring the conversation while he shuffled things around in the back of the Jeep. He pulled two canvas covers loose, revealing several weapons.

Nathan took an immediate interest. "Let's go over this stuff," he said.

Hunting knives were the closest items, so Jake started with them. "These are Trail Master knives," he said, picking them up. "For situations you have to cut your way out of."

Nathan's eyes brightened, like he was a kid at Christmas time; he snatched a crossbow with a rifle-style grip and recoil pad, giving it an admiring eye.

"That's a Blackhawk Superbow," Jake said. "It's rigged to fire solid wood arrows."

"The silver bullets," Mike said. "Did you get some?"

"Lots," Jake said as he pushed aside a heap of body armor and lifted out a sawed-off Remington shotgun. "This was done specially by a friend of mine in ballistics. It fires expanding silver slugs."

Morris carried a large canvas sheet over from his truck and spread it on the ground. Working efficiently, the men laid out the weapons, supplies, and tools. They all got involved with the job, with Mike the only person constantly looking over his shoulder. The sun fell as confidence on the backs of the other men, but Mike saw it differently; his teeth were on edge, and there were staring eyes in the back of his mind. They were eyes in a pit, filling with dead hate as they swam in liquid darkness. In one brief flash, he saw himself as the monsters saw him: a strange, revolting creature, and an enemy and target for feeding. His knees wobbled; it was so real he could almost hate himself the way they did. Catching hold of his emotions, he firmed up his thoughts and blocked out

the cave emanations. Sweat trickled on his brow; he was afraid the others would become victims of the raw mesmerism these monsters exuded. It was quite possible; he could envision them falling to their knees, tearing at their scalps as vile emanations engulfed them and left them prey to the fangs and claws slashing out from hidden corners of rot and death.

Tanned and sweating in a military-green tank top, Morris looked more like a marine than the owner of a radio station. He held an inventory list, and when everything had been laid out he checked the items one by one, coils of rope, flares, crossbows, quivers of arrows, belts of sharpened stakes, machetes, Swiss army knives, hunting knives, silver slugs, sawed-off shotguns, long wooden stakes with cross grips, a handgun with laser sights and silver bullets, Kevlar vests, body armor, belt lanterns, two splinter mines, rations of chocolate, portable radios with earplugs, head gear, a tool box and more.

When they finished with the list, the men lifted the canvas by the corners and carried it down the beach to a dilapidated shack near the caves. There, the second phase began with hammering as Morris and Jake went to work converting the shack into a command post. Mike and Jack went on ahead, carrying machetes and hatchets, and Nathan patrolled with one of the special handguns while they began clearing the brush and vines at the cave entrances. Anyone watching from above would have thought they were viewing soldiers preparing for a long stay on a desert island.

Twenty minutes was all it took to complete preliminary work on the command post. Jake and Morris were already testing the radio when Mike and Jack returned from brush-cutting duties. Nathan broke out some cold Cokes, and they guzzled them, wiping grit and sweat from their faces. In their thoughts, they were steeling themselves to go in.

"Guess it's up to you, Nathan," Jake said. "It's your country, so you decide who goes in."

Nathan swallowed the last of his pop and crushed the can. His left eye glittered; serious calculation showed on his foxlike face. "We want the best plan, not heroics," he said. "Each man should gear up with weapons he feels confident using. Here's the order, we'll enter and file down with two men at the head. The first man will be me, and I want Mike with me because of his sixth sense. Jack will tail us, acting as backup, and Jake will stay well back. You're the biggest man, Jake, so I don't want you up front in the tight spaces. Morris mans the radio and command post. He never comes inside. If there is a disaster or one of us becomes trapped, Morris will have the location marked on the map and will be able to arrange a rescue."

"I'm going to track each man as a point on the map," Morris said. "The dot moving as he moves. As far as cave-ins go, it's pretty solid rock in there, and the tunnels don't dead-end. There shouldn't be any big natural rockslides, but you have to watch out for pits. Some of them are deep enough to make a fall deadly."

"That's our strategy," Nathan said. "Let's gear up, keeping in mind that we're in this game to win and not lose men."

As a game, it was a cold one; they stepped over a heap of glacial stone, experiencing an immediate temperature drop as they entered the cavern. It was thirty degrees Celsius outside and near freezing in the depths.

Nathan clicked on his belt lantern, and a moment later, Mike did the same. Wisps of icy mist drifted in front of them. The walls near the entrance were smooth and magnesium blue, and the ceiling undulated, the stone there resembling ripples and droplets of water. It was the throat of a beast, and Mike shivered, touched by invisible splinters of ice. The

atmosphere was one of dread, as if the chambers belonged to a dark mind that could hurl apparitions and ambushes from every shadow-draped recess.

Morris' voice came over the earplugs. He had the clear tone of a person trained for radio. "Is the entry clear?"

"Looks like easy going for quite a ways in," Nathan said. "I got the shivers - might be some bogies around."

The flowstone's roll became increasingly crusty, and niches appeared in the walls. Sometimes the lights didn't cut through, and they stopped at the banks of shadow. Mike's main weapon was a sharpened oak staff with an ornate silver cross for a grip. With the pointed end, he probed the shadows, coming up with nothing time and again. He didn't sense anything deadly in this tunnel and didn't expect to discover anything. Even so, he didn't consider himself too psychic to be ambushed.

Crouching slightly, they crept around a bend, and the situation changed. The walls in this new section of the tunnel were dripping with rusty ooze, and the distant roar of running water reminded them that they were exploring ancient watercourses.

For a second, Mike thought he heard evil whispering; the sort a madman might make, then icy fingers of doom went up his spine, and the feeling caused him to shiver his lips back against his teeth.

The floor was growing slippery and corrugated; they were taking their steps delicately. Nathan suddenly halted. His lantern played on a section of the passage that was nearly impassable because of multi-colored phallic stalactites.

"We can get around them if we stay near the wall," Mike said. "Be ready. I don't feel good about it."

Nathan got on the radio. "We're in a dangerous area of stalactites. Be prepared to move up, Jack."

"Will do," Jack said. "And I'd rather move up. It gives me the creeps back here. I keep mistaking shadows for crawling things and hands."

After the word "hands," a crackle of static devoured Jack's words; the darkness became black magic, and a hand appeared. It shot around a stalagmite and seized Nathan's ankle. Startled, he yelled, tried to pull back, and drew his handgun.

Mike stepped up, saying, "Don't shoot. You'll blow your foot off!"

A hideous eyeless thing had its foot, and it hissed as it slid and pulled itself out of the stalagmites. The bead of Nathan's laser sight flashed over it, and he had to grind his teeth and make an effort to keep from firing.

Swiftly, Mike approached and drove down with his staff, speared the vampire's arm, and impaled it to the stone. The creature screamed horribly through damaged vocal cords, and Nathan gasped as the grip broke and he stumbled back. A stalagmite caught the back of his leg, and he went to the floor, his gun clattering on the stone. On the radio, Morris ordered help.

The creature flung itself at Mike, but he put a boot on its shoulder and kicked it back. Then he watched in horror as it tore its arm free, leaving the rotted hand and wrist impaled on the staff.

Flailing out with the stump arm, it showered Mike with bits of speckled rot and flesh. It wailed and moved to charge. Mike stopped it by flipping up the cross end of his staff. Its gouged sockets caught fire, and it fell back to its knees. Veils of illusion swept over it,

and for a moment it looked like the harmless middle-aged man it had once been, but Mike didn't fall for the trick; he turned the staff, pressed forward, and drove in the spike.

Heaving, he took the creature down among the stalagmites, shifting his weight and strength to keep it pinned as it struggled.

Nathan was back up, and he clicked his light on and saw it twitch, snarl, shiver, and fall still. Odors of rancid rot, worse than outhouse smells, hit his nose, but he ignored them. "Looks like that staff is more effective than silver bullets," he said.

A light flashed as Jack arrived. Immediately, he saw that the job was done and lowered his shotgun.

"One stake special going out," Nathan said over the radio. "And by the way, we're okay in here."

"I wasn't so sure," Morris said. "Maybe I'll never be the same again, not after hearing that scream."

Unhitching his coil of rope, Jack went over to the vampire. It sure looked dead, but he didn't want to take any chances with it, so he tied its arms and legs. Pausing, he put on work gloves, then he lifted the corpse, and after placing it on a canvas stretcher, he dragged it away, moving Indian-style up the tunnel.

The corpse was delivered to Jake Skagway, who was responsible for exposing the bodies to sunlight.

"Never thought I'd smile at something like that," Jake said as he studied the corpse's rat-chewed suit.

"Be careful, that thing will probably explode in flames," Morris said as they headed for the exit.

"Here's the test," Jake said, then he laughed, spat on his hands, threw the body over his shoulder, and ran. The cave mouth grew like a lens, he went through a grid of light and shadow, and tossed the body; it went out over the rocks and exploded to meteoric fire. After crashing down the rocky embankment, it flattened to a sheet of fire on the sand. Finally, it flared red and went out, leaving big leaves of ash drifting out over the water.

"A beautiful funeral," Morris said over the fuzzy airwaves. "The best cremation and scattering of ashes I've ever seen."

A slow hour followed their initial success. Time crept like an insect as Mike and Nathan probed deeper, exploring a number of narrow passages. Although Nathan was nervous and on edge, shrinking from the shadows draped over gracefully sculpted walls, Mike felt hollow and empty. He sensed nothing positive or negative and knew that it was wrong to be numb.

They drifted back to the larger tunnels and the roar of water, glimpsing it occasionally, pouring at the bottom of dark, yawning pits. Fossils of coral and sea creatures studded the walls, and with the shadows took advantage of the mind's habit of turning forms into faces -- demonic faces and leering masks in this case.

Nathan was shaken, and Mike couldn't blame him for it - the ambush had been scary enough. Now Nathan used a stake from his belt to probe, leaving the gun holstered.

The peculiar numbness stayed with Mike, and he took some moments to reflect on it. There was always a mood of fear and apprehension in caves, and in these caverns, you were a hero if you didn't just panic and run. Someone had to be interfering with his emotions. Concentrating on the sound of the water, he tried to shake the feeling. Silver

images flashed in his mind, and he knew it meant something. He tried to get a clearer picture; the image of a silver medallion trailed into view - a talisman the vampires were using to blind him.

Nathan held up his hand, and they stopped partway into a huge opening. The floor ahead was depressed like a dish and scattered with gross stalagmites the size of large dogs.

A couple more steps, and Nathan stopped again. There were too many inky shadows at waist level, where he most feared them. They moved when his belt lantern did, which made it impossible to tell which one might be a lurking vampire.

"We're into a dangerous cavern," Nathan said over the radio. "Move up, Jack."

"Don't let one of the things jump you again," Morris said. "Try a flare."

Nathan liked the idea. He pulled a flare from his pack, lit the fuse, and tossed it. It exploded into blue light, a blinding flash that sent liquid spots of glare dancing before their eyes.

A carousel of sinister shadows moved on the walls as the flare fizzled with brilliant sparks. A moment later, wailing and a deep-throated cry of anger rose. Two frenzied cave vampires emerged from among the stalagmites. Their flesh sagged through rotten clothing, their faces were death-eaten, noses, bones, and jaws jutting grossly. The light of the flare transformed into a red flame in their eyes.

Staggering back, Nathan drew his pistol as the vampires charged. A Superman crest was on the T-shirt of the first vampire, and Nathan recognized it as Freddy's. Visceral rot was bursting at the belly, below the crest; the thing was so unlike Freddy or anything human that the sight of it caused Nathan to hesitate. His finger froze on the trigger as feelings of disbelief washed over him.

A shout came from their rear, and Mike glanced back. He'd been prepared to fight with his staff, but now Jack was running into the light and had the Blackhawk aimed.

Dropping to his knees, Mike ducked his head, and Jack fired while he was still on the run. The bolt from the crossbow flew, zipping over Mike's head and into Freddy's chest. It bit in solid and deep enough that the point protruded out of his back as he collapsed and disappeared beneath the stalagmites.

Nathan's confusion had passed. He fired at the second vampire, and the silver bullet struck it in the solar plexus, halting it. But it didn't fall; it looked down at the flaming hole in its chest, screeched through shredded blue lips, and charged again.

Two more bullets ripped into it, and it flew forward, burning, to the stone, where it continued to advance doglike on its knees.

It reached Mike, and he moved to fend it off with the cross end of his staff, but it still managed to lunge, flying up for his throat. Taking a step back, he struck it with the cross end, and it fell back, exhaling smoke as it roared in pain.

Rallying, it attacked again, this time seizing the cross with its twisted hands. The destructive effects were instant; its eyes vanished, its entire body shook and smoked, and its hands melted like wax. It dropped to the floor, looking more like a roasted witch than a vampire.

Jack's excited voice came over the radio. "Send in the undertaker. Two bloodsuckers to go!"

They stopped to rest in an area where white calcium carbonate coated the walls with angel patterns, and Mike felt glad the angels had been with them so far. Another slip-up by Nathan could mean the end. On the brighter side, Nathan had seen the devil now, and he wouldn't likely succumb to fear or amazement again. Satisfied, Mike began fastening the straps on his pack. He heard a rumble, and then a fanged face flashed across his mind. "Chandler, damn it!" he said.

Nathan washed back a bite of chocolate with pop, and then he jumped up light as a skeleton, showering the wall with Coke. "Rock slide!" he hollered as he tossed the can away.

Checking their rear, they saw dust billowing in the stalactites down the passage.

Nathan got on the radio. "You all right, Jack?"

"A-okay," Jack said. "It just missed me. I saw it, a chalky part of the ceiling split, and boulders poured through."

"I think it was deliberate," Morris said. "Watch the roof from now on. According to the maps, Jack can get to you by backtracking and turning back up at the first fork in the passage."

A few minutes passed, and Mike was getting worried. He knew the vampires were being directed by Jon Chandler, and they had nearly gotten them twice now, a slide and an ambush. What would be next?

As it turned out, he didn't have to wait long for an answer. Up ahead, where the calcium carbonate gave way to iron-red stains, the ceiling was splitting. The sound of grinding stone tore at their ears. The earth rolled with thunder. Mike and Nathan were sprinting instantly. They dodged falling stalactites, getting past the split before anything came through, and they kept on running, going into a widening cavern. It had a dangerous stalactite-fanged roof, but it wasn't splitting, so they took a moment to stop and look back.

At first glance, it looked like earth pouring through the split, then they realized it was bats, clouds of them. The canvass snapping of their wings like crashing surf as they flooded the tunnel.

There was no way to retreat from them, and they were down the tunnel in a moment - hungry pig-snouted vampire bats diving in to tear and worry at their clothing. Body armor provided protection as they struck at the bats and stumbled into a recess where they could do a better job at fending them off.

Squatting, Mike blocked his face with his forearm and dug through his bag. A bat locked onto his hand, and he forced a death squeal from it as he crushed it against the wall. Getting hold of a smooth metal rectangle, he yanked it out. The object was a splinter mine that had been designed for use against vampires, but he figured it would be a good weapon to use against the bats.

He stood and turned to Nathan, who was flailing wildly at the bats. "Get down," Mike said. "I'm going to use a mine."

The weapon had a grenade-style pin. Mike yanked it out, clicked the timer, and tossed the mine into the center of the cavern. He grabbed Nathan by the shoulder and spun him so he faced the wall and then ducked down.

The explosion wasn't thunderous, but more like a strong cherry-bomb pop. A concentrated blast that sent wood splinters flying in every direction, and the chaff sawed into the bats - a shock that stopped them in midair and sent them raining to the floor.

When the dust cleared, most of the bats had been put out of action, but some could still fly, and they were headed back to the crack. They went up through the ceiling as a lantern's flash came from the opposite direction. It was Jack, and Mike heard Nathan sigh with relief as Jack stepped up and studied the floor. His lantern played over a carpet of flopping, half-dead bats.

"What happened?" Morris said. "Your radios went out."

"Some high-frequency bat interference," Nathan said.

As the day wore on, they began to realize how big the system of caverns really was; if the vampires wanted to, they could escape them forever. Tracking them was important. Mike did sense the presence of vampires. They were ghostly forms at the edge of his awareness, and they never appeared in reality, but seemed to be fleeing ahead of them with the shadows created by their lanterns.

In the deeper passages, the tunnels were sinuous; an eerie fairyland of weird shapes. Twists and turns open regularly in ballroom-sized chambers. Colorful stalactites dripped from the chamber ceilings, and moisture, shadows, and flowstone bearded the walls.

"We're too damn good," Mike said. "We scared them off."

"I'd still like to be better," Nathan said.

"It's hard to pick you up that deep," Morris said, his voice a crackle of static. "According to the maps, you're nearly under Allan Rampa's property, so be careful."

Mike heard water bubbling in hidden underground channels. Star-shaped clusters of calcite crystals began to appear on the walls. They were approaching a vast opening illuminated by phosphor. It was like being in a grotto: a phosphor haze twinkling in crystals and haloing around coral-colored stalagmites.

It came on Mike suddenly, ice on his heart; he could sense a beast lurking in this grotto, and he was about to mention it to Nathan when another danger halted them. It was a pit, hundreds of feet deep, blocking their way.

Nathan glanced over the edge then flashed his lantern beam along the fluted walls. On the right side, a lumpy walk of flowstone ran next to the wall. It was three feet wide and looked quite solid.

"Should we chance it?" Nathan said. He got on the radio. "Jack, move up. We might need you."

"Be there in a flash," Jack said.

"I sense the presence of a vampire," Mike said.

"Then now's the time to exterminate it," Nathan said. "The damn things are getting hard to find."

A Cyclopean eye flashed. It was Jack's lantern. He was moving up. He walked to the edge of the pit and looked over.

"Whoa!" he said, staggering back. "What a drop. Rocks like icicles at the bottom. Okay, I'll back you guys with the shotgun, then follow you across."

Nathan led the way as they went out on the walk, looking like men on another planet in the eerie phosphor light. They hoped they wouldn't encounter a vampire until they got across, and their hopes were in vain. A shadow was swooping in the cavern ahead, and moments later, a vampire appeared. Its eyes glowed with fire, but its body was zombie-dead, torn flesh and clothing. It wore a rotted black leather jacket, open, revealing a

mat of hair and black-red gore. The toe bones poked out of the decayed flesh of its feet, and its hands were skeletal claws with death-growth nails. The power and wickedness of a devil were in its expression, highlighted by glowing phosphor light. Immediately, it roared through desiccated lips, a sound of such desperation and hunger that it shook Nathan, causing him to slip.

There was slime coating the stone, and Nathan went over the edge swiftly. Mike lunged, using his staff to hook Nathan's pack and break his fall. Scrambling wildly, Nathan got a hold of some knobs of flowstone and hung there at the edge.

The vampire roared again and charged, forcing Mike to step to the side to keep it from getting to Nathan's neck. With no defense, it looked like the crazed vampire would take them all over the edge.

"Get down!" Jack yelled, his voice echoing in the cavern and breaking with static on the radio.

Mike obeyed, dropping quickly to his hands and knees.

Grabbing a quick bead, Jack fired his shotgun, the expanding silver slug catching the vampire square in the face. The creature's head was torn off by the blast, and the rot that was its brain sprayed the wall. Continuing to fly, the slug went into the grotto and slammed a stalagmite, smashing it.

The vampire didn't fall or stop; it continued its charge, headless, with red steam showering up from its neck stump.

Jack didn't want to risk another shot when the thing was so close to Mike, and Mike barely had time to scramble to his feet. Unhooking his staff from Nathan's pack, he swung and caught the vampire square in the chest. It was like piercing dry coffin rot. The force stopped the vampire dead in its tracks, and Mike continued to push forward. Taking the creature off its feet, he heaved it out over the edge and let go. With the stake solidly through it, the vampire fell silently and crashed into the rocks at the bottom.

Turning, Mike saw Jack pulling Nathan up over the edge. "Maybe we aren't so good after all," he said over the radio.

"I hope you're not saying we lost Nathan?" Morris said.

"No, but it was close."

Morris called them out of the caverns well before sunset. More or less, it was something they'd agreed on. Ten vampires had been destroyed, but there were more, and hunting in the caves wasn't the best way to get them. In the long run, Chandler and Allan would have the advantage; they could hide the monsters and set traps.

They needed a way of getting all the cave creatures at once, and out in the sunshine, they drew up plans. Morris noted that one of the caverns opening on the beach was particularly wide and low. It had a ceiling of crystal-coated stalactites, needle-sharp and everywhere like dirty icicles. The cavern was also unsound; it had fissured walls of soft speckled stone, overhung by a limestone shelf.

Morris' plan was simple: Using some of the blood bags Nathan had obtained, they would lure the fanged devils into the cavern and onto the beach. Then they could target them from behind a barrier of brush and sand and blast the cavern. The shelf composing the roof would come down, and the crystal and stalactites would stake the trapped bloodsuckers.

Feeling uneasy, the claw and growl of hunger opening in his belly, Mike followed Nathan into the cavern. He was sure there were no vampires present, but he was also aware that the idea of using the cavern as a trap could have come to Jon Chandler first. It wasn't likely, but it was possible.

A cracked floor made of a salt-like substance ran off into the gloom. Wisps of mist drifted at the ceiling, and there was a strong mineral odor. Flashing their beams along the wall, they saw how unsafe the place was. Lightning bolt fissures a foot wide, huge stellations, and spider web cracks marred the speckled gray stone.

Exhaling steam in the cold air, they moved up to a pocked face and began to inspect it. Chunks of the rock crumbled like sandstone in Nathan's gloved hand. "Hmm," he said. "We can lay some charges along the walls. There's a big split in the ceiling back there that we can blow. The way I figure it, if the walls and split are blasted at the same time, this whole section of roof will drop down like a big bed of nails."

"Sounds really nice," Mike said.

They could imagine the spiked roof shifting like doom above them, so they planted the charges quickly, packing them in with clay putty and then clicking the detonators on.

Mike surveyed the scene; no charges were visible, but he knew a signal from Morris would make the place history. He took a bag of bait blood from his pack, and after Nathan nodded, he punctured the cap and began sprinkling it on the floor, making a trail that led to the cavern mouth and the red of the setting sun.

Nathan began doing what looked like pantomime, stringing invisible threads across the opening.

"How do those trip wires work without connecting to anything?" Mike said.

"They emit a tiny charge when broken, and the meter picks it up," Nathan said, fixing the last wire.

Mike and Nathan emerged, walking over a lip of flowstone that ran out to the sand. They were amazed at the first-class job the others had done on the barricade. Most of the brush they'd cut that morning had been stacked with driftwood, boulders, and sandbags. Together with the trucks, it all made a tight semicircular wall that isolated the cavern mouth.

Ten feet from the opening, they'd inflated a dollar-store plastic wading pool. Jake stood beside it, taking the seal off a bag of blood. He had his shirt off, revealing a mat of chest hair, and he grinned, putting on a false face of madness.

Blood poured into the pool. Mike watched for a moment, and then he smelled something cooking and looked over the barricade. Smoke rose from a portable barbecue. Jack and Morris sat next to it, grilling steaks. Strolling over, Mike vaulted the barricade. Jack turned to him and took a swallow of red beer.

"While we were working, you guys were setting up a barbecue?" Mike said.

"A man can't live on rations alone," Jack said.

Using the tongs, Morris turned a slab of steak. "I hope I never see chocolate again," he said.

Nathan came over the barricade. "I'll have mine well done. Break me out a beer."

Jack passed out beer. Morris took a cold swallow and glanced at the sunset. "We'd better eat quickly," he said, "or else freeloaders with mighty bad table manners will be here to

join us.”

Well before nightfall, they were armed and ready at the barricade. The moon was about to rise, and a faint ribbon of silver emblazoned the shield of twilight. Dusk and telltale veils of mist began to obscure the cavern; that, along with an ominous silence, told them the vampires were rising to the bait.

The men were tired, and they fought to stay awake as they waited for the trip wires to break. Cooler night air made the beach a comfortable place, so they didn't notice time slipping by. An hour passed.

“They should’ve risen to the bait by now,” Morris said.

“Maybe Chandler called them away,” Nathan said.

“I don't think Chandler has much control over them, some, but not enough to force them back from the smell of blood,” Jake said.

It made Mike wonder; he contemplated the situation, then he looked over his shoulder at the rising moon. Something glittered in its face, causing him to look again. As he watched, the craters vanished, and the features became fine lines on a silver talisman. In his mind's eye, he could see the vampires, a nest of them in the cavern, hissing and clawing at the stone as the blood fragrance drove them to a frenzy. But they couldn't get out.

The vision switched, and he saw Jon Chandler in a hidden chamber, using his talisman to channel the power of the moon and hold his vampires back.

If it were a blood spell, it could be broken. Silently stepping away from the barricade, Mike sat cross-legged in the sand. The others paid little attention, putting it down to his moodiness. Slipping into a trance, he had the feeling of passing lightly across the face of the moon. Darkness engulfed him like deep water, and the moonlight became a gloss on ebony, the cloak of the vampire, shielding him and his spell. Mike concentrated on breaking through to the enemy, and at the same time, he felt for the silver crucifix he had around his neck. A vision rose, a thousand morbid eyes congealed in blood, and they separated to reveal the death-darkened face of Jon Chandler. Placing the crucifix against his forehead, Mike focused on Chandler, searching him out. Silver caught fire in his mind as he broke through, and he saw Chandler suddenly shriek and claw at a flaming cross scorching his face.

A chorus of inhuman wailing echoed from the caverns, throwing the men to attention.

Nathan took charge. “Holy shit, they're coming. Wait till I hit the spotlight, then open fire.”

“The trip wires are still up,” Morris said.

Jake found it hard to hold his fire. The cave seemed like a madhouse of monsters busting open. Things that belonged to hellfire. Wailing was their burning, the mist at the cavern mouth their smoke. They moaned and scraped at the stone as they threw themselves forward, and they tore at each other as they tried to get to the blood.

The yellow warning light on Morris' meter began blinking, meaning the trip wires were down. A clutch of ugly shadows emerged.

Nathan held back, waiting for more vampires to come out, but it was hard to see, and the wailing was fading to silence. There was one last cry, then they heard guttural noises and vile slurping as the vampires lapped at the blood in the pool.

Nathan hit the switch.

Spotlights cut through the darkness and mist, illuminating a section of beach, the cavern mouth, and the vampires. Six scrawny bear-chewed vampires had their faces in the blood-filled swimming tube, and they didn't even look up to notice the light, but others closer to the cavern did, and they began to screech and spit.

They fired the Blackhawks first, and the wooden bolts struck with close-range force, taking down the screamers at the cavern mouth like they were rag dolls. At the pool, the six vampires lifted blood-dripping faces. The light ignited their eyes, and they shot to their feet. The spotlights highlighted their pasty skin, blackened eyes, and sunken cheeks. In their hideousness, their cries were the calls of abominable creatures, begging for extermination.

Silver rained in the night. Slugs from the Remingtons took off heads, and bloody chunks of scalp flew while skull fragments like pieces of broken crockery skated in the sand. Eruptions of red fire covered torsos and legs as bullets from Nathan's handguns struck. Red-hot hammers were knocking the vampires apart, and some of them staggered headless, flailing smoking limbs as they fell shuddering to the sand.

The strong ones twitched violently and leaped back up to be hit again. None of them got a chance to charge.

Even though the vampires appeared to be finished, the hail of bullets continued. Judging the time right, Morris detonated the charges. The cavern mouth boomed and cannoned out pebbles, dust, and smoke. It was a ground-shaking explosion, and they heard the grinding of massive stone blocks as the roof sank. The whole spiked slab was dropping down like the world's largest vampire crusher. Ghastly screams echoed out as it went to ground.

"Wow! We killed 'em!" Jack hollered.

"Let's celebrate with a beer," Nathan said.

"What's with you, Skagway?" Jack said as Jake turned away with a hand on his belly.

"He's seen too many corpses," Mike said.

Morris took charge. "We'd better dig a pit to hold those corpses before we celebrate. We'll stay until sunrise to make sure they're destroyed."

Mike's eyes followed the last of the drifting smoke; he found some relief in the victory, but it was mostly unrewarding. Unless they stopped the vampirism at the source, it would continue to spread, and they would be little more than a cleanup gang, killing and burying the undead.

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From the top of the hill the highway lights made her think of a row of mantises; bright rectangular eyes beaming from elongated neck stems, painting the strip of blacktop with bowling alley yellow. No cars were in sight, and few vehicles traveled this road out of Milford. Lana knew most of the people who used it. Otherwise, she'd never chance skating it at night.

Stepping from the shoulder to the newly laid asphalt, she looked to her rear, and then she pushed off and began to skate down the hill. Lifting her ankles lightly, she let herself coast. She had the fastest wheels on her Roller Derby skates, so it was better to go easy on the speed. Wind raced through her hair, an exhilarating feeling. The Milky Way showed as a trail of gauze in the purple-black sky, and the sensation was of riding its tail into a fine future. Her nose twitched; she enjoyed the scent of the open fields. When she'd told Jack she only wanted to be a teenager, it was because she knew there wasn't

any advantage in getting older. Who would ever feel better than she did flying down a hill? Some of the kids were in a hurry to pursue careers, and in her opinion, they were in a hurry to let the years and their lives pass them by.

Power heated her legs; she was pumped up, and it was like the stars were close enough to be falling through her short hair. Her thoughts began to zip along with them as she looked at the day's problems. Alice, Danny, and Joey were worried. They were sure the men were going to meet their match in the caves. Lana wasn't worried; she'd looked at the weapons, and she had faith in the cleverness of the men. Not so much faith in her father or Nathan, but faith in the others, especially Mike. The best team wins. She believed every game worked that way, and this time she was sure the good guys were a whole lot better than a gang of rotted monsters.

Her thoughts had also been positive earlier, as she skated into Milford. At least they were until she got there. Nothing was happening in the old dullsville, so she'd hung out by the town bridge with the gang and listened to new music. Dullsville or not, the summer had been good. Because of the high unemployment rate, she hadn't been able to get a job, which meant that softhearted Pop had increased her allowance. The situation was pleasing. Work didn't appeal to her. She didn't want to waste the best summers of her life jerking sodas at Dull Mart when she could be hanging out with the gang. Lana believed work was best used as a form of punishment. Make kids with poor grades work at the meatpacking plant if they fail.

She rode into a dip at the bottom of the hill and lost speed as she tackled a long rise. Pumping the skates uphill was difficult and good for the legs and balance. She was halfway up when headlights shot over the crest, forcing her onto the shoulder. A rattling pickup on oversized tires banged by, smoking grit in her face. Lana got a flash of the driver's clenched teeth and gave him a finger as he sped on. The guy was the kind of driver she hated; he'd crested the hill on the wrong side of the road.

Her good mood was ruined, and she felt like killing the guy. She spat out dust and began the slow grind up the rest of the hill. Moments later, she heard the pickup engine roar. Glancing back, she saw the driver making a U-turn in the rattletrap. She hadn't seen the driver's face clearly, but she was sure she didn't know him. That meant trouble. Light fear and a surge of adrenaline gave her a weightless feeling, and she began to skate faster, nearing the top as the pickup closed in on her.

It came alongside her at the crest, and she checked out the driver, finding it hard to see him in the darkened cab. Road lights suddenly swept a checkered pattern over the window, revealing a grimy pan of whisker stubble and a lecherous grin. She could feel his eyes crawling up the back of her legs to the pleats in her red shorts.

Her stomach turned as she began to roll down the steep side of the rise, picking up speed. The truck also sped up. The driver passed, moved out in front of her, and tried to block her, so she slowed and checked his plate as she came close to the bumper.

There was no license plate, and the surprise of it sent blood pounding from her heart to her ears. She tried to fight off a sense of unreality. This was the real thing, with a creep pursuing her, and if he got her, he'd probably make her a famous corpse. It was scary, it was terrifying, but it didn't seem real. It was as weird as the yellow glow of the highway lights.

The truck braked, stopping in the middle of the road, but Lana didn't stop. She went around the passenger side, speed-striding by just as the door flew open and a man scrambled out.

He lunged and tried to grab her, but missed and stumbled. Regaining his balance, he began to sprint after her, but she was off like lightning. She got clear and glanced back to see him staggering to a winded halt - a gaunt man wearing green work pants, runners, and a dirty white T-shirt. The word creep was written across his sharp-featured, unshaven face.

He hurried back to his truck while she flew down a mostly straight stretch of smooth highway. Home was three kilometers away. Lana was panicked, but not crazed with fear. She knew it would take quick reflexes and calculation. If he continued the pursuit, and she could hear him gunning his engine already, she could make it difficult for him. As long as she made sure he didn't hit her and knock her down, she figured she could keep skating out of his reach. No one could catch her on race blades on a highway with a slight downward incline. Not even an Olympic sprinter.

His high beams swung up and caught her like an evil eye, and she switched and skated backward as he roared up. He was attempting to bump her into the ditch; there was no doubt. Swinging back around, she edged over near the shoulder.

Seeing his chance, he grimaced and hit the gas, thinking he could sweep her into the ditch, but she simply maneuvered and skated in a tight curve to the other side of the road.

His right front wheel snagged a rut in the shoulder, and he fishtailed and thundered into the ditch. Scrambling from the accident, Lana raced off, only glancing back when she was safely away.

The pickup was far from totaled, and the shaken driver was backing out, tossing clumps of gravel and dirt with the big wheels.

"Wouldn't that rot your ass off," she muttered as she clicked her lead skate down and headed for home at racer speed.

Headlights appeared in the distance; another vehicle was coming up the road. She went to the middle, hoping to flag the driver down.

With a squeal of rubber, the pickup tore back down the road toward her, careening as the driver tried to check her. At the last moment, Lana dodged and skated a half loop to the other side of the highway.

The truck streaked past, wind grazing her as it bounced on a bump, and this time the driver didn't stop. He booted it, going right down the center of the highway toward the approaching headlights.

Lana thought it was a game of chicken and that the creep was sure to swipe the other driver off the road. But the headlights suddenly split and went around the pickup on the shoulders. It wasn't a car after all, but two motorcycles approaching.

In fact, it was Danny and Joey on their dirt bikes, and they spotted Lana and pulled up beside her.

Joey was hot, but his anger only served to accentuate the girlishly silly look the wild blond locks sprouting from his helmet gave him. "That crazy asshole!" he said. "I hate guys like that!"

Lana shook her head. "He tried to grab me."

Danny's eyes narrowed. "We'd better give Nathan his description."

"Yeah, but we can't talk to Nathan now," Joey said. "He's busy blowing up one of the caverns. Maybe we should pop over for a look?"

"We'd better not," Danny said. "Dad will kill me if he catches us near there."

"I know of a big cavern over by Rampa's place," Lana said. "It even has a sidewalk in it. We could go there and listen for the explosion."

"There's no such cavern," Joey said.

"It's there," Lana said. "It's one of my gang's secret spots. It used to be a showcase cavern back when Burchell Lake was a town. They put in a sidewalk and lights and gave tours there."

"Okay, stupid, what if we go there and vampires are inside?" Danny said.

"We could carry weapons," Lana said.

"Yeah," Joey said. "Like, what are we going to use, your hair pick?"

"Dad stored some extra weapons in the stables," Lana said. "He doesn't know I know about them. There are guns and stakes."

"Okay. Hop on," Joey said. "We'll check it out."

They raced off and soon were approaching the house. If they were to pull in, Janice and Alice would keep them there, so they opted for stopping up the road and sneaking into the stables.

Keeping their headlamps off, they waited in the moonlight while Lana took her skates off and put on sandals.

"Moon's dull as a bone tonight," Joey said.

"The man in the moon is a skull. That's the way I always see him," Lana said as she hung her skates over the saddle.

"I wish it was even duller," Danny said. "Alice and Janice are armed with shotguns. If they see us and think we're vampires, we might get terminated."

Fear of getting shot or caught sharpened their senses. Several minutes later, they were stealing back, moving through the tasseled grasses like cutthroats, the stable turrets and the moon behind them. Danny carried a cross-handled staff, and Joey and Lana had stakes. The three of them didn't feel quite the same; Lana felt powerful, like a witch holding a stake, while Joey found his stake had a lot in common with a matchstick, at least when he thought about how deadly vampires were. Danny carried his staff like it was a guitar, half-forgetting the risks they were taking.

Back at the bikes, Lana put her skates around her neck and fastened the stake to a loop on her purse.

"How do we get there?" Danny said.

"You have to pass Miller's hole and turn toward the Franken Monster Oak," Lana said. "It's in the outcropping behind the oak."

Pounding down the field and forest paths on dirt bikes was easy, even at night. Perhaps they should've been trembling, but they felt safe together. It was a night of velvety darkness, and the pine-scented breeze was disarming. Even the old monster oak appeared friendly - its gnarled limbs, which usually shivered, were swaying and creaking gently.

They pulled into a tiny clearing and parked, with the outcropping and a stand of pines looming over them. They were next to Allan Rampa's property, land that looked more like wilderness or wolves' territory.

"Can you find this cavern in the dark?" Joey said. "I don't want to get lost."

"No sweat," Lana said. "It's a small split in the rock. I know the way by heart."

Not trusting Lana's by-heart ability, Danny and Joey took out their flashlights. The moonlight was bright enough in itself, but they wanted to check the shadows and be sure no fanged fiends were lurking in the area. Their beams played over the breeze-flooded grasses and stopped on a waterfall of vines on the outcropping. The red-tinted leaves whispered suspiciously, but no hidden secrets were revealed. Over on the bare portions of the jagged face, climbing poison ivy had sprouted, and dark lichens clung to the rock like scabs. No opening was visible.

Snatching Danny's hand, Lana directed the beam to the right, illuminating a deer path that twisted into chokecherries and spotted sumac. The growth of bushes ran over and blanketed the rock, and Lana didn't have to explain that the opening of the cavern was hidden there.

"I'll lead the way," Lana said, drawing out her stake.

"I really hate those windy bushes," Danny said, watching inky shadows spring up in the moonlight.

Wound tight as bowstrings, they went down the deer path, coming first to the rusted barbed wire of a long-collapsed safety fence. Farther on, they met another fence, this one made of logs. Lana moved the top log away like she was opening a gate, and they went through onto the rock. Treacherous vines ran over the steep rocky trail, and it was hard to dodge them while jumping from every rustle in the bushes.

A short way up, the trail ended at a crevice in the rock. Bushes obscured most of it, and mist hung there like milky cobwebs. It was the outcropping's obscene orifice. Neither Danny nor Joey could picture Lana's gang of fraidy-cat girls entering it.

Mist billowed in Danny's beam. "Might be too foggy inside," he said. "Maybe we should forget it?"

"The mist only hangs around the entrance," Lana said. "It'll be clear inside."

Joey bull-frogged his chest and put on a brave face. "I'll go first," he said, marching straight into the crevice.

"Wait!" Lana hollered, snatching at his shoulder. "There's something I should tell you about. . . ." Her voice dropped to a whisper as he went out of sight.

A wild yell echoed out, and they heard a clattering of small stones.

"What did you forget to tell us?" Danny said.

"You can't walk straight in. You have to lower yourself down."

"Oh, great. I hope he didn't stake himself by accident."

"You guys coming in?" Joey's words echoed up loudly from below.

Danny watched as Lana removed her sandals, then he followed her in, checking his steps. Popping down on her butt, Lana swung around and held a knob of flowstone while she dropped. It looked easy, so Danny did the same, having some difficulty because of his staff.

Letting go, Danny dropped down, his feet splashing into icy water. Clicking on his flashlight, he saw ankle-deep spring water pouring over mossy limestone slabs. "Damn it!" he said as he splashed out of the stream. He came face to face with Lana and Joey, his hair fuming with mist. "My runners are soaked. Why didn't you mention the stream?"

"You saw me taking off my sandals," Lana said.

"Look who's complaining," Joey said. "I'm completely soaked, and my knees might never work right again."

"Not a good start," Danny said. "Not good at all."

"Say," Joey said. "We'd better be on guard for monster spooks, or it'll be a finish instead of a start."

Using his flashlight, Danny looked up the stream, finding it to run into a narrowing tunnel they couldn't follow. His beam stopped on a red rivulet. It poured into the stream, turning it blood red. "Blood!" he yelled, stumbling back and waving the beam wildly.

"Hold onto your head," Lana said. "It's just ochre clay. It's always been here. We use it to paint the walls."

Joey turned and flashed his beam down the widening cavern. Stalagmites cast giant shadows that made them tremble, and then Joey clicked off the light. Evil shadow forms vanished, but darkness didn't fall. A faint reddish phosphor glowed on the walls, spilling eerie light down the passage. It was like a tunnel into a fire-and-brimstone preacher's version of hell.

There were no horned devils lurking, so they held their weapons at ready and began to move down the passage. A haze of phosphor light obscured the ceiling, chunks of quartz glittered on the rough-cut walls, and the floor was an old stream bed polished to a smooth bowling alley by time. In places, slogans and love notes had been smeared on the wall with red ochre clay.

Joey kicked a root beer can aside. "Look at all the cigarette butts," he said. "What a litterbug gang of girls."

Lana stopped at a bluish stalagmite that rose out of the floor like a bench. She took her skates from around her neck.

"I hope you aren't going to skate in here?" Joey said.

"I surely am," she said. "We always skate here. The floors are smooth, great for skating."

Joey squinted at the darkness and saw only more darkness. "I'm getting the creeps," he said. "I keep thinking of this movie I saw. These guys go into a cavern in the mountains. Music that could make your hair stand on end is playing in there. They go in deeper and deeper, not knowing that the spider-thing from Mars is hanging on the wall at the back. Then they get there, shine a spooky lantern, and see this girl mummified in the cobwebs. She's hanging down and swinging slightly on a rope of webs, and her face is poking out. Her dead eyes are open, and the camera zooms in so she's staring at you through the webs. Scary or what, eh?"

Lana had her skates fastened, and she popped up and skated off down the tunnel.

"Hey, wait!" Danny yelled. "You have to stay with us!"

"I'm going ahead to skate on the walk!" Lana hollered back. "No vampires are in here! We would've spotted them by now!"

Lana picked up speed, watching for bumps. Phosphor-coated walls streaked by, and the ceiling was a steamy lid. An old, worn sidewalk suddenly appeared, and she raced down it into a ballroom-sized opening. Once inside, she noticed that the ceiling was dripping with bats.

Off the walkway, the floor had a slight bowl shape, and she skated down and began to circle. Switching, she skated backward, then she went straight through the dip and did a speed jump. Skating near the top edge of the bowl, she noticed a giant bat-like thing suspended from one of the old rusted light fixtures. After another loop, she slowed and rolled up to it.

It was a weird black bat that appeared to be sleeping. Drawing her stake, she poked at a spot of moldy brown down on its wing. It pulsed gently, and then membranous flaps of skin quivered slightly as the wing fell still.

Thick tendons controlled the fine bone structure of the wings. With the stake, she touched a knot of tendon, causing the bat to shudder and open its eyes. The eyes were emerald and filmed with blood milk. She could tell by its piercing look that she'd made a mistake in arousing it.

Letting herself roll backward, Lana turned and skated off. An otherworldly keening came from the bat. It popped its wings open and fluttered after her.

Reaching top speed, Lana shot into the narrower tunnel just as the bat reached her. Soaring through a tight curve, the bat circled the cavern a couple of times. Lowering its sharp black talons, it flapped into the tunnel.

Racing down a slight incline, Lana could see the boys' flashlight beams. Rather than slow down, she shouted a warning.

Glancing back, she saw the bat fluttering up. Ducking her head and squatting, she rolled on, hoping the bat would pass overhead.

The bat was over her, and she could feel the rush of its wings, then a distant explosion rang the cavern walls like they were bells. Going off her skates, she went for a tumble.

Spooked by the sound, the bat lost its bearings, tumbled in a scramble of wings, and managed to turn and head back to the larger cavern.

Danny and Joey had gone to the floor, and their hearts thundered in their ears as a wall split behind them and poured earth and stones into the tunnel.

As the rumbling subsided, Lana got up. Being used to spills, she knew how to fall and was unhurt. She licked dusty lips, spat, and then made her way back to Danny and Joey.

"That had to be Nathan's explosives," Danny said, dusting his jeans off.

"Oh-no!" Joey said. "The tunnel's blocked."

Danny checked it out. "It could take all night to clear a space through it."

"We can go the other way," Lana said, "but we have to watch out for killer bats."

"Don't worry about bats," Danny said, tapping his staff on the stone floor. "I can make bat shish kabob."

Choking on dust, they moved on to the walkway and the larger cavern, finding it sound and clear of rubble and dust. Quivering bats lined the ceiling, but there was no trace of the giant bat. At the far end of the cavern, starfish arms of crystals formed brilliant patterns on the wall. Next to the crystals, a narrow passage broke off to the right.

Lana took the passage. "This is the official entrance, the one the old Burchell Lake people used. There are steps going up to a field on Rampa's property."

"I really don't want to go on Rampa's property," Danny said, "but I guess we'll have to."

Lana moved ahead, sliding stride by slow stride on her roller skates. Farther along, the phosphor light dimmed. Ahead, the gloom became total darkness. Danny clicked his flashlight on. The floor was strewn with boulders that glittered with specks of fool's gold. Crystal formations dripped on the walls. Bejeweled or not, this small tunnel carried a more frightening atmosphere. They were aware of the tons of rock and earth swaying above them, and hip to the fact that there was nowhere to hide should something fanged loom up in such a confined space. They felt trapped, and they could hear their own deep breaths as they sucked in more of the thin dusty air. Danny hoped the squish of his runners wasn't an omen of his fate.

The tunnel took a sudden bend, and as they rounded it, the flashlights revealed another rockfall. Their way was blocked again; a vampire named Claustrophobia cast a shadow of panic.

"Shit!" Danny said, and then they all ducked as wings fluttered overhead. It was a bat, a common brown bat, and it flew into the beam and disappeared into the wall right near the slide.

"Those things know their way around like rats," Joey said.

"It went through a hole there," Danny said. "Let's check it out."

They moved up to the slide, hearing nothing but the squish of soggy shoes. Checking the wall, they found that a dark patch was a tiny adjoining tunnel.

Dropping to his knees in the dirt, Danny inspected it. Dust rolled in the flashlight beam. "It's a tiny umbilical passage," he said. "Think we should try going through?"

"It might dead-end," Joey said.

"It doesn't," Danny said. "I can see light at the end."

"It's probably not sound," Joey said.

"Lana," Danny said. "You're small, so you go first. Be careful not to touch the sides and knock rocks loose. Take off those stupid roller skates?"

"No way. I might need them at the other end."

Opening her purse, Lana took out the fingerless gloves and plastic kneepads she was supposed to wear while skating. She slipped the gear on and crouched down.

"Come on," Danny said. "We haven't got much time."

"Looks like my skating equipment is perfect for this," Lana said as she studied the hole.

"I wish I had equipment," Joey said. "My clothes are wrecked. Mom will probably think I've been in a fight."

Lana's kneepads clicked, and her gloves smacked the stone as she crawled into the tunnel. "I'm not waiting for you guys," she said. "I want to get through." Confined spaces weren't for her; even out in the open, she could wrestle guys twice her size off her, simply because she became terrified when pinned down. And in the stuffy tunnel, it was worse, as the humidity and dust made it itch. She was sure that million-legged creepy crawlies were skittering over her back.

She ducked some cobwebs, leaving them for the boys, and as she neared the light, she heard Danny moving behind her. He was dragging the staff through, clumsily, and pebbles and dirt showered on him every time he hit the wall with it. Joey was at the rear, letting out weird groans like he was in the arms of a cold succubus.

Blue light streaked the opening, and Lana peeked out before emerging. She saw a large chamber with a stream running through it. Water bubbled musically over gold-flecked stones and emerald moss. One entire wall was covered with crystal forms like melted glass. The place was phosphor-lit. As her eyes adjusted, she spotted an ebony slab at the far end. It was pretty much a clear chamber, with a vaulted ceiling of azure stone. The floor looked to be smooth, dark marble.

Lana popped out, stood, stretched, and scanned the chamber. There were no dangerous shadows, so she let out a rebel yell. When the echoes ceased, she called to the boys. "Come on through. It's safe here!"

Looking ahead, she squinted, trying to make out the distant slab. A red lozenge rested on top of it, and after a few moments, she realized it was a coffin.

More pebbles rattled in the tunnel as the boys scrambled to the opening. Lana began skating toward the coffin. She turned back, fearing what might be in it. She'd already learned her lesson. As far as disturbing things underground was concerned, she'd let the guys do that.

The boys came out, looking like gravediggers or front-line soldiers wearing grease camouflage.

"We may be in trouble," Lana said as they batted hunks of dirt off their clothes. "There's a coffin over there."

Danny and Joey stopped sweeping their clothes and looked at the coffin. Expressions grim, they slowly checked out the rest of the chamber. "Yeah, it's a coffin," Danny said, "and you yelled loud enough to wake the dead."

"We'll be very quiet from now on," Lana said.

They crept along by the edge of the stream, holding their weapons up in case of surprise attack, or in case the coffin opened. The place was a kingly mausoleum, the stream flowing over boulders of fool's gold, the wealth of polished stones dwarfing them and their tiny human dreams. They felt like trespassers in a palace and only wanted to get to an exit and run.

They tried to keep as much distance as possible from the slab as they passed it, headed for a smaller passage up and to their right. On the far side of the slab, beneath the coffin's head, they spotted a red gem embedded in the stone. Danny took an immediate interest in it.

"I think it's a ruby," Danny said. "I want a closer look at it."

"Forget it. Let's get out of here," Lana said.

"Wait," Joey said. "If it's a ruby, we'll be rich. Look at the size of it."

"It's just red crystal," Lana said, knowing her words were useless now that the lights of greed were in the boys' eyes. "I'm going to skate this passage and see if it's an exit," she said. "You got two minutes to ogle that hunk of glass." With an angry snort, she skated off.

A warm wine glow pulsed at the heart of the gem, and it drew them to it, moths to a flame. As they stared at it, they forgot about the burnished coffin just above them.

"It's set in there quite loosely," Danny said, leaning his staff on the slab. "Maybe I can pick it out with my knife."

Joey said nothing, but just watched, the shine of the ruby making him feel warm and light on his feet. Danny opened a Swiss Army knife and began to pry at the gem. The ruby swiveled but didn't come loose.

With perspiration and dirt streaking his face, the whites of his teeth showing through taut lips, and feverish eyes, Danny had the desperate look of a gold hunter. His lips warping with greed, he folded the knife, seized the ruby, and tugged.

But it didn't come loose; instead, it acted as a trigger, and two metal bands shot out of the slab, covering his hands and the gem.

Danny cried like a dog with a hurt tail. "It's crushing my hand," he said. Twisting his body, he struggled to free himself.

Joey snapped out of it and stumbled back, his hands flying from the slab like it was red-hot. Before he could speak, he heard a muffled rasp, then a whimper, and the lid of the coffin flew open.

Their eyes were so wide they might've been looking at the exposed core of a nuclear reactor, only the being emerging from the coffin was more electrifying. A dark head rose up, one that was hairy all over, until a longer look showed that it wasn't hair, but bugs dripping from it by the hundreds.

Danny's teeth chattered so hard he thought they would break, and Joey remained transfixed by fright. Shoulders of rotten flesh appeared. The creature moaned hideously. They understood its pain; it was a half-decayed corpse with smears of blood for eyes and uncountable insects hatching in the splits of its flesh.

It was also fanged and without lips, and it lifted splayed hands and threw itself over the side. Danny choked and bit his tongue, and Joey fell to his knees, blubbering nonsense as it tumbled to their right, showering black beetles across the floor.

To be touched by it was to die of a heart attack, and they were fortunate because it didn't approach them. Instead, it crawled away and collapsed, moaning repulsively, aware of only its pain.

Joey felt urine trickling between his legs, and he jumped up, turned, and tried to run, but before he could take a step, he froze again. Elizabeth Kanter had appeared, stepping like an angel through halos of beautiful light. Though her hair was dark and lustrous, she bore a resemblance to Marilyn Monroe and Mary Ellen Norris, both women whom Joey worshipped. Her eyes glittered, admired, and teased, and were the gloss on a bauble in which snowed the secrets of love. She walked provocatively toward him, a loose sway of hips and breasts that didn't clash with her angelic smile.

Forgetting his wet pants, Joey got hard, then he bit his lip so hard it bled, and he smiled as he waited. Liz shifted her fanged grin to Danny and back, and when she chose to approach Danny first, Joey began to weep, sobbing his teenage heart out at the thought of losing her for even a moment.

Lana skated down the telescoping end of the tunnel and found it led to an exit. She halted, catching her breath as she stared at the neatly cut blocks of stone composing the stairs leading up to the fields and night. She was winded, the tunnel had followed an incline, and the short skate had been difficult, so she let her heart settle, then she turned and headed back.

It was an easy run, and she picked up speed quickly, her eight wheels rolling like hard marbles on the smooth downhill plane. Lumpy walls flew past her, a race of fists and knuckles and stalactites overhead. A brown bat fluttered up; she ducked and skated in a

squat. As she popped back up, she drew her stake and prepared to strike at any larger bats that might show their wings. She'd really had enough and wanted to get out of the caverns. Moving on in haste, glancing about for bats, she misjudged the distance and found herself flying at rocket speed through the opening and into the chamber.

A lip of stone sent her shooting up, and while she was airborne, she saw a woman in black leaning over Danny and the slab. Then her skates touched stone; she went through a dip, lost her balance, and sailed ahead, flailing the stake as she tried to regain her balance. Doing a clattering dance, she tumbled, and in a reflex action, she threw out her hand to break her fall. Only she was holding the stake, and at that moment, she crashed head-on into Liz, driving the point deep into her shoulder.

Liz's scream was colder than the icy cavern mist, and she bounced off the slab and went hard to the floor. Danny also yelled as his arm was nearly wrenched from the socket. Lana whirled ahead, arms and legs twirling with her as she went along the edge of the slab.

Joey's head came clear as Liz's screams died, and he jumped up off his knees. He stared at Liz, stunned anger on his face as he shook the tears from his chin. She was lifting her face, and now it was splotched by mold and birthmark discoloration. Ivory fangs and feral eyes put the final, destructive touch to her beauty.

Her attention shot to Lana, who was clattering back up on her skates. Joey's eyes flashed to Danny and the staff. He lunged for the slab, thinking the staff to be his only chance.

An unseen force threw Liz up puppet-quick, and her robes billowed in the air, crackling with static; then she flew like a flung doll, going almost headlong at Joey.

But Joey got to the staff in time, and he spun, swinging up with the metal cross handle. It struck Liz's head; a hard, smoking crack, and she tumbled off to his side, wailing as she went.

Scrambling to her knees and hissing, Liz turned about. The mark of the cross was scorched into her cheek, and she lifted hands that were shriveling to corpse claws. She made as if to beg, then, when Joey appeared to be lowering his guard, she scrambled and lunged.

Spinning the handle, Joey brought the staff up, catching her solidly in the heart area. The point slid beneath her ribs and found deep purchase, stopping her dead in her tracks. Joey held her there, lifting her so that her heels kicked in the air as if she were on a noose. A death gurgle came up from her throat, and her tongue shot out, wagging like a snake trying to escape. A swift, withering transformation began to consume her entire body, and in a matter of moments, he found himself holding up a skull-faced rag doll, nothing but bones and skin, cracked and yellowed to parchment.

Shivering, he threw the staff and Elizabeth Kanter's remains to the floor. He heard Lana scream and spun around. Over by the stream, the thing from the coffin had got to its knees. Small flames sprouted on its body. It began to burn like a flare, shooting off maggots that smoked and popped. It brightened, a miniature sun, and then it exploded, showering the cavern with bugs and burning bits of flesh.

Danny ducked, Lana and Joey went flat on the floor, and the three of them rolled and scrambled as they batted away vile bits of burning rain.

Silence followed, the floor was alive with corkscrews of rank smoke, and the worst seemed to be over.

Joey was up first, and he looked to Lana. "Let's break those damn bands on Danny and get the hell out of here."

"You can say that again," Lana said. "The way out is over there, so let's not waste any more time."

Danny's wrist was swollen, a puff of black, and he moaned several times as Joey pried at the bands with his stake. When they wouldn't give, Lana came up with a better idea. Taking a bottle of suntan oil from her bag, she greased his hand, and after a few twists it came free.

Danny dropped back on his butt, breathing deeply through clenched teeth. "Thought I was dead meat," he said, choking out the words.

"Man, that corpse smoke is horrible," Joey said. "Let's go before I throw up."

The boys jogged behind Lana for the first stretch, and then they slowed, moving quickly but with caution, like street kids making a pass through another gang's alley. Two brown bats were all of the enemy they encountered, and that was enough to make them jump.

Danny and Lana abandoned their weapons in the chamber, but Joey still had his stake. He took the lead as they went up the huge block steps. The way things had been going, he was sure someone or something would ambush them at the top. But nothing did, and they came out of a rock face carved to resemble a giant rattlesnake head. Stars swirled in a dark sky, and they could see the lights of Allan Rampa's mansion shining beyond the fields.

"Now I know what they mean by the bowels of the earth," Joey said, his flesh crawling in his soiled clothing.

"We've got to get back to the bikes," Danny said.

Shifting on their feet, they glanced about warily while Lana pulled off her skates. The sight of a distant column of smoke strengthened their urge to flee. After a last look at the serpent-head doorway, they knew it was the devil they had escaped. Taking off, they dashed with shadows, the moon and wind-kicked weeds, and they didn't stop until they were at the bikes.

CHAPTER 14: Cult Lands

Golden sunlight gilded the picture window, and Lana noticed it as she marched into the living room and snatched the converter. Her manners were nervous. She wore an animal-print T-shirt and tight black jeans. "Sure would be nice to be out," she snapped, shifting on her bare feet like a caged animal.

"Forget it," Danny said, frowning as he continued combing his hair. "Something in the caverns, chemicals maybe, wrecked my hair. I can't get rid of the split ends. I'm glad we're canned. Saves me from going out looking like this."

"I hope you go bald," Lana said, staring at him with eyes as hard as glass.

"I'd just get a hair transplant."

"On your allowance. They'd put a dog pelt on your head."

Mike shifted in his armchair. "I've seen some dog pelts. It happens if you get a transplant before you're finished shedding hair. Maybe it was seeing Liz that did it to you. Your hair

stood on end too long.”

“Joey's nearly turned white and dropped off,” Lana said. “The more I think of it, the more I think it's unfair. I got rid of Ms. Liz Fangs, and Dad makes me stay in for it.”

“There's more to it than that,” Mike said. “Your father is worried. Nathan and Jack are still out looking for the man who chased you. You had better not go anywhere while he's around. Alice won't let Annie go one step without watching her. She has a city-bred fear of maniacs.”

Lana was about to say something, then she turned and looked as a cat's ball tinkled over the carpet. There was a throaty cat's cry, and Peppur, the Waters' tabby, bounded in, followed by Annie moving on all fours, pretending to be another cat. A moment later, Alice showed up. She looked neat, wearing a wrap skirt, a white blouse, and dark stockings. But her expression was as dark as her stockings. Mike knew the look; with Alice, once worry set in, it clung to her like stormy weather. And there really was no way he could reassure her, not while the Burchell Lake investigation was still in progress.

Lana remained silent, forgetting what she'd been about to say as she watched Annie and the leaping cat. Danny ignored everyone as he studied his damaged hair in a hand mirror. Alice didn't sit; she put her hands on her hips and looked at Mike.

“So what are you men doing next?”

“Don't know. I'll be discussing it with Morris later, when he gets back from the station. I'm not sure when Nathan and Jack will return. They're out tracking the guy that attacked Lana.”

“I'll feel better when they have him in jail. It's getting to be like the city out here.”

Danny fingered his hair and looked to Alice. “It's not as bad. We study it in school now, sociopaths and what makes them tick.”

Mike nodded. “Jake knows that subject well, but he still can't figure out what the reason is for the big increase in those kinds of crimes.”

“Alienation breeds deviants,” Danny replied, “and there has always been more of it in cities. There are other factors. Being beaten as a child is one.”

“We never discussed stuff like that when I was in school,” Mike said. “I remember having an English teacher who couldn't say the word homosexual without turning bright red.”

Lana pouted. “I don't want to study criminals. Perverts are as boring as they are ugly. Monsters, like vampires, are more interesting.”

“Yeah, Mike,” Danny said. “When did you first see a monster, or even a ghost?”

“I can answer that,” Alice said. “Back when Mike was first dating me, he was playing hard to get, living in a house full of criminals.”

“You lived with criminals?” Lana said.

“Alice says that to be facetious. I was a teen, and it was a party house. A lot of guys drinking too much or using drugs.”

“What kind of kid were you, Mike?” Danny said.

“A very confused kid,” Alice said.

Mike shrugged. “I was a kid seeking an answer, and I didn't really find drug-induced enlightenment to be it. Like everyone else my age, I grew extremely skeptical about everything. Young people still are, and they can't buy into wealth as much as past

generations. The money's not around in Canada. Too many recessions. Now, young people can't afford marriage, a house, or anything. That's why I like them better. They can't believe in the values offered, so they have to look for something new. Yet they're still too skeptical to fully buy into anything. They've seen it all before. Even in the New Age, real believers aren't that numerous. It's mostly publicity and culture."

"How could someone skeptical believe in monsters and ghosts?" Lana said.

"The being I first saw was a monster and a ghost. An older guy lived in the basement of our house. He'd been in the Vietnam War before he skipped out. Lenny was his name. We thought he was crazy. Flashbacks of the jungle used to hit him, and he'd go down wrestling with something invisible. He was a mess, always covered with cuts and bruises. His eyes haunted like a junkie's eyes. I always thought something was really eating his soul, but we couldn't see it. We didn't know what to do about it. Then one weekend, Lenny died. He was out in the woods. A hunter found him, and it was ruled a heart attack."

"That's it?" Lana said. "What a dull ending."

"It was later that night I'm really talking about. I was in the living room when I suddenly saw Lenny. He appeared in front of the fireplace, struggling with a horrible monster. It was black with slick skin and a head of tentacles and orifices. I could see it feeding on him, making him bleed, and draining him as a vampire would. I watched them struggle until they went into the fire and vanished."

"So what was it?" Danny said.

"Something I think he picked up in the jungle. A soul-sucking spirit. I saw it and knew supernatural beings were real."

Soft and black, with steam rising, the asphalt was so fresh that Nathan thought they might catch up with the crew laying it. The odors of tar, pines, and mowed weeds slipped in the window with the racing wind. He glanced at Jack. Sunlight glistened on Jack's balding head as he eased the wheel of the car and slowed at a deer crossing. Nathan figured that if the brain underneath had the smooth perfection of the skull, then Jack had a fine mind. He often wondered what really went on in other people's heads. Sure, he'd always been able to read people on the everyday level; the reasons for their actions, why they played the game, the pieces of personal history that were the roots of their personality quirks. Nearly everyone had motives that didn't quite involve heaven and hell, especially here in the country where a moderate nature god ruled.

But what about the Burchell Lake people? Nathan knew that, as an ordinary guy, it was his tendency to write off religious people as either fake or loony. Christian sects or way-out people in spiritualist magazines all looked phony on the surface. But there had to be more to it than that; whether they were superficial or not, the new age people had attempted to comprehend the big questions at one time or another. That made them brighter in the sense that people who try to think are ahead of people who never do. Perhaps the problem was that if you arrived at the wrong answers in the big questions, then some sort of devil had you - a devil of superstition or whatever. And if you were brighter than most, you could become a bigger monster than most.

White on green, the sign announcing BURCHELL LAKE: HOME OF THE BEINGS OF THE MILLENNIUM appeared. "You ever think about the big questions, Jack?" Nathan said. "I mean life after death, heaven and hell?"

"Yeah, I do," Jack said, sun and shadow dappling his face. "It ties me in knots. I'm not gifted in that area, but I do recognize some of the spiritualist stuff as silly. I wouldn't win

a debate with Allan Rampa, though. I go more by gut instinct. Some of the new spiritualist people are good in that they drop taboos and rigid rules and try for freedom in religion."

"Freedom in religion," Nathan said, "that's what Wilde talks about."

"Yeah, he does. He says he attends no church because organized religion can't provide freedom in religion."

"He told me the problem with the new spiritualism is that when you start trying to sell the answer, you sell your values and soul with it."

There were two mountains of bulldozed rubbish at the edge of town. A dirt lot with parked cars, trucks, and wreckers' equipment was behind them. It didn't make for a good impression, but the scene changed in the next block. Most of the main street had been facelifted; many of the frame buildings had been renovated and painted. Pastel colors were popular, sunlight glossed polished glass, and residents strolled on a sidewalk of patterned brick. Nathan was aware of the contrast with Milford. Burchell Lake was definitely developing an atmosphere unlike other Ontario towns. There weren't any men in silk pants on the sidewalks of Milford. Women in short wine robes with demon faces painted on their purses weren't common there either. The stores here were unique: herbal healing stores, health food shops, a spirit-guide shop, and a couple of clothing shops. It made him wonder what sort of items he'd find at a Burchell Lake flea market.

Jack rolled right through town and didn't draw attention by driving too slowly. He U-turned in a surround of abandoned houses, cruised back past the center of town, and went up a side street to the old part of town. Impassable weed-choked streets were to their left and right. Many of the buildings were like scabrous old lepers, tilted down to their knees on busted-up sidewalks, trails radiating from where structures had crumbled completely.

"I don't see the pickup anywhere," Jack said. "We'll stop in town and ask some of the store owners if they've seen it."

Booting through the ruts, Jack headed back to the main drag and pulled in at a recessed parking area. They were facing a crystal outlet. A bench shaped as a shell stood directly in front of it; beside it was an artist's copy of a horse's skeleton.

"Let's try this crystal store first," Nathan said.

Jack moved to get out. "I hope these people will cooperate," he said.

A few people were on the street, and they were a dazzling sight. A bald man wearing large rhinestone earrings shaped as doves stood in front of the natural cosmetics store, holding hands with a long-haired teenage boy dressed in a bright tunic. The boy had his eye on another scrawny kid who was taking a seat at the bench.

Passing the bench, Jack noted that the man's blackthorn stick had a dog's head. Glancing back at Nathan, he saw that he was stopping at the window of a store called Creative Listening Today.

"Are those guys father and son or gay?"

"I couldn't even guess," Nathan said.

Nothing of interest was in the window display, so they turned back to the street. Two women passed and smiled. Nathan took it in stride and smiled back, but it was too much for Jack, and he took a deep breath. Their outfits were revealing. They had teased hair. One wore a strange mesh bra top that left nothing to the imagination, and the other

wore a flower-print top that barely covered her loose breasts. Both sported skin-tight jeans of a coral flesh tone.

Another lady approached; she was wearing oversized sunglasses and black leather shorts. She had leather bands on her arms and breasts and nothing more. Jack's eyes switched to her. He smiled, but as he did, Nathan pulled him into the open door of a shop called Crystal Spirit Guides.

Cool air, dim lighting, and the sparkle of crystal met them on the inside. Crystals rested on shelves, pedestals, in the windows, and under glass. Crystal chimes tinkled by the counter, and they turned to it and saw a dark-haired woman wearing a low-cut top and a wide brown leather belt. She was beautiful with full cherry lips and a tiny dimple on her chin.

"We're having a look at the new town," Jack said as they walked up to the counter.

"I'm Alice Moody," she said, her voice belonging to a much younger woman. "Where are you from?"

"Milford. I'm Jack, that's Nathan."

"Are you serious about crystals or just browsing?"

"I might be serious," Nathan said. "Exactly what could a crystal do for me?"

"We specialize in spirit guides. Many crystalline life forms want to share their secrets and wisdom with you. You can also use certain crystals as a rainbow bridge to project your soul to other worlds. When placed on your third eye, crystals will give you visions, images, even direct knowing."

"Direct knowing is what we need," Jack said. "The truth is that we're also here looking for a certain man in a pickup truck. He seems to have escaped us."

"Ah, so you want a seeing crystal?"

Jack looked to Nathan and shrugged. "We'll try one, but if it doesn't work, maybe you can tell us something?"

"It will work." She swept her hand under the counter and came up with a large, clear quartz crystal.

"Do we just look into it?" Nathan said.

"No. You'll have to lie down. Follow me, please." Alice opened a door in the counter, and they passed through, following her to a small back room. It had plain wooden chairs and woven mats on the floor. Other than that, it was empty with bare blue-painted walls.

"You want to try it first?" she said to Jack.

"Sure, why not?"

Taking hold of his shoulder lightly, she led him to a mat. "Take your boots off. I want you to lie down and hold the crystal to your third eye. Relax and accept without a doubt the spontaneous images that come into your mind."

Jack didn't want to take his boots off, but Nathan told him to. The amusement on Nathan's face steamed him some, but he decided he might as well do it right. He followed her instructions exactly, and once he was stretched out on the mat, he found it quite comfortable. Still, his face remained flushed, and he found it hard to feel anything but foolish while holding a crystal to his head.

A couple of minutes passed, and his embarrassment faded, replaced by relaxation so deep that with his eyes closed, he was afraid he'd fall asleep. There weren't any spontaneous images, only a flow of colors. They drifted, and he fell into a dream. He saw blowing dust, a parking lot, then the pickup, and a sign that said TOWNSIDE HOTEL. A sudden flash of lightning changed the scene, and after a few seconds, he saw a man matching the description Lana had given him. The man was bleeding from the lips, and he suddenly transformed into a howling inhuman monster. The roaring knocked Jack's eyes open, and he sat up, dropping the crystal.

"I don't believe it," Jack said. "It worked. We'll pay you for the stone and be on our way."

Jack found a side street that ran off the main road, followed it past the last store, a hardware store, and bounced onto a sandy road. Weeds and junk had been cleared for a stretch, leaving some ramshackle buildings exposed. They were festooned with weathered and warped boards. New beams supported the walls. The TOWNSIDE HOTEL was a sway-backed building at the center of the barn-like structures.

"It's a temporary hotel for the workmen rebuilding the town," Nathan said. "The place is a lot like an old saloon."

Parking was across the street, a crudely cleared field that was still strewn with sizable rocks and chunks of hard clay. Most of the parked vehicles were trucks, and as Jack pulled in, Nathan spied the set of oversized wheels belonging to the wanted pickup. "There she is," he said.

Jack rode the ruts over and parked next to it. No one was inside. Hopping out quickly, they looked. Numerous scratches, dents, and scars on the body labeled the driver as either a maniac or an idiot, and the fact that the vehicle had no plates made him a criminal.

Finding the door unlocked, Nathan looked inside. A pair of mirrored shades rested on the dashboard, and empty beer cans and cigarette butts lay on the floor. An old country music CD leaned against the shift. Opening the glove compartment, Nathan found a plastic razor and a hairpiece - a cheap one. There were no identifying papers.

A check of the back of the pickup showed it to be clear except for splinters, bits of rust, and dirt. The truck had obviously been used to haul waste. After the inspection, Nathan snorted, kicked a tire, and walked away. He transferred the wig to Jack's truck, placing it in a Ziploc bag.

"Makes the guy a major suspect," Nathan said. "I'll have to notify homicide. They'll want to study the vehicle. Let's go to the bar and see if we can spot the driver."

Wary-eyed, they strode over the lot. Dust blew in the street, and the cantilevered roof of the TOWNSIDE HOTEL cast a shadow that darkened the windows. Sunset wasn't far off, and it was sure to be red. Nathan hoped to get his man and leave before dark. Pushing through the swinging doors, he had the feeling of being in a gunfighter movie.

The joint had hole-in-the-wall decor, and the air was stagnant with beer, smoke, and vomit. A quick scan showed five patrons, every one of them sitting alone at cheap cigarette-scarred hardwood tables. Ceiling beams hung down, as did thick yellow smoke and a TV screen tuned into a channel of fuzz.

It was so dim that Nathan couldn't get a clear look at the customers' faces. They approached the bar, the nicest feature in the place: a long, smooth shuffleboard counter. There was no shortage of supplies, the place being mainly a beer hall with a long glass-fronted cooler that boasted a wide variety of bottles.

The bartender had his back to them, and he turned as they took stools. He was a big, lard-bellied man with stubbly jowls. His small brown eyes added an air of dishonesty to his appearance.

"You boys be wanting a beer?" he said, darting his eyes and snapping a dirty cloth magician-style as he went to work on a chipped beer mug.

"Not sure," Jack said. "You want a mug, Nathan?"

Nathan caught the twinkle in Jack's eye. The question was a joke. Nobody sober would order one of Lardbelly's watered mugs. "Give us two Blue," Nathan said.

Moving with the agility that his body didn't seem capable of, the bartender served two beers.

"We were looking at that pickup dumped over there in the lot," Nathan said. "Maybe it's for sale. It has no plates. The owner wouldn't be around, would he?"

"Nope. Different guys drive it, but I think the owner is David Shaman."

Nathan clicked an ashtray with his bottle. "Where would we find this Shaman guy?"

"Can't say," the bartender said, a flick of his eyes indicating that he was lying.

Nathan took a swallow, wishing his tone and manner weren't so marked by authority. People always unconsciously knew him to be a cop, and because of it, had no desire to tell him anything. Dust smoked past the grime-yellow windows, and the wind hummed faintly, a dead susurration in the cracks and rafters. Chairs creaked, patrons wheezed out stale smoke, and Nathan glanced at the fuzzed TV screen, thinking what a hick hole the place was - if you drank yourself under the table, they might bury you under the floorboards. He knew the place changed at night; round about midnight, THE TOWNSIDE would be a hell storm of cursing, blaring music, flying bottles, tables, blood, and busted teeth. And even if he were called, he wouldn't come here. Not to lay a bunch of nuisance and drunk charges. This was the sort of sleazy hole that couldn't be damaged anyway; it had the brand of round tables on one support that could easily be put back together after a fight.

"I'd like to buy that old pickup," Jack said, addressing the bartender like he was the owner. "If I find this David Shaman guy, what sort of Joe is he? I mean, if I wanted to get friendly with him in a way that would make him partial to lowering the price, what would I get to talking about?"

The bartender raised a beady eye and a speculative eyebrow, leaving Nathan admiring Jack and his casual style. Jack could open yokels up easily; he'd probably be a better country cop all around.

"You'd get to talking about earth magic," the bartender said, rather matter-of-factly. "And don't be looking at me like I've been tasting the hard stuff. He's an earth sorcerer, that's the truth of it. Says it was the Rosicrucian angels that sent him into the world."

"Guess I better not try to cheat him," Jack said. "He might put a curse on the engine."

"Might have an angel under the hood to save you," the bartender said. He chuckled, then he squinted, his lids narrowing like he was falling asleep. "I think that might be him out there now."

The window was behind them; they turned and looked out. Heels of wind were kicking up waves of dust. A man was moving near the pickup, but the grimy window turned him into a smear. It was enough for Nathan and Jack. They stood up, bringing the place to life as their boots pounded smartly over the boards. All eyes watched them go out.

Beyond the doors, they were greeted by grit in the eye and choking dust.

"Maybe the guy is a sorcerer," Jack said. "He brings his own dust clouds with him."

"Say, he's checking our vehicle," Nathan said.

Heat waves turned to fluid electricity in their limbs as they strode over the road. Through the dust's smoke signals, they caught sight of David Shaman. He was slim, tall, and athletic. His hair was long and dark, and he wore a hip-length shirt with bright stitching over dark skin-tight jeans.

He was also extremely agile, and when he heard their feet kicking up stones, he spun on his moccasins and faced them. His face was handsome, like the face of a television Indian, and he held a painted stick in one hand.

"Hold it right there!" Nathan hollered.

But David Shaman didn't obey. He flashed the painted stick to his lips and blew, then he turned and ran off through the trucks.

It was a blowgun, and the dart zinged through the dust and caught Nathan in the throat. Halting and slapping at it like it was a bee sting, Nathan knocked it out. A tiny spike on a shaft of wood and yellow feathers fell to the ground.

Jack kept running, rapidly gaining on Shaman. Diving, Jack caught him by the waist and took him down. They rolled in the dirt, and Jack moved to pin him, but the man was as slippery as a snake, and he broke free and jumped. Jack also jumped to his feet, and he lunged for Shaman again, but the sorcerer dodged him, moving more like a ballet dancer than a fighter.

Stumbling almost headlong, Shaman ran off. Jack glanced back at Nathan. He was on his knees, choking, his eyes rolling. Giving up the chase for a moment, he ran back. Close up, Nathan looked bad; his facial muscles were twitching, and his eyes were settling to a distant stare. Jack was sure he was hallucinating.

And Nathan was hallucinating; he saw webs of light and a sky filled with a multicolored mushroom cloud. Spores exploded from it and became swirling bats. Then, as the bats swooped, he collapsed.

"Nathan!" Jack yelled. He seized his shoulders, rolled him over, and slapped his face. Wiping the dirt away, he plunged his fingers into his mouth. His throat was clear, no vomit, and he wasn't choking on his tongue. Checking his wrist, he found his pulse to be steady.

Some of the TOWNSIDE patrons, still holding their beers, and the bartender were approaching. No doubt, this was the sort of spectacle they thrived on. Jack turned to them. "He needs a doctor."

"Our doctor's gone," the bartender said. "The way I heard it, he took off a while ago. You'll have to get him to Milford."

"Shit!" Jack said. Reaching down, he picked up the dart, accidentally pricking his finger as he looked it over. "Hope I didn't poison myself. Someone give me a handkerchief."

The bartender produced one, and amazingly, it was clean. Jack wrapped the dart, and then he turned to one of the workmen - the cleanest one, a guy in steel-toed boots and green overalls. "You sober?" Jack said.

"Had a couple."

"What do you do here?"

"I'm a contractor, putting in sewer pipes."

"I'm a detective. The victim is a Mouny. I want you to drive him to the Milford hospital, and fast. Take this poison dart so they can try to analyze it. And don't stop for anyone, or you'll be in big trouble."

"Sure, I'll run him in. Anyone who gets in my way will be in the hospital with him."

"That's what I like to hear. Here are the keys. Let's load him in gently."

Lifting Nathan, they found his breathing to be faint, and he was as limp as a sandman. Stinging dust sheeted over them as they placed him in the truck.

"I'm going after that sorcerer," Jack said. "I want the name of the poison. It might speed his recovery if the doctors know what they're dealing with. Keep his throat clear!" he yelled as the contractor gunned the engine.

"You're going after Shaman?" the bartender said.

"You bet I am. I saw him go that way, over into the ghost town."

"Watch out for more tricks. I told you he's a sorcerer."

As Jack stared through the trucks to the sagging buildings, the sheets of dust flashed to flame and back. His face was stiffening to wax, and his bowels and scrotum were contracting. Luckily, he wasn't freezing up; it was more like weird steroids were making him stronger. He knew he'd ingested some of the poison, but probably not enough to put him down. At present, everything had a hallucinatory edge. Patterns were etched into the sand, but his thoughts were clear, maybe too vivid.

"Tricks or not, I have to get that guy, and the name of the poison," Jack said. Then he stepped away from the bartender and began to run toward the vacant part of town.

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Late afternoon sunshine showered through the windy poplars, dappling Morris Waters' face with gold and shadow. He furrowed his brow, but not just because of the light. Worry also showed in his expression. Originally, he hadn't broadcast any frightening news concerning Burchell Lake for fear of causing a panic. Now, after a discussion with Linda, one of his disc jockeys, he was sure people would never believe such a fantastic broadcast. Linda said she was certain such a broadcast would be taken as a hoax. War of the Worlds was already well known. Instead of fleeing, people would probably drive out to see what was really going on. If something deadly was happening, it would be better if they pulled up stakes and ran. He could only hope that his new people wouldn't pick up on some shocking events and decide to give a news flash.

Living near the epicenter of vampirism was nerve-wracking if not outright terrifying. Fears for his family were as heavy as a lead weight on the back of his neck, dragging his mood into the pits. He didn't see running as a solution. It wasn't the kind of problem you could keep running from, and Jon Chandler and Allan Rampa would likely track him if he took his family away - either out of a need for revenge or because he knew too much.

Hitting a hairpin turn a touch on the speedy side, Morris awoke to alarm. Some fast steering kept him in control. He put his mind back on the road. Something was moving in a pool of blue shade up ahead on the shoulder. It became a male form and then showed as Joey, who was hitching out to see Danny.

Morris glided over, and Joey stepped up, the rays of sunset and a noisy flight of crows behind him as he got in leisurely. "My bike's out of action. Thought I'd hitch out to see what Nathan and Jack have turned up."

"They went into Burchell Lake," Morris said, pulling back on the road. "No doubt they'll unearth more than they want to."

"Word in Milford is that the lake people are friendly. Strange but friendly. Maybe not to Jack and Nathan."

"I think those are some of your friendly people ahead. They've come up with a neighborly way of blocking the road."

Joey checked it out, squinting against the steam and glare of the road. He saw people wearing light clothing, sandals, and ropes of glittering beads. They were in front of an enormous ebony slab set in the middle of the road. Nothing short of big machinery could've moved such a large stone. Morris frowned, knowing he couldn't get around it or the boulders piled on the shoulders.

Rolling to a slow stop, Morris got out and approached the crowd. He assumed they were Wiccans from Burchell Lake. They had that odd look, standing at the foot of a giant bier or grave slab. Morris was flustered, of course, but careful not to let it show. It seemed to be a religious ceremony, and he didn't want to be perceived as a nasty hick.

Dust smoked up from the slab's rear, and he could hear people sweeping. Looking through the boulders, he caught the motion of a fir branch and wondered what sort of lunatics would be cleaning the road with them.

A long-haired man wearing many filigree beads stepped out. His features were heavily lined, and it looked like it was from too much sun exposure rather than age. "Road's closed for Belthane," he said. "The Earth has commandeered it."

"Really," Morris said. "When will Belthane be over?"

"Tomorrow," the man said. "You can go on foot if you want."

"No thanks," Morris said. "I'll find another route." He turned back to his car, convinced that the Wiccans probably weren't dangerous. With their nutty ceremonies, they made a good front for Allan Rampa and the more dangerous elements of the cult.

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Jack poked about on the outskirts of Burchell Lake searching for signs of David Shaman. He caught sight of him moving as swiftly as a panther at the side of a broken concrete wall. His face flushing hot with fury, Jack took off in immediate pursuit. The effects of the poison were strengthening now, and the heart-hammering strain of chasing Shaman through the town wasteland began to take its toll. At first, he was running through horrible emptiness, then his skin clammed up and roaring filled his ears; it might have been a torrent, wind, or an earthquake, but he stumbled on doggedly, following the sorcerer through weedy lanes, lots, and ditches.

Liquid shadows flowed among the mounds, rubbish, and fallen buildings, and the confusion that was setting in made him wonder whether it was the poison or if the muddy cast of the light was natural. Overwhelmed by the spinning scenery, he stopped, swallowed air, and looked around. He caught the form of Shaman skating in the corner of his eye, and he took off, striking through the world of rubble with renewed vigor.

Coming through a gap in a brick wall, he found himself in a maze of shattered foundations and tilted walls. His quarry was getting ahead, and he was forced to stop and catch his breath. Askew walls shook and quivered, ready to throw themselves down to dust. Pits and holes gaped, filled with teeth of stone, and the lumpy ground was an undulating hallucination. Looking up at the sky, he saw it was stained with blood and fire. The way his mind was racing, he thought it was going to outpace his body.

Beyond the foundations, the scene of decay flattened, and the town ended at a stony field of weeds and thistles. Shaman had bounded halfway across, and he was now looking back. Jack halted, and it came to him that David Shaman could be leading him on. Nevertheless, he caught his wind and sprinted off, breaking into the field as Shaman jumped a fence and faded into a forest of maples.

Jack made for the maples, finding his breath increasingly constricted as he ran. With the lack of oxygen came fire, first at the crowns of the trees. It was as if he'd suddenly developed infrared vision. Reaching the fence, he rubbed his eyes, but his vision failed to clear. A feeling like a sick animal's desire began to soak his flesh as his pores expelled the poison. Reaching out, he struck at red lines that weren't there, then terror coursed through him as he saw spurs of fire whirling round him.

Swinging over a fence, he saw more red, a big wash of fire that ended as he steadied himself. Motion was turning everything to fire, but either way, he had to move, and he didn't want to give up on Shaman. The maples were neatly rowed forestry trees, so he cut across, stopping at the top of each row to look down. At the fourth row, he caught sight of Shaman, walking now, and entering a swampy area.

Jack rushed off, dashing wildly down the row. Blinding light shone down from a vast sky, and the grass began to burn with chaotic flames. He felt like he was melting into flowing metal, to be molded again in the evil hands of the poison. He ran on, as light as a shadow - then he was many shadows, darkness against the light, dodging a line of descending fire masks.

Water hissed on his feet; he slogged into a swamp and stopped, his lungs aching and his head spinning. After a moment, he saw a dark form moving behind an emerald curtain of moss. Crooked tree limbs shifted. The form turned and pressed partway through the moss. Jack saw eyes like fiery red stars and a gaping fanged mouth. Other parts of its body showed through gaps, and they were a mass of dripping blood. It was a horrible thing, without skin, like it'd been flayed alive.

With a roar, it stumbled away into the swamp, and Jack had no desire to follow it. His thoughts went back to David Shaman, and he quickly glanced to his rear.

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The sky showed as a vast shell, shimmering in shades of dark lavender. A pearl of moon rested below the horizon as the night deepened. Jon Chandler walked across the field, a touch unsteady; his mind was swimming with thoughts of revenge. The cave vampires he didn't care about, but Liz had met misfortune, and her death would be avenged. There was also the matter of punishing Mike Wilde. Wilde had interfered and disconnected his control of the undead at a crucial moment, and for that reason, Jon thought the art of sorcery to be the most satisfying way of getting even. David Shaman and Allan had mentioned various methods, but in the end, he drew on the Baron's knowledge to select a classic method.

Emerging at a space in a windbreak of hybrid willows, he spotted Allan and Jackson approaching, the sacred grove blossoming like a dark flower behind them. They were in ceremonial dress, as was Jon - velvet shirts with hammered silver, copper, turquoise, and shell. Deerskin pants and boots gave them a native look, though only Jon had features that were anywhere close to the usual native ones. In the quickening darkness, Allan and Jackson had more of a cruel Mongol look.

They faced off in the long grass. "You have the photos?" Jon said.

Allan patted a straw bag he had over his shoulder. "Everything we need is here. The photos are blown up: two clear ones, one of Wilde's little girl and the other of the Waters girl. Personally, I feel we should just move to terminate Wilde, rather than waste time tormenting him."

"He'll have to come to us tonight," Jon said. "We'll be ready to finish him. It's better this way. They want to pierce my flesh, so what better method of revenge than to use sorcery to pierce the flesh of their children? Time is on our side. Their movements are guarded, and their actions are limited by what they think they can get away with. Now is the best time to act, while they are split up and suffering indecision."

A blue spruce showed as a silhouette against the last of the dusk, and Jackson led the way over the field to it. They halted just beyond the tree, facing a circle of boulders that surrounded a flower-covered mound. The blossoms were all red, their brilliance apparent even in the darkness. Grecian roses, late-blooming poppies, carnations, lilies, and vines were in a wild arrangement.

Jon's pale face caught a blood tint from the flowers, and his eyes darkened to splashes of crimson. He turned and nodded to Jackson, who stepped up to the mound and began to pull away a mass of deep-red trumpet vines. They lifted off easily, and a tilted headstone showed. It was cracked and so weathered that the inscription had been eroded to notches.

"It will do," Jon said. "You have explained it to Jackson, I hope?"

"Yes. No tools are to be used. He has to dig up the coffin with his bare hands, as a ghoul would." Fishing in his bag, Allan took out a treated reed torch and stuck it in the ground at his feet. He snapped a match with his fingernail, and the torch rolled with liquid fire, bringing the mound alive with flickering light.

Firelight didn't bother Chandler, but he stepped back out of habit, his face impassive, a wax mask as the dancing shadows gave him the occasional illusion of warped emotion. His real feelings remained locked in his heart, and they were poison only a stake could drive out. Firelight and night now always brought memories of medieval times to him. There was the warmth of the blaze, and beyond it, plague and murder. The flames were holy, a beacon burning across Europe, fed by the evil priests who burned the innocent on the pyres.

Jackson had no hard feelings or memories; he was a ghoul in firelight and darkness, focused on the job at hand. Groaning heavily, he pulled the gravestone from the earth, managing to lift it chest high before the weight forced him to let it slide down the side of the mound. Ripping up a huge mat of trumpet vines, he tossed them carelessly on the headstone, and then he got to his knees and began to tear at the remaining flowers and sod. Before long, his callused hands were scooping up cake-soft earth, and his progress was swift as he scalped the top off the mound. After the first couple of inches, the earth turned to soft clay. Jackson had already become so muddy that amid the showering dirt, he gave the impression that he might be rising from a grave and not excavating one.

It was fortunate that the coffin wasn't too deep. Digging around the bottom end, he tried to ease it up, but the moist wood broke in his hands, and maggots showered out. He tossed the broken piece to Allan, who carefully removed a rusty nail. Jackson went back to his digging, working furiously as he made a trench around the coffin.

"That should be good enough," Jon said, seeing the coffin fully exposed. "Now get me the nails."

Throwing his back and shoulders into it, Jackson put pressure on the sealed lid, which split off like the cap of an eggshell. Holding it lightly, fearing it would crumble, he passed it over to Allan.

The contents of the coffin were withered to the last stages of decay. Maggots in the eye sockets fell to dust before their eyes, and a gray webbing of desiccated skin and wax collapsed into the skull. The suit was eaten to bleached rags that clung to the bones, making it a poor man's mummy.

Moving around the coffin on his knees, Jackson reached in and seized the skull. Vertebrae dropped away; he shook out the dust and maggot husks and tossed them up to Allan, who admired them briefly and sealed them in a cloth bag for future use.

The nails were what they wanted most, and Jon watched with a critical eye as Allan and Jackson cracked the rotten tick-covered coffin wood. When they had gathered the nails, Allan placed them in a small wooden box.

Jon took the box, rattled the nails, looked off into the night, and, after a vision of desolation, turned to Jackson. "Fill the mound back in and cover it with vines and flowers so it looks undisturbed, then you can go and clean yourself up."

Jackson grunted, shivered, and began gathering the coffin pieces and bones for burial. Commanding Allan with a nod, Jon led the way over the field toward the glowing moon on the horizon. Frayed ropes of mist were beginning to lift from the long grass, and the unnatural quiet lent the breeze a sound, making it an ocean in their ears.

They came to a long hump, lower than a mound and barely discernible. Bur plants and thistles covered it. There was a single cornstalk, brown and dead, and it rustled dryly in the snatches of wind. Some spots on Allan's land really were sacred, not the ones he'd designated, but others that were old Iroquois burial mounds - long abandoned as the tribe had moved north fifty years ago.

This was one of those mounds, and Jon walked up to it, weaving his way around clumps of thistles and patches of burs until he was at the corn stalk. It had a single dead ear, and he plucked it and peeled off the parched husk. Opening a leather pouch at his side, he held the cob against it and ran his hand down, combing the kernels into the pouch. They fell away, a tumble of black and red, like rotten teeth.

Leading Allan to another spot in the field, Jon sowed the corn seed, breathing on each kernel before he tossed it.

Following a nature trail through some pines, they came to a clearing. It had a large birch at its center, which Allan claimed to be the sacred birch from his book THE MILLENNIUM TRANSMISSIONS. To their right, huge tire ruts cut into the grass. A number of large objects had been hauled in and set up in the clearing. There were several stone idols and a portion of the wall near the birch. Though the idols were featureless and without detail, they had a menacing appearance in the darkness. They were a fearsome representation of the beings of the millennium, most of them done in black-pigmented, green stone. The wall was made of quarry stones and inlaid with ebony rectangles. It was unfinished at both ends so that it resembled a remnant of a larger structure that had crumbled. The clearing was more of a testament to Allan's love of grandiose illusions than something that would fool a discerning eye.

Jon and Allan were hardly humble pilgrims, yet they made their way to the center and the wall with measured steps; bent slightly into the night as they walked like priests on their way to kneel at a graven image.

As they passed the last idol, Allan took out a torch and lit it. Ebony gleamed on the wall, and an iron scone collar was revealed. He placed the torch in it and turned to Jon.

Jon grinned. The night and moonlight had peeled the membranes of gum tissue back from his fangs. "We are about to send a message from the beings of the millennium," he said. "Put the photos on the wall."

Allan removed the envelope from his bag and slipped out the photos. Jon passed him two of the coffin nails, and using a tiny devil-headed hammer, he pinned them up.

Jon's eyes brightened, growing fierce and otherworldly, like the beings of the millennium really were going to speak through him. "We must drive the nails in to pierce the fleshy parts of the body," he said. "If the bones are touched, this particular voodoo won't work. The method is effective. The Baron once used it against another vampire, to drive him mad with pain."

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Morris was ready to lose his cool; he drummed his fingers on the wheel as the car hugged the road. Route 27 had been blocked by a strange mudslide, and he was now circling the lake, trying the last country route home. The waters of the lake were a darkening mirror of murk below, and a ways down the shoreline, the spire of the old Baptist church was nearly as dark as blood, reflecting the last ember of sunset.

"Maybe you should call home?" Joey said as the engine continued to strain against the promontory road.

"My phone's not working. I haven't had time to get it fixed."

Rocking over a couple of final humps, the car reached the top and began an easy run down a flat, graveled road. The deer forest was to the left, and the steep side of the promontory showed on the right. The final rays of sunset were washing to pale pastels, and mist was rising. Switching on his headlights, Morris proceeded at a slow speed.

"No! Not Again!" Morris said.

"It's only mist," Joey said.

But Joey was wrong. In reality, a solid fog bank blocked the road ahead. And Morris' recent experience had been that where the signs were there, the road was blocked.

He pulled over on the shoulder and stopped. "Grab the flashlight," he said to Joey. "We'll walk in some. I want to make sure no obstacles have been planted on the road."

They got out into the blowing fog and began to move up the road. Visibility was poor even on foot; patches of fog drifted like ghostly monsters. Just as Morris was about to switch on the flashlight, he saw another light.

"Taillights," Joey said.

"Let's get a look before we reveal ourselves," Morris said. "Around here, it might be anything."

It turned out to be a parked truck, and they moved up and looked in the driver's window. No one was inside; a scraping sound caused them to look over their shoulder. Through the mist, they saw the outline of a man, and he appeared to be struggling to drag another man over to the edge of the promontory embankment.

Morris switched on his flashlight, and the beam illuminated a man in work clothes. The look of surprise and desperation on his face made it clear that he'd been caught in the act.

Lowering the beam, Morris got a look at the body being dragged, and he nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw that it was Nathan.

"What do you think you're doing, pal?" Morris said as the man let Nathan slide to the ground.

"I spotted him here on the roadside. He's in bad shape, so I'm taking him to the hospital. How about giving me a hand?"

"Okay," Joey said, taking a step forward.

Morris grabbed Joey's shoulder. "Freeze," he said to the man, pulling a Taurus pistol from the clip holster fastened on the back of his belt. Switching the laser on, he put the bead on the man's forehead.

"Hey, don't shoot," the man said, raising his hands.

"Just don't move," Morris said as he stepped closer.

Treachery showed in the man's eyes; it was a situation Morris didn't like at all. He didn't want to shoot, but he knew the guy had been dragging Nathan over to drop him off the promontory. If given any opportunity, he would likely jump for the gun.

And as it turned out, he saw an opportunity to attack right away. Ducking down, the man threw himself forward, going for Morris' legs. But Morris was quick enough to step back. He brought the gun barrel down hard on the back of his assailant's neck. Then he was bowled over as the man kept rolling forward. The gun went off, a wild shot as he tumbled. Hard earth bit him, but he kept his grip on the gun.

The man got to his knees, scrambled up, and glanced around. A grimace froze his face, and his hand flew to his injured neck. He saw that Morris was down, but before he could jump him, Joey stepped in the way.

The man let a kick fly, a slow one because of his heavy work boots, and Joey sidestepped it easily. Seeing an opening, the man charged Morris, who was getting to his knees. Morris' response was to keep low and push forward, causing the attacker to overshoot him. Taking the man's legs out from under him, Morris sent him flying head over heels.

The man rolled, stopping near the edge of the embankment, and he quickly jumped up, seizing a chunk of jagged rock as he did. Turning, he confronted Morris with the rock. Morris sighted the laser beam on his head, but before he could fire a shot, a large stone thrown by Joey hammered the man's forehead and sent him staggering. He went over the edge and plunged like a rag doll to the bottom of the promontory. A scream and a loud splash echoed up. Hurrying to the edge, they heard some distant choking, followed by silence.

Morris checked Nathan's pulse and found it to be okay. It looked like he was drugged. Dashing over to the truck, he checked the gas tank and found it to be nearly empty. "You can take Nathan to Milford in my car. I'll take the truck and see if I can get home with it. I want to see if anything is happening there. We've got to find out what happened to Jack."

"I hope he isn't already at the bottom of the lake," Joey said.

"We'd better take a look," Morris said.

They went back, noting a clear trail in the muddy roadside where Nathan had been dragged. The trail ended at Nathan, and there were no others. At the edge, Morris shone the beam, illuminating only rocks and the dark water below.

"Jack isn't down there," Morris said. "There's only one trail in the mud."

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Yellow lights lit the haze in the sky to the north and south, marking Burchell Lake and Milford. Tentacles of mist drifted just below the stone mansion, leaving it isolated under bright country stars. Inside, Lana sat cross-legged on the carpet, bathed by light from the television. Absorbed in a movie, she munched on ripple chips and swallowed root beer. Dracula appeared on the screen, and she froze, holding a chip in the air as Bella Lugosi mesmerized her.

"What is this schlock?" Danny said, shaking his head as he walked into the living room.

"Dracula," Lana said. "It's vampire night on Channel 37."

"Haven't you had enough of the vampires?"

"I'm trying to come to terms with them. It's common in psychiatry - facing your fears. Understanding death by taking it into your soul."

"It doesn't work," Danny said. "I watched Wake of the Werewolf just after Dave Wood's shepherd bit me. It didn't do a thing for me."

"Some people are beyond help."

"I doubt it, and I doubt you'll be helped. That movie's so old someone should drive a stake through the projector."

"The Horror of Dracula is on next," Lana said. "It's more modern. 1958 with Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing."

"1958 is modern. Say, why don't I get out a case of Coca-Cola Classic and some Elvis records? We can make a party out of this."

"You're not funny," Lana said, not taking her gaze from the TV, "but that new ponytail you're wearing sure looks silly."

"So what are you reading, Mike?" Danny said.

Mike's eyes were nearly vacant, carrying only the screen flicker as he stared off into space. He'd been drifting away from the book, thinking about Alice, how she always treated him coldly in front of others, like affection was something you kept in the closet at home. "I'm reading Astral Projection. It's an old book by Dick Sutphen. I doubt it would interest you."

"Sure it does, but is it possible or not?"

Mike rubbed his eyes lightly. "He's talking about astral projection using hypnosis. I think you want to know whether the mind can travel in space and time, beyond the body. A question science can't answer because the mind at its higher levels can't be observed. What happens there is a personal experience; no one can look at it from the outside. There might not even be any space and time for a disembodied mind."

"How about in the future?" Danny said. "Would it be possible for this Sutphen guy to teach everybody how to astral travel?"

"I hope not. People would become lazy slugs, staying in bed and conducting business by way of astral projection."

Danny laughed. "You mean they'd be like Dad. The only difference is that he uses computers and internet projection."

"Some of them would be like you, Danny," Lana said. "Using recording equipment to project astral noise."

Danny frowned; Lana liked to irritate him by digging at his music. He ignored her, turned away, then thought he saw movement behind a chintz curtain and went over to the window. Cupping his hands to the pane, he looked out and saw a patch of luminous silver spilled across the night sky. It moved too fast to be a comet or meteor, and after a moment, it vanished. Danny blinked in disbelief, and it reappeared, swinging rhythmically like a hammer gliding in the heavens.

It was almost like he was hallucinating, and he thought he'd better call the others over to be sure he wasn't . . . but before he could speak, something else appeared, and it caused his mouth to open in silent awe. A waterfall of mist was rolling over the field . . . as thick as a cumulus cloud come to ground, and it immediately siphoned his giddy mood from him. His skin tingled, and he remained silent, feeling light cotton blocking his nose and throat. Bella Lugosi's voice and the howling of wolves drifted from the TV.

Danny looked above the mist and darkness, back to the stars – they'd gained a new dimension, like a bed of nails rocketing down, then the mist rolled up, and he was seized by the hands of an invisible strangler. The grip turned to iron, and he dropped to the floor, scratching at his throat as he tried to pull away ghost fingers he couldn't find.

The windowpane shattered, and glass and curtains flew. Lana screamed as a fist of air entered, whooshed across the room, and knocked her flat on the carpet. Mike shot up from his chair, his book flying from his hands and away like a fluttering bat. He gave his head a shake, clearing the state of hypnotic sleep that had slipped over him. Before he could rush to Lana, a garbled yell came from Danny, so he spun to face him and saw him rise and stumble back from the broken window.

Danny choked, took his hands from his neck, and breathed deeply. Mike could see nothing but mist beyond the smashed pane. Someone or something was probably lurking outside, and he kept that in mind as he turned to Lana. She was on her back, pinned to the floor by an unseen weight, her lips parted fishlike as she mouthed a silent cry. Huge nipples of goose flesh were appearing on her shivering body, and her eyes were iced with terror. The chills looked strong, radiating on her skin like invisible icicles driven deep in the flesh.

Danny broke out of his stumble, gaining control as he rushed up beside Mike. Neither of them knew quite what to do, but after a moment, Mike threw himself down, seized her shoulders, and tried to pull her up. A shudder ran through her and up his arm. She was as cold as a corpse. Only her left side came free; her right shoulder and thigh were held to the floor like they were spiked there. Mound-big bruises appeared at both spots.

Mike glanced at Danny. He was staring out the window. "See anything out there?"

"Weird things in the mist, but I don't think they're real."

"Lana's in shock. This is a supernatural force holding her. I've read about it, but I've never encountered it until now."

"What can we do?"

Mike put his hand on his chin, studying Lana and trying to think. A scream rang out, echoing from upstairs. "Watch the window, don't let anything get to her," Mike said. He jumped up, ran out of the room, and bounded up the stairs. He saw Janice on the landing, her red hair flying up in a draft blowing from Annie's bedroom.

Janice closed her eyes and gulped air. As Mike got to her, she opened them, and her expression changed from frightened to bewildered. She fainted, and he caught her, eased her down, and propped her against the wall.

Glowing night lights made the hall a passage into an unsettling dream. Thoroughly spooked, he burst into the cold, drafty bedroom, finding the window broken and Alice at Annie's bedside, both of their faces ghostly pale. Alice held a palsied hand over Annie's forehead like she wanted to touch her but was afraid she might hurt her.

As Mike stepped up, Annie flailed her limbs puppet-like, swallowed air ravenously, then fell back and stared fearfully at the ceiling. A moment later, her eyes went glassy. He could see that she was in hypnotic shock, like Lana, probably aware only of pain and the dreamlike movement of people and shadows in the room.

Alice shivered, then panicked, spun around, and seized him, her nails digging into his arms deep enough to draw blood. "You've got to do something!" she said. Putting her head on his shoulder, she shook and wept.

Anger, pity, and outrage formed storm clouds in Mike's mind. His hand went to his face as he tried to clear his head and formulate a plan. He couldn't look at Annie and think so, so he averted his eyes, and when he did, he noticed an odd shadow on the wall. It was human-shaped, hunched over Annie. Glancing in the mirror, he saw that the complete shadow wasn't in the reflection. Only the outline of a skeleton showed in the darkened glass

"Do something, for God's sake!" Alice said, suddenly pushing away and turning back to Annie.

"This is some kind of vampire's sorcery. The only thing I can do is go to Allan Rampa's place and force them to stop it."

"There's a horrible lump here on her shoulder. She needs a doctor."

Mike could see the purpling lump pulsing through her nightdress. "We can't move her," he said. "Just keep her warm. Lana is suffering from the same evil, so you'll have to watch her too. See if you can contact Morris or Nathan and Jack and have them meet me at the gate to Rampa's place."

She nodded, crying now, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Just do what you can," he said, kissing her forehead. "Annie is going to be all right if you stay calm. If any intruders show up while I'm gone, I want you to shoot them."

They embraced. Alice wiped the tears away and held her hands out, steadying them. "I'm ready to shoot, but you be careful, Mike. Don't try to be a hero. It'll be no help at all if you get yourself killed."

"I can handle it. I've been in spots like this before. It's part of my job." He kissed her, turned, and hurried down the stairs. He found Danny on his knees, pulling a blanket over Lana.

"I want you to guard her while I go over to Allan Rampa's estate. Get a rifle out, but don't shoot anyone before they come clear of the mist. You have to make sure you don't shoot Jack or your father."

"If any strangers try to get in, I'll fire a thousand rounds. None of those creeps is going to touch me."

"Use the furniture for a barricade and run if you have to. If they touch you, you're dead."

Danny nodded grimly, watching as Mike turned and went out. Mike halted for a moment, waiting to see if anything would emerge from the mist, then he walked briskly down the slate walk to the stables. The mist wasn't as thick as it had looked from the window, and it seemed to dissipate as he plunged into it. Up in the stable turrets, it swirled like angel hair, the breeze lifting it higher. He considered what he'd like to do to Jon Chandler and his clan of vampires and sorcerers, and the thoughts left him feeling black in the heart, like a murderer.

Creepers of mist broke to smoke as he opened the side door. Getting to the storage room, he pulled out the key and decided on various weapons. The air smelled of horses, though the animals were now elsewhere and under professional care. A shove and a brush of his hand, and he had the door open and the light on. Spots and straw dust danced before his eyes, and the stock of weapons was at his feet. Passing over shotguns and staves, he took only a single stake on a belt and a Taurus pistol. His eyes fell on some masks they had purchased but hadn't used. The one he picked was Inca Indian in style, with features in ebony and overlaid with green jade. A red key pattern formed the eyebrows and cheeks. The eyes had cross slits for pupils, and there was a third eye in the center of the forehead. It also had a cross, but a silver one. The mask had fierce, brutal beauty. He judged it to fit his needs perfectly. If they wanted to play sorcerer, he would come as another one. Let them guess who was behind the mask; even if they did, it would still work to inspire fear.

As he fixed the mask in place, Annie's wounded body flashed in his mind. It pained him like a razor in his heart. His bowels twisted; if someone were to run him through with a hot knife, the feeling would be the same. Fighting the sensation, he stumbled, threw the door open and recovered some in the darkness.

In moments, he was ready. Pumping his legs piston fast, he pounded over the dew-soaked lawn, sweeping through the mist like it wasn't there. His goal was Alice's car, and he reached it and popped in. Kicking it to a start, he rolled down the drive.

The shortest way to Allan Rampa's estate was to bypass Burchell Lake by way of Route 31. On the road, poor visibility threw his judgment off, and the sign came out of the mist before he expected it. He barely made the turn, his tires skidding on glass-smooth asphalt. Hitting the high beams, he squealed off down the lonely mist-drenched road. Shadows were everywhere in the mist, and he was sure he saw bats diving and other evil shapes vanishing in the dark. Most of them proved to be illusions as his headlights blasted their outlines away.

A dark form appeared up ahead, and this time the lights didn't laser it away. Mike swerved, fishtailed, and saw it bound into the trees. It was a stag. As he hit the gas and drove on, he was sure that both his heart and the engine had skipped a beat.

It had been a mistake not to go after Allan Rampa and Jon Chandler in the first place. By leaving them open, he'd given them the power to call the shots, increasing the risks. Now he was stuck fighting them on their own prepared territory. Vengeance was their motive more than anything else, and one good thing about vengeance was that it often failed. The intended victim always had to be kept alive long enough for the victor to savor the sweet fruit. He hoped that in this case, they'd already left him alive too long, and that overconfidence would be their downfall.

A tight ride around a local dead-man's curve, and he got a fuzzy view of the fields leading up to Rampa's estate. A cedar bog ended at a meadow of weeds and sumac. The conical red flowers of the sumac were as dark as blood, and he could see the moon

shimmering beyond the gables of the mansion. Behind it, the mist was darkened by a column of smoke.

Entering the gates wouldn't be a good idea. There would be booby traps. Unfortunately, he couldn't avoid driving by. Hitting the brakes, he drove slowly, taking a good look at the outer rubble-stone wall. No one was waiting in the dark; the iron gate was ahead, guarded by its supports - two stone Toltec warriors.

Shadows merged with the darkness; there was only the dimmest light at the turnoff, and he thought he could see pale shapes moving in the yellow haze.

Mist swirled in the light, and as he got closer, the shapes gained definition. Two men, a confrontation; David Shaman was at the partly open gate, and Jack was stumbling up to him. Jack's gate was gangly, like he was drunk, and he seemed a sure loser in any scuffle with Shaman. Mike had first met David Shaman years ago and had never liked him; he was a dangerous man, so he would have to put him out of commission quickly. With that in mind, he pulled over.

Before Mike could get out, he saw Shaman suddenly go into action; a flow of motion in the mist, and body language said he had to be throwing a dagger. The blade was thrown with great skill; it whistled through the shadows and connected with Jack's shoulder.

Jack staggered, stepped back, groaned, drew his pistol, and fired a single shot. Its crack was quick, like a firecracker; it knocked into Shaman's shoulder and took him down, leaving him writhing at the front of one of the stone warriors.

Gun smoke drifted up, a blue ghost of cordite. Flying out of the car, Mike dashed to Jack. He'd fallen and was now struggling to his feet. His left hand was on the hilt of the dagger embedded in his shoulder. Jack's eyes were slits, his face slicked with sweat and grime, and his nose twitching from the acrid fumes of smoke. A groan rolled off his lips as he pulled out the blade, and agonized satisfaction was in it, like getting Shaman had made the wound worthwhile.

"Jack, it's me, Mike. What's going on here?"

Jack looked at him but didn't seem to see him. His eyes were whirlpool big. "Shaman poisoned us with darts. Nathan's in the hospital. My vision's still not so good, Mike. You look like a devil."

"I'm wearing a mask. I have to go in after Chandler and Rampa. There's no other way, they're killing my family with black magic."

"Maybe you'd better check Shaman first, see if I killed him."

"Okay, I'll look at him."

Mike glanced around, and then he began to jog over to Shaman. A glow on the face of the Toltec warrior spelled danger; his feet skidded on the rocks as he ducked, dived, and rolled. A molten river shot from the mouth of the warrior, and David Shaman was bathed in the fire. The flames were so strong his body flew up, a flaming blue torch, and then he crumpled and fell to burn like a flare on the driveway.

Emotions of relief, pity, and horror all crossed Mike's brow, then it all added up to a fourth horseman of confusion as he watched David Shaman continue to burn. It was as spectacular as a vampire in the sun, only this time the source was chemical: a volatile liquid so hot that it was causing a flaming decomposition of the body. Rivulets of blood-black ooze flowed from the torso as the blue fire whipped in transparent sheets and flung up puffs of soot. The skull exploded, a sparkling shower of silver points, then the belly ballooned and Mike jumped back as the corpse skated in circles under the power of red-

hot steam. When it halted, only a charred log remained. Bits of charcoal were scattered around it. A final wave of flames licked up, and the fire went out.

Smoke billowed and hissed, and Mike's thoughts cleared. So this ambush had been set for him. He was supposed to arrive, maybe with Morris and the others, and be consumed by liquid fire at the gate. They would have died in ghastly flames like cave vampires, and Jon Chandler's revenge would've been perfect. This time, perfection had come like a tornado and missed.

Jack's rubbery legs were giving out. They'd kept him up to see the witch burn, but now the muscles were freezing, causing him to moan weakly as he collapsed.

Still shivering at the thought of the fate he'd escaped, Mike turned back to Jack. He looked groggy and nauseous, and in fact, he had a bitter taste in his mouth and stomach cramps. His bowels quaked, about as bad as they would if rotten apples were fermenting in his intestines. The world became a rocking skateboard. He could barely hold himself up on his knees. "I'm afraid I've lost my legs, Mike," he said, recognizing the mask floating up to him. "It's the poison. I got a small dose, but that was enough."

"It's fatigue, too," Mike said. "You look like you ran miles through the bog. Let me check that bleeding."

"Does it look bad?" Jack said.

"The bleeding is very light. It sliced in without severing any major blood vessels."

"You'd better not go in alone, Mike. It's too dangerous."

"I have no choice. You'll have to hang on out here for a few minutes."

"That's no problem. You're going to have the problem, trying to hang on in there."

"Come on," Mike said, pulling him up on his good side. "We'll get you to the car."

As he helped Jack get to the car, Mike finally saw some of the truth in the dark corners of the vampire night. Looming up as a wall of fear, it said that good and evil were in the blood - human beings were predatory more than anything else.

For Jack, the walls were too high to climb, and there were stone gargoyles at the top, ready to spout blood lava. He hated being out of the fight almost as much as he hated the effects of the poison.

A Luna moth fluttered over the hood as Mike opened the door. It sickened him; he felt like squashing it. He hated anything that thrived on the vile mist. If he admired anyone in the future, it would be people of the sun. He gave Jack a clean handkerchief. "This should hold the bleeding. If anyone comes near the car, use your gun."

"You don't have to tell me that," Jack said. "Maybe you should tell me how to stand sitting here while you're over the wall."

Picking up a palm-sized stone, Mike crossed the road and threw it at the wall. A bat fluttered up, but nothing else happened, so he jumped the ditch and began to scale the wall. Boulders in the rubble-stone made it easy to climb, but at the top, his hand touched broken glass and barbed wire.

It wasn't very sharp, as the weather had done some work on it. He got up and began to walk along it, dodging the larger chunks of glass. A few weeks of mist had rusted the barbs so they crumpled underfoot like burs.

He had a hunch; the head of one of the gate pillars was ahead. He could see its warrior features in profile and the shine of a plaque. Coming up to it, he glanced down, spotting

a tiny glow deep in the carved mouth.

Looking back at the plaque, he read the inscription: GUARDIAN IDOL, PROPERTY OF THE BEINGS OF THE MILLENNIUM. Taking a fold-up knife from his pocket, he began to pry at the edges of the plaque. It popped out easily, and his hunch proved to be correct. Wires and a circuit board were inside. Pocketing the knife, he pulled out his wooden stake, and with it, he ripped out the panel and a tangle of wiring. There was a brief electrical flash, and the glow behind the warrior's lips died.

With the gate disarmed, he wouldn't have to worry about Morris or the others arriving and getting fried. Momentarily satisfied, he studied the grounds, then he leaped from the wall, landing in soft turf beside some lilac bushes.

An oval drive cut through the landscaping. Keeping to the shadows, he went around a bed of geraniums and began working his way to the back. Lights were on in the mansion, but he had no intention of going inside. He was sure the source of the sorcery would be near the bonfire.

At the back, he stopped at the edge of a narrow drive. A lawn led to a grove of maples, and a portion of a palatial structure was at its heart: columns, staircases, and a massive lintel. The column of smoke was rising from another location, well beyond the grove.

There was no cover, and he feared someone might spot him from the mansion. To reduce the chances of that, he dashed over the field to the grove, coming to a path that led under the canopy of maples. He was just getting into the trees when he spotted someone coming toward him. This man was dirt-streaked, his clothes stained with filth, and by the Oriental cast of his features, Mike knew it was Jackson, Allan Rampa's groundskeeper. A huge silver lunula gleamed on Jackson's chest, the sort a moon worshiper would wear. Mike stepped off the path into some ferns, and he saw that it was too late. Jackson had spotted him. The mask had its effect; Jackson was visibly startled. Stopping dead in his tracks, he seized the lunula on his chest, and it split into two curved blades, the neck portion being the handles.

As he stood motionless for a moment, holding his blades in the skilled samurai fashion, his eyes shone in the moonlight. There was madness in them; he was shark cold, like killing was his birthright. He was the kind of man Mike hated, a believer in murder. He'd probably commit new order hari kiri without flinching if he failed. And if he had no fangs, it was because no vampire wanted the morbid humors of his blood. Embalming fluid ran in his veins; a liquid drowning all compassion.

Even so, Mike didn't want to shoot him, and it wouldn't be that easy. He had the pistol in a clip holster at his back. It would be simple to draw it and terminate him with a silver bullet. But the gun would make noise, and Jackson was still human, though barely so. Killing him with a quick shot wouldn't be moral or fair. Vampires were different. They were a plague rising up to kill humanity. They'd force you to drive a stake through the hearts of loved ones, and your good memories of them would be destroyed by the last memory of the hiss and the fangs.

"I have a gun," Mike said. He could see that Jackson's sinews were strung tight, ready to unwind in an explosive attack. "If you don't drop those blades, you'll die."

Jackson captured the weight of the statement with his eyes, and he hesitated for another moment, like he was snapped in the trap of a decision he couldn't make. The tension building on his face said that he'd either fly like a cobra or shatter at the feet of his false god.

Reaching around, Mike eased out his gun. Fate acted. Patches of mist with the opacity of cheesecloth drifted out of the trees, and Jackson's eyes flicked to the corners. Mike had a grim choice; he could gun Jackson down or let him disappear in the mist. It seemed like murder, so he didn't fire, and Jackson dived off the path into the cover of some bushes.

Nice guys finish last, Mike thought. Having sympathy for human devils was fine as long as having your severed head offered to the moon, and vampires wasn't the result. He should've killed him, but he knew that no one ever went by the book in real confrontations.

Moving back, Mike crouched, holding the gun in one hand and the stake in the other. Jackson was out of sight, plowing through some bushes. A charging moose would have made less noise. He heard him fall, grunt, and slash some brush with the blades, then he was silent.

The problem with Jackson was that he wasn't bright enough to flee. Mike knew beyond a doubt that he was creeping through the trees, positioning himself to attack from behind.

Rising and turning, Mike glanced around, seeing nothing but darkened leaves and trails of moonlit mist. Expecting a charge from the rear, he resumed his crouch, breathing lightly as he waited.

A twig snapped, a branch whipped, and the urge to fire wild shots crept into Mike's fingers. Silence returned, and impatience and guilt began to eat at him; he was betraying his family and himself by wasting time playing with Jackson.

There was a high flash of silver, and it told Mike that Jackson was cleverer than he'd imagined. The attack was from the rear as expected; only it was from high up. Jackson had climbed a tree and was right above him. One blade swung down like a deadly giant's fang. Mike held his fire and ducked low and forward so that the blade swept over his head.

He rose as Jackson landed, knocking him aside. Both men tumbled in the grass and quickly sprang to their feet. Mike was up first, but his mask had twisted around, blinding him. Fortunately, he'd held fast to the gun grip.

Knocking the mask back in place, Mike prepared to shoot. Jackson was still dazed by his bad landing; his samurai cool had left him; he began a clumsy charge, jabbing blades. Ducking aside, Mike left a leg behind, and Jackson tripped over it, going for a loop at the edge of the path.

Enough was enough, Mike frowned, but it was also the calculation of a man taking aim. Jackson rolled up, turned, and charged again. This time, Mike fired, the laser beads skating on Jackson's knee just before the silver bullet turned it to a spray of blood and smashed bone.

Jackson's legs were clipped out from under him, and he wailed violently as he fell on his face. The blades were at Mike's feet in Jackson's twitching hands, and he dropped them as he rolled over. It was clear that he would fight no more; his face was crooked with anguish, and his knee oozed reddish pulp.

Intense pain drained Jackson, causing him to bleed energy. Mike saw a grainy aura, then bright splinters of violet light shooting from him. He began to turn away, but the light scorched his mind, and a vision took shape. His vantage point was a mystic center that seemed to radiate the whole of reality - a strange reality; he could see the Waters' mansion like it was a house of glass. Inside, Lana shivered, and Annie vomited. Alice was rushing from the kitchen with hot water bottles, Janice at her heels. Outside in the

nearby forest, Morris was running, and something else was moving - a vampire corpse that was bleeding like it'd been flayed. It was well ahead of Morris on the path, headed for the house.

It all became flames and shrank in the pupil of an eye. Jackson reappeared. He was crawling hand over hand and choking in shock. Balance became a confusion of wheels, and Mike staggered back, bright lights exploding to daggers in his mind. Jackson's pain was entering him, so he had to get clear of him. He couldn't help him anyway. He had no time.

In essence, the mist was a cloud of doom, rolling and sucking inward, dragon breath drawing Mike to its heart. But Mike refused to surrender to the power of gloom. He believed Morris could stop the creature in the vision and that the game could be won if he kept himself steady for the confrontation with Allan and Chandler. Snatching up one of Jackson's silver blades, Mike turned away and cut through the maples, bypassing a huge structure at the heart of the grove.

At the perimeter, he found a mostly bare patch of burs and thistles. Beyond them, the grounds were wild foliage except for the work Jackson had done on sacred spots. Char-black smoke rose high in the whitened sky, darkening the face of the moon. The fire was a bit beyond a field of straw grass and stands of pines, and he was sure the source of the black magic was there.

Jogging through the thistles, he plunged into straw grass, quickly working his way to a beaten path. Vapors lifted, creating threatening shapes in the field. He hoped none of them were real, but he was also aware of the possibility of traps. It would be best if Chandler thought him too inept to get past the firetrap at the gate, then he would have an element of surprise on his side. His pistol wasn't a loud one, so perhaps the shots had gone unheard.

The stand of pines he was closing in on looked like a wintry hallucination. The trees were cloaked in mist that glittered like snow in the moonlight. Light danced in his eyes, and he almost failed to notice that the path was blocked up ahead. Cornstalks came into view, and they were moving in the breeze in a weird way, murmuring and shivering, growing before his eyes.

The beat of his heels wound down to silence. He approached with caution, fearing something might come scurrying out of the stalks. Halting, he looked at a scene that was odd and idyllic. It was a variety of corn he'd never encountered before, crowned with thick bundles of golden hair. He listened to its parchment rustle, decided against passing through it, and began to walk at its edge.

In one spot, a single errant stalk tilted out. He seized it and swept it aside. It left the palm of his hand feeling bee-stung. Glancing at it, he saw that it had been pierced by tiny golden filaments.

As he moved on, something whipped out and wrapped around his arm. He was prepared to slash at a man-sized object, but all he saw was a stalk of corn. It'd thrown itself out in tentacle fashion, and with poisonous effect, biting his arm, sending shooting pains and waves of numbness.

A swift slash with the lunula severed the stalk, and it shriveled and fell away like a dead vine. Mike's arm was devilishly sore and spotted with blood where filaments had pierced it. He began to pluck them out, and as he did, the entire corn patch came alive. Animated by an evil power, plants became as flexible as snakes. They snapped at him with rubber-band speed, but his reflexes were just as quick, and he was able to slash

down the few stalks that reached him as he retreated. An unnatural shriek rose as the stalks and leaves sawed at one another, almost like the corn was angry at the escape of its intended victim.

He ran to the pines and planned to burn the corn patch later. Fragrances of pine gum and the herbs Jon and Allan were burning in the field beyond filled his nostrils. Little other than shadows and shafts of moonlight appeared in the evergreens. Faint yellow light filtered in from the distant bonfire, illuminating the duff path. He ran on, and after his encounter with the corn, it wouldn't have surprised him if the pines were armed with porcupine quills and ready to fall on him. But nothing deadly happened, though he was sure something would have had he decided to linger there.

The path began to spread, and the trees broke at a clearing. Heaps of dry, cut brush marked the perimeter, and it crunched underfoot as he went through. He thought it was a road he'd come to, but closer inspection showed only some deep mud ruts, widely spaced and obviously made by heavy equipment that'd been used to set up the stones in the clearing.

Now was the time to look for traps and size up the enemy. Standing on the lip of a rut, he studied the clearing. It was large. Beyond a scattering of stone idols and monsters, he saw a broken wall, a small totem pole, and a birch tree. A bonfire sent up a sudden crackling burst of flame as it fed hungrily on thick logs. The mist here was thin, and there were drifting flakes of ash. The odor was foul, as if they were burning coffins or corpses. From the look of the birch tree, it had been fed with the same plant food as the corn. It dwarfed the stone statues like a giant and was white enough to be another idol. Torches burned on the wall, and shadows shifted as a result of their flickering. He couldn't see any people, but he knew Jon and Allan were lurking somewhere, waiting to ambush him. He tried to get a psychic fix on them but couldn't. Without a doubt, Chandler was blocking him.

There was really nothing he could do other than press forward and see what fanged snakes were in the grass. The root of the voodoo affecting Lana and Annie was somewhere at the bonfire; it was just a matter of breaking the spell at the source, and to do that, he'd have to be faster and deadlier than the enemy, because his few abilities wouldn't be a match for Jon Chandler's powers of the blood in a direct battle.

He was about to press ahead, then he glanced at the blade in his hand. He'd taken it from Jackson, and it was therefore Allan's property. It couldn't be relied on, so he tossed it aside. He headed into the longest grass, thinking an ambush might come from behind one of the idols. Keeping his distance, he passed them slowly. They were set up in a way that a hunter stumbling upon them would think he'd met with an invasion from a Lovecraftian world. Mike figured that perhaps one piece of evidence against the idea of monsters from another world was that Allan hadn't been able to contact any.

Wind slithered through the grass like snakes, a gentle hiss, and moonlight and firelight silver-plated the dew, making a bright carpet that ran to the bonfire. His progress was slow as he watched for any unusual movement on the ground and for anything that might have been hidden behind the idols.

Passing one of the larger idols, he noticed a flow of mist that was contrary to the breeze. It smoked up the twisted arms of the crouched monstrosity and dispersed in a funnel shape at the head. It had no face but appeared to be breathing. Mist blowing behind it made for false movement. A sudden rush of air gave a clear view of the head, beaded with red droplets, as if it were sweating blood.

The other idols loomed like black shadows in the misty night. They spooked Mike thoroughly, catching him in a moment that was a long silver thread drawing tight to snap. He was sure the idol was about to explode with deadly tricks. Perhaps shoot fire or poison darts.

Something flashed in the grass before him, quicksilver skating up, and he was off his guard with his neck craned toward the suspect idol. A man flew up, heavily muscled, with gleaming eyes and a hairy body. He caught only a glance of the hideous visage, and then he saw an axe swinging for his head.

He ducked aside, and the blade glanced off his shoulder and scraped his arm. He felt his flesh tear and gasped as the bestial man hulked into him. He was thrown off balance, and the axe swung again. Forcing himself through a crazy half-turn as he fell, he managed to dodge the blade. Hitting the grass, he rolled and drew the stake. Time fell into slow motion, and his movements seemed slow and inadequate like those of a drowning man. A hairy arm was swinging down, and his stake was driving up. The weapons clashed, the axe was glanced aside, and the point of the stake drove into the ape-man's shoulder.

Fat droplets of blood showered from the wound as Mike pulled out the stake, and a scream slammed his eardrums, hard and painful like broken glass. From one knee, Mike pushed up, driving an elbow into the screaming throat. It brought the man down, and there was silence as he tumbled, rose, and fled.

He ran, almost loping through the grass, then he choked, and an illusion was swept from him. Light trailed the ape-man, and his appearance fell away into the mist like discarded skin. Now Mike could see that the fleeing man was Allan Rampa.

The power of the stake had killed his sorcery. Rampa tumbled and then looked back as he got up. Blood flowed from his wounded shoulder, pouring through his fingers to stain the patterns of silver and shell on his ceremonial shirt. Grimacing, he turned and continued to run.

Lowering his stake, Mike decided not to pursue him. He feared more traps ahead, and he was wounded. Inspecting the gash, he found that his shoulder and upper arm were split and bleeding. Shivers and stiffness were setting in. Shock and vigorous exercise worked to kill the pain. Using his good arm, he pulled off his shirt; he ground his teeth as he used it to bind the wound.

The bloodstained axe was in the grass at his feet. He grabbed it and inspected it. It was dark-green jadeite and crudely made -a power object that had somehow lent Allan the form of the prehistoric man that had once wielded it.

Allan had definitely not expected him to capture the axe. He thought of keeping it, then tossed it in the grass and moved on. Time was close to the quick now, and pain made concentration difficult. In a few minutes, he'd be unable to function. The last of the idols towered on his left; one with a mouth and no other facial features. It was postured toward the sky, its limbs distended, its body a distortion of form. The twisted and curled orifice was open to howl in some unnamable language at the cosmic force tearing it upward in deformed metamorphosis.

Allan had disappeared near this idol, diving into the mist and the grass. Mike suspected that he might be cowering behind the idol, waiting for a chance to backstab him. He halted. Mist swirled at the idol's head, and a white mane took shape. Red liquid began to dribble out of the mouth, and if stone could bleed, it was blood. A hint of blue smoke showed, and Mike crouched and threw himself headlong into the grass just as an object

cannonballed out of the idol's mouth. It thundered to the ground where Mike had been standing and lay there in a crater. He could see that it wasn't a cannonball; it was an ancient mace head, made of speckled stone, and radiant with power.

Before Mike could fully recover from the surprise, Allan stepped from behind the idol. He twirled a necklace of amber pieces on his index finger. His grimace shifted to a devil's grin, and with a snap, he released the necklace. It ignited, a wheel of fire bearing down on Mike. There was no escape, but he tried to scramble away. Wet grass sizzled, smoke seared his nostrils, and when he looked up, the fire snuffed itself out. The necklace collapsed in the grass; the spell hadn't worked because of his own necklace of protective coral.

Drawing his gun, he fired a shot. He saw the silver bullet knock flesh as Allan faded behind the idol. It was a solid hit in the back, maybe even a fatal one. Unless a miracle occurred, he was sure Allan was out of the fight.

Allan blundered into view - a man who'd just discovered the true meaning of sorcery. Mike held his fire as he stumbled through the grass, headed for the birch.

Chandler hadn't appeared yet, so Mike crouched and waited, wondering where he might be hiding. He stood up, took a step, and then he spotted Jon coming around the wall. He stood in the torchlight, his shirt of shells, gold and silver, spangling with stars of glare. A sizable sheaf of shredded birch bark was in his hand, possibly bark from Allan Rampa's sacred birch. Shadows and flame-glow flowed liquidly, obscuring his face and burying his intent. Chandler's audacity amazed Mike. He'd seen him shoot Allan, yet he was still willing to stand in full view, an open target.

Allan tripped, crawled, scrambled up, and continued on, making his way to the wall and Chandler. It came to Mike that such confidence could mean an attack was coming from the rear, so he crouched and spun with his gun at the ready. The idols wore a netting of mist and ash, wave patterns of wind ran in the grass, but nothing solidly animate took shape.

Spinning back, he saw that Allan had fallen several yards from Jon and was getting to his knees. If Chandler wanted to draw fire, he decided to oblige him, and, taking quick aim, he fired.

As the trigger banged home, Chandler stepped forward and swung around on bended knee, sweeping his bark bundle through thin mist. A dark blur trailed the bundle, and it streaked out, a shadow form, a giant claw that shattered the air before it to mirror-like shards. Allan was lifted and thrown by the energy, and invisible hands pushed Mike back a step. The bullet didn't get through.

Silver bullets weren't going to work; that much was apparent, and it was impossible to move in for body contact while Jon was wielding such a deadly weapon. Mist ran thick off to Mike's left, so he decided to buy a minute and ducked through the grass. Wild carrot and straw grass gave him cover, that and the rolling mist, only he didn't put so much trust in the mist as it probably didn't block Chandler's blood vision.

Chandler, as usual, didn't act as expected. He merely turned away when he saw Mike flee and began a slow dance. Mike could see his form vaguely, leaping and gleaming, laying out patterns of sorcery in the mist. He was using the bark bundle as a rattle, though it didn't make any discernible noise.

Looking up through the mask, weeds, and shifting veils of white, Mike watched a scene in which the ancient became modern. Bat-winged shadows hovered and slid, and in the carpeting of mist, he couldn't see Chandler's feet touch the ground. Moonbeams shifted,

and they were an eerie power swinging the vampire through movements that plainly weren't his own, but the puppet commands of some dark god of idols.

Trying to guess what wickedness the vampire was conjuring, Mike glanced around warily, looking for enemies in the gloom. He spotted Allan; he was up again, having risen from the grass where he'd been thrown. His condition was ghastly; he staggered zombie-like, sticky blood coating his right side. His face was speckled with gashes from the explosion Chandler's weapon had caused.

Jon was still moving, doing a slow vanishing dance. He made a series of steps to the fire and tossed the bark sheaf. Flames consumed it, sending smoke rushing up, then he swung away and removed his necklace. He whirled it and spun, and his body faded, leaving only a glittering blur from the stone. From Mike's vantage point, the necklace had originally resembled a lump of clay on a leather strap, and he'd assumed it to be an ancient seal. He'd seen a similar object of magic before, with tiny cuneiform inscriptions on the face describing the ritual it was to be used in.

Allan was now at the wall, leaning by a torch, gathering strength, and Chandler didn't seem to be aware of his presence. Mike had no feelings left for Allan, but he had boiling anger for the vampire and wanted to throttle him good. The ostentatious display of sorcery left a bad taste in his mouth; that anybody would go so far for revenge was revolting. If Chandler had to demonstrate his superiority, then he was no better than a weak man.

Regaining some wind, Allan pushed off the wall and seized Jon, breaking the dance. Forced to stop, Jon reddened with fury and struck Allan with his palm, the unnatural force of the blow slamming him to the ground.

This was the opening Mike had been hoping for, and without hesitation, he sprang and began to sprint over the field. The speed he wanted was unattainable in the long grass, and his shoulder was impeding him. Numb for the moment, it felt as stiff and cold as hanging beef. As he ran on, he got a clear view of some dramatic circumstances. Allan was on his knees now, gesturing at his neck while Jon looked on. Mike didn't have to hear his words; it was obvious that Allan feared his injuries were fatal and was pleading with Jon, trying to get him to take his blood so he could rise as a vampire. Anger and disgust were melting into confusion and lust on Jon's face as he stared at the bloodied mask that remained of Allan's visage.

Compensating for his shoulder, Mike got his step into smooth action. A few more seconds, and he could pounce at the drooling vampire. He came up under a birch and was at the bonfire when Jon realized what was happening. Putting a foot on Allan's shoulder, he kicked him over, and in the same movement spun back and around, whirling his necklace. It was a clay seal as Mike had thought, and Jon let it fly a short distance to the ground.

Mike needed one more step to leap at the vampire; he failed to find a footing. Clods of earth exploded in his face, and the ground rolled thunderously. The way he was thrown, he could've been standing on the back of a rearing stallion. Stones, clay, and twigs flew with him as he traced a backward somersault through the air and crashed into the shaking ground.

Topsoil was splitting into furrows and crevices. He saw the grass in front of him disappear, sucked down through a sinkhole to the caverns below. A boulder rolled up against him, but failed to crush him.

Even with the sounds of the quake storming around him, he could feel his heart thudding like a prizefighter's punching bag. Blinding pain shot lightning into his eyes, and his wounded shoulder got twisted into an unnatural shape, then everything began to fall silent.

The tremors gone, he found himself crammed against a boulder and sprawled up the side of a mound of fresh earth. There was no feeling left in his right shoulder. The mask had tilted down on his face, yet he wasn't blinded - he could see with his right eye through the third eye in the mask's forehead.

A night-of-the-apocalypse landscape was before him; the ground was smoking in a torn and tumbled world. The first detail that came to him was fitting. It was Allan, his face a monster-chewed mess of dark bleeding and mud. His mouth agape, running with drool as a sinkhole of sand sucked him down. The whirlpool expanded, a dilation of the earth's eye, then soil poured in and closed over him, but he was only gone for a moment before an eruption of gas spat him back up and left him buried to his chest. Ochre clay oozed behind him, and colored rings of mud bubbled around him. With his gasping, he was like some vile demon vomited up from the shores of hell. He threw his arms over his head, trying to say something, but the words were garbled and incomprehensible.

Small fires were winking out in the darkness, and Jon Chandler showed, breaking through a tumbleweed mass of weeds and vines situated above Mike. Unharmed and unscathed, he began to descend on a tilted lane of flattened straw grass. He had a victor's aura, and his walk was proud and predatory like some new king of the beasts.

With his body halfway to ruins, Mike knew he had only one chance, so like a rattlesnake, he lay in ambush, waiting to see the whites of the enemy's eyes. Tendrils of acrid smoke crept into his nostrils, and he feared he would choke and forfeit the game to the vampire. He hoped the crackle of burning twigs would hide the thump of his heart. All his reserves flowed into the act of playing dead, and he did begin to feel more like a dying animal than a predator waiting to strike.

With one eye slit open, he viewed the vampire's approach, watching the steady feet pick their way past depressions and steaming lumps of clay. The circumstances of the night were now aiding Mike, but that didn't stop him from dwelling on little things that could go wrong. There was the possibility of a sudden twitch in his numb right shoulder, a telltale tremor that would give him away to the vampire. Even the thought of the horrible resurrection Chandler's fangs could bring almost made him cheat himself with a shudder.

This meeting in a landscape of destruction had an air of *déjà vu*, as if it were a strange repeat of history. They might have been Cain and Abel at the end of the world, only Abel had been weeded out by the natural selection that is the murderous acts of men. They both had the mark and the forbidden vision, and they both knew that the stars were pinwheeling into a frightening new future somewhere above the darkness and mist. The idols had been raised, and now they were broken and ancient, brought down by the thundering gods of a new age. Jon Chandler, his mind warped by the Baron, wanted to rule the future with the blood of dead history; eternal life, more like eternal death, was to be the axis spinning a world of rotted corpses.

Cain and Abel, Mike thought bitterly as the vampire's lips tightened over his fangs - a story of good and evil. The higher man is made of fantasies and dreams. Mike wanted to believe himself the higher man, the wandering dreamer who wouldn't allow everything good to end. He had to be more than an animal protecting his brood; if he wasn't more than that and more than Chandler, he wouldn't have the strength to act.

Jon halted and put his hands on his hips. Mesmerism lit his eyes, a corridor of crystal and starlight running thousands of years back into the blood. He gazed down at Mike, seeing a corpse crumpled against a boulder, one of the shoulders twisted like a bird's broken wing. "So you thought you were the good guy. I guess you didn't know that all good things have been aged a thousand years, or that once blood has been spilled, it never stops flowing. Mortal life is just a dream. Death is the truth of it, and surely you had a pleasant dream, because they most quickly die."

Averting his gaze from Mike, Jon looked to the sky. He saw the heavens as his crown, and then he saw movement in the corner of his eye. The mask was moving, Mike's knees were drawing up, and before he could spin more than half around, the stake was shooting up. Mike flew up, pierced him, and transfixed him before he could raise his defenses.

"My dreams don't die that easily," Mike said, breathing the words into Chandler's shocked face.

The point had gone in well below the heart, and it had carried the stake straight through the abdominal wall, probing so deeply that Mike lost his grip on the handle.

Dropping back a step from the vampire's pale face, Mike grinned. Jon's eyes fell to the wood buried in him, and his face warped with the outrage of a murdered king. He knew the stake was so firmly planted he couldn't pull it out without disemboweling himself. Blood and a hiss of desperation came to his lips. He turned away and began to stumble crookedly. He had little control, and with the broken ground, he went forward like a mad marionette.

Phosphor light fanned up from the caverns through cracks in the ground, creating an eerie glow in the mist. His mind reeling in pain and the knowledge of death, Jon paid no attention to where he ran. He nearly fell several times, but was somehow lucky enough to miss the pits. Going down an angled bed of earth, he stumbled into the mud near Allan.

Caked in clay and blood, Allan was blinded, but he felt the brush of air from Chandler and reached out and grabbed his pant leg. Jon struggled, but Allan's grip held, and he pulled him down in the mud. Chandler screamed as Allan pulled him slowly to him, his fluttering left hand finally grabbing the stake.

Allan wouldn't let go, and Chandler's contortions were self-destructive; the stake slipped out, violet intestines spilled over Allan's sleeve, and Jon's heart collapsed as he rolled in the mud. His bluish lips released a final cry of agony, then immortality lifted from him, and he slipped into the grave and certain death that no man escapes.

Turning away, Mike saw smoke and mist melting in the strengthening breeze, and in his mind's eye, he saw a man running. The man was Morris, dashing desperately up the driveway to his estate.

It was a tight situation - a hissing, fanged corpse was facing Danny on the walk. It was a mass of blood, black rot, torn and hanging tissue, and protruding bones. The hideousness of it was too much for Danny, and he held a pistol in his trembling hand, unable to find the resolve to pull the trigger and bury the creature with silver.

Morris closed in; he tried to draw his revolver on the run and stumbled, rolling off in the grass. Then Alice stepped out the door, a gust of wind lifting her hair as she pushed Danny aside. She raised a Remington shotgun and blasted the creature with both barrels, sending a spray of fire and gore flying high with the body. The blast exploded in Mike's mind like some volcano at the beginning of time. He fell to his knees, thankful to

be touching the ground, and grateful that his head was still spinning with those higher emotions that are the beauty of human life.

--The End—