

Chapter 1

/ dreamt of blood upon the shore, of eyes that spoke of sin.

The lake was smooth and deep and black as was her scented skin.

June 18, 1993

New Orleans

Dawn was barely perceptible, bleeding a diffused golden pink into the night sky. It was a tremulous light that merged, mistlike, with the darkness.

Out in the bayous on the edge of town, there were one or two old men that, had they been awake and watching, could have accurately predicted an unusually hot, unusually humid summer's day.

But they were not awake and neither was Gabriel Knight. He was sprawled naked under a thin sheet that badly needed washing, and into his sleeping mind something crept. Its invasion was not nearly as shy as the dawn's.

A dream. The dream. Unfortunately, Gabriel's unconscious mind did not recognize that it was the dream and was therefore as vulnerable as a child squatting in the middle of the road. If only he were able to anticipate, he'd often thought upon waking, if his sleeping self could only recognize the tang of it coming, he might be able to steel himself. Dread wears thin, images lose their power. He writes horror. He knows this. But no matter what his conscious mind did to prepare, the images hit him square in the face as though he had never seen them before, nor even imagined their existence. This being the case the dream always was—that bad.

He moans. He pushes down the sheet that covers him, as though trying to push away his sleep, but there is no one lying beside him to see his distress, no one there to waken him, not on this particular morning, and so it goes on.

He sees a gathering in the distance and approaches it, curious. A group of people are clustered together—men, women. There's a bonfire. It isn't until he draws near that he notices something odd about the people. Their clothes. They're wearing old-fashioned clothes.

Then his eyes fix upon a single man. He is not part of the crowd. He stands to one side, but that's not what sets him apart. His hair is worn long,

most of it covered by a large, square black hat. Thick blond locks lay on the shoulders of the man's black cloak and those locks gleam like real gold in the firelight. Beneath the cloak is a flash of white collar. But it's the man's face that draws the eye. He's staring at something, face pale, eyes wide. He trembles and weeps. Fear and loathing are stamped indelibly on his features as if the hand of God had put them there.

And then, just as if it were the very first time, Gabriel's dream eye turns to follow the man's gaze. At first he only notices the fire. The pile of wood that fuels the flames is high and broad, an enormous bonfire. The flames rear up over the heads of the crowd. Then he sees that there is something in the flames, some matter, tall and dark, and it takes him a moment to categorize it in his mind because, really, he's never seen anything like this before and the image will not register.

It's a woman. They're burning a woman.

It punches into him: shock, horror, guilt. He feels a terrible guilt, although he does not know why. He's afraid, too, as he looks at her. He feels helpless and nasty—like a child caught stealing—but it's a thousand times worse, as if what he'd stolen was . . .

Her life.

The woman's head is thrown back in the flames, a mute scream of agony driven to the sky. He doesn't want to watch, but he does. She slowly lowers her head and looks at him. Her face is unmarred yet by the flames, and it is a beautiful face. He can see now that she is dark-skinned. And she is young, oh, yes, but powerful and piercing. She knows such things. She laughs at him, her cracked lips parting, her white teeth gleam. Her disgust at his nasty ways is in her laugh, as though she had spit on him instead of laughed, and she might have, had he been closer. Then her face begins to melt and he moans with repulsion. He doesn't want to see this! Doesn't want to watch as her body is consumed! But it isn't the fire, and her face is not being consumed. It is being transformed. The face in the flames restructures itself into the head of a leopard. It screams at him in fury.

And he runs, his dream self. Runs away, not over the ground, but into the air. He plows through the black night sky, higher and higher, toward the stars. He only wants to get away, but after a moment that mindlessness fades and he feels com-

pelled. He must turn, must look.

Far below he sees the circle of fire, though he can no longer see the woman. The circle spreads out into a large open hoop of flames, a burning wheel, then another circle springs up inside the first, two wheels of fire, spinning. And from the center something spins out, coming toward him, rolling in the air like a slow-motion bullet. He tries to get out of the way, but as the object approaches he sees that it is only a medallion. The gold surface bears the images of a lion and a snake gripping each other in mortal combat. The medallion stops in the air in front of him and hangs there. Something about the medallion is magical, hypnotic. He stretches forth his fingers to take the device, but before he can touch it, the medallion begins to ooze blood, black blood welling up as if from golden pores. He withdraws his hand in disgust.

Three drops of blood fall into the blackness below. He follows them, down, down. Far below him is a cobblestone street, just like the streets in New Orleans. The three drops of blood hit the cobblestones.

Drip, drip, drip. And the black blood, making contact with the stones, hisses and elongates. It is not three drops of blood at all, but snakes, three snakes, black and small and slick. The snakes split apart and wriggle away into the night.

And then it is dark again. No light. No street. Nothing at all, until lightning splits the sky in the distance. By its light he can see a hill far off—a peaked hill silhouetted against the sky. The lightning fades and the blackness returns. He rushes straight ahead, to where his mind fixed the location of the hill. Something is there, he thinks.

Lightning flashes again and he can see that he's closer this time, much closer. And now more of the hill's silhouette is detailed and on the peak of the hill is a tree, black against the sky, and from the tree dangles a rope, black against the sky, and from the end of the rope hangs a body. The light goes. He rushes toward the hill still, because now he knows why the hill is important. He must see. Who?

And the lightning flashes again and he is close to the figure now, can make out... a black cloak, a collar, long blond hair. And then it is dark and still he rushes forward. It's the man, the man from the... And the lightning comes again, purple and white splitting the blackness with a power and

brilliance no Con Edison man could ever hope to generate. And he's so close now he can see the strands of hair, the weave of the cloak, the face. But it isn't the man, isn't the man from the bonfire at all, is it? The face at the end of the rope, purple, swelling, dead. It's his own.

It was nearly ten A.M. when Gabriel stumbled from the back room of St. George's Books into the shop front. The place was predictably devoid of customers, but his shop manager, Grace, was sitting behind the desk. He was glad to see her, and the creamy bit of leg sticking out from under her gauzy skirt wasn't even the reason why. He was glad to see anyone at all after the night he'd had, but Grace was busy on the phone and Gabriel made a beeline for the coffeepot.

"Mmmm-hmmm. I bet. Just a minute."

Grace covered the receiver with her hand.

"Do you want to speak with 'Bunny'?" she asked him sweetly, blinking her lashes in a remarkable imitation of the "B" herself.

Gabriel made an urgent canceling gesture.

Grace returned to the phone.

"I'm sorry, but Gabriel is a lout ... I mean, he's out."

He picked up the coffeepot and poured out a cup with his usual morning semiconsciousness.

Bunny was obviously not about to retire peacefully, and Grace rolled her eyes at him and agreed wholeheartedly with the receiver. He studied her from across the room. It was almost as rejuvenating as the Java.

Grace Nakimura was twenty-six years old, and about as foreign a species to him as a goldfish is to a trout. She was from the East, in the first place. New Hampshire or some blue-blooded place like that, and he was a N'Orleaner born and raised. The differences in their accents was only the beginning. The East/South thing seemed to extend deep into their subatomic cell structure. Grace was always in a hurry, always thought something ought to be done about something, and was at a loss to handle only one thing—free time. When she wasn't working here she was taking classes like tai chi and oil painting. And this summer was supposed to be her break from school. Gabriel, on the other hand, preferred to watch life, as if from a rocking chair on the porch in the middle of August. He figured if something really interesting went past (and if he felt up to it at the moment), he could always get up and jump in.

But Gabriel had met Easterners before, and there was a lot more to it than that. Grace was also smart, really smart. She was the kind of person that you knew had probably never gotten anything less than an "A" in school in her entire life. She could whip through the Times Picayune crossword puzzle in about six minutes (he'd actually seen her do this, and had promptly left for the gym). She knew all the things about history and geography and world events that Europeans were always ragging on Americans for being too dumb to know, and she made you feel a couple of cents short of a dollar yourself if you spoke to her for over thirty seconds. Gabriel had never spent much time with smart women. Quite the opposite. He made sure that the women he went out with were . . . uncomplicated. He preferred to keep things light, as a rule. Grace wouldn't know light if she stumbled across it in a blackout.

And beyond all that, Grace was Japanese or, rather, Japanese-American. Although she spoke and acted as American as a native (well, she was a native), there were subtle things about her that Gabriel found incomprehensible. Her loyalty to her parents, for example. She called them daily and they still seemed to run her life to an extent that Gabriel could not comprehend any grown person putting up with. Hell, his gran had never been that bad, and he'd still moved out when he was sixteen. And Grace was so clean-cut. She didn't drink or smoke. As far as he knew, she didn't even date.

For any or all of those reasons, or perhaps because of something else even less tangible, Grace reminded him of the old science fiction pulps he used to read where the scientist would explain to the politician that even if they did run across an alien life-form, that life-form was likely to be so different from our own that we wouldn't even know it was a life-form. And yet, life-form or not, he liked Grace. He was damn lucky to get her to run the shop this summer, and he knew it.

"Yeah, if he ever comes back, I'll tell him," Grace was saying. "You know, you could do better. I know I don't know you, but you could do better."

Grace hung up the phone and turned to him with a wide-awake cheerfulness that made him feel exceptionally unkempt.

"So, I see you've decided to join the land of the living. It's about time. The phone's been ringing

off the hook all morning."

Gabriel grunted, uhhhn.

Grace looked at him with interest. "Did you have another nightmare last night?"

"More or less/" Gabriel managed to croak. He quickly drank another gulp of coffee.

Grace shook her head in her half-concerned, half-annoyed way. "I'm telling you, it's that Voodoo book you're researching. No wonder you get the night sweats."

"I've been having that dream since I was thirteen, Grace. I don't think it's the Voodoo book."

"Have you ever had it so often? You've looked like crap every morning this week."

It had been bad lately. He used to have the dream once, maybe twice a year. It started going up when he hit thirty, but in the past month it had been as relentless as a pack of piranhas. It was one thing to go to bed knowing you probably wouldn't have the dream. It was an entirely different kettle of fish convincing yourself to close your eyes when you knew you probably would.

"You're too kind," he replied, giving her his most charming smile. "If you're truly concerned, you could offer to sleep with me. I never have it when there's someone else in my bed."

Grace raised a thin brow. "Well. That explains a lot," she said, dismissing the subject. "I checked the city for Voodoo references. I found two.

There's a shop called the Dixieland Drugstore on Dauphine and The Historical Museum of Voodoo on Chartres and Ursulines."

Gabriel put down his empty cup and stretched.

He was starting to feel vaguely human. "Great. So who else called this morning?"

Grace picked up her notepad. "Your grandmother. Wanted me to remind you that you still need to go through your father's things before the charity sale next weekend."

"Damn! That's the third time she's asked me to do that."

"Fourth. Don't worry, she already knows you're completely unreliable."

"I'm sure you reminded her anyway," he said calmly. "What else?"

"You also got a call from Germany—a guy named Wolfgang Ritter. He wants you to call back. Says it's important."

Gabriel snorted. "Like hell."

Grace peered at him over the pad. "Aren't you even curious?"

"Not enough to pay long distance. What else?"

Grace muttered something under her breath and turned the page on her notepad.

"Your pal Detective Mosely called," she recited dully. "And called, and called."

Gabriel grinned. "He has a crush on you, Gracie. What'd he say?"

"He wanted me to tell you that his mother's maiden name is Humphrey, and that he left some photos for you at the front desk at the station."

"Good."

Grace looked at him suspiciously. "You want to fill me in on this one?"

"Not especially," Gabriel said warmly.

Grace gave him an acidic smile in reply and turned delicately back to the account books spread out on the desk. She'd been trying to make heads or tails of the shop's records for weeks.

Gabriel, whistling cheerfully, headed for the shower.

It was a little past eleven when he arrived at the police station on Royal and Conti. He managed to leave his motorcycle curved between two badly parked cars, avoiding a meter. He brushed the front of his black leather biker's jacket (his prize possession), ran a hand through his unkempt blond hair (a style that Grace referred to as "James Dean sticking his finger in a light socket"), and walked to the front door. In the reflective glass of the station's windows he saw a teenaged girl watching him from across the street. He smiled. He was thirty-three, but, if he did say so himself, he'd never looked better.

The station's air-conditioning was a relief after the hot mugginess outside. At the front counter was an older man, gray-haired and beefy, with a gut that displayed a Southern delight in fried chicken, beignets, and beer. Gabriel strolled to the long, polished wooden barrier and asked for Detective Mosely.

"He's not here," the man said shortly. The name tag on his chest read Frick.

"Do you know when he'll be back, uh, Officer Frick? He's expectin' me."

"That may be," the man said, his tone implying that it might well not be, "but he's been called to a crime scene. Don't know when he'll be back."

"A crime scene?" Gabriel said with interest.

"Near here?"

Officer Frick scowled. "You with the press or somethin'?"

"That's a distinct possibility."

"Look, I know you guys are all hot on this Voodoo Murders shit, but crime scenes're police confidential."

"So it is a new Voodoo Murders then?"

The man's scowl deepened. "I never said that. There's gonna be a crime scene right here if you don't mind your P's and Q's."

"Sorry. Really." Gabriel looked awfully sincere. The man glared at him a second longer, then looked back down at his register.

"One more teensy thing?" Gabriel drawled.

"Detective Mosely said he'd leave somethin' for me at the front desk. The name is Knight?"

Officer Frick looked Gabriel up and down skeptically as if he might, by looking at him, ascertain whether he was really Mr. Knight or not. He decided in Gabriel's favor, reached beneath the counter, and brought out a manila envelope.

Gabriel took it with a charming smile.

Although he preferred the air-conditioning, Gabriel went outside before opening the envelope. He didn't want Officer Frick to see what was in it, and he didn't guess Mosely would either.

Inside were two photographs. One showed a young Mosely at his police-academy graduation (he had hair then). Gabriel stuffed it back in the envelope carelessly. The second image had his full interest. It was taken at one of the Voodoo Murders crime scenes. It centered on the corpse of a young man who had once been good-looking, but was now carved up like a Halloween pumpkin.

The man's chest was covered with matted blood, but Gabriel thought he could make out a gaping hole where the heart had been. Symbols, equally obscured, were carved into the flesh of the face and stomach. Around the man's body were traces of a white powdery substance and something else . . . feathers.

* * *

Gabriel headed out from the police station, grinning. The boys down at the Picayune would slice off their balls and present them on a silver platter for the photograph he now had in his back pocket. The police had been very tight-lipped about this case. The most significant facts the newspaper could report was that Voodoo paraphernalia was found around the bodies and that the victims, six at last count (maybe seven by now if Prick's slipup meant anything), were all out-of-towners. "The general public of New Orleans

is in no danger," so quoth the N.O.P.D. Hell, the mayor was probably pissed off that even that had leaked out. It might soothe the natives, but it had to play havoc with the convention crowd.

Voodoo paraphernalia my ass. The bastard's heart is missing.

At last, he was on his way with the new book.

His last two, *Fire in the Hills* and *The Stalker*, had barely brought in five grand apiece and were no longer on the shelves of even the best-stocked horror sections in the city. Gabriel had to call his agent five or six times before he even got a call back. But not for long. Gabriel was determined that his Voodoo book would hit the big time, and damn Knight bad luck.

He contemplated a direction at the corner and the car behind him honked in irritation. Gabriel ignored it. He had those leads of Grace's to check out, the shop and museum. But those were interviews and background only. Right now, he wanted to be at that crime scene. But where was it? Gabriel decided on his usual course of action. He'd go to the park, have lunch, and see what came up.

* * *

Jackson Square was a tourist-ridden spot natives avoided in the summer, but it was one of Gabriel's favorite hangouts. For one thing, there was always a band or two playing (free music). For another, he knew most of the vendors (free food). Besides, there was inevitably a lot of women running around in minimal summer garb and, well, that made the scenery pretty unbeatable.

He parked and locked his bike, passed the artists that surrounded the park, and went in to sit on the grass. A brass band was on the lawn, doing "Saints" for the tourists, and Joe, the band leader, nodded to Gabriel and gave him a wink. Gabriel winked back.

The park wasn't big on shade and was therefore lightly populated in the midday heat. For a park, it had a curious history. It had once been an army parade ground, way back in the days of the French (it was called *La Plaza d'Armas* then). Public executions had taken place here—hangings, beheadings. Gabriel wondered if mothers ever thought about that as their kiddies played on the grass. Even the name, Jackson Square, was a bit of a contradiction. The park was actually laid out in a circle. A broad sidewalk circled the park's rim, and in the center a smaller circular sidewalk

surrounded the bronze statue of Andrew Jackson on his horse. Across the street to the south lay the Mississippi, and to the north of the square was St. Louis Cathedral.

The day felt lazy. Even the band's rhythm seemed to drag. Gabriel got up again after a minute and went for a stroll, hoping to see a familiar vendor. A hot dog would taste good about now. Hell, even a cup of coffee wouldn't hurt. He passed a motorcycle cop who had pulled his bike up on the lawn. I'd get a ticket if I did that, Gabriel thought. The helmeted officer stood next to the bike, ostensibly maintaining the peace, but probably just taking in the babes. As Gabriel passed him, the radio on the cop's bike hissed.

"Coroner requests assistance at... hiss, pop."
Gabriel paused. He stood there listening, trying to look incongruous.

"Car eleven, attend . . . crack."

Gabriel looked at the policeman. The policeman looked back pointedly. Gabriel gave him a sheepish grin and kept walking.

On the other side of the park, Gabriel hesitated. He was drawing close to a mime. He'd seen this guy before and he was bad news. The mime was dressed in black, his face painted white. He was following the pedestrians as they strolled by, mimicking their walk, exaggerating their manners. He had gathered a small audience—a few people stood watching with amusement so tame it was just this side of boredom. The objects of the mime's attentions clearly did not appreciate his act.

"Buzz off," a girl was saying angrily. She tossed her braids and stomped away.

The mime tossed his imaginary braids and minced back to his platform.

Gabriel turned to walk back the other way, then he thought about that radio.

He first made sure there was no one he knew in the park. There was Joe, but Gabriel could live with that. Playing dumb, Gabriel strolled past the mime, exaggerating his natural macho strut in a way he thought would be irresistible (Grace, he knew, would say that it hardly needed exaggerating). He heard titters behind him and gritted his teeth. He did not turn around.

He passed halfway around the square with his parasite in tow. Joe looked at him with raised eyebrows from around the mouthpiece of his trumpet. Gabriel gritted his teeth harder and kept strutting.

He finally reached the bike and the cop. The cop was reaching up under his helmet and scratching his head with one finger. Sweating, probably. Gabriel smiled. That was good. He could hear that he—or, rather, they—had a small gathering now, following them around the park and giggling. Gabriel passed close to the policeman, walked a few feet away, then abruptly sat down on the grass, and went as lifeless and dull as possible. He waited.

He heard the giggles turn into laughs and smiled to himself.

"Knock it off, mister!" a gruff voice said.

Gabriel turned to look.

The mime was doing an impression of the police officer, only what he was really mimicking was a chimp.

"I said stop that!" the cop said, his face reddening.

But the mime had a crowd now, and he continued to jump around, legs bent, arms hanging down to the ground.

The cop took one step toward him and the mime leaped just out of reach, still aping it up.

"You little shit!" The cop chased the mime, leaving the bike unmanned.

Gabriel walked quickly over to the radio and grabbed the handset. He pressed a button and a conversation popped to life.

"Ambulance ninety-one, have you located the crime scene yet? They've radioed for you three times."

"I'm tryin', Molly, but it's so goddamn misty out here or somethin'. Did you say south on Lakeside Drive, near Muholland?"

"NORTH of Mulholland if you're coming from the city, ninety-one."

"Right. Damn."

"Everybody's having trouble. Must have been something in the coffee this morning."

"Yeah, I guess, I... Wait! I see a squad car. Got it, Molly!"

"Have a good one, ninety-one."

Gabriel replaced the handset just as the cop strode up.

"Hey! You! Get the fuck away from that bike!"

Gabriel stepped back and smiled. "Nice machine. I have a bike myself."

The cop was in no mood for male bonding.

"Yeah, whatever." He brushed Gabriel off like a dog with a flea. But that was all right. That was

just fine.

Gabriel found the crime scene at about three o'clock. He'd driven up and down the west side of Lake Ponchartrain six or seven times looking for it. The sky was still overcast with the thick, gray, summer-storm cloud covering that had been there all week but had yet to produce anything wetter than the humidity that Gabriel wrung out of his T-shirt every night.

He parked a little down the road from the squad cars and hoofed it. As he approached, he could see Mosely standing just inside the police tape. Mosely was dressed in his black trench, which was rumpled and unwashed. Like Gabriel's jacket, the trench was a prop so treasured not even the Louisiana heat could dislodge it. Below the trench, Gabriel could make out Mosely's typical brown polyester (Mosely claimed they were "rayon khakis") pants and pseudo-leather brown loafers. With him were several uniformed officers, one finishing up the photographs and the other using a tape measure around the body. A man Gabriel assumed was the coroner was standing over by the ambulance, smoking a cigarette. Mosely wasn't paying any attention as Gabriel walked up.

"Mostly! My man!"

Mosely jumped. "Knight! Christ!" He looked around to see if anyone was nearby, then hissed under his breath, "You wiener! I told you not to call me that in public!"

"Sorry. Nervous, are we?"

"What do you think?" Mosely beckoned toward the body. "You hang out with this guy for long, you'll feel a knife at your back, too."

"Can I see?" Gabriel asked.

"Well ... I shouldn't. How the hell'd you find me, anyway?"

"Just drivin' by."

"Uh-huh. All right, come on. I suppose you oughtta see one if you're gonna write about it."

Mosely held the police tape up and Gabriel slid under it. They walked over to the body.

The corpse was covered with a plastic green tarp. Mosely bent down and carefully drew it back. A photograph was one thing, but this was quite another. Gabriel felt his stomach clench and fought to keep from retching.

The body was male and it was naked. It was the first up-close-and-personal dead body Gabriel had ever seen, and he was struck at once with a

strange contradiction. It looked so physically real, yet out-of-place, so fake at the same time. There was the gaping hole in the chest—just like the body in the photograph—and the blood, the knife carvings in the flesh. Death unmasked and impersonal, simply a fact. The sheer mortality of it grated on him—the vulnerability of flesh and bones so easily ripped and smashed, the ignominy of the naked spawl of the torso and limbs on the sand, so beyond the most basic human efforts at modesty and ego . . . Nobody could make that up. The blunt truth of it was way beyond the wizardry of movie FX.

"Same M.O.?" Gabriel asked.

"Signed right on the goddamn dotted line."

Although he wanted to look away, Gabriel forced himself to memorize the details of the scene. The carvings in the chest and stomach were bloody and fuzzed, but there was a circular pattern to them. The heart was simply gone and he didn't want to look at what was left in the hole too closely. The face was lifeless, eyes half-open, no expression at all, but rather an inhuman lack of one. There were no marks on the face that he could see, but blood was splattered on it, so it was hard to tell. The man's hair was nearly black and already looked as dull as a cheap wig.

Around the body were lines of white powder, which were smeared, and Gabriel could also see some white feathers, small ones. There were some lying around the body and even a couple farther off, in the gravelly sand of the lakefront.

"Thanks," he said, finally.

"Yeah, Jesus, you're welcome."

Mosely was covering the corpse when they heard the powerful hum of an approaching car.

A long, sleek, charcoal-gray limousine pulled around the curve of the road. It was moving slowly, and it braked when it saw them.

Mosely stood. "Christ! Now what?"

The back window on the limo rolled down.

Mosely strode toward the car with an irritated look on his face. Gabriel followed.

When he was about a foot from the car, he saw Mosely's back stiffen. Gabriel looked over Mosely's shoulder and had his own reaction.

Inside the car was a woman. Her dark eyes looked at Mosely, then at Gabriel, and Gabriel felt something inside of him just ... go. A foolish grin spread across his face and he was helpless to rein it in. First the corpse, now this. Someone upstairs is

playing me like a violin, he thought.

She was tall, he could tell that even though she was seated, and fine-boned but strong. The front of her dress was scooped. Delicate shoulder blades and creamy brown skin were displayed before the dress was caught up and out by full breasts, then fell to a slender waist and thighs. Her hair was long and thick, brown-tinged black curls that sprang like coils in the heat. Her face was beautiful, undeniably that, but it was her eyes that caught him like a rabbit in headlights. He got his own features under control enough to raise an eyebrow at her and was rewarded by an amused, indulgent look in return.

The woman took her eyes from him languorously and placed them, in a delicate fashion, on Mosely.

"Is there a problem here, Officer?" she asked. She sounded concerned.

"Detective Mosely, ma'am, uh, Ms. Gedde." Even Mosely's voice was blushing. "Just official business, ma'am. Nothing for you to worry about."

"I see." The tone of her voice was smooth silk in some dusky shade. "Sorry to bother you. You boys be careful."

"Yes, ma'am, thank you." Mosely bobbed up and down from the waist like one of those rear-window monkeys.

The window slid up and Gabriel caught a shot of his own face in the black reflective covering. Still grinning. Damn!

They watched as the limo disappeared around a curve. Mosley said something, but Gabriel wasn't listening.

"Who is she?" he managed.

"Her? Don't you know?"

"Uh-uh."

"Man, you don't get out much, do you? That's Malia Gedde. She owns a house around the lake here somewhere. One in town, too."

"Money?"

"More than you'll ever see in your godforsaken life, Knight, or me either."

"My mother had money."

"Yeah, so you've told me a hundred times.

Now come on, boy, snap out of it. I gotta go in a minute."

Gabriel turned back to Mosely. He was still thinking. "You know, if she's got a house out here she might of heard something, or saw

something ..."

Mosely's considerable brow furrowed in irritation. "Don't start with that shit, Knight. You leave her alone! Hell, even I wouldn't go bothering her on a basis like that."

"Well, officially, no."

"I mean it! I'm putting my ass on the line for you about this book stuff. Don't go getting me in trouble, now."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Gabriel smiled gamely. One of the officers walked up. "Detective Mosely? We've about wrapped it up, sir." The ambulance drivers were waiting near the body with a stretcher.

Mosely looked around. "Yeah, all right. Take him in. You boys go on, just leave the tape up for a few days. I'll see you at the station."

The young man nodded and the crime scene quickly began to dissolve. The body was moved into the back of the ambulance.

"Look around if you want, Knight. I've seen just about all of this lake I want to see for the next few decades."

"I bet. Thanks, Bud."

"No problem. You'd just better make me look good in this thing."

Mosely and his team left. Gabriel was alone with the clouds and the lake and the marks in the sand.

He spent another hour at the crime scene. Now that the body was gone, he could see more of the pattern that had been laid out in the white, powdery substance. It had been trodden over. In fact, it looked purposefully stamped out. But it had been a pattern, of that he was sure. There was something that looked like a star in one corner, and the whole thing reminded him of a circle. He found one wedge-shaped area that was relatively intact and he copied it down. It would make an authentic prop for the book, he thought, if he could only learn what the pattern meant.

He wandered farther out from the area where the corpse had lain. At first, all he saw was the brown gravelly sand of the shore and the rich, claylike deposits of the lake's banks. He kept looking and his diligence finally paid off. Near the lake was a tree. A hearty tuft of grass hung on grimly at its roots. Something about it caught Gabriel's eye. The grass was matted. He pulled out a magnifying glass and checked the base of the tree, feeling glad that no one—especially

Mosely—was there to see him play detective. In the grass were indentations—deep, thin lines that flattened the rubbery blades and pressed into the earth beneath. It reminded him of something.

Mesh? Yes. Wire mesh. And it had been heavy, too, or the marks wouldn't have sunk into the earth like that.

He caught sight of something faintly shiny and bent down closer. In the grass was a scale of some sort. It was small, but it was a scale. He used a pair of tweezers (stolen from Grace's book repair supplies at the same time he'd pocketed the magnifying glass) and picked it up. The scale might be a fish scale, but it might not either.

Yeah, right, some fisherman had a good day out here, that's all—a wire basket full of fish. But the scale was iridescent and faintly green with a tinge of dark red. His imagination latched on to it. He decided to keep it.

He continued to look around for a while, but he didn't find anything else. There were no other scales to be found—not at the tree, not in the sand, and not on the banks. He went back to his bike.

It was nearly five now, and he was getting hungry. He hadn't eaten anything that day except for his A.M. coffee. He wanted to go home, but he wasn't all that far from Gran's house. He idled his bike at the exit from Lake Shore Drive, pulled between his tiredness and his guilt. With a sigh, he headed west toward the suburbs.

Gabriel's grandmother was as sweet and pretty a belle as the South had ever produced. Her hair was silvery white and was perfectly teased and mounted on top of her head like Audrey Hepburn's in the sixties. She wore powder and rouge, and lipstick as well—subtly done—and she dressed in gauzy, floral chintz dresses. Gabriel always pictured her with a magnolia in one hand and a mint julep in the other. In his mind and heart, his grandmother and the South were the same thing.

She smiled with delight when she saw him at the door and he gave her a big hug.

"I'm sorry for being a pesky nuisance, dear, but I've just made a decision to get that attic all cleared out this very year, and I'm bound to keep it." Her voice was only slightly edged by time and had a delightful lilt. Ye-ah.

"Why now, Gran? You gettin' a new roommate?" He winked at her.

"Heavens, no! What on Earth would I do with

another man in the house? Truth is, I've turned seventy, that's why. I don't mean to sound maudlin, Gabriel, but it's time to start storing my nuts for the winter."

"Gran!"

"Now, I'm not saying I'm gonna lay down and die this minute. Lord willing, I'll be around another thirty years, but I'm not gonna depend upon it."

Gabriel sighed. His grandmother looked in perfect health and didn't seem depressed, just methodical. But he worried about her. She'd been caught up in Knight luck and had probably paid as bad as just about anybody.

Ester Wright had married Harrison Knight at a young age. Gabriel gathered that her father, a plantation owner, had been abusive and alcoholic, though Ester didn't talk much about him. She'd met Harrison at a revival. He was a German immigrant, fresh off the boat, and she'd fallen for him. He'd been handsome, apparently, and a poet. Harrison hadn't had much money. He worked odd jobs. They moved a lot. He died in his mid-thirties of heart failure and Ester was left to raise their son, Philip, by herself. Philip grew up into something of a rake. He married Margaret Templeton, a New Orleans socialite and Mardi Gras Queen. Margaret's father was furious—Philip was a struggling artist with nothing but plenty of good looks, a bad reputation, and an attitude. The Templetons, and their money, disowned Margaret. Margaret and Philip died tragically two years later in an automobile accident. Gabriel had been a year old.

From a young age, Gabriel had keenly felt the absence of both father and grandfather, reminded of them as he was by the memorabilia that haunted the house. Gabriel was convinced that he himself would die young. That belief was probably more responsible for his rocking chair mentality about life than anything else.

"All right," he sighed. "I'll go look."

"Take anything you want and stick it to one side, then I'll know I can do what I please with the rest."

He left her knitting on the parlor settee and went up to the attic.

The room was filled with junk—some of which he remembered, like the old dress form in the corner, Christmas bulbs, and a worn green upholstered chair. Some things were from a different

era altogether. His grandmother had stacked Philip's things in a pile by the chair, but he decided to look around first. If his gran wanted to get rid of this stuff, there might be something he could use in the shop.

He found something he liked in the far corner. It was an old-fashioned trunk, the kind that made him think of passengers boarding ships like the QEII. Inside were stacks of letters, books, and an ornate mechanical clock. The letters were between Harrison and Gran, and he put them aside without rummaging their secrets. The books were in German. Not much good for the shop, but the bibliophile in him couldn't resist one volume. It was bound in kid-soft leather—an exquisite job. The author was someone named Heinz Ritter and inside were hand-drawn columns of German poetry. He slipped it into a pocket.

He picked up the clock, more out of curiosity about his grandfather—whose trunk, he realized, this was—than any real interest in the thing. It was a mechanical mantel clock, made from gold-painted metal. The inner dial displayed the numbers as usual, but surrounding the numbers was a separate dial, this one displaying six little pictures set in mother-of-pearl. There was a sun, a moon, an angel, a dragon, a crown, and a scythe. He touched the outer dial. It moved, clicking around clockwise so that each symbol could sit at the twelve o'clock position. Quaint, but a bit too baroque for his tastes.

It was getting late, and he was still hungry. He shut the trunk and started to rummage quickly through the box of his father's things, wanting to be done. He found clothes and textbooks, a few small trophies, mementos that meant nothing except to someone who was dead. He was about to give up when he saw the corner of a large brown book in the box. It was an artist's sketchbook. The pages were large and heavy, vanilla-colored and starting to darken around the edges. He flipped through it.

The sketches were done in thick charcoal pencil. His father had been talented, that was certain. The hand that did the drawings—the surety of the lines, the proportions—was professional. Gabriel flipped past sketches of women and men, of wolves and deer, of voluptuous still lifes. Toward the end of the book, he suddenly stopped, shocked. He turned a few more pages, and more, staring at the drawings in disbelief.

The images in his father's sketchbook had taken a turn for the worse in latter years. They became angry-looking, then gruesome, then horrific. He knew that his father had painted disturbing works. That, according to his gran, was why Philip had never had much success as an artist. Nobody wants a painting of a decapitated head on their living-room wall, Gran was wont to say. But Gabriel had never seen much of his father's work. Gran had put most of it away before Gabriel could remember, probably figuring that the stuff wasn't suitable for young eyes and, well, it wasn't. But what bothered Gabriel wasn't the intensity of the dark images that grew and multiplied like mold from about the middle of the sketchbook to the latter pages. It was the specific images that scared the shit out of him.

They were from the dream.

The sketchbook pages sprouted life, sketch on top of sketch, until Gabriel had to stare fixedly to make out some of the images lying underneath. Circles within circles, wheels within wheels, leopards running and leopards screaming, fire flames and burnt bodies, snakes upon snakes, clumps of three snakes crawling in and through other drawings, crawling off the page, knives and lightning. Nooses.

Gabriel slammed the book shut, his mouth dry, his heart doing a salsa beat.

By the time Gabriel returned to St. George's Books that night, Grace had her coat on and was getting ready to lock up.

"I'd almost given up on you," she said. She put down her box of paints and looked at him curiously.

"How did that shop and museum pan out?"

"I didn't get over there yet, Gracie. Tomorrow."

"Where've you been all day?"

"You don't want to know," Gabriel sighed. "But I did get over to Gran's house, in case you're wondering."

"Who, me?"

"She's doing great."

"Good. Was there anything you needed for tomorrow?"

Gabriel thought. He grinned, then forced himself to stop it. "There is one thing," he said seriously.

"Can't wait to hear it."

"Could you see what you can dig up on a local woman named Malia Gedde?"

"Gedde?"

"I need an address, and anything else you come across."

Grace looked at him skeptically for a moment.

"I assume this is for your book?"

"Absolutely." Gabriel gave her his most sincere "good boy" look.

Grace raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

"All right. Good night, Gabriel. And try not to dream, okay?"

"I'll give it my best shot," he said dryly.

Grace left. The shop seemed darker without her.

She had pulled down the blinds, and the late evening light filtered in from the frayed edges.

He went back to his studio and checked the fridge, but the only thing in it was an old bottle of cheap champagne. He gave up, suddenly more weary than hungry. He felt like he'd been on a roller coaster all day. He stared at the bed a moment, wanting to crawl into it but wondering about the nightmare.

Look, you must have seen that sketchbook when you were a kid. End of story.

Yes. That worked. Gabriel blinked at the bed tiredly, rubbed his eyes. Nightmares or no, he was going down for the count. He turned off the light, stripped, and sank into oblivion.

Chapter 2

A mask I wore as I approached, I was what I am not,
And though the pattern was unclear, its meaning could be bought.

June 19, 1993

He slept soundly until dawn, then the dream resurfaced. When he awoke, clawing at his throat for the breath that alluded him, it took him a few moments to realize that something had been different. The dream had been almost the same, but it was not the same. He tried to remember over the clamoring of his heart, and an image came to him. A knife. A strange curved knife, the blade shaped like a wave. It had appeared when the blood hit the cobblestones and it had then shifted into the three snakes that crawled away.

A knife? The dream had not changed since his adolescence and now it had. He tried to fathom it, but his eyes were so heavy . . . He slept again.

When he crawled out of bed a few hours later, he had forgotten about the knife and about the dream.

For the first time in months, when his eyes opened, he had a purpose. He got dressed quickly and went out to the shop.

Grace was already at the desk, already annoy-

ingly together. "Good morning. Don't you look swell today! Actually . . . swollen."

"Ughhh!" Gabriel protested.

"So have some. There's a fresh pot on the table."

He poured his first cup of the day and started nursing it like a babe at a breast.

Grace studied him insidiously. "Seriously, you look like hell. Your hair is sticking straight up like a ... oh. It always does that. Never mind."

"Hah hah," Gabriel intoned flatly.

"Was it the dream that put those bags under your eyes or were you planning a trip today?"

Gabriel chose to ignore her. "Did you get anything on Malia Gedde?"

"I'm not sure you want it. You're a little out of your league here, big fella."

"Grace," Gabriel said tiredly.

"I knew I'd heard that name before. It's on three local hospitals for God's sake. The Geddes practically own this town."

"Did you get an address?"

"I got the address," Grace said, annoyed. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that Malia Gedde is incredibly gorgeous? I should have known you wouldn't go for a rich ugly socialite."

"And that address is?"

"Hey, far be it from me to postpone your total humiliation." Grace sniffed and departed with the information in a pout. "It's 557 West Ingrahm. That's the Garden District. Estate City."

"Thank you."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Grace said in a singsong voice. Gabriel rolled his eyes. For an anal retentive, Grace could be amazingly childish at times.

"Anything else?" he asked impatiently.

"Oh, we're in a hurry this morning, are we?"

Grace said dryly. "And I always thought it would take a forest fire to light a blaze under your butt."

Gabriel grinned. "You're probably right, but Malia Gedde would qualify as a forest fire at least. More like the towering inferno." He raised his eyebrows knowingly and growled.

That finally did it. Grace was annoyed. She turned back to the books, muttering in disgust.

"Men."

Gabriel grinned and headed for the shower. He drove to West Ingrahm and found the address. He whistled appreciatively from the

curb. Grace was right. In front of him rolled an amazing expanse of green lawn. Beyond that was a house big enough to board a couple of large families and their relations. It was a tall old plantation home, impeccably remodeled. Gleaming white paint gave it a republican air. A broad porch was supported by pillars and shutters bracketed tall, graceful windows that marched unendingly, it seemed, from the double front doors.

Feeling a little conspicuous in his black leather, Gabriel strolled across the lawn and up the porch steps. He admired the rosebushes in full bloom that cushioned the porch rim. There was a brass knocker on the door. He used it.

A man answered. He was white, trim, relatively young, bearded, and dressed in a suit. He reminded Gabriel of a high-priced road manager. "May I help you?" The man's accent was British and his eyes grazed over Gabriel coolly, then dismissed him.

"I'd like to see Ms. Gedde, please."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Well... not exactly, but I.."

"I'm sorry, but unless you have an appointment or some official business, I cannot announce you."

The door was shut in his face, just like that.

Gabriel frowned at it, and found himself getting angry.

He did have official business, or at least an official-sounding cover story, but it looked like it would take something heavier-handed than that to get the man's attention. Butler, personal manager, secretary, or whatever the hell he was. (The word "boyfriend" crossed his mind, but Gabriel dismissed it. The man surely wasn't Malia Gedde's type.)

He wasn't giving up, he told himself as he got on his bike, he was simply going to do a little "rocking" and wait until an opportunity came up.

In the meantime, there was Mosely. He headed for the police station.

Officer Prick wasn't any more hospitable than he'd been the day before, but this time Mosely was in. After making a call to confirm this, Prick waved him on through the gate. Gabriel wove his way through the maze of desks and phones and office equipment behind the front counter and found the door Prick had pointed out to him.

There was a large mirror set into the wall next to the door, and Gabriel checked his hair in it before

entering the office. The cycle always played havoc with his moppish bangs.

Mosely was waiting for him inside. He was wearing his gold Coldwell Banker clone jacket, a wrinkled permanent press shirt, and a tie. About the only thing spit-and-polish about him was the police badge that he wore on the front pocket of his blazer and the shine coming off his pate. He was grinning.

"Everything in place, Knight, my boy?"

Gabriel turned and looked. The mirror was one-way. He could see a desk in the lobby outside quite clearly.

"Yah, ya wanker," he grumbled. "At least I have hair. Is this so you can amuse yourself when you get bored?"

He jerked his thumb at the desk beyond the window where a particularly attractive brunette in uniform was working at a computer.

"Officer Franks. What a babe, huh?"

Gabriel shrugged. Normally, he'd be interested, but today his mind was elsewhere.

He sat in the plain wooden visitor's chair across from Mosely's desk.

It was the first time Gabriel had been in Mosely's office, but he would have known who inhabited it if he'd come across it blind during a sandstorm in the Sahara. Posters of jazz musicians hung on the walls. The rickety old desk was a jumble of papers, files, and empty plastic coffee cups. A computer was pushed to the far edge of the desk and grew mold from disuse. An outdated microwave in the back of the room wore dried mustard and ketchup stains. Old tennis shoes stuffed with dirty socks and a gym bag sat in one corner—mementos of a man who liked to say that he exercised at lunchtime, but probably hadn't since the last election. It not only looked—it smelled—a lot like their room at college. Hell, it even smacked of Mosely's bedroom in his parents' old place, back in the days when their chief amusements were matinee horror flicks, medical textbooks, and tormenting Mose's kid sister playing monkey-in-the-middle.

"How's the writing coming?" Mosely asked. He leaned forward hopefully. "Were you inspired yesterday? Up all night typing your little fingers off?"

Mosely was an ex-football quarterback gone to pot, and he made the word "typing" sound like an effeminate activity.

"It's screamin' off the page," Gabriel said, wide-eyed.

Mosely leaned back looking satisfied, then he frowned. "Remember. No bald jokes."

"Hey, you're the hero, right? I gotta make you look good, no matter how challengin' it is."

"Yeah, yeah," Mosely grumbled. "So whaddya need?"

"Fuel. I need to know more about the case."

Mosely shrugged. "My brain is here for you to pick, Knight."

"What a pleasant image. Okay. This is the seventh killin', right?"

"Unless there's a body we haven't found yet, but they don't exactly go to great lengths to hide 'em."

"What are they doin' with the hearts?"

Mosely shook his head. "I dunno. Wear 'em around their necks, sell 'em to a black-market organ house, eat 'em? I wish I knew."

"They're not exactly surgically removed, are they?"

"No. I was kidding about the organ house.

Coroner says they practically rip 'em out. Not much good after that, I expect."

"Is that what kills 'em?"

"Yeah, I'd say having your heart ripped out is pretty fatal."

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "I mean they're conscious at that point?"

Mosely sighed. "Yeah. Gross, huh."

Gabriel looked thoughtful. He tapped one finger on the chair absently.

"What about the Voodoo paraphernalia? Any data on that?"

Mosely looked skeptical. "Like what?"

"Like?" Gabriel said impatiently. "Like is there any meanin' to that pattern? Can you link it to a specific group?"

"Word is that the Voodoo is fake," Mosely said. He looked down at his hands.

"That's what you've been telling the papers ..."

"Yeah, well, that's the line inside the department, too."

Gabriel stared at his friend, trying to figure out if he was for real. "It didn't look so fake to me, pal. I was there, remember?"

Mosely glared at him. "So? What, you're an expert now? These guys cut up some chickens and throw around a lot of flour, does that mean we have to buy it? I can do that, too, just come by sometime and I'll make you dinner."

"Flour?"

"That's right. That's what the powder is, flour."

"Well, don't real Voodoo groups use flour?" In truth, Gabriel hadn't researched enough to know if they did or not. Time to get to that museum.

"Maybe. But it's not exactly a precious commodity, you know. It's not fucking plutonium."

"Okay. I still don't see why the Voodoo is fake."

Mosely leaned forward. He spoke seriously.

"Look. I've talked to some Voodoo experts. It's all spells and gris gris and love potions, ya know?

Voodoo types don't go around ripping people's hearts out. They just don't, okay? They might curse you or something, and if you believe in that crap, you just might get sick, even die. But rip people's hearts out? No way."

"So what z's goin' on?"

"Just between you and me until this case is closed?" Mosely asked dubiously.

"I hear ya."

"You read the papers. The victims have all been from out of town, right? Well, we're talking way out of town. Chicago. And these guys ain't 'businessmen.' You get my drift?"

Gabriel looked at Mosely keenly. "Are you telling me it's Mafia?"

Mosely shrugged. "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't.

I'm just saying, it ain't Voodoo."

"But why the theatrics?"

Mosely looked disgruntled. "Misdirection? A scare tactic? Maybe these guys just decided to get creative. Beats the hell out of me. But the way they pull these off ... they're not amateurs. I'd stake my badge on it."

Gabriel sat back and studied the balding detective. There was something odd about Mosely's manner, something he didn't like one little bit. He was spouting a party line, all right, but how much of it he actually believed, Gabriel couldn't guess.

"Suspects?" he asked quietly.

"Not yet," Mosely muttered, as if embarrassed.

"No physical evidence after seven murders?"

Mosely sighed and began picking at his teeth.

"We know it's a group. Probably seven or eight people. We've taken some bare footprints, but no fingerprints. Blood and fibers haven't come up with anything useful. Chicken blood, even a goat once. Nothing human except for the victim's own."

"Footprints? Aren't those as good as fingerprints?"

Mosely snorted. "First of all, we don't have a

data base of footprints, ya know? When you're arrested, they don't stamp your feet. Sure, we get a suspect in, we check his feet, we find a match, we've got something to go to court with. Other than that, we can't exactly go around asking random people off the street to stick their feet in ink for us."

Gabriel played with his hair absently. "Witnesses?"

"You would think so, wouldn't you?" Mosely said, annoyed. "Lake Pontchartrain, fields right outside of town ... We oughta have a fucking brigade of witnesses. Nobody hears. Nobody sees. I'm telling you, Knight, it's damned weird!"

"Do you think people are scared to talk?"

"No! I think most people are too dumb to be scared. I think it's exactly what I said. Nobody hears. Nobody sees."

"And you're telling me these guys don't have any real magic?"

Mosely looked uncomfortable, but he didn't say anything.

Gabriel sighed. "Well, thanks for the input, anyway."

Mosely grunted. "Look, I know you're hot on this Voodoo angle, and, believe me, I agree that it's a great selling point for a true crime book. But it'll be just as good a hook if the Voodoo's fake. Hell, most of those satanic cases they get up north turn out to be nothing but a couple of teenagers who like to play records backward. We'll find a solution, and it will be worthy of print, my friend. I can tell you right now, it'll be weird, whatever it is."

Gabriel nodded. He drummed his fingers some more. "You never did tell me about that pattern around the body."

Mosely shook his head. "If it is a pattern. I doubt it."

"The other six bodies had those marks around them?"

"Yeah, but smeared, just like the one you saw."

"Do you have a photographic record of them on file?"

"Yeah . . ." Mosely said reluctantly.

"Can I see them?"

Mosely shrugged as if to say that Gabriel was welcome to waste his time if he really wanted to. He picked up the phone and punched a couple of numbers.

"Franks? I'm sending somebody out to you for a

file. Just let him look at it, okay? It doesn't leave the station."

Officer Franks walked over to a long bank of filing cabinets that were conspicuously locked. Gabriel watched her bend over for her keys, but couldn't raise his normal level of gratification about it. It didn't take her long to locate the file. She brought it back and handed it to him.

"You can look at it all you want here, but you can't. . ."

"I know. It doesn't leave the station."

She merely gave him a reinforcing stare and went back to her computer.

The file contained six photographs of the areas where the Voodoo Killings victims had been found. The bodies had been removed to allow for a clearer shot, and the white powder was definitely there, but it was mostly mixed with the surrounding earth. Smearred, like Mosely said. Still, like at the Lake Pontchartrain site, there were bits and pieces of the powder outlines that seemed relatively intact. Gabriel thought about pulling out his notebook and trying to sketch the images, but he knew neither his artistic skills nor the details of the photographs was up to the task. Not standing in the middle of a police station, anyway. He needed that file.

He glanced at Franks and saw that she was working diligently. He began to casually stroll a little, pretending to be studying the file. He came within a foot of the nearest photocopy machine when her voice halted him in his tracks.

"No photocopies, please!"

He stopped and turned back to her. He smiled charmingly.

"No big deal. I haven't got much time at the moment, though, and Detective Mosely wanted me to give him my opinion of these?" He used his most ingratiating Southern lilt.

She'd heard it a million times. "No photocopies of police files. Ever."

Gabriel sighed and checked a rude comment that was about to leave his lips. It was then that he saw the camera on her desk. A police photographer? He glanced at the one-way mirror to Mosely's office and tried to remember the view of her desk from that room. No, from the office you couldn't see the far end of her desk. He just might get away with it.

He smiled more genuinely this time and placed the file carefully in her "In" box.

"Thanks anyway," he said. He gave her a wink, and the look she returned said You've got to be kidding. Gabriel walked back toward the office and, when he glanced at her in the one-way mirror, was gratified to see that she wasn't exactly rushing to put the file away. Perfect.

Five minutes later, Gabriel had convinced Mosely that they really ought to take a "cop/author" photograph for the book. Mosely was a bit hesitant, but Gabriel convinced him by telling him it would replace the author photo on the jacket (like that would ever happen) and by reminding him that when they'd attended L.S.U. they'd always had the best luck with women when they traveled as a pair. Of course, Gabriel knew this was because he attracted women and Mosely was lucky enough to get the leftovers, but fortunately Mosely never had figured that out.

Mosely called in Franks and her camera.

They took a couple of shots. True to his usual form, Mosely managed to insult Franks enough in the process. ("Sweetie," "Hon," and "Darlin'" being Mosely's favorite and entirely well-meant prerogatives) to get her silently furious and focused on getting the experience over with.

Gabriel made his move.

"Can we ..." he said hesitantly.

"What, Knight?"

"Well, if you'll just wait a second ..."

"WHAT, for Christ's sake?"

Gabriel looked embarrassed. "I'd like to check my hair. It'll just take a second."

Mosely sighed. "Knight, I swear to God you're vainer than a rooster in a henhouse! Well, go on! Hurry up!"

Gabriel slipped a glance at Franks as he strolled out but she looked nothing except incredibly exasperated.

He dodged out to Franks's desk, picked up the file, and quickly photocopied the six prints. He grabbed the copies and returned the file to the desk.

"For Christ's sake, Knight, hurry up!" Mosely's voice came through the partially open office door.

Gabriel checked his hair in the one-way mirror again and went back in for his photo opportunity.

Officer Franks didn't even have to ask him to say "cheese" this time.

Gabriel managed to locate the Historical Museum of Voodoo without much trouble. The front was marked with a hand-painted sign. It was white with black lettering and featured a

skull and a badly rendered face of an African-American woman wearing a kerchief.

Gabriel stepped inside and was overwhelmed by incense. He didn't recognize it from his black-light days—probably something homemade. It was cloyingly sweet, more musky than floral, and it was vaguely . . . rotten in its underpinnings. It fell on his skin, penetrated his nostrils, and coated his throat like a sticky web.

The sight of the room wasn't any more inviting. The day was still overcast outside, and the only natural light came from one tall old window with filthy glass that was mounted in the exterior wall. The room was not large, but the corners farthest from the window nevertheless faded away into shadow. Here and there, burning candles added their own luminescence, accenting the objects nearby.

The room was packed with curious displays and, not being able to see them well from the doorway, Gabriel made an observatory circuit of the room, hands behind his back, his steps slow and silent.

A vertical pole marked the center of the room. It reached from floor to ceiling and was covered with brightly painted and grotesque carved figures. The pole gave the impression that the room was not a room at all but some dark circus tent. At the base of the pole was a twisted mass of polished wood that bore a placard—"The Wishing Stump of Marie Laveau." Coins filled the bottom of the gnarled specimen.

On the left side of the room was a long table draped in black cloth. Both its surface and the wall above it were inundated with small, garish objects and their accompanying handwritten placards. The whole mess looked like a garage sale from hell. There were a number of small idols, wooden and hand-painted. One of the figures on the table was horned, but it looked more like an African entity than a Christian devil. There was a worn, stained kerchief that proclaimed itself as having belonged to Marie Laveau, a braided leather whip coiled and greased, and a Voodoo doll made from black material and wearing scraps of what had once been bright calicos. Gabriel's eyes grazed across a knife that was held blade down on the wall by a cluster of nails. He looked back at it anxiously, searched for a placard but saw none. The blade of the knife was wavy. His eyebrows creased. Why did it look familiar?

Something Mosely had told him? He couldn't recall. He stood there a moment longer, then reluctantly continued his exploration.

He was passing by a counter in the far back of the room, where a donations bowl and pamphlets on the museum were arranged, when he detected a movement out of the corner of his eye. Startled, he took a step back and peered into the shadows. "How do you do," a deep bass voice rolled forth in a tropically accented tone, "I am the proprietor, Dr. John. I am at your disposal should you have any questions."

Gabriel felt a flush of embarrassment. He'd thought he was alone in the room. His eyes tried to focus on the figure in the shadows, but every time he thought he had it, he realized he had not found the edges of it yet. The man was enormous. He sat on a stool that was not particularly high, yet his eyes were level with Gabriel's own, and the breadth and length of him stretched out impossibly on every side.

The man's gaze was intelligent and steady and pleasant enough, yet veiled in some way—perhaps, Gabriel thought, because the stranger in his museum was white, but it was difficult to tell. "I didn't see you," Gabriel apologized. "My name is Knight. Mind if I look around?" "Our purpose is the free distribution of knowledge, Mr. Knight," the man said, and he smiled serenely.

Now that his eyes had found the figure of the man, Gabriel found it difficult to look away. The man's head was smoothly shaven. His skin was a uniform, flawless expanse the color of milk chocolate. A small gold hoop adorned one ear and his costume was vaguely East Indian. He wore a long-sleeved tunic constructed entirely of white linen. The tunic buttoned asymmetrically, like a sailor's pea coat, and had a mandarin collar. Massive thighs, sheathed in white linen pants, emerged from beneath the tunic and disappeared behind the counter. Gabriel couldn't see the man's feet, but an image of sandals presented itself to his mind. Gabriel smiled. "I'm doing some research. I might take you up on your offer."

"As you wish." The man nodded passively. Gabriel continued around the room. In the back across from the counter was a set of African drums. They looked well maintained and authentic. He continued past a skull and a huge, blue-painted African mask. More candles lit the

mask from underneath and flickered on the oversized, grimacing features.

He had almost made it back to the door. Just inside the doorway on this side was a table that bore a small coffin, painted black. A cross was carved in and through the thin wooden lid. There was something both cute and grim about the size of the coffin. It struck one as either a play replica or a coffin for infants. He lifted the lid cautiously. "What's this for?" he asked.

"It is a ritual coffin," Dr. John replied. His deep voice seemed as penetrating and close from this side of the room as it had when he was a foot away. "It was used ceremonially."

"So it's not actually used for burial?" Gabriel asked. He let the lid back down. It creaked. "It is ceremonial, as I have said."

Above the coffin was a light switch. Gabriel flicked it up absently. He thought it might light one of the displays.

A loud thumping noise vibrated the room.

Gabriel located it. It was coming from a fan in the upper part of the single window. The fan was of the old-fashioned blade variety and it was clearly not in good repair. It thumped—whack, whack, whack—loudly.

"Turn that off!" Dr. John snapped. His tone was neither cool nor pleasant.

But there was another thumping beneath that of the fan. Gabriel looked back toward Dr. John and saw something he hadn't seen before. Attached to the wall above Dr. John's head, in that back corner, was a large Plexiglas case. Inside the case was a huge snake and it was currently beating its head relentlessly against the top of the cage.

Gabriel flicked the switch off and the fan slowed—whack, whack—then stopped. The snake's kamikaze run stopped, too.

"Sorry," Gabriel said, feeling idiotic.

Dr. John took a deep breath and collected himself.

"It is not your fault. I have asked my assistant to tape that switch down for weeks. It is the snake, you see, she gets . . . excited by the vibration. The fan needs to be replaced."

Gabriel walked over to look at the snake more closely. It was difficult to make out in the darkness of the corner. Perhaps she was the reason why the corner was dark. Gabriel didn't know much about snakes.

"What kind is it?" he asked.

"She is a boa constrictor."

"Do you . . . use it in your practice?"

Dr. John smiled thinly. "The tourists like her," he said.

"Can I see her? I mean, close-up?"

"I am afraid she doesn't care to be handled by strangers. She can be ... challenging when she gets upset."

"I see. Well, we wouldn't want that, would we?"

Dr. John only gazed at him. No, you would not.

"Can you tell me about Voodoo?" Gabriel asked, changing the subject.

Dr. John smiled indulgently. "That is a broad question, Mr. Knight. Are you interested in the history or the modern practice?"

"Hell, might as well start at the beginning,"

Gabriel joked. "How about a Reader's Digest version of the history?"

"I will do my best," Dr. John said, without the least flicker of humor. "I must first tell you that my expertise is in the Voodoo of New Orleans. There are many forms of Voodoo around the world, in Haiti, for example, and Brazil. All of these forms originated in Africa and it is still widely practiced there. I would not attempt to enlighten you on these forms."

"I'll take what I can get," Gabriel said, trying again with the smile.

Dr. John only looked at him blankly and went on. "Voodoo combines various African tribal beliefs with Anglo religions such as Catholicism. In other words, it is a religion born of the African slave trade."

"Well," Gabriel said lamely. "Huh." Dr. John ignored him.

"African slaves were not only imported into the United States, but also into other countries, in particular to the West Indies where the French and Spanish ran plantation islands."

The man was quoting blandly now, as though reading a mental cue card.

"Prior to 1803, New Orleans was owned by France. The French Creole had many African slaves, but they did not permit their slaves to gather, giving no chance for Voodoo to breed here natively. The Creole also knew enough about the 'corrupted pagan practices' of the West Indies slaves to ban slave importing from that region."

Gabriel nodded politely.

"After the Louisiana Purchase, American legislators relaxed regulations, allowing slaves to gather. They also removed the ban on West Indies slaves.

That coincided nicely with the Haitian slave revolt and West Indies slaves began pouring into New Orleans. Some of them were free people of color—freed or escaped slaves. Some were slaves still, brought by white men fleeing the revolt."

"And they started Voodoo in New Orleans?"

"Naturally, they brought their beliefs with them. The native slaves were more than enthusiastic about adopting their new brothers' religion. It gave them power. They met in Bayou St. John and on the banks of Lake Pontchartrain."

"Interestin'," Gabriel said thoughtfully. "Are those still active sites for Voodoo?"

Dr. John looked at him calmly. "No," he said simply.

"The early Voodoos were heavily into snake worship. They worshiped one they called the Great Zombi, a snake god. By 1817 the Voodoo activities were beginning to cause fear among the white slave owners. An ordinance was passed that forbade slave gatherings except in designated public areas at designated times."

Gabriel recalled the local sites. "Congo Square, right?"

Dr. John was not impressed. "Yes. Congo Square on Sunday afternoons. The slaves and free people of color gathered to dance simulations of their Voodoo dances right in front of Creole society. As you may imagine, the Creoles were offended by the sexuality of the dancing, and they turned up in droves for the privilege of being scandalized. This was entertaining enough for the early Voodoos, but many of them also managed to meet in private for the real thing."

"What was 'the real thing'?" Gabriel asked.

Dr. John, again, refused to change his course.

"There were a variety of Voodoo Kings and Queens in those days, but eventually a single power emerged. That was a Voodoo Queen named Marie Laveau. She ruled Voodoo in New Orleans for many years."

"I've heard about her," Gabriel said. It was difficult to live in the French Quarter and not hear about her. "But I don't know much except that she was a Voodoo Queen from the old days."

"The Voodoo Queen. There were actually two Marie Laveaus—mother and daughter. Mos* people thought they were the same woman. Her 'continued youth' added to the mystique. The original—the mother—was also known as the Widow Paris. It was she who started the empire."

"Uh-huh."

"By 1830, Laveau was Voodoo Queen of all New Orleans. She began as a hairdresser for rich Creole ladies. She also paid household servants to spy for her. Between these two sources of gossip, she knew everything about everyone. She was not above using her information to appear psychic or even to blackmail."

Gabriel nodded in acknowledgment. "What was her practice like?"

"She kept a pet snake—danced with it, too. She held traditional Voodoo ceremonies out by the lake. She took her worship seriously, but she didn't mind selling tickets to curiosity seekers either. Today that's called 'entrepreneurial genius.' Unless you happen to be a poor black. Then it's still called 'fraudulence.'"

"You're preachin' to the choir. I admire anyone that can actually make a livin'," Gabriel said dryly.

"It was Marie Laveau who defined the Voodoo that is truly and uniquely the Voodoo of New Orleans. She invented hundreds of spells, charms, and potions—what we call gris gris. They form the basis of the modern practice."

"Fascinatin'. Marie Laveau still has followers, doesn't she?"

"Of course. The Laveau tomb is in St. Louis Cemetery #1. It is a popular shrine for practitioners, and tourists get a 'thrill' going there. I myself take tours through the cemetery on a regular basis."

Gabriel made a mental note to check it out.

"What about modern Voodoo?" he asked.

"Voodoo has returned to its more serious religious form lately. It has a strong following in New Orleans these days. In fact, it is growing quite rapidly. There are several temples in the city and others all across the United States."

"That's curious/" Gabriel said, surprised. "It seems a little ... well, outdated, doesn't it? Voodoo dolls, all of that."

Dr. John blinked at him blandly, but Gabriel thought he could detect a tinge of irritation underneath. "Voodoo dolls have nothing to do with the modern religion," he said simply.

"How would you describe the modern religion then?"

"The Voodoo religion has magic and mystery, yet it contains traditional Catholic themes. For African-Americans, it is a religion of their own heritage. Whites are attracted to it because it is exotic. It is not at all surprising that it is finally

coming into its own."

"I suppose," Gabriel agreed. "I mean, Witchcraft is making a comeback. Even Druids, or so I hear."

Dr. John only stared at Gabriel as if he were being incredibly stupid, but he didn't say a word.

"Well, you've been very informative. Thanks," Gabriel said. Dr. John nodded benignly.

Gabriel pulled out the crime scene photograph and handed it to Dr. John. "One more thing. Do you recognize anythin' about the ritual in this photograph?"

Dr. John took the photo. He held it at arm's length as though to catch it in the light. His fingers trembled.

"This is truly offensive! Is this from those so-called Voodoo Murders in the paper?"

"More or less," Gabriel said smoothly.

Dr. John returned the photo with a disdain simmering on anger.

"The police already know that the killings have nothing to do with Voodoo. Why the newspapers insist on latching on to that name, I cannot fathom. 'Voodoo Murders' indeed!"

"You didn't notice anythin' that would suggest somethin' you've come across in your studies? What about that pattern around the body?"

Gabriel moved to hand the photograph back for a second appraisal.

Dr. John's lip curled. "Don't be absurd, Mr. Knight. I know you are naive about Voodoo, and for that I will excuse your insults. I do not need to look at your pornography further. That is not Voodoo!"

Gabriel gave up and put the photograph away. No point in burning his bridges.

"I'm sure you're right. I was only curious to hear the opinion of an expert. I apologize if I insulted you or your religion."

Dr. John calmed visibly. He stopped glaring at Gabriel and looked pointedly away as if to recompose his blandness.

"Education is what I am here for. If you have learned something, I am satisfied," he said calmly.

Gabriel supposed he'd done better jobs at networking in the past. He sighed heavily and headed for the street.

St. Louis Cemetery #1 wasn't far from the Voodoo museum. Gabriel headed over there to take a peek at Laveau's tomb. The cemeteries had always been big tourist attractions for New Orleans, being of an eerily romantic and highly

unusual configuration for the United States. But in the past ten years or so, muggings and worse had become as frequent as funerals in that mossy realm. The tourists now visited the tombs in clumps, safe in the hands of official guides. The locals still took their chances, but earlier in the day was certainly better than late.

Gabriel left his bike outside and wandered in through the graves on foot. The cemetery was a miniature city. Marble tombs, some ancient, some modern, some of plain cracked granite, some of colored and polished marble, were aligned to form avenues and boulevards, plazas and dead-end alleys. New Orleans has a high water table, making in-ground entombment impossible. Even the poor were placed aboveground in common public tombs with drawers that held bodies for only a decade or so before the bones were shoveled to the back and a new corpse took over the real estate. Even on a cool, sunny day, the air had the sickly sweet taint of decay here, stone walls being less of a filter for stench than six feet of earth. In the dead of summer, like today, the warm air buffeting one's nostrils had a nearly visible ripeness.

Gabriel found Laveau's tomb, aided by small metal signs that discreetly pointed the visitor down this street and that. She obviously was one of their more famous residents.

The tomb was old and small. There was nothing fancy about it, but neither was it one of the public tombs. The little building was of granite and stood about five feet tall and three feet wide. At the door of the tomb were a variety of offerings: dried flowers and herbs, several plates of peas and rice, small jars and bottles with tops of paraffin and foil, containing dark secrets Gabriel couldn't begin to guess at. There was even a cheap plastic rosary. The tomb walls were covered with graffiti. Not painted on, but drawn with some red-colored material. Gabriel touched a drawing of a rose with his finger and some of the material came off. It was dry and dusty, like chalk. He looked around and saw broken bits of old brick littering the ground, apparently left here to serve the faithful who wished to write prayers.

He circled the tomb slowly, examining the drawings. There were simple phrases like "Marie Laveau grant my wish!" "Marie Laveau Lives!" even things like "In the name of Laveau I curse Herbert Dunn!"

On the back of the tomb he found an area near

the bottom that was cleared of most of the graffiti. In a large blank space appeared a number of odd-looking symbols. The wall looked like this: Curious, Gabriel decided to copy down the marks. He took out his notepad and carefully reproduced what he saw. It looked like code. Perhaps it meant something mundane, but if it was a genuine Voodoo code, it would be a neat trick for the book.

He decided to wander for a bit before heading back to his bike. He'd always had a fascination for places like this. Anything occult, anything spooky, anything bizarre, had drawn him since he was a kid reading *Witching Hour* comics. At least his prurient interest came in handy as a novelist. Whether or not it would ever make him real money was another matter.

He had rounded a bend past a section of Civil War-era tombs, reading names and epitaphs like an erstwhile archaeologist, when a flash of gold caught his attention. At the end of the avenue, and constituting the dead end of the street, was an unusually large plot. It boasted a grassy lawn and, placed in the center of the grass, a huge marble tomb. The tomb was twelve feet high at least, and perhaps seven feet wide. It had a Grecian design. Double columns on either side of the front supported a frieze overhang. Beyond this small porch was a massive set of marble doors that met in a center seam. The frieze at the top of the tomb bore a single word, deeply carved in the marble, and embossed with the gold that had attracted his eye. The word was "Gedde."

Gabriel whistled under his breath. The Geddes didn't skimp on death either, apparently. The tomb's position was clearly among the more ancient in the city, yet the place was immaculately kept. Grace was right. He was out of his league. For some reason, the tomb impressed that upon him far more than the mansion in the Garden District had.

His sightseeing mood faded away. He headed back to his bike.

He hoped to have better luck at the Voodoo shop on Dauphine than he'd had at the Voodoo museum. The shop was in a rough neighborhood (not that the entire Quarter wasn't rough) and the harsh brick facade was made more menacing by thick bars that blockaded the windows and doors when locked. A small lighted sign hung in the window "Dixieland Drugstore."

There was no sign of Voodoo anywhere. He hoped Grace hadn't been offtrack.

He needn't have worried. Inside, the store was less a pharmacy than a herb den and sideshow. Metal racks formed crude aisles, their shelves jammed with home-brewed and home-bottled remedies. The labels read like a prop list for a Hammer film: "Lover Come Back Oil," "Man Fixin' Lotion," "Wander-No-Mo Powder," "Baby Luck Oil," "Lawyer in a Bottle," "Lady Luck Additive." Along the back wall were plywood buckets stuffed with dried roots and herbs: "Flower of Passion," "St. John the Conqueror, Big," "St. John the Conqueror, Small," "Mandrake." Gabriel wasn't exactly a botanist, but he was pretty sure the naming convention was a language unto its own and had nothing to do with the Latin system or the common vernacular. There were even things in jars along the far wall, things that had once been living, he was sure, but he didn't care to identify them.

A stuffed dummy in a faded old robe stood sentinel near the door. It wore the head of a crocodile. He examined the head with interest. The scales on the crocodile's skin were dried up, shriveled. Even so, they were obviously not the same type as the scale from the lake. And yet, something about the head reminded him of the crime scene. Why? Was he simply connecting lake and crocodile in his head?

There was a small white tag hanging from the head. He looked at it. It said "Mask—\$100.00." Way out of his league.

Behind a glass service counter was a black man whose eyes hadn't left Gabriel since he entered. He was a smallish man, but wiry and tough. His hair was cropped close to his head in a style more interested in the weather than fashion, and his dark face showed the scruff of a faint beard. He stood with his arms folded in a protective posture. Behind him candles of various colors, also home-made, and do-it-yourself Voodoo dolls and accessories were displayed. Gabriel couldn't believe this kind of thing had been in New Orleans since before he was born, and he'd never been aware of it—a murky subculture just under the surface of his own backyard.

"How ya doin'?" he said warmly as he approached the counter.

"Uh-huh," the man replied noncommittally.

"Name is Knight," Gabriel said. He held out a

hand, but the man looked pointedly away. Still, he wasn't completely rude. He answered.

"Walker. Willy Walker."

"Is this your place?" Gabriel asked, withdrawing his hand.

"Mine, my daddy's, his daddy's before him," Walker said.

"Nice place. I have a little shop in the Quarter myself." He said it Qwawta, as every legitimate native would. Usually this was good for some bonding, but the man looked extremely disinterested.

"Do you sell to the Voodoo worshipers in town?" Gabriel asked.

The man shook his head and frowned. "No Voodoo, m'sieur. Curiosities, 's what I sell. 'Sail." Gabriel looked around, bewildered. "Are you telling me this stuff isn't for Voodoo?"

"Neither know nor care what folks do oncet they bought it, me. I sell curiosities, local color. Tourists think it interestin'. 'Sail it is."

Two for zero. He was really getting the hang of this.

"I'm not with the police or the press or anythin'," he tried, "I'm interested in the religion myself. It's got a fascinatin' history."

Walker made a dismissive gesture with his head. "Don't know nothin' 'bout that. Just old folk remedies', 'sail."

Great.

Gabriel looked around, hoping for inspiration.

On the counter a sign read, "Items sold as curios only! We cannon guarantee results!"

Sounded a lot like the owner. Next to it, though, was another sign. It read, "St. John's Eve special! Free lagniappe with every purchase. Choice of Passion Root Oil or Lady Luck Gamblin' Oil. FREE!"

"What's St. John's Eve?" he asked.

The man frowned again. "'S local holiday. Been one since my daddy's time and his daddy's ..."

"Before him, yeah, I get it. Never heard of it, though."

The man shrugged as if to say that Gabriel's ignorance was none of his concern.

At this rate, "pissed off" might be about as good a reaction as he was going to provoke from this blank-faced man, so Gabriel decided to show him the photograph. He pulled it out and handed it to Mr. Walker.

"Do you recognize anything about..."

The man's eyes widened as he stared at it.

"Cabrit sans cor'," he whispered hoarsely. He dropped the photo on the counter as though Gabriel had just handed him a scorpion.

"What?"

The man licked his lips, rubbed his hands unconsciously on his slacks, and took a slight step back.

"Did you say something?" Gabriel insisted.

"Cabrit sans cord? Is that French?"

The man had recovered himself, though he clearly didn't want anything to do with that picture. He crossed his arms again.

"I didn't say that," he said, still shaky.

"You did. I heard you say it, you said ..."

"You heard wrong, m'sieur. Now put that thing away. I don't want nobody walkin' in here and seein' it."

Gabriel picked up the photograph and slipped it back into a coat pocket. The photograph wasn't pleasant, true, but nevertheless, it generated the weirdest damn reactions.

Mr. Walker seemed about to say something further, but the tin bell on the front door chimed and both men looked that way.

"Yap, yap, yap."

A small dog entered. It was cradled in the crook of an arm that belonged to a little old white lady, so wizened and shriveled and pale that she looked like one of those apple dolls they sold at bazaars. She had to be under five feet, and she looked as though a stiff wind would knock her flat. A faded blue print dress hung from her tiny body and an old-fashioned pillbox hat was perched on her gray hair. She strode to the counter purposefully.

Gabriel decided the best tack would be to get out of the way. He wandered over to the shelves again.

The conversation drifted to him over the racks.

"Bonjour, M'sieur Walker."

"Bienvenu, Madame Cazaunoux. Comment \$a va?"

"I'm feelin' awful, that's how! I'm certain someone's buried a Sleep Not bag somewhere near my steps. I haven't had a decent night's rest in a week!"

"So sorry to hear that! You be needin' some Sleep Tight candles, then?"

"If you think it'll help. I'll try just about anythin'. I said three rosaries this mornin' for Our Lady's mercy."

"Rosaries are good luck, sure enough, but them candles are a right blessin', too. Ain't no gris gris gonna keep your eyes open oncet you

burned them."

"Bless you, m'sieur. Put them on my account and send them right over. Oh, and another thing! I didn't catch her at it, but I just know Mrs. Le Fevre put stomachache powder in my cake at the last meeting of the Creole Grande Dames. I've been in terrible torment!"

"You don't say! You gotta turn that kinda trick! Put nine pin heads in a little box, add a pinch of Graveyard Dust, and put it under her front porch step. It'll be Mrs. Le Fevre with the bellyache come next mornin'."

"Serve her right, too! You send over those things, now. I must protect myself—with the Blessed Virgin's approval, of course."

"Oui, madame. The Virgin won't be mindin' if you're aimin' for the wicked."

"That's exactly what my grandmother used to say, m'sieur! Merci beaucoup. You know where to send my things."

"Mais non, madame. Au revoir."

"Au revoir, M'sieur Walker."

The bell tinkled again. Gabriel pondered the conversation for a moment, then moved back over to the front counter.

"That customer of yours, the little old lady? She sounded interestin'. Do you suppose ..." Gabriel began.

"What customer, m'sieur?" Mr. Walker said innocently. His arms were folded again.

So much for that idea.

"Never mind. Thanks."

Mr. Walker inclined his head almost imperceptibly in response, clearly dismissing Gabriel and the horse he rode in on, then he picked up a rag and started to polish the counter where the photograph had lain.

More than a little discouraged, Gabriel decided he needed some time to think. He headed for the park. As he drove his motorcycle in and around the squalid traffic of the French Quarter, his mind was tucking a napkin under its chin and sitting down with a grunt to feed on itself. Some great investigator he was turning out to be! His ace in the hole, Mosely, wasn't exactly pouring forth those rich troves of secret Voodoo knowledge that Gabriel had hoped would be the dramatic angle for his new book. No, the police weren't learning anything, were they? Taking matters into his own hands wasn't exactly paying off with the Big Bonanza jackpot either. Hell, no wonder the

police preferred the Mafia angle. It was a familiar animal, after all, and compared to the Voodoo people he'd talked to so far, it had to be relatively easy to get some gangster flunky to sing an aria. The visions of bored Ohio housewives settling down in their curlers and bunny slippers to devour the True! Voodoo Rituals Revealed! horrors of his "impeccably crafted expose" (New York Times review) were beginning to fade. Veiled. That word kept whispering in his mind. Veiled. Like the dances in Congo Square. You'll see what we want you to see—just enough to make you nervous, just enough to raise the hackles on your flesh, just enough for you to understand that it is foreign beyond your comprehending, that there is power beyond your control, erotic, dark, frenetic power, just a brief glimpse of the true face and no more. Not the real thing, not for you. You can dread it, you can want it, you can turn away sickened, but you'll never see it really. Why? Because we choose to KEEP YOU OUT. Gabriel slammed his hand down on the chrome handle of his bike in disgust and frustration. "Goddamn it!"

He thought about going back to the "drug-store" and forcing the maddeningly blank-faced owner to spit out the truth with his bare hands. What did you say? What the fuck did you say about that photograph, and what the fuck does it mean? It was a satisfying thought, and he visualized it lovingly, but in the end there were a couple of problems with it. First, Gabriel hadn't gotten in a fight since the fifth grade and wouldn't know what to do with a fist even assuming he remembered how to make one. Second, ol' Mr. Walker looked like the type to have a twelve-gauge shotgun under the counter for just such occasions. A person who puts bars on his windows and doors was the sort of person that would have something under the front counter, and it wouldn't be candy for the kiddies. As for Dr. John, well, the man might look and act like an acolyte of Gandhi's, but he was just way too motherfucking big. Charm, 0. Brute force, 0. Gabriel had little enough of those two attributes. He wasn't sure he had any other talents lying around to employ. He was circling Jackson Square now. He parked the bike and headed in. Not being the introspective sort as a rule, he sighed and decided to give up on this brooding stuff already. It wasn't fun to be pissed off. It wasn't in his nature to enjoy it. He was an Aquarian, and he much preferred flitting

to the next mood to hanging about in the one he was in. And, when he thought about it, what did it really matter, anyway? So he didn't write a Voodoo book. Neither his agent nor the public was exactly holding their breath. The authors currently dominating the bestseller charts wouldn't mind his absence. So he stayed in hock up to his wisdom teeth, so he never made a name for himself. Did it matter? Had he ever really expected to change his luck? And he was thirty-three now. Wasn't he about due for that ol' Grim Reaper anyway? Normally, this sort of logic was very effective. It had worked for him for many a year in many a situation. It almost worked this time. He felt his anger being sapped into weariness. He waited for the resignation. Hell, he courted it. He was inside the park now, and he glanced around longingly. He could just give this all up right now and spend the rest of the day lying on the grass. He sat down in said same and waited.

But the resignation didn't come. His anger faded, but his mind did not let go. It was already looking for another path. All right, not charm, not brute force, then ... what? It still had its knotty little fist clenched tight around the idea of the book and it wouldn't release it. He recognized this with some surprise and forced himself to turn back to the concept of the book again, examining it impersonally. Okay. It would be nice to finish the project, sure. He was enthusiastic about the subject matter and he thought the audience would be, too, but ... but ... no. Realization struck him from nowhere. It wasn't even the book anymore, was it? It wasn't the book that had taken up residence in his cerebral cortex like a recalcitrant demon refusing to be dispossessed. This wasn't going to be simple, this wasn't going to fall into his lap like a ripe fruit or even walk by nice and close and leisurely so that he could just reach out and pull it into his lap, he might actually, God forbid, have to get off his rear end and go out and find it, and nevertheless he, Gabriel Knight, who never worked hard at anything, was not going to give up.

His mind flashed on the image of Malia Gedde sitting in the back of that limousine, her eyes turning languorously to his, of the body under the tarp—white face slack, chest ripped open, of the cloying smell of the incense in the Voodoo museum, of Dr. John's eyes, white-rimmed chocolate, gazing across at him and through him

as though he didn't exist, of the white powder tracings that tickled his brain, of the knife in the museum, that curvy-bladed knife . . . a veil, a veil. His anger surged back in an unexpected tide. No. Maybe there had been too many dreams, too many nights of helpless fear, too much bad luck, too much poverty, too many meaningless women, too much of watching life go by him, waiting to die. Not this time. Not by a long shot. Not this buddy boy. No.

And it felt good. It really felt good. His anger turned into something powerful. He turned it over in his mind like a weapon, watching the glint, feeling the weight, and damn it! it felt fucking great.

His body was tensed on the grass, tensed and pumped as if he were about to run a marathon. His mind hummed. Adrenaline. Is Ms what it felt like? Hell, no wonder Gracie was addicted to the stuff. From out of nowhere, another thought crept up and bit him.

And what if you succeed? What if you manage to rip that veil? Are you prepared for what's underneath? Are you really?"

But he felt good. He didn't want to lose it. He pushed at the thought quickly and it went away. The adrenaline was only slightly dampened. He grinned, lying there on the grass, and reveled in it. He was still grinning when he heard a muttered curse from nearby. A voice said, "Hey! Grab that, would ya?"

He looked up, blinking in the diffused light from the sky above him, and something white and flat passed directly in front of his eyes and then struck him.

He flinched instinctively, then felt idiotic. It was only paper—a large square of paper with a building drawn on it. It had landed on his chest and he reached down to pick it up, but another small gust of wind got there first, snatched it away, and whisked it off. It went, skipping end over end, across the green lawn. Gabriel scrambled to his feet.

"Damn!" a young man said. He was in his early twenties, brown-haired, lean, and wearing cutoff jeans and a T-shirt that bore a Frank Lloyd Wright house on it. Over his shoulder, Gabriel could see an easel with a now-empty clip and an array of drawing tools next to it on a collapsible table. He hadn't even noticed the artist when he sat down. So much for his powers of observation.

The man started after the paper.

"Sorry," Gabriel said as the youth passed by.

"Thanks for trying," the man said absently, never pausing in his chase.

The paper, and the young man, disappeared around Jackson's statue, and Gabriel followed them absently. He'd been thinking about getting up soon anyway.

When he reached the other side, he saw the young man bent over and straining to reach his arm in through the narrow bars that surrounded the statue. The paper, Gabriel saw, was stuck flat up against the base of the statue some foot beyond the man's reach. It appeared to be quite happy there.

"I don't believe this!" the man said, exasperated. He stood up.

Gabriel turned his head to one side so he could look at the drawing, which had landed faceup but at a right angle. It was a very precise drawing of St. Louis Cathedral.

"Bummer," Gabriel said. "Nice drawing."

"It was," the man said, and sighed. "Can you believe this? I'm supposed to turn that in tomorrow as part of my summer final. I've been working on it for a week!"

Gabriel made one of his famous leaps of intuition. "Architectural student?"

The man rolled his eyes. "Was. Probably be washing dishes for life now." He kicked his toe bitterly at the fence, then quickly regretted that particular form of expression, his face grimacing in pain.

They examined the fence around the statue together. It was black-painted wrought iron with bars narrow enough to keep out all but the pigeons and gophers. It stood over six feet, and the top of it was outfitted with cruel-looking spikes. Both men's eyes looked at the spikes simultaneously and simultaneously they both squeezed their legs shut with a pained look.

"It's gone," the man said with a resigned sigh.

"Can't you do another one?"

"By tomorrow? Fat chance. And here I thought I was ahead of schedule. Damn it! Why me?"

Gabriel could relate. He'd probably been sitting too close to the man and some of his luck had rubbed off.

Having nothing better to do, Gabriel followed the slumped, defeated figure back to his easel. He picked up a compass from the table absently.

"You've got quite a setup here, uh ..." he said, hoping to cheer the guy up.

"Max. Yup. I can draw just about anything that has lines and angles with these babies. Won't help me do Monet, though."

Gabriel put the compass down. "Let me see what I can do," he said sympathetically.

The man looked at him warily. "You don't want to climb that fence."

"No," Gabriel agreed, "I don't want to climb that fence, but let me see what I can do."

"Predate it," the man said bitterly, "but all the same, I think I'll start another. They might be having a sale on miracles this week."

The man picked up a large pad of drawing paper from under the table and ripped off a sheet wearily. Gabriel left him to it.

He walked around the park slowly, thinking. Why should he bother? Wasn't he all loaded up with adrenaline and raring to go kick some Voodoo butt? But the man's instruments ... He thought he just might save some time if he spent some now. If not your charm or brute strength, then what?

On the southwest corner of the park, Gabriel saw a familiar figure. It was George, the Lucky Dog guy. George was one of the vendors Gabriel had an "in" with, and he'd used it often enough to get a bite to eat. George was currently occupied doing, God love 'em, what George did best, and good thing for Gabriel's stomach that he did. He was sitting on his Lucky Dog Cart under the brightly painted umbrella, reading a book.

Joe's band was nearby, trumpeting out a heavy "St. James's Infirmary," and next to them was one of the local street kids doing his act. The kid's wooden board was laid flat on the lawn, and his feet were tap tapping to the music, his donations cup—empty—perched in the grass nearby. The boy was torn between dancing for the pedestrians, none of whom paid the slightest heed, and camping it up for George, who was equally uninterested. The boy was rail-thin; probably twelve, but looked eight. He looked hungry is what he looked. Unfortunately, the kid wasn't going to impress George. George cared about one thing. Gabriel could manipulate it, and did. The boy didn't stand a chance.

Gabriel tried to recall the last time he himself had eaten and couldn't. Not yesterday. Not yet today. Grace was always yelling at him about

that, said he was eating up his muscle tone. She was probably right, but then his muscle tone was for shit anyway.

The boy, sensing Gabriel's appraisal, did a sudden backflip followed by splits, and grinned at Gabriel ruthlessly. Aren't I great?!

Flexible little bugger. And that gave Gabriel the first good idea he'd had all day.

George looked doubtful at Gabriel's proposal.

"I don't know . . . You need to get some new material, man. Last time I was in there, I didn't see anything I wanted."

"Oh, we had a new shipment this week. From an estate sale. Old paperbacks, mostly. Some Chandler I believe," Gabriel lied smoothly.

George's eyes glistened with greed. "Cool! I'll try to get over there after work!"

Gabriel pulled out a notepad and wrote "Good for \$10.00 free merchandise. St. George's Books." He signed it.

Five minutes later, the taste of mustard was all that was left of one hot dog and the boy, who had been the happy recipient of dog #2, was following Gabriel meekly back to the statue. Without an inch to spare, the kid slipped in through the bars and grabbed the paper. He handed it to Gabriel with an offended look. Gee, that was easy. Thought you wanted something hard.

Gabriel took the paper firmly in both hands and smiled.

"My drawing!" Max looked every bit as grateful as Gabriel had hoped.

"Is it all right?"

Max looked at it carefully. "All right? It's the best damn thing I've seen in about a million years." Max opened his drawing pad and stuck the sketch of the cathedral in carefully. He placed the pad on the ground, then placed some of his heavier tools on top of that.

"Thanks. Really. You saved my butt, big time."

Max reached out his hand. "I don't think I caught your name."

"Knight. Gabriel Knight." They shook hands.

"Well, thanks, Gabriel. I guess I owe you one."

Gabriel cleared his throat. "Actually, I was hoping you'd give me your opinion on something. If you have a minute, that is."

Max raised an eyebrow. "Sure. What is it?"

Gabriel pulled out the photo envelope Mosely had left for him and withdrew the photocopies of the six crime scene areas and the drawing he'd

done from Lake Pontchartrain. Max looked at each carefully. His brow creased.

"What is it?"

Good question. "It's ... uh ... from ... uh ...

Haiti. I'm doing some research for a book I'm working on? And a friend of mine sent me these marks? Apparently, they find these all the time there. Uh, my friend thinks it's a pattern of some sort. You see here, where it's not been smeared, here and here?" He pointed out the clear areas on a couple of the photocopies with his fingers. "And this sketch was the latest one. He ... uh ... didn't have his camera."

"Yeah?" Max said curiously. "Haiti, huh?"

Interesting."

"Yeah. It is interestin'. He thinks that these were all the same pattern, but it's kinda tough to reconstruct, you know?" Gabriel shrugged. "Seems to me there's enough of those clear areas, someone should be able to reproduce the whole pattern."

Max studied the photographs carefully. He fished among his tools and picked up a handleless lens. He moved it over the photocopies and Gabriel could see it was a magnifier. Hell of a lot more modern than his Sam Spade edition, too.

"You might be right/" Max said finally. "It looks symmetrical. It might be just a matter of assembling a complete wedge, then multiplying that around the whole circle." He looked some more.

"There might be a few changes, at the edges it looks like." He looked up finally.

"I'd have to spend some time with this before I could tell you for sure. Whether you could reconstruct it accurately, I mean."

"Is there any way you could ... ? I don't want to take up a lot of your time, but..."

"You want me to reconstruct it?" Max said, surprised.

Gabriel gave Max his most sheepish smile. "I'd be happy to give you credit in the bibliography. If you can reconstruct it, that is."

Max looked doubtful. "Well ... I'll tell you what," he said. "I have tonight free since you got my drawing back. I'll spend the evening on it, and we can see how it goes. I'm busy tomorrow then, and next week..."

"That's fine. Tonight would be great. Really.

Thanks so much."

Max slipped the pages into his pad and started to pack up.

"No big deal. What's the pattern about, anyway?" he asked.

Gabriel's grin froze. "Honestly? I'm not sure. I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

Max seemed willing to let it stand at that.

Gabriel headed out of the park quite pleased with himself. He'd not only managed to eat something, but for the first time since this case began, he thought he just might have made some progress. True, the police artists had not come up with anything on the pattern using the same material, but Gabriel had a feeling they weren't trying all that hard. Mosely didn't care about the pattern, didn't even think it was a pattern, why would anybody else on the force put their ass on the line about it?

Thinking about Mosely reminded him of Malia Gedde, the way her eyes had looked at him from that limo. Thinking about Malia reminded Gabriel that he had her address, had even been to her house, and he hadn't managed to crack that stately facade.

Mosely had a point. Malia Gedde probably didn't matter to the investigation. That part had simply been an excuse. Then why couldn't he stop thinking about her? She wasn't really his type.

Oh, she was any man's type, to be sure, but it had been a long, long time since Gabriel had gone out of his way for a woman. Why now? Why her? He didn't know why. He only knew that she was part of that clenched fist in his mind and he simply wanted her. Wanted her. Bone deep, down where it counts, he wanted to see her, to know her, in an urgent, running-out-of-time kind of way. The brake lights that normally went on in his head when he ran across a woman that he knew could matter, well, they just weren't functioning on this round. All gates were open and his hormones were plowing full steam ahead.

The cloud-filled sky had taken on the cast of late afternoon and the temperature had dropped slightly, but the day was not over yet. Unless you have an appointment or some official business, I cannot announce you. The guy didn't think Gabriel could have official business, that was the problem. He didn't think Gabriel looked the part. He was right, Gabriel didn't, but didn't wasn't couldn't.

Was it?

Gabriel turned the bike around a block from St. George's Books and headed back to the police station.

The building was quiet. The heat must be slowing down the criminals, Gabriel thought, and he thanked Providence that it wasn't Mardi Gras season. Frick glanced up at him briefly and waved him on through. Officer Franks did not even glance up as he walked by.

He was about to enter Mosely's office when he noticed the air-conditioning controls just outside the office door. He stood there and looked at the gauge thoughtfully. He had come back here hoping Mosely would help him out with his little problem, but would he? Willingly? Probably not, particularly if he knew the reason was Malia Gedde. Gabriel remembered Mosely as he'd seen him last, sitting in his office in that bad gold blazer and his . . .

Gabriel looked around, but no one was watching. He turned the control up from its position at seventy-two to ninety degrees. He then checked his hair in the mirror and entered the office.

"Mostly! Honey baby!" Gabriel said, strolling into Mosely's office.

Mosely had been napping. He jerked upright in his chair and rubbed his face.

"Shut the hell up, Knight," he said shortly.

"Can't you knock?"

Gabriel shut the door behind him and knocked on it irritatingly.

"Christ! What a moron!" Mosely said.

Gabriel slipped into the chair across from Mosely's desk, grinning. "Anything new?"

Mosely grimaced. "Not much. Got the coroner's report and the evidence analysis from the murder yesterday. Been questioning anyone we could in the area all day. Not a goddamn shred of new evidence." He frowned. "Except. . ."

"Except what?"

Mosely looked up at Gabriel and sighed.

"Leopard fur fibers."

Gabriel felt a chill go through him. The leopard screams and ...

"Leopard fur? Are you shitting me?"

"I wish I were," Mosely said tiredly.

"What do you mean, 'leopard fur'?"

"What the fuck do you think I mean? They found some fibers at the lake. They identified them. They're leopard fur."

"But . . . !" Gabriel protested. "How would they get a leopard there and, why, for Christ's sake, and ..."

"Calm down, Knight! Jesus, you don't have to take this personally*."

Gabriel forced his mouth shut. His heart was racing. Her face changes into ...

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Anyway, they don't think it's a real leopard."

Gabriel looked confused. "What do you mean, it's not real, I thought you said ..."

"Yeah, it's leopard fur all right, it's just that it's been parted from the leopard for a real long time."

Gabriel studied Mosely's face for a hint.

"Clothes? Leopard-skin clothes?" he asked.

No, not clothes, you know it's not clothes, it's a ...

"Think so," Mosely said. "Looks like it."

Gabriel swallowed. "Well, that's pretty unusual, right? Isn't that a good lead?"

Mosely rubbed his face again, frowning. About this time of day, as Gabriel well remembered, Mosely's jaw became fuzzier than his head. He always rubbed it like that, as if he liked the feel of the stubble.

"Yeah ..." Mosely said slowly. "We'll check out all the fur places in town. Seems to me, though, it wasn't somebody walking around in a fur coat. I mean, would that make sense to you? Probably something else. A belt, maybe, or a skirt, or even fibers from a leopard-skin rug one of the killers had been around earlier in the day."

Yeah, or «...

"There's a few places in town where you can get that shit. Punk places. We'll see. If they didn't get it around here, though, it's not gonna be much help."

"Well, it's something," Gabriel said hopefully.

"Yeah, and God knows breaks have been few and far between on this case. You been writing today?" Mosely asked, changing the subject.

Gabriel thought of the coupon he'd written for George. "A lot. More than I can afford to," he said seriously.

Mosely nodded, his mind elsewhere. Sweat was beading on his forehead. It was beading on Gabriel's, too.

"It's hot in here," Gabriel said. He waved his hand in front of his face and stuck out his tongue.

Mosely looked at him. "Huh? Oh, yeah. It is getting hot, isn't it? Must be the sun hitting us from the west." Mosely went back to his thoughts.

Gabriel sat up, stretched his arms out for effect, and slipped out of his leather jacket.

"Phew! Really warm! Aren't you hot in here?"

Mosely looked up again. "Yeah," he said. He paused a moment, looking at the phone, then he peeled off his jacket and put it on the back of his chair. "Maybe the air conditioner's on the blink." Gabriel had to bite his lip to keep from smiling. "Do you think I could get a cup of coffee?" he asked innocently. "I'm dying for one."

"Coffee? You want coffee?"

"Should that surprise you?"

"Nah, you've always been a caffeine addict. Just a minute." Mosely started to pick up the phone, and Gabriel thought shit, but Mosely put it back down again, looking irritated.

"That Franks. She hates it when I ask her to get coffee. Like it's not a simple decent request."

Mosely stood up. "Fuck it. I'll get it myself."

"Thanks. You're a pal."

A split second after Mosely was out the door, Gabriel dived over the desk and grabbed the badge on Mosely's jacket pocket. It slid out of the coat in its black walletlike holder. He stuffed it in his pocket, grabbed his leather jacket, and headed for the door.

He ran into Mosely just outside the office.

Mosely had a foam cup in one hand with black coffee in it. He almost bumped right into Gabriel and he looked at him in amazement.

"Jesus, it's right here, Knight, you don't have to come after it!"

"I'm real sorry, Bud, but I just remembered I'm late. I promised Grace I'd be back early, you know."

He took the cup from Mosely. "But thanks for the coffee. Really."

Gabriel backed up toward the front counter as Mosely stared at him in amazement. He was still shaking his head as Gabriel slipped through the station door.

The man who answered the door at the Gedde estate was the same man who answered it that morning, and he hadn't gotten any friendlier during the course of the day. He took one look at Gabriel and sniffed.

"I told you once today, sir, unless you have an appointment or some official business, I cannot..."

Gabriel pulled the police badge from his pocket and flipped it open briefly in front of the man's eyes, covering Mosely's photo with his finger.

"Detective Mosely, New Orleans Police Department?" Gabriel used his best Southern official drawl. "I want to see Ms. Gedde." Not a request,

an order. It felt good after the day he'd had. Hell, if it weren't for the boot camp training, regular work hours, and physical danger, he could get into this police stuff.

The man's eyes blinked once in surprise, but his face remained impassive.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll see if Ms. Gedde is available."

The door closed again and Gabriel was still on the stoop, but his pulse quickened. The badge would get him in, he was sure of it. He wished futilely for a mirror and some hair gel. He used his palms as best he could to smooth back his bushy blond bangs. He licked his lips for good measure.

The door opened. "Right this way. Sir."

Gabriel was led past an impressive foyer with a grand staircase, ten-foot ceilings, and beautifully carved molding everywhere. The hardwood floor played peek-a-boo through overlapping runners of thick, expensive oriental carpeting. The man opened the second set of double doors on the foyer's right and held his arm out for Gabriel to enter.

It was a library. A fire crackled in the grate, but the room felt cool despite that and the July heat, probably from the A.C. Floor-to-ceiling built-in bookcases of mahogany lined two walls, and they were filled with leather-bound tomes.

"Wait here, please," the man said mechanically.

He shut the double doors and left.

"Christ," Gabriel breathed. He was about to get a hard-on from the room alone. A library like this had always been Gabriel's dream. It made St. George's look like a garage sale, and Gabriel had put everything he had into the collection at the shop. It hurt him, frankly, when even a single volume sold. Fortunately, that didn't happen often. He walked around and looked at the bindings on the shelves. Dante's *Inferno*, Shakespeare, Homer, Copernicus, Dickens, Trollope, Kafka. Maybe Malia wouldn't be impressed with a signed copy of one of Gabriel's novels.

Near the windows in the back of the room stood a large statue. It was marble and from the rough-hewn sides and base writhed the powerful image of a man entangled in chains. He'd seen it before somewhere . . . Yes. It was in one of the art books at the shop, it was an image that had always drawn his eye. He even remembered the name . . .

"The Rebellious Slave" by Michelangelo. This

must be a reproduction. Mustn't it? He shivered. "What can I do for you ... Detective?" Her silky low voice came from behind him. He turned. She was wearing a garnet-colored silk dress with a high neckline and long, form-fitting sleeves. It was tastefully styled, classic and discreet. There was nothing discreet about the shape beneath it, though. He felt his mouth go dry.

"Thank you for seeing me, Ms. Gedde."

She gave him a tight smile. "It's my civic duty, Detective. I'll be happy to help in any way I can. Please, sit down."

She motioned to two overstuffed brocade chairs by the fireplace. He managed to make it over to one of them without stumbling, even though he had suddenly lost all contact with his feet.

"Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?" He tried to sound professional.

"I assume that's why you're here," she responded, smiling politely.

Gabriel felt himself smiling back. He breathed a deep sigh, not realizing it until he heard it loudly in his own ears. She was waiting patiently.

"Yes. Right. Okay. Did you notice anything out of the ordinary at the lake yesterday or the night before?"

Malia shook her head sadly. "I wish I had, Detective. The only unusual thing I've seen at the lake recently has been you and your men. I do normally spend quite a bit of time out there, but I've been very busy this past week, so ... I wish I could be more help."

"That's quite all right." Gabriel pulled out his notebook and jotted mindlessly into it, hoping to look the part.

He sat for a moment, trying to think of another question. Her gaze was hypnotizing.

"Detective?" she said finally.

He startled. "I'm sorry. It's . . . uh, your eyes are kinda . . . distractin'. I've never seen a color quite like that, if you don't mind me sayin' so."

She raised a cool eyebrow. "You mean . . . brownl"

Gabriel blushed. "They're not brown, they're more a dark gold."

Malia looked away self-consciously. "That's an interesting observation, Detective. Though probably not relevant to your case."

Gabriel smiled rakishly. "A good detective never knows what might be relevant."

A slight smile turned the corner of her mouth,

though she still didn't look at him. "The color of my eyes is probably a safe bet on the 'not' side. Was there something else?"

Gabriel fought to compose his features. Serious. Detective.

"Voodoo," he said abruptly. "Do you know anything about it?"

She shot him a look of amused skepticism.

"Voodoo? Why would you want to know about that?"

"We are investigatin' the Voodoo Murders, ma'am."

"But the papers say that isn't real Voodoo!" She didn't seem to be taking this line of questioning very seriously.

"You shouldn't believe everythin' you read in the papers."

Her bemusement faded into mild curiosity. She studied him lightly. "So you don't agree?"

"Well, frankly . . . The police department isn't known for its imagination."

She crossed her legs. "You seem to be an exception to that rule."

The silk of her dress was taut over the long, muscled thigh on top. He was staring again. She cleared her throat.

Stick to the point, Bucko, he told himself. What was wrong with him? He found it increasingly difficult to focus on the charade. What he really wanted to do was to blurt out everything, confess like a schoolboy, tell her that what he really wanted was to drown in her, just on the wild chance she might say yes ...

He forced his eyes back down on the notebook he was pretending to write in.

"So you know nothing about Voodoo?" Had he already asked that?

She sighed in ... what? Exasperation? Remorse? "I really don't. Isn't there someplace in town you can learn about it?"

"I think there is a museum," he agreed slowly.

Then go there, her gaze said.

He pulled himself upright. "What about the Voodoo Murders, ma'am? Do you know anything about them?" It came out more surly than he'd intended.

"Only what I read in the papers," she said without much interest.

"And what is that?"

"I'm sure you would know better than I. Detective." There was a note of irritation in her voice.

"Yes, of course. But you must know a lot of people in town, Ms. Gedde. A beautiful woman like you . . . Have you heard anything about the murders? Casual talk? Rumors?"

She frowned. "The sort of people I socialize with are not interested in such things. Besides, I don't really get out all that often. I'm more of a recluse than you might imagine."

He saw the crack and leaped for it. "That's unfortunate, if you don't mind my saying so. A woman like yourself..."

"Your opinion is noted, Detective." The sarcasm was back in her voice.

She looked pointedly at her watch. It was a slim, gold and crystal affair. He was running out of time with her, and what possible excuse could he give for coming back? He began to panic.

"Look," he said suddenly. "I'm not making many points here today, am I?"

"I don't suppose it's your job to worry about that."

"Ms. Gedde . . . Malia . . . Before I go, there's something . . . There's something about you that... I'd really like to get to know you better."

There. It was out. He held his breath. Malia Gedde appraised him with disbelief. He'd seen the look before—on numerous occasions, but usually he'd been a lot heavier-handed than just now to earn it. Still, as she gazed into his eyes, as if to read there a clue for the level of outrage she should feel, he saw that disbelief fade instead. She must have seen something earnest in him, for in the end she only sighed and looked away.

"That's very nice of you to say, Detective."

There was a hint of bewilderment in her voice.

He plowed ahead. "Nothing major, of course. Coffee, maybe? Dinner?" He tried to sound light, though light was the last thing he had on his mind.

But the moment had passed. She was closing up inside herself like a moonflower in the sun. "Look, you seem like an interesting person, and I'm sure you have some fascinating stories to tell..."

"Storytelling is just one of my gifts..." It sounded stupidly flirtatious, but he'd say anything to stop what was coming.

"... but I'm afraid I'm quite unavailable at the moment. My mother died recently, and I'm completely overloaded with the family business."

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling like an idiot, "My parents died when I was very young, but I don't

suppose being an adult makes it any easier."

She looked at him blankly. "No, I don't suppose it does."

She stood up suddenly, frowning. "You're not really a detective, are you?"

His heart practically stopped. He scrambled.

"Me? Well, I am on the case, Ms. Gedde."

"I saw you out at the lake yesterday, so I thought you must be with the police, but you don't act like a police officer. Besides, I'm quite sure the other man said his name was Mosely."

Gabriel could barely hear her over the pounding of blood in his ears. He felt his face go a nice beet-red. "I'm sorry," he managed. "You're right. I'm not Detective Mosely. My name is Gabriel Knight and I'm working with Mosely on a book about the murders."

She looked at him narrowly. "Isn't it against the law to impersonate a police officer?"

"Uh ... yes. Detective Mosely doesn't know anythin' about this, ma'am, so ..."

She made an "Ah!" expression, then her gaze grew icy.

"Since you're confessing, perhaps you should also tell me the real reason you're here, Mr. Knight."

"Well, I am doing research for the book ..."

"Try again, please."

He flushed deeper. "Okay. All right. I just ... when I saw you at the lake, I really wanted to see you again." He paused, raised his arms, and shrugged. "That's it. That's the only excuse I have."

He stood awkwardly, wanting only to get out now. How much humiliation could one guy take? But she was staring at him with genuine puzzlement.

"I can't fathom for the life of me why I'm not going to call the police," she said. "I suppose I must be vaguely flattered."

He swallowed. "I predate that. I do apologize again for takin' your time."

She walked over to the library doors and pulled them open. The man who'd shown Gabriel in was there, waiting.

"Robert, show Mr. Knight out, please." Malia's tone was worse than icy—it was already on to other business. Without a good-bye, she left the room.

Robert looked at Gabriel and folded his arms, and smiled. At least someone was happy.

Gabriel stopped and picked up some tacos on the way home. No point in starving again tonight,

even if it would end his misery. He broke his last five with no idea where the next one was going to come from and swallowed what might well be his last meal until he'd figured that out.

Grace was reading the newspaper when he arrived. It was five minutes to closing time. She put the paper down and looked up at him with a worried expression.

"That's two days in a row you've missed your afternoon nap," she teased, but he could tell her heart wasn't in it.

"Been busy," he said, shrugging off his coat.

"Did you have any customers today?"

Grace frowned. "Yes, as a matter of fact I did. Thanks for reminding me to ball you out. A guy named George. Ring any bells?"

Damn!

"Look, Grace ..." he started.

"Gabriel, we do not now, nor have we since I started here, have any Chandler mysteries!"

"Oh," Gabriel said blankly. "My mistake."

"Uh-huh. I'm sure you were just thinking of one of the many other bookstores you own. It doesn't matter. I managed to hook him on some old Time-Life true crime books. Too bad he wasn't a paying customer."

"There's nothing wrong with the barter system, Grace. It's an old Southern tradition."

"Yeah, well, I'll tell that to Southern Bell next time they threaten to disconnect the phone."

"Could you do something for me tonight?" he asked, smiling to get back on her good side.

Assuming she had one he hadn't seen, of course.

"What?"

"Could you look up a Madame Cazaunoux?"

"Oh? Is she 'related to the Voodoo Murders' the way your friend Malia Gedde was?"

"Grace! Cazaunoux's at least seventy!"

"As if that would stop you," Grace sighed. "All right, Sherlock. I'll see what I can find."

Grace walked over to the coatrack. "I have my tai chi class tonight, but I'll check it out when I get home."

"Thanks, Gracie. Sweet dreams."

As if it were that easy. He watched her go, feeling a catch in his throat. Another night. Alone.

Chapter 3

Drawn to Bacchus's abode, I sought there to conspire. But it was in the city of the dead that I found my heart's desire.

June 20, 1993

He knew he had dreamt again when he awoke the next morning. He didn't remember anything, which was unusual, but he awoke tired, his muscles sore, and the sheet on the bed was twisted around him like a shroud. The clock on his bedside was missing, and after searching for a moment, he found it lying on the floor just under the bed, blinking a complaint about a temporary loss of power. He might not remember the dream, but it must have been a doozy.

He showered before coffee, a departure from routine, and pulled on one of the pairs of Levi's and one of the many white T-shirts that made up the entirety of his wardrobe. He was already making a mental list of what he had to do that day—planning anything being yet another departure from routine—as he stepped through the heavy curtain that separated his studio from the shop front and ran smack into Grace, nearly toppling the full load of books she carried in her arms.

"You're the only person I know who can get out of bed in the morning and jump right into being in the way!" Grace said cheerfully, maneuvering around him and setting down her cargo.

"Good morning to you, too, Grade." He headed for the coffee.

"That guy from Germany called again this morning. Wolfgang Ritter? Now he's claiming to be a relative of yours." She dusted off her hands and wiped her brow. "It's going to be hot today."

"A relative? My my."

"Yeah, poor bastard. I took down his name and number. It's stuck to the cash register."

"Great," Gabriel said distractedly. He sipped his coffee and picked up the day's newspaper from next to the coffeepot where Grace always left it. He scanned it casually for anything about the murders.

"And your pal Mosely called, too. Said he was interrogating a suspect this morning and you might want to come by."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow behind the paper.

"Sounds like fun."

"I bet. Police Brutality 101," Grace said dryly.

"You'll be happy to know I didn't even tell him what a schmuck he was being for believing you about that book crap."

"Book?" Gabriel said innocently.

"Save it. You told him you'd write a true crime book about the Voodoo Murders case. Featuring

him, naturally. He told me."

"Well, I..."

"When in reality," Grace continued calmly, "your new novel is about a female orthodontist who gets entangled in a Voodoo cult while touring New Orleans."

"I might change it," Gabriel said defensively, "I keep an open mind."

"Uh-huh."

"Did you, uh . . . did Mosely ..."

"Don't have a cow. I left Mosely his illusions. I figured it'd be better to wait until the book actually comes out and let him kill you then."

"Thanks," Gabriel said, relieved.

"No problem," Grace replied.

He returned to the newspaper. A notice caught his eye. There was a lecture today at Tulane on African religions. It was set for 1:00. He made a mental note of it—wasn't Voodoo based on African religions, according to Dr. John?

He put the paper down and realized that Grace was studying him from her seat at the desk. There was a delight in her eyes that Gabriel did not care for at all.

"Are you going to tell me what happened yesterday with Malia Gedde or is it just too embarrassing?"

"Gentlemen never kiss and tell." He gave her a big wink.

She regarded him with suspicion. "You don't expect me to believe that you actually got in to see her?"

"And why not?"

"Why would someone like Malia Gedde agree to see you?"

"You've always underestimated the Knight family's tragic 'poet-samurai' appeal."

"Humph! Underestimating anything about you would be impossible." She sat back and bit her lip worriedly.

"Well, one wouldn't expect you to have the refined tastes that, say, Malia Gedde has, for example."

Grace looked at him quizzically. "Look, I don't know if you're serious or what, but I really think you should be careful about her. I have this bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. I'm not usually wrong."

Gabriel gave her a sardonic look. "Perhaps, when it comes to your crossword puzzles, but from what I've seen of your social life this summer, love

isn't exactly your area of expertise, Grade."

She scowled. "And from what I've seen of your social life this summer, you don't know what the word means."

He put down his cup and held up his hands in a submissive gesture. "Touche. Truce, okay?"

Her scowl lessened a little.

"I know you're worried, and I appreciate it." He offered, "I'm fine, though, really. Did you get anything on Cazaunoux?"

Grace picked up a thin yellow page from the desk. "I checked the phone book and there were multiple Cazaunouxes listed. Since I haven't a clue who you're looking for, I got the page for you, but you'll have to figure out the right one yourself."

"Thanks." Gabriel walked over to the desk and took the page. He took the phone number from the register while he was at it. He almost crumpled it, but then decided to pocket it instead.

"About before ..." Grace said awkwardly. Her voice always stiffened when she got within two feet of an apology. "It must be my maternal hormones surfacing. Forget it. I could really care less. Your life is in your own slippery little hands, Knight."

"For now," he agreed, "but the point is to get it into somebody else's hands. And soon." He winked at her lasciviously. She turned coral and stuck her nose back into the books.

* * *

Gabriel headed for the police station, hoping that he hadn't missed anything yet. He slipped inside Mosely's office quietly, hearing voices coming from behind the door.

Mosely was perched on his desk. A black uniformed officer stood to one side, arms folded, face blank. Both men were focused on the figure in the visitor's chair. It was a male of the impossibly small-and-wiry variety that always made Gabriel think of horse jockeys. It was clear that this specimen, however, would never be a player at Ashton Downs. His skin was mostly Caucasian in tone with just a fine blush of tan, but he had thick black dreadlocks that were as frizzled and unwashed and randomly broken off or determinedly protruding as the straw bristles of an old porch broom. He looked to be in his early twenties, though it was hard to tell. He had a strange combination of a youthful form and older-than-

death carriage. Whatever else the boy was, he was clearly terrified. Even from behind him, Gabriel could hear the chattering teeth and see the trembling that racked the boy's body—from the quivering top of that knotty hair to the soles of his dirty old Dock-Sides that shuddered against the tile floor like a hunk of raw meat in a frying pan. Mosely shot Gabriel a scorching look that, to Gabriel's mind, had no discernible provocation unless it was simply a warning to keep his head down. He leaned against the back wall of the office and kept quiet.

"Come on, Crash," Mosely resumed in a querulous tone. "We know these murders have something to do with the underground in New Orleans. You have your ear to the wall. I'm only asking you to tell me what you've heard."

"I don't know nothin', I swear to God!" The boy's teeth clattered so hard it was a wonder he didn't bite his own tongue off.

"Yeah, you and my grandmother! You've been in here, what, four or five times giving us information on underground activities. You can't play dumb with me now. At the very least there's word on the street, and I wanna know what it is."

"Nobody says nothin'. Nobody talks about it. I swear!"

"Bullshit! You can't piss in this town without everybody talking about it!"

"There are some things nobody talks about. Look, ya gotta let me go. I... word'll get out that I was here. Please. I'm beggin' you, man."

"You tell me what I want to know and you're free to go," Mosely counteroffered, folding his arms.

"I don't know nothin'!"

The boy looked around with haunted eyes, like he was expecting the walls to look back. His glazed eyes moved over Gabriel in the back of the room and dismissed him. He muttered under his breath.

"I gotta get word out, that's all. Didn't say nothin'. Not my fault. They can't blame me for gettin' picked up."

Mosely pounced on this utterance. "Who are 'they,' Crash? Are 'they' the ones doing the Voodoo Murders?"

But Crash was ignoring Mosely. Even Gabriel could see that the boy's panic was putting him beyond the reach of reason or even coherence. Mosely scowled and gave it another shot.

"Crash, listen to me. Listen!" Mosely leaned into the boy's face and tried to fix him with his

eyes. "I'll let you go. Right now, if you want. I just need you to tell me what the word is on the street about these killings. It's connected with the underground, I already know that. Tell me how, Crash. You don't have to say who, just tell me how and why. Rumors, that's all I want."

Crash glanced at him for a moment, then looked away.

"Don't know nothin'," he mumbled. "Didn't say nothin'. Sweet Jesus, I swear to God!"

His eyes resumed their tour of the room. They seemed to rest on one of Mosely's jazz posters. He suddenly burst out.

"Please, for Christ's sake, let me go!" He grabbed Mosely's pants leg and clung to it, his eyes begging Mosely's.

"Oh, for the love of ... !" Mosely said. He stood up, disgusted.

"All right, Crash. I'm tired of fucking with you. I'm locking you up. When you decide you really want to leave, you tell the guard you'll talk. Got that?"

Crash moaned and tugged at his hair with clenched fingers. Yeah, he got that.

Mosely signaled to the uniformed officer. The man took Crash from the room and shut the door.

"What was all that about?" Gabriel asked Mosely. "Why's he so worked up?"

"Goddamn it, I don't know," Mosely said irritably. "He's probably stoned. We picked him up this morning at Jackson Square. He's been like that since we brought him in. Gotta have them do a blood test on him."

"He acts stoned."

"Yeah. Damn!" Mosely looked as beat and frustrated as Gabriel had ever seen him. "I've been looking for him for three days, too. He's an informer for us. Gave us help before busting local pimps and drug dealers. Usually small-time rookies trying to break in, but, you know, every little bit counts. I know he's got connections. I thought for sure he'd give us something."

"Maybe he does know somethin'. Maybe that's why he's so scared," Gabriel offered.

"Maybe don't get me from here to Tuesday. I can keep him in for twenty-four hours—we found a little bit of pot on him. If he won't talk by tomorrow morning, though, I'll have to let him go."

"You don't think he had anythin' to do with the murders, do you?"

Mosely grunted. "Hell, no. Did you get a good

look at him?"

Gabriel nodded. "Not exactly the lethal type. More like a kid."

"A fucked-wp kid. He's been on smack since he was fifteen. Crash will do anything for money. And has, I'm sure."

Gabriel didn't even like to think about things like that. "Anything else new with the case?"

Mosely grunted again. "I wish, I..."

Suddenly something dawned on Mosely, his face got that dark look it had when Gabriel entered.

"Goddamn you, Knight!"

"What?" Gabriel said innocently.

"You took my badge yesterday, didn't you?"

Gabriel blushed. Oh. That. "It was kind of an accident," he said.

"Uh-huh. Just leaped right off my blazer into your pocket. I bet. You know I had a picture with the superintendent yesterday? You ever try explaining to your boss that you lost your police badge?"

Gabriel pulled it out of his jacket pocket.

"Sorry, Bud. It was for a good cause, though."

He tossed it on the desk.

"I don't wanna hear it! You wanted to impress some girl, no doubt. I should have you locked up!"

"Seems to me there was that time you 'borrowed' my motorcycle from the front of my shop without askin'," Gabriel said thoughtfully.

Mosely glared at Gabriel, but that shut him up, at least.

"You ever do that again, it'll be full prosecution. You hear me, Knight?"

"I promise. Never again. Really. I meant to bring it back last night but, you know, I forgot."

Mosely looked slightly mollified, but he wasn't done grousing. "You get me fired, you can fucking pay my salary," he threatened.

Uh-huh. The line forms to the left, bud. "Don't worry. Won't. Sorry," Gabriel said calmly.

Gabriel escaped Mosely's glower as soon as he could. It took a lot to get Mosely's back up, but once evoked it was best to just get out of the way until his anger had run its course. Another day and Mosely would be fine. Or so Gabriel hoped.

Max had set up his easel on the grass a few feet from where he'd been the previous day. He was working on a new drawing now, one of the Pontalba, but his movements were listless and his heart didn't seem to be in it. He startled when

Gabriel walked up and said his name.

"Oh, it's only you," he said, sighing.

"How'd it go last night?" Gabriel asked.

"Great. Good. I finished it. I thought it had taken me a couple of hours, but when I looked at the clock it was three A.M."

Max pulled a rolled-up paper from his toolbox. It was bound with a rubber band. Gabriel took the paper and unrolled it. On the coarse white drawing paper was a peculiar double circle shape with protruding symbols.

"Wow. That's really it?" Gabriel asked.

"I think so. Close as I can get, anyway."

It did look right. Or, rather, it felt right. Something in the pattern stroked a familiar chord in Gabriel's memory, but why? He had never seen it before, had he?

"You've been great. Thanks," Gabriel told Max, rolling up the drawing.

"I'm just glad to get rid of it. It was, well, I dunno. Last night I had the strangest feeling when I'd finished it. Like ... like someone was looking at me. Really kinda freaked me out. You said that thing was from Haiti?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Good reason never to go, I guess." Max laughed nervously. "I just hope I didn't piss anybody off, you know?"

Gabriel frowned. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any trouble."

Max smiled gamely. "Forget it. I don't know what I'm saying. I don't believe in that stuff. Just ... just take the thing and good luck with it, okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks," Gabriel said.

Max went back to his drawing. His stroke was a little firmer now.

Gabriel crossed the lawn, headed for his bike.

He was halted by a flash of gold and purple gauze. It was a fortune-teller. She had a booth set up on the lawn and the sign on the front proclaimed her to be "Madame Lorelei," and gave a list of her services. Palm reading, \$15.00; Crystal Ball Reading, \$20.00; Numerology Reading, \$25.00.

She was pretty and young and scantily clad, all of which caused Gabriel's eye to linger. Her dark hair was thick and curly and just brushed the tops of her shoulders. Her outfit resembled that of a belly dancer more than a fortune-teller. Her feet were bare except for gold chains that connected her ankles to her toes just—apparently—for the

sheer hell of it. Her purple gauze and gold-sequined harem pants and top were transparent—all but the important parts, that is. Her stomach was bare, her navel pierced with a small gold hoop. There was a matching one protruding from her left nostril.

None of that, though, was quite enough to intrigue Gabriel with so much already on his mind. It wasn't her prettily displayed breasts that drew his eyes though she clearly thought so, based on the semi-amused, appraising looks she returned. No, his gaze was aimed a few inches higher than that—on the large snake that she had draped behind her neck and over her shoulders. The snake reminded Gabriel of the snake in the Voodoo museum. Or, rather, its younger, sickly brother. The snake was definitely smaller, yet it was a constrictor of some sort, Gabriel felt certain. Its body was quite thick and looked very muscular. It was napping in the summer heat, securely and comfortably draped on its unsteady post. Gabriel approached the booth and Madame Lorelei smiled up at him, blinking her thick, false lashes.

"Vat do you vish?" she said in a deep Hungarian accent.

"I noticed your snake. Interesting."

She smiled wickedly. "I could zay the zame of you."

Amazingly, Gabriel blushed. "What kind of snake is it?" he asked.

"Giselle is a python," she replied. She reached up and touched the snake fondly. "Giselle" slept on.

"Do you think I could, uh . . . You wouldn't happen to have any loose scales, would you?"

"Snake scales?" Madame Lorelei's voice went from Hungarian to Brooklyn.

"Yeah. Snake scales. Just one would be fine, actually."

She looked at him warily. "No. I don't."

"Oh. Well, thanks."

He started to walk away, but she called him back.

"Don't you vant me to tell your fortune?"

Gabriel looked up at the sign.

"Maybe some other time," he said dryly. Even if he had fifteen dollars, this is the last place he'd spend it.

Madame Lorelei pouted. "You can at least vatch me dance," she said. "I was about to anyvay."

She got up and signaled to the leader of a rag-time ensemble that was playing nearby. The band

leader nodded and the band cut off their song and began playing a New Orleans version of a snake charmer tune.

Gabriel watched Madame Lorelei belly dance with her snake. Obviously, it was a ploy to draw customers for her fortune telling, particularly male customers, and it worked like a charm. Men began circling in like ants to & barbecue. She worked the crowd expertly, paying special attention to Gabriel. On her third time around the circle, Gabriel figured, what the hell, and began to return her flirting. He whistled at her in a low tone and gave her his burning gaze—or, at least, a fifty percent power version—he wasn't that serious. By the end of the song, she was wrapping him in the gauzy veils she pulled from her dwindling harem pants. He gritted his teeth at the public humiliation and kept smiling. After all, she did have that snake.

She finished her dance, picked up her veils, and glided back to her booth. Three men followed eagerly. Gabriel noticed a veil she'd missed on the ground. He picked it up.

He was waiting for the men at the booth to finish, figuring he'd give the snake bit another shot, now that she was consumed with passion for him, when he examined the veil. It had a number of shiny gold sequins on it, but one of them looked quite dull, as if the gold paint had worn off. He turned his back to her and pulled out his magnifying glass to get a better look. Yes. It was a scale, not a sequin. He carefully removed it from the veil with his tweezers and compared it to the scale he had from Lake Pontchartrain. The two were enough alike for Gabriel to convince himself that the scale from the lake was a snake scale, not a fish scale. Beyond that, the comparison only proved that Madame Lorelei's snake was not the one that had left a piece of itself behind at the crime scene. The colors on her snake's scale were various shades of brown. Madame Lorelei's crowd cleared and Gabriel stepped up to the booth.

"You dropped this," he said, handing her the veil. He looked at her snake again, to make sure it didn't have different color tones elsewhere on its body, but it was consistently brown.

"Why zank you, darlink," she cooed. "Dese things are not cheap. You just sit right down here and tell me your name."

"Gabriel Knight," he said awkwardly. He didn't

sit down. Having found the scale, he was ready to leave, but before he could bow out gracefully, she'd taken possession of his left hand.

"Sit, darlink," she said. She was pressing his hand in hers and gently opening the fingers. He could be totally rude or he could sit down. Her teasing touch on his palm decided him. He sat.

"I don't have the fifteen bucks."

"The veil is worth at least that, handsome man," she cooed. "And I really want to get a look at your future."

He wished she'd get a look already and hurry up. She looked at his palm.

"Oh, good! I see that you will soon fall for a mysterious and beautiful lady." She winked at him knowingly.

Gabriel smiled politely.

"And you have the possibility of great fortune ahead!" she breathed. She seemed particularly excited about that. "Great fortune or ..." She paused.

Gabriel waited.

But Madame Lorelei did not say anything. His hand remained clasped firmly in hers. He looked at her, waiting for her to go on. Her head was bent. She did not move. He leaned forward to see her face.

Her skin had drained of color. Sweat was beaded on her cheeks and above her lips, which were turning blue. She stared down at his hand, unblinking.

"Christ! Are you all right?"

She looked up at him slowly, her eyes wide and strangely blank.

"There are ... forces." The words came from her mouth, but the voice was neither Hungarian nor Brooklyn, nor female, nor even human. The snake that was wrapped around her shoulders awoke suddenly, tensed, and hissed.

Gabriel wrenched his hand from her grasp, knocking his chair over as he jumped back to get away from her and her snake.

But she was on her feet, too, and swaying. Her hands went up to cover her face.

"Oh, God," she sobbed, in her own choked voice. "Beware! Beware!"

She took off running across the lawn and had disappeared within seconds, snake and all.

"I'm back," he said rather unnecessarily to Grace as he hung up his coat.

"Didn't know you were gone," she muttered

with great disinterest, not looking up from her ledgers. At the moment, Gabriel found great comfort in her cool sarcasm. It beat the hell out of hysterical belly dancers.

He went back to his studio and pulled out the phone-book page Grace had given him. There were five listings. Two of them included street addresses, but his instinct told him Madame would not be one of those. He started dialing. His approach was the same for each number. He used his most effluent Southern lilt. He always found it amazing that hamming up the drawl made other Southerners intuitively respond like blood relatives.

"Hello. I'm callin' from the Dixieland Drugstore? About your order?"

The first number was answered by a young woman who told him politely that he had the wrong person, she'd never heard of the place, and hung up. The second and third numbers drew similar responses. He crossed them off. There went his two addresses.

On the fourth try, the first sound he heard was that of a small dog barking. Yap, yap, yap. An old woman's gravelly voice answered. "Hello?"

Bingo.

"Hi. I'm calling from the Dixieland Drugstore? We have an order for you?"

"Who is this?" The woman was immediately suspicious.

"I do deliveries for Mr. Walker, ma'am? I got out in my truck this mornin' and forgot the addresses? Could you just tell me ..."

Yap, yap, yap. The dog must be psychic. It wanted to rip his face off.

"Hush, Castro!" the old woman warned the dog. "I already have my order, young man, and you tell Mr. Walker that I don't appreciate his delivery boys calling this number!"

The phone went dead in his hands.

Gabriel put down the receiver thoughtfully.

He'd found Madame, and that was good, but he didn't have an address, and that was bad. He drummed his fingers in thought. Then he spied something else on the phone-book page. It was worth a shot.

"Cajun Critters Animal Clinic, this is Melissa."

The veterinarian's receptionist sounded young, friendly, and busy, all of which were in his favor. She was the sixth one he'd tried.

"Hi. I'm calling about a Madame Cazaunoux?"

She z's a client of yours, isn't she?"

"Uh-huh. Or, rather, her dog is." The girl giggled.

"Of course. Hey, you're Melissa, right?" He oozed boyish charm.

"Yeah," the girl said, obviously pleased. Duh.

"Yeah, my aunt mentioned you. I'm Madame Cazaunoux's nephew?"

"Uh-huh. Hold on," the girl said distractedly.

In the background, Gabriel could hear that there was someone with her who needed heart worm medicine. Gabriel suppressed a shiver of disgust.

She came back on in a minute. "What can I do for you, Mr. . . ."

"Cazaunoux," he lied smoothly. "Hey, is my aunt there, by any chance, Melissa?"

"No," the girl said, confused. "She doesn't have an appointment today."

"Oh, shucks! I was hopin' . . . You see, I just got into town. I've forgotten her address and no one answers the phone, you know? I'm a bit worried . . . She's in that house all alone and she's gettin' up there. Do you have her address on file by any chance?"

Melissa sounded sympathetic in her reply, but not sympathetic enough. "Gosh, Mr. Cazaunoux, you know what?—I do, but I'm not supposed to give that kind of thing out to people."

Gabriel thought fast. "I admire that, Melissa. Some folks just aren't responsible, you know? But, um, I'm kinda worried about her and Castro."

"Castro? You think something might have happened to him? He's just the sweetest little thing!" The girl was now genuinely alarmed.

Couldn't care less about the old lady but the dog was a different matter. Okay.

"He is a charmer, isn't he? If my aunt was sick or something ... Well, she's the only one there to take care of him," Gabriel said, pressing the point. He had a disturbing mental picture of what a cute little thing like Castro would be munching on if indeed he were alone in the house with a dead old woman.

"Well, I guess if it's to check on Castro . . ."

Melissa said, wavering. "Hold on."

A minute later, Gabriel was jotting down an address on St. James Street. He hung up the phone and stretched, feeling mighty pleased with himself. Maybe he should open a detective agency. Hell, it had to be more lucrative than writing

horror novels.

He was about to go when his eyes fell on the book of poetry he'd brought home from Gran's attic. He'd left it on his desk, not exactly in a rush to get it out in the patronless bookshop, but now he was feeling so uncharacteristically boosted by success that the notion of an actual customer manifesting no longer seemed implausible. He picked up the volume and examined it again, trying to gauge a price that was high enough to be gouging but not so high as to put off a really determined buyer.

He read the first poem in the book. Despite his mental struggle with pronunciation, something in the beauty of the language thrilled him. He strolled out to the shop with the book, smiling.

"Gracie, listen to this," he said as he emerged.

"Drei Dmchen kriechenin in meinen Schlaf, die Seele woll'n sie lebendig zum Frass.

Feurigen Atems, gespaltener Zunge, geniessen sie jedes Mahl."

Grace sat up in her chair and looked at the book in his hands. "Interesting. What does it mean?"

"Beats the hell out of me." He strolled over to the reference section. "We have a German-English dictionary around here somewhere, don't we?"

"Right under the window."

The dictionary, too, had been Granddad's.

Gabriel located the book and pulled it out.

"Drei means three, I know that much," Grace offered.

"Drachen then," Gabriel muttered, leafing through to the D's. Why it should matter he couldn't say, but he was suddenly curious.

"Dragons," he mused, reading the entry.

Grace piped up. "Drei Drachen. Three dragons. That's interesting. I wonder if it's an analogy? I studied symbolism in school, you know. The dragon is one of the oldest. It means hidden knowledge, esoteric mysteries, sometimes associated with Lucifer, Light Bearer."

"That's pleasant," Gabriel replied. The girl did go on.

"Yeah. The dragon symbol is older than the concept of the devil, too, which is probably why Satan is depicted with a tail and horns. He's just a newer version of the same thing."

"You're a walkin' encyclopedia, Grade."

"Well, shoot me for being less ignorant than a box of rocks," Grace said irritably. "Me, I've always hated snakes. That's where our fear of

snakes comes from, you know, or the symbol comes from our fear of snakes. One or the other."

"What the hell do dragons and the devil have to do with snakes?" Gabriel said, confused.

Grace rolled her eyes. "Same thing, dummy. The snake symbol is the same as the dragon, and the devil for that matter. They're interchangeable."

An idea crossed visibly over Grace's face and she glanced up at the painting that hung over the desk. It was the only piece of art on display in the bookshop. It morbidly depicted a stripped human skull. Three snakes wound around and through the skull's empty sockets. Grace had never hid her dislike of it, nor her opinion that it didn't do much for business, but it was the only painting Gabriel had of his father's, and he was determined to display it. She'd been more tolerant of it since he told her who'd painted it. She had this Japanese thing about ancestors.

"Hey. Three snakes . . . three dragons. It's the same imagery. That's weird," Grace said thoughtfully.

Gabriel glanced up at the painting, suddenly feeling cold. He remembered the drawings he'd found in his father's sketchbook. He hadn't connected them to the painting until now.

"And the name of the shop," Grace continued thoughtfully. "St. George. He was always depicted fighting a dragon—that whole good versus evil thing." Grace was getting an excited tone in her voice. "How'd you decide on the name St. George's Books, anyway?"

How had he? He'd found an old coatrack at a rummage sale years ago, a coatrack shaped like St. George. Tacky and chipped, yes, but it had immediately struck him. As soon as he'd seen it, he'd pictured it standing in his own bookshop one day, and in fact, it now stood near the front door. But he'd only had a vague notion of owning a bookshop then, so why exactly had he bought the gaudy relic and why name the shop after it?

"Don't remember," he lied.

"Uh-huh. Who's the author of the poem?"

"Heinz Ritter," he said, his mind elsewhere.

"You know him?"

"Uh-uh." But the book had been in Granddad's trunk, hadn't it? Had Granddad bought the book for the same reason Gabriel had bought the coatrack? Or was there something even deeper to it? He tried to calm down. Grace and her blathering were getting to him.

"I gotta go," he said suddenly. He put the dictionary back.

Grace was studying him with a puzzled expression.

"Want me to look up the rest of the poem while you're out?" she offered.

He paused. Did he really want to know? But that was dumb. "Yeah, okay. But don't sell the book, right?"

She shrugged with an expression that clearly indicated her conviction that she wouldn't be selling anything to anybody anytime soon. He gave her the book reluctantly and left the shop.

He was halfway to the Cazaunoux house when the striking chimes of a church pervaded his thoughts and reminded him of something he'd filed away earlier. One o'clock. He slowed down the bike and hesitated in the middle of the street. Would the Tulane lecture tell him anything new or would it be a waste of time? He'd never given a rolling fuck about time before—wasted or otherwise, but lately he had a budding consciousness of the hours slipping by. He could almost hear the sound of sand whisking through the hourglass. Either time had speeded up or he had. Either way, it was a new sensation, and he didn't much care for it.

Sighing, he turned the bike around and headed for the University.

He was late. The lecture hall was mostly empty. Spatterings of students, alone and in small groups, dusted the room like flies on a cake. The lights were down and a slide show was in progress. Gabriel fumbled for a seat.

"In tribal Africa, each tribe had their own culture, but tribal religions all had the same basic core. This is the religious system known as Voudoun." The lecturer's voice was clipped and arrogantly intellectual. The kind of voice, Gabriel thought, that indicated a stick up the ass about the size of New Hampshire.

"Voudoun worships a pantheon of spirits, known as Loa. Some Loa are elementals—spirits of water, fire, earth, and air. Some relate to specific tasks or places—for example, the spirit of the crossroads or that of the graveyard. Some Loa are the spirits of tribal ancestors.

"This pantheon is not static. New spirits are born, old spirits are forgotten. This is precisely why it has never died. When one tribe would war with another, the chief Loa of the victor would be adopted by the losing tribe—after all, the god was

powerful if he beat them, wasn't he? Similarly, when European slavers kidnapped Africans from their homeland, they kidnapped Voudoun, too. Today Voudoun thrives—in Africa, of course, but also all over the world, in hybrids, assimilating easily the gods and saints of Christian faith. Indeed, it thrives right here in New Orleans." This sounded like it might be relevant after all. If Gabriel could stay awake.

"Trying to trace the beginning of Voudoun is not unlike trying to trace the dawn of man. Since Africa is the cradle of the human race, the two may be one and the same. The oldest known pagan practices on other continents show traits of Voudoun—animal totems, sympathetic magic, and a pantheon of gods.

"We still can't explain the real power of these primal religions. There are African bokors who baffle our scientists with their supernatural powers. Now let's discuss the elements of Voudoun ..."

Gabriel stifled a yawn. He was genuinely interested in the material, even if he didn't care for the tone in which it was delivered, but his eyelids were responding in time-honored fashion. Since grammar school they'd displayed an odd association, no doubt a mental syndrome not unlike color blindness or dyslexia, in which the mere sound of a lecturing voice caused them to grow to the size of boulders. He forced himself to tune back in.

"During a Voudoun ceremony, celebrants are possessed by the Loa. This is called 'being ridden.' "

The slide projector came to life, withdrawing the map of Africa that had been up since Gabriel entered and bursting forth with a photograph of a man in a state of possession. His eyes rolled back in his head, his body spasmed, his lips curled into a hideous grin. Gabriel was suddenly very awake. The photo looked frighteningly inhuman, like looking at something not of this plane.

"Human worshipers are seen as horses, the Loa as the Divine Horsemen. A person being ridden takes on the characteristics of the Loa and becomes, in effect, merely a vessel for the more powerful entity."

Other pictures of ceremonial possession flashed by in the darkness—a woman wearing flour on her face flirting with men through glazed eyes, a man strutting like a rooster.

"To the Voudoun practitioners, possession serves two purposes. First, it is a gift to the Loa.

They believe spirits long for flesh to dance and sing, to make love, to eat and drink. Thus the worshipers offer their own bodies, hoping to please the gods and gain favor. Second, when a Loa possesses the body of a worshiper, Voudoun believers are granted direct physical communion with a god. It is a very intimate and personal deity/worshiper relationship. Can you imagine what it would feel like if Christ or Jehovah attended your church or synagogue services, personally?"

The spasming bodies disappeared, replaced by painted figures in gaudy costumes.

"Who or what are the Loa? It varies from group to group, but some of the widely worshiped African Loa include Damballah, the great serpent god; Erzulie, the 'mistress of love'; Paper Nebo or Cede, the Lord of Death; Aqwe, spirit of water; Legba, spirit of the crossroads; and the cruelest and most dangerous—Ogoun Badagris, the Lord of Destruction."

Paintings of a snake, a woman in a mantle, a skeleton figure in a tall hat, and others flashed by. The last figure was dressed like a soldier. The eyes, although painted, seemed to bore directly into the student audience menacingly.

"Voudoun temples are called hounfour. A hounfour has a ritual circle marked by a center pole called a poteau-mitan. The ritual circle is prepared with a veve—a pattern of symbols. Each group's veve is slightly different, consisting of complex symbols that identify their specific Loa."

A slide of a veve flashed up on the screen. It was a series of symbols, done in flour on a dirt floor around a center pole. Flowers and snakelike lines radiated out from the center. Gabriel studied it. It wasn't the same as the drawing Max had done, but it was the same principle. Yes. He was sure the drawing he had was of a vevel

"During ritual ceremonies, called 'conclaves,' initiates dance under the supervision of a bokor and mamaloo. The use of totems, or animal masks and markings, was not uncommon in the original African ceremonies. Now, though, all but the oldest sects have abandoned this practice."

A very old photograph, apparently taken in tribal Africa, showed a conclave taking place around a bonfire. The participants were realistically decorated with animal heads and paints.

Leopard fur.

"Ritual objects used during the conclaves include the ritual gourd or assort..."

A photograph of a bead-encircled gourd appeared.

"... the ritual knife or ku-bha-sah ..."

The gourd was usurped by a photograph, like an evidence photograph, of a knife with a curved blade. It occurred to Gabriel that the knife on the screen was surprisingly like the one from the museum, but his eyelids were doing their thing again.

". . . the ritual whip orfwet kash . . ."

The knife became a braided leather whip.

". . . and the ritual coffin or sekey madoule."

A photograph of a man wearing death-mask paint and carrying a small coffin on his shoulders appeared. The coffin was so small. . .

Gabriel yawned enormously.

"These items are often optional, called for by the mamaloo for specific magical rituals. In some Voudoun sects, the mamaloo is the most powerful figure. Voudoun easily becomes a matriarchal system when a strong priestess line emerges, for a mamaloo can inherently possess more power than a bokor."

"She mutter mumble grumble ..."

The voice droned on, but Gabriel was no longer awake to hear it.

"Gabriel?"

Huh? He was drifting in a womblike blackness. He pushed the voice away, didn't want to be disturbed.

"Gabriel? Get in."

Wha? The voice was deep and male and heavily accented. He brushed it aside in irritation. There was nothing to get in to.

Then a speck of color appeared in the darkness. It grew larger, then took shape. It rushed toward him.

A coffin.

No. He muttered, suddenly terrified. 7 won't.

"Gabriel, it's safe," the voice said. It was reassuring, urgent.

The coffin's lid opened and the box rushed closer, enveloped him.

He woke, voicing a half shout. Fortunately, the lecture hall was already deserted.

* * *

The name of the professor who'd given the lecture was Hartridge, or so a young woman waiting outside for a ride had informed him. Gabriel found Hartridge's office with little trouble.

"Are you a student?" Hartridge asked rudely

as Gabriel walked in. He barely glanced up from his work.

"No. My name is Knight. Gabriel Knight."

Hartridge was unimpressed. "You have wandered into my private office, Mr. Knight."

"I know. I was at your lecture and I . . ."

"Yes, you were. I trust you had a good nap."

Gabriel blushed. "Nothin' personal. Just kinda overtakes me. I s'pose that's why it took me five years to get my undergraduate degree." He grinned rakishly, hoping the personal revelation would break the ice.

It didn't. "Really?" Hartridge said dryly. "I, myself, did it in three."

Gabriel suppressed a smart-ass reply with supreme effort. He took a deep breath and forced himself to smile. "Guess that's why you're behind the desk, and I'm here to consult the expert."

Hartridge looked up and finally put his pen down.

"What about?"

"About somethin' that may or may not be related to your Voodoo, Professor."

"I'm listening," Hartridge said. He crossed his arms skeptically.

Gabriel took out the pattern Max had given him. He handed it to Hartridge, studying him carefully for a reaction. Hartridge opened the paper and stared at the piece intently. He didn't say anything for several minutes.

"Mind if I copy this?" he asked.

Gabriel shrugged. "Knock yourself out."

Hartridge left the room hurriedly, still looking at the paper in his hands. When he returned he handed Gabriel his original, and put a photocopy on his desk, where he continued to look at it.

"I was thinkin' it might be one of those veve things," Gabriel said carefully.

"So it is," Hartridge replied.

Gabriel felt a rush of excitement, but kept his tone casual. "Have you ever seen this one before?"

"No. Not quite." Hartridge looked up at him.

"Where did you get this?" His eyes burned with interest. His curiosity was definitely piqued.

Gabriel considered his response for a moment, then decided he'd get more using the big bait.

"Have you heard about the Voodoo Murders, Professor?"

The blood drained from Hartridge's face. "The ones in the papers? My word! I hadn't paid any attention! I didn't . . . the papers said it was fake Voodoo!"

"Perhaps it is," Gabriel said carefully.

"Mr. Knight, if this veve is from those murders . . . God knows what you're dealing with."

Hartridge looked down at the veve again, his face puzzled and scared. "Whatever it is, it's not fake."

"What do you mean, 'God knows what you're dealing with'? Doesn't the veve tell you that?"

Hartridge shook his head. "It's not from any sect I recognize. Some of these symbols are old, very old. And there are some that I've never seen at all." He sighed in frustration. "I- don't know how to explain it to you. It's like finding ancient Summerian graffiti downtown. That's how old some of this stuff is. I haven't seen it in modern practice anywhere."

He continued to stare at it. "And in conjunction with murders ... ? It's very bizarre."

Gabriel fished the crime scene photograph from his pocket. He handed it to Hartridge.

"Hope you haven't eaten recently," he added.

Hartridge took the photograph and studied it, too. On the surface he maintained the composure of a scientist used to things like autopsies, but Gabriel could tell that he was excited, excited and scared beneath the facade.

"Mean anything to you?"

Hartridge shook his head. "Looks ritualistic to me, but I've never seen this in Voudoun. Looks more Aztecan."

"Cabrit sans cord?" Gabriel tried.

Hartridge looked thoughtful. "Yes, true. But I've never actually seen it practiced."

Gabriel felt a rush. "That phrase means something to you?"

"Of course. But it's cor'—cabrit sans cor'. It's a Haitian term. It means 'goat without horns.' "

"As in a female goat?" Gabriel asked, confused.

"As in a human sacrifice, Mr. Knight."

"But you just said they don't do that!"

Hartridge's eyes were bright. "No! I've never seen it done, or heard of it being done. That doesn't mean they don't have a word for it. Theoretically, human sacrifice is possible."

"Under what conditions?"

Hartridge sighed. He obviously found Gabriel's ignorance a difficult gulf to bridge. "You have to understand. During the ceremony, the looker or mamaloo makes sacrifices to the Loa. The Loa are asked what they want. Chicken is the common sacrifice, but goats and bulls are also given on

occasion. Theoretically, if the Loa demanded a human sacrifice, it would be necessary to give it one. The fear of this occurring is built into their rituals. For example, one of the chants I heard at a Haitian ceremony went like this:

"Mistress Erzulie, come and aid us.

If a cock is demanded, we will give it.

If a bull will suffice, behold it.

But if a goat without horns is required for sacrifice, oh, where will we find one?

"Erzulie is the gentlest of Loa, so they call on her for mercy. But this is just part of the theater of it all, a titillating fear. I've never seen it actually happen, nor ever heard of it happening. Not even with the so-called Black Voodoo sects."

"Black Voodoo?"

"Certain sects dedicated to the darker Loa, such as the Cult des Marts. They're incredibly secretive and very much feared, but their focus is on making spells, powerful spells, using the remains of the dead. Human fat, bone marrow, things like that. As 'evil' as they are, their crimes are restricted to graveyard robbery and necromancy. They may occasionally throw curses that attempt to kill their enemies—though that's not as common an occurrence as the outside world might think, and most of their 'enemies' are protected up to the hilt with 'good magic' in any case. But even they don't do this kind of human sacrifice."

Gabriel leaned back and digested this information.

"It'd be really helpful if you could pin down somethin' more specific about that veve," he said.

"Where it might have originated from, any relation that group might have to better known groups, that kind of thing. Would that be possible?"

"Believe me, I intend to look into it immediately.

If I find out anything, I'll call you." Hartridge suddenly looked at Gabriel suspiciously. "You are with the police, aren't you?"

"Me? Sure. I'm undercover, though. You can reach me at St. George's Books in the French Quarter."

Hartridge nodded, too preoccupied to give it another thought. "All right."

Gabriel stood up to leave. "Oh, one more thing. Have you ever heard of St. John's Eve?"

"June twenty-third, the feast day of St. John the Baptist, according to Catholic tradition. But it's just a new name for an ancient rite. Sun worshipers used to roll a flaming wheel down a hill to

celebrate the sun's descent on that day. It's an important feast day in Voudoun as well."

Gabriel nodded appreciatively. "June twenty-third. Comin' up, innit?"

Hartridge looked up at him. He looked downright uneasy. "So it is."

He had no trouble finding the address Melissa had given him for Cazaunoux. It was an old building, and decrepit, like any one of a thousand such residences in the French Quarter. This part of the city had often seemed to Gabriel like an aging painted lady, a stained and tattered satin gown drooping off bony shoulders, breath sour and teeth discolored from too many nights of a good thing. The door opened directly onto the cracked sidewalk, not a blade of front lawn in sight. Its red paint was chipped and a tarnished crucifix of the gruesome variety was nailed like a magical charm where a knocker should be. Gabriel idled the bike on the street and racked his brains for a cover story.

He had a feeling Cazaunoux would know something. She obviously was a believer in Voodoo and every indication was that she'd been in New Orleans for many a year. She might be a crazy old grande dame, but she might have tales to tell, nonetheless. Question was, why should she tell them to him?

A car passed by noisily and jerked to a halt at the nearby stop sign. It was an old Chevy convertible. The three teenaged girls spotted him and whooped. He sheepishly waved.

"Mmmm, baby," a perky blonde said with a drawl that was not the least ladylike. "Can I have a ride on your machine?"

But her friend, a studious-looking brunette, stopped cracking her gum long enough to express her opinion.

"Gaa-aad! The guy's old enough to be your faaa-therrr!"

"I like 'em old!" the blonde replied rebelliously. She was caught off balance and fell into the back seat as the car leaped through the intersection. He could hear the three burst into hysterical laughter as the car sped away.

Gabriel felt his face burn. Old enough to be her father? Really! Why, he would have had to have been ... He tried to calculate it, didn't like the number he came up with, and so immediately dropped the whole thing.

Cazaunoux. He glanced up at the door again.

Two or three minutes passed before a quizzical look creased his brow, then deepened into skepticism, then faded to a grin. Old enough to be your faaa-therrr . . . He started the bike.

He returned half an hour later. Or, rather, his bike returned. That he was no longer quite himself was clear. He'd found the items he needed—okay, he stole the items he needed—from a ready room in the back of St. Louis Cathedral. A mass had been going on, scantily attended, and the back halls had been quiet and empty, but trustingly open, as churches were wont to be. He did not feel guilty. They weren't valuable things, and as far as he was concerned, the Catholic Church owed just about everybody on the planet a favor or two, given their role in human history. He'd then stopped by the bookshop to rummage through his closet for accessories, including a black suit jacket he hadn't worn since his college graduation, and a pair of black shoes, equally ancient. He'd picked up some hair gel, too, thick, gloppy stuff, from the wide selection of such products in his bathroom (one of the few things he consistently spent good money on). He'd never get away with it with his mop of hair, and he sat on the bike now, combing the stuff through his mane until it was all slicked back, nice as you please, and hideously normal-looking. God, the things he was doing for this book!

When Madame answered the door, she opened it merely a crack and peered out at him over the safety chain nervously. Castro was in her arms, scrambling his nails against her bosom frantically, eager to get away and protect his turf by taking a chunk out of Gabriel's leg. But Madame herself relaxed when she saw who stood at her door.

"Yes, Father?"

"Good day to ya now, madame," Gabriel said with a heavy brogue. Weren't priests Irish? "I'm Father MacLaughlin from St. Louis Cathedral, and I've come to pay thee a visit in the Lord."

"But I don't go to St. Louis, Father." Madame blushed. "I go to St. James."

"Ah, but we're all children of God, doncha know. It matters not if ye be one of my flock or nay. I minister to all God's creatures."

"Yes, Father," Madame said obediently. "You know it's been ever so long since a priest took the time to come out and visit me." A frown moved over her face as quickly as a summer storm blowing in. Her tone grew excessively bitter. "It's

a disgrace! It's just like everything else, tradition and courtesy have gone to the birds! More of the devil's work, curse his soul!" Her rancor spewed forth like vomit, then disappeared as quickly as it had surfaced. She gave him a smile that positively dripped honey. "Do come in."

She unchained the door and Gabriel entered, trying to keep up his own smile, and thinking that this was one whacked old lady. He'd be lucky to get out of here at all, much less with any information.

Madame led her visitor into a small parlor and motioned for him to sit down. The room was a parlor, too—not a living room, family room, home office, or "media nook." Old silk settees bore clawed feet and doilies covered each chair arm and tabletop within eyesight. The wallpaper, yellowed and cracked, still matched lampshades, which had yellowed and cracked in synchronicity. Like the building exterior and, indeed, Madame herself, only the ghost of graciousness was left clinging to physical matter so staled by age it already smelled of the grave.

"I trust you are keeping yourself safe, madame?" Gabriel said as Cazaunoux settled herself on an adjacent settee. Castro calmed, hypnotically silenced by the warmth of her lap. Gabriel observed this and felt his stomach turn. He did not want to imagine the rancidness of either the dog or his perch.

"Oui, Father, I try, with Our Lady's help."

Madame sighed the sigh of a true martyr.

"It is a dangerous time out there," Gabriel prompted.

"Don't I know it, Father!"

"What with those horrible crimes in the paper! I feel it my duty to check on the security of good Catholics like yourself, doncha know."

"Bless you! It is a comfort to be visited. I'm usually so alone here. I do get afraid, Father." Her large, bleary eyes peered at him desperately. "I do get afraid."

"Is it the murders, my child?" Gabriel asked, sounding extraordinarily sympathetic.

Madame pulled back, her face blanking with disdain. She pursed her lips knowingly. "Ha! They are only the latest! You'll see, Father, when you've lived here as long as I have. Their evil is ever present, whether they are in the papers or not! We are neither more nor less safe that we've ever been or ever will be!" Madame

smoothed the fabric of her dress, picked lint off Castro's fur.

"They, madame?"

Madame nodded. "Oui, Father. But let us speak of something more . . . uplifting. Perhaps you'll pray for me?" She looked hopeful.

Gabriel felt a rush of irritation. "So I would like to, dear lady, but we must know what to pray for, mustn't we? God isn't a mind reader."

Madame looked confused at this remark.

Obviously, this wasn't a Catholic tenet she was used to hearing. Gabriel pressed on.

"I feel it my duty, as spiritual shepherd of this community, to know its sinners as well as its virtuous so that I can be informed in my prayers and in my efforts."

Madame looked concerned. "But, Father, it is better for you not to know too much about some things. It is very dangerous!" She looked around the room bitterly. "Why do you think I am forced to shut myself up in here, behind closed doors? It is because I know too much, and if I were not careful, if I did not guard myself, they would smell out my knowledge and come for me!"

Gabriel suppressed a smile. He nodded sympathetically instead. "And what is it that you know, madame?"

Madame looked mysterious. "I am Creole, no? My grandmother lived in this very house. She was alive in the time of Marie Laveau. She knew!"

"Ah, did she now? And what did she know, my child?"

"I couldn't tell you, Father," Madame said stubbornly. "C'est pour ceux qui savent."

Gabriel had heard this phrase before, among other Creoles. It literally meant "It is for those who know," but it more accurately translated to "Fuck off, you're not Creole."

"For those who know about... cabrit sans c'ori!"

Gabriel hinted darkly, hoping she wouldn't think he was talking about the Swiss Alps or something.

She did not. Madame stopped petting Castro abruptly, her hands flying to her face in alarm.

She blushed deeply. "Father, you do know!" she whispered. It would have been funny if there were not something quite so maniacal about it.

"To fight the enemy, you must know the enemy," Gabriel said ominously.

"What a relief! You don't know the times I've tried to speak with a priest about it, and they always act like you are crazy. Tut your faith in

God/ they say! How the Church can believe in the mysteries of the cross and yet not believe in the real presence of evil . . . ! I am so glad you understand, Father." And she was, indeed, spilling tears of gratitude. Gabriel felt guilty. "Open are the eyes which see," he responded knowingly. What the hell does that mean? But Madame didn't sweat it. She was in her own universe now. "The sacrifices, Father, they continue! It was the same in my grandmother's time!"

"Tell me what she told you," Gabriel said. He was oozing paternal sympathy.

Madame looked around as if expecting company of the evil spirit variety. When she had satisfied herself that they were alone, she leaned forward and reached out a bony hand to clutch his arm.

"You know that Laveau was only a front—not the real Voodoo Queen at all!"

Gabriel cursed himself silently. She was just a nutcase after all. But the investment had already been made, he might as well play it out. "Is that so?" he said, trying not to wince at the nubby protrusions of her hand.

"Yes! My grandmother was a Voodooienne herself! An acolyte of Marie Laveau. They held services for the slaves and the white folk who wanted to watch. They made it all look scary and soooo mysterious, but they didn't really know the first thing about Voodoo! This was all just a trick—a ruse to hide the true heart of Voodoo in New Orleans."

"It was," Gabriel said neutrally.

"Yes! You know, Father—the way a magician makes you look the other way while he goes and does something sneaky! There was a secret group, way in at the core. Even most Voodoos never guessed it was there. The inner group—that was run by the real Voodoo Queen."

"Oh? Who was she?"

"My grandmother wouldn't say. She only said she was the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen. She had beautiful copper-colored skin and power you cannot imagine. Some of the things they say Laveau did were actually done by the real Voodoo Queen. Laveau aged, and her daughter, but the real Voodoo Queen never died! She's still alive to this very day!"

Madame was leaning far forward now, spittle flying from her lips as she intoned these horrors.

Gabriel could smell her sour breath across the space that separated them. Her eyes were fixed upon him. He felt his head swim, his hands and feet grow cold, as if her now-aching grip were sucking the life from him.

There was a loud Yelp! as Castro was crushed by Madame's forward-leaning posture. She sat back quickly, and was instantly coddling the mangy creature. Gabriel felt like a train had been headed straight for him had suddenly jumped tracks. He blinked and rubbed at his wrist with numbed fingers.

"Did your grandmother ever say anything else about this secret sect, madame?" he finally managed.

"Only that they were pure evil! They killed those that got in their way then, and they still do!"

"Yes," Gabriel said thoughtfully.

"Oh, Father, it has just occurred to me. Would you like to see something?"

Gabriel nodded doubtfully.

Madame opened a faded music box on her coffee table. An unnameable tune tried to begin, then gave up with a mechanical sigh. She brought out a silver bracelet. It was in the shape of a snake with a head at both ends. The heads met in the center of the circlet. It was a simple thing, yet it evoked a primitive power. Cazaunoux handled it as though it were alive and ready to strike.

"This bracelet was my grandmother's. She wore it to the real ceremonies. It was their sign."

She held it out toward Gabriel. For some reason, he suddenly felt he needed it.

"To have such a thing in the house, my child .. ." he began in a warning tone.

"Don't I know it, Father! Many a night it has kept me awake with its evil pull! But what am I to do? It was my grandmother's!" Madame seemed heartbroken over her moral dilemma.

Gabriel felt a smile tug at his lips. She was almost too easy. He quelled it. "You must let me take it, madame. I will take it to the Church and bless it. When I return it to you your troubles will be over."

Madame looked doubtful. "I could not let it out of the house, Father." She seemed quite sure about that.

Gabriel sighed. He racked his brain. For some reason, the crime scene at Pontchartrain came to mind.

"Then I shall return to the Church and get

some holy water, madame. I will bless the bracelet here."

Madame's grizzled face cracked into an eerily radiant smile. "Father, you are too kind!"

Gabriel was back at Cazaunoux's thirty minutes later. As Madame closed her eyes for his "blessing," he dropped the traveling-size shaving bracer bottle he'd found in his bathroom (the "holy water"), and withdrew from his pocket a lump of clay he'd taken from the banks of Lake Pontchartrain. He quickly pressed it around the bracelet as he intoned.

"Bless, oh, bless this circlet, I pray. Take the evil curse away, that Madame might sleep by night or day!"

Madame dabbed her teary eyes when he was done. In fact, to Gabriel's horror, she almost kissed his cheek, but shyness overcame her in the end. She didn't seem to notice that his hands, when they shook good-bye, smelled of fish and of the earth.

When Gabriel emerged from Cazaunoux's, a light mist was in the air. It was the kind of mist that appeared when the heat and humidity reached ridiculous levels, the kind that made the entire city feel like one big sauna. Between the heat and the mist, Gabriel felt like a shirt waiting for the iron to descend. He touched the clay in his pocket worriedly, but, hell, it was already damp—mist wasn't going to hurt it any.

His elation at his successful subterfuge with Cazaunoux melted slowly in the reality of the street. Where was he going to find someone who could make a bracelet out of that mold? Even if he did find someone who could, why would they? There's no way he could pay for it. His pockets were way past "E." What did he want it for anyway? Did he imagine that if he wore it into the Voodoo shop, it might be some secret sign to loosen M'sieu Walker's lips? Was it going to enlighten Mosely? A snake bracelet claimed by a paranoid schizophrenic to have belonged to her Voodoo-inner-circle grandmother? Some physical evidence!

But despite this mulling, Gabriel still felt the bracelet was important. Was or would be, somehow. He returned to the bookshop to check the yellow pages for a jeweler who sounded desperate, gullible, or both.

He entered, whistling. Grace was speaking with Bruno, their next-door neighbor. Bruno owned a

flower shop (La Fleur de Paris) and was one of Gabriel's least favorite people on the planet. Bruno was gay, which was fine, but he was also a flaming bitch, which was not. His favorite pas-time was to observe St. George's from his window, then show up every couple of days to comment on their lack of patronage, ad nauseam. "Well, the man of the house returns," Bruno said with dripping sarcasm.

"Guess that never happens at your place, huh?" Gabriel replied dryly. He headed for the coffeepot. Grace spoke up firmly. "Bruno was just leaving."

"Of course, darling," Bruno purred cattily. "But before I go I must ask your master once again about that painting." Bruno turned to Gabriel. "Someday you're going to be broke enough to sell it to me."

Gabriel took a sip of coffee and looked at the skull and snakes. Bruno had been after that piece for years. His shop had a gothic decor.

"How much?" Gabriel asked.

"Gabriel!" Grace protested.

Bruno was tongue-tied for a moment. Gabriel watched with amusement while surprise and greed for the painting fought cheapness on his face. "Eighty dollars," Bruno finally stuttered.

"One hundred," Gabriel said firmly.

"Gabriel!" Grace voiced again in utter disbelief.

"I'll take it," Bruno said quickly. He whipped out his billfold and counted out the money.

Grace's face reddened and she watched, stunned, as Bruno took the painting from the wall and hurriedly exited the shop.

Gabriel tossed his coffee cup.

"That was your father's work," Grace said.

"What is going on with you?"

Her tone indicated that if she'd thought Gabriel was heartless before, she'd never truly guessed the depth of lowness of which he was capable. It actually kind of hurt him to feel her disdain so clearly, but he wasn't about to apologize or explain.

"It was only a painting, Grace," he said. And one I don't care to keep looking at, now that I really see it.

"I need the money."

She didn't say anything more. She only picked up a note from the desk angrily and handed it to him. He glanced at it. It was the translation of the German poem. It read:

Three dragons crawl into my sleep, my soul they

want to devour.

With fiery breath and split tongues, they enjoy every meal.

The paper trembled in his hand. He quickly stuffed it into a jeans pocket, aware that Grace was watching him intently. In fact, her look was so burning, he could feel his skin blush. He forgot about the jewelers in the phone book. It was suddenly much more important to get out of there. He left without another word.

Having a hundred dollars in his pocket was like having a bar of gold—as implausible, and just as weighty. He thought as he drove about going out to one of his favorite restaurants, one he hadn't been to in years. He'd order a dozen oysters to start, and follow it up with the Steak Diane. His stomach growled with approval.

Of course, there were a dozen or so shopkeepers in the area holding I.O.U.s that would also be more than willing to divide up the proceeds. But then, that would only whet their appetite and that would be cruel. There was also the matter of the bracelet. One hundred dollars might get it done.

But he wasn't going to do any of those things, was he? He sighed as his bike seemed to be driving itself single-mindedly, as it had been wont to do more and more of late. For the first time since he'd started this research, he knew for an absolute certainty. He really was going mad. Willy Walker, to his credit, did not bat an eye in protest when Gabriel counted the hundred dollars out onto the counter and pointed at the crocodile mask. Unfortunately, neither did he melt into the steaming pool of cooperation due a good paying customer. He merely walked over to the dummy, unhooked the mask, and brought it to the counter for Gabriel's inspection.

The base was hollow and the insides were lined with a dried linen and papier-mache mixture. Now that he was close to the mask, Gabriel could discern the holes that were cut in the skin just below the glassy fixed eyes.

"They still wear these in the ceremonies?"

Gabriel asked.

Willy crossed his arms over his chest and looked back blankly. "Don' know what you mean. 'Sa curiosity, that 'sail."

"Yeah. I forgot," Gabriel said dryly. He tucked the monster under his arm.

"Don' be forgettin' your lagniappe, sir," Willy

said. He brought a small bottle out from under the counter. The bottle said "Lady Luck Gambler's Oil."

"Thanks," Gabriel replied. He looked at it with disinterest, but it was impolite to refuse a lagniappe. He dropped it into a pocket and smiled as sweetly as possible at Mr. Walker. He was rewarded by a flash of annoyance. It cheered him considerably.

As he carried the croc head out, he could feel Walker's eyes on his back.

The ugliest heat of the day had passed, and the shadows were lengthening toward late afternoon. Gabriel was getting tired, and it wasn't much fun riding around with the croc head—which was slipped over the seat behind him like a disembodied passenger—getting stares and poking him in the back. He wasn't quite sure where he was going, the momentum of the day slowing down for the first time. He fingered the clay in his pocket as he drove. It felt cool and clammy. He thought again about the jeweler and, so doing, saw the bracelet in his mind's eye. He frowned. A two-headed snake. Something was wrong with the shape. It had bothered him when he first saw it at Cazaunoux's. It itched at his brain now. What? He'd never seen the thing before, had he? It hit him suddenly and sent an icy chill through him, making the mist on his skin tingle. THREE snakes. That's what's wrong with it. There should be THREE.

* * *

Gabriel's grandmother could scarcely believe her eyes when she opened the door and saw him standing there for the second time in almost as many days.

"Gabriel! My goodness!"

"Hey, Gran." Gabriel brushed her cheek with a kiss and headed for the attic stairs. "Just wanna check on somethin', 'kay?"

Before she could answer he was out of sight.

He went straight to the old trunk and began pulling items out. Old clothes, the clock, the stack of letters. He riffled through the books carefully, checking their pages for concealed notes, examining the bindings for name and author. Nothing else by Heinz Ritter. Nothing in the pages.

He ran his hand along the sides of the trunk but found nothing unusual. When he was through he sat, surrounded by Harrison's things, feeling very low. His father's sketchbook, the painting, Heinz

Ritter's poem, his own dreams . . . For the first time in many years, since the days when he'd played ball by himself in the backyard, Gabriel felt the terrible gaping hole of loss at the absence of his paternal ancestors. What was born in the male Knight line? What secrets had they died without revealing? And if there was nothing to it, to hear that from their own lips ("Oh, that? Just something I saw in the movies, Gabe my boy. Never dreamt of snakes, me.").

"Why are you messin' with this now?" z's what they'd say, Gabriel thought bitterly. "Ain't you got bigger fish to fry, boy?"

He started putting the stuff back in the trunk automatically. Gran had the voice of a Southern kitten, but she'd trained him well nonetheless. You didn't leave messes for Gran. She didn't like it. He was about to put the clock in the trunk when he paused and gave it another look. The outer dial around the clock's face ... a sun, a moon, an angel, a dragon, a crown, and a scythe. Three snakes . . . three dragons. It's the same imagery.

He stared at the clock a moment longer, a frown on his brow. Unsure what it was he was doing, he reached out and touched the outer dial. He pushed at it, and it clicked to the right one symbol. The moon replaced the sun at the twelve o'clock position. Gabriel looked at it thoughtfully. He slowly turned the dial until the dragon was at the top. Nothing happened.

At the base of the clock was a winding key. Gabriel turned it. The mechanism's spring sounded healthy enough. From inside the clock came the loud sound of ticking. Gabriel drummed his hand on the clock's base, thinking. The dragon looked back at him, its jeweled eyes laughing. He placed a tentative finger behind the minute hand. He began to push it clockwise. It went easily, dragging the little hand behind it as it revolved. Twelve o'clock . . . one o'clock . . . two o'clock. When the hands reached three o'clock, he heard a click. From the base of the clock a small drawer popped open.

Gabriel stared at the little drawer. How did he know? He felt that same icy chill sweep over him. He had known, some part of him. Ancestral memories? The ghost of Granddad? A lucky guess? He summoned up his courage and reached a hand inside. He pulled out two items: a letter and a photograph.

The photograph was faded. It showed two handsome young men and an older man. The three were posed outside, and in the distance was a large old castle and, beyond that, tall, snow-covered mountain peaks. Gabriel recognized one of the young men as his grandfather. He didn't know the other two, but he recognized a little of himself in the second young man. There was nothing written on the back.

He turned to the letter. It was written in German. It was addressed to Heinz Ritter, care of the U.S. Post Office in New Orleans.

The letter trembled in Gabriel's hands. He shut his eyes. Granddad was Heinz Ritter.

It made total sense. Harrison Knight wasn't exactly a German name, was it? And Gran had said Harrison was a poet. He didn't just like the poem because of three dragons. He wrote the poem.

Gabriel studied the letter, but couldn't make much sense of it. There was a strange word, Schattenjäger, that appeared repeatedly, and the tone of the writing seemed emotional—lots of underlining and a shaky hand. The letter was signed "Karl Ritter." Probably Heinz's father, the old man in the photograph. And the other man in the picture . . .

You know who that is. That's the guy that's been buggin' Grade. That's Wolfgang Ritter.

Yes. Naturally.

Gran put her knitting aside and rose from the settee as Gabriel descended.

"You look pale, dear. Is somethin' wrong?" She approached Gabriel and placed a small, dry hand on his forehead.

"You're perspirin' sheer ice, and it must be a million degrees up in that attic!"

Gabriel smiled doggedly and pulled away. "I'm just a little tired, Gran."

"Well sit down, dear. I'll make us some lemonade."

Gabriel shook his head. "I'd love to, but I'm really busy today."

Gran's face pursed into a skeptical scowl. "Now I know you're sick! The only time I've ever seen you busy is when you were fillin' your diapers."

Gabriel smiled, despite himself. "There's somethin' I wanted to ask you . . . Did Granddad ever talk about his family back in Germany?"

Ester Knight's face grew seriously worried.

"Gabriel, is there somethin' goin' on with you?"

"No, Gran, it's just ... I've been thinkin' about

the stuff in the attic," Gabriel covered.

Ester studied him carefully, and seemed to accept this excuse. "I wish you'd known him, dear. He was very special."

"I never heard you mention any family on Granddad's side. There must have been some," Gabriel persisted.

Ester smiled sadly. "That's what I said to Harrison. Seems to me family's an important thing, I said. 'Specially since my family didn't approve, you know." She glanced at Gabriel shyly at this last remark. It struck him again how difficult it must have been for her—bred in a large Southern family, to find herself widowed and utterly alone with a young son to raise.

"Harrison was adamant," she sighed. "He'd left that life behind him for a reason. He didn't want to talk about it—didn't want anythin' to do with it at all."

"Did he say why?"

Ester shrugged, looking pained. "I wish I could tell you. He and I were close, but I could never get through to that part of him. He was a sad man, didn't sleep well, but he wouldn't admit he had any troubles."

She sighed. "All he would tell me was that his family was cursed. He said nothing good could ever happen for them. He was bound and determined to start his life fresh, without the old chains. For himself, and for Philip." She smiled sadly at Gabriel, touched his hair. "And you." "Yeah? Got news for ya, Granddad. It didn't work."

"Hmmm. Did he ever mention a brother?"

Gran shook her head sadly. "He wouldn't talk about his family. I'm sorry, dear."

"Salright. Just curious." He kissed her cheek.

"Now I gotta run."

She saw him to the door and watched him until he drove out of sight. Fear was etched on her face. Spare him, please, Lord, she prayed. Spare this one, at least.

And that, really, was all she could do.

For some reason, Gabriel found himself cruising Malia Gedde's neighborhood. He had been thinking about his grandfather, and about what Wolfgang Ritter might have to say to him, when he realized he was bringing his bike in to a curb, and that the house he was sitting in front of was the Gedde mansion.

Either his automatic pilot had a boner, or he was here for a reason. He didn't care which. He needed

a reality check. He needed comfort. Despite the fact that she couldn't tolerate his presence, Malia Gedde was the person he wanted those things from. In fact, seeing her was suddenly the most important thing in the world.

The door was answered, naturally, by Robert of the beard and the unpleasant disposition.

"I need to see Malia, please," Gabriel said firmly.

The man's expression showed disbelief at Gabriel's audacity. He folded his arms across his chest. "Ms. Gedde is not at home."

"Look, go ask her if she'll speak with me. Ya hear? Ask her."

The man blinked at the demand. Surprised? Amused?

"Is your hearing impaired, Detective?" This last was uttered mockingly. "She is not. At home." Gabriel realized the man was serious. "Where is she?" he demanded.

The man's face darkened. "She is visiting her mother's grave," he said scathingly. "Is that what you wanted to hear? Leave her alone, Mr. Knight." This last was a threat, and the glare that accompanied it was lethal. The door slammed in Gabriel's face.

Gabriel turned without a second thought and marched to his bike. He did not reflect upon how unusual it was that he should know exactly where that meant, nor did he even feel satisfaction at tall-thin-and-obnoxious's unwilling divulgence of precisely what he was trying to conceal. Had he reflected, he would have realized there was a flash of panic in the man's eyes the minute the phrase had left his mouth, as if Robert himself had not known he was going to say that, nor why he had.

But Gabriel's purpose was suddenly aimed with all the tension of an arrow in a bow. He was not thinking about anything except getting across town to St. Louis Cemetery #1.

At first glance, the Gedde tomb looked deserted. But from underneath the massive marble doors of the crypt, Gabriel detected a thin light, barely there even in the shadows cast by the late afternoon sun. She was inside. He settled into the shade of a nearby monolith to wait.

It didn't take long. After about ten minutes he heard a faint click, then the marble doors of the tomb slid smoothly apart. Malia Gedde emerged. She was dressed in black and she'd

been crying.

He summoned up his courage and stepped into the murky light.

"Malia . . ." he said. For some reason, it came out as a plea.

For a moment, as she stared at him, he had the impression that she was about to run into his arms, as if she, too, needed comfort. But she did not run into his arms and the moment passed.

"Mr. Knight," she said tersely. She began walking quickly away through the cemetery.

He followed. "Malia, wait!" He hurried behind her. She ignored him.

He felt a rush of frustration and humiliation. In two quick steps he caught up to her and grabbed her arm.

"Please," he said tightly. "Don't ignore me."

She turned and regarded him. Her cool demeanor was not evident now. Her grief made her eyes glisten and gave her a vulnerable air that Gabriel found primally compelling. He wanted to protect her, he suddenly realized, and was absolutely stunned. That emotion was definitely not in his character.

"What is it?" she sighed, as if he were one more problem in a hard day.

He shook his head angrily. "Don't say that.

Don't belittle it like that. You know what it is."

She said nothing, but the comment had registered. She eased somehow. The exasperation left her mouth. She seemed to be waiting for him to go on.

He looked around, fishing for words. "All I know is I have to see you. You pop into my head all day long. It's like . . . like a sore tooth you keep probing with your tongue."

She peaked an eyebrow. "That's a lovely image."

"Christ! Okay, so I'm a bad writer. I'm also dead serious. There's somethin' . . . magnetic between us, somethin' I can practically smell. If you tell me you don't feel it, then I'll know I'm really losin' my mind."

She pulled her arm away from him gently. Her face softened.

"You're not losing your mind," she said, sighing. "There z's an attraction between us. Normally, this would all be so many steps in a lovely mating dance, and I'd applaud your effort. But you have to understand—I'm simply not in a position to play that game right now."

He was hurt. "It's not a game. Hell, it's not even a dance—believe me, I've danced plenty. This isn't it."

She closed her eyes momentarily, looking exhausted. "I'm not trying to be derogatory. I'm just talking about natural human ritual ..." She smiled at him. It was the first time he'd seen it, a smile for him alone. It made his chest hurt. Now if he could only take the tragedy out of her lips.

"So why fight it?" he asked.

The smile faded. "Because I'm not free to participate. With my mother's death I've had to take over as head of the family. There are many dependent on me."

"So? If you're the boss, why not take off for a while? Even just for an afternoon. You can come see my shop. It's St. George's Books—in the French Quarter. We could take a walk, see the sights."

She looked tempted, at least. "That sounds very appealing, but. . . it's not so simple. Even if I could get away for an afternoon, why start something I don't have the time or freedom to pursue? There's such a thing as duty, you know. Sometimes what you want for yourself doesn't matter."

The sad smile returned. She backed away from him. He wanted to say something, anything to make her stay, but he couldn't relate to what she was talking about enough to argue against it. He himself had never taken responsibility for anything. What he could see was that she was unhappy, and that couldn't be right.

"Everyone deserves somethin' of their own," he said softly.

Her smile wavered at that, but she did not stop. "Good-bye," she said. Then she turned and was gone.

Love hurt. Gabriel felt like one of the Voodoo Murders victims—a huge gaping hole where his heart had been. He told himself he'd only gotten what he deserved for allowing himself to feel something for someone. Goddamn hormones! This was precisely the reason he never allowed himself to give a fuck about anything. Why he'd been suckered in this time was beyond him. But, whatever the cause for his temporary insanity, his patsydom was decidedly over.

He drove to the Napoleon House, a bar and hangout popular with the artistic set in the French Quarter. When he drank at all, he did it here. The walls were a soothing dark gray and classical

music played over the hum of the patrons. No neon, no mirrored balls, just a good, old-fashioned pub. Besides, it was one of the few places that still gave Gabriel credit.

He ordered a beer. He considered taking a shot of whiskey with it, but his stomach was too empty not to get seriously upset about something like that.

The bartender, Monty, tried to open a dialogue, knowing Gabriel just about as well as anyone in the neighborhood, but Gabriel politely relayed his disinterest in human contact and took his mug gloomily over to a table.

His brooding lasted through a half hour and a beer and a half. Gradually, his brain started allowing in signals from the outside world—the soothing music, the laughter of the patrons. He began to relax.

A few tables away were Sam and Marcus. They were fixtures in this place as predictable as the bust of Napoleon that sat behind the bar. Just as predictable was their argument.

"Come on, move will ya? Yer slower than a pregnant slug."

That was Marcus, the ruder of the two.

"I gotta right to think, don't I?" Sam shot back.

He studied the chess board with obvious dismay.

"Think? You should have a solution to world peace by now!"

Gabriel smiled, despite himself. Poor Sam. He'd been playing chess with Marcus since Gabriel could remember. And, as far as Gabriel knew, he'd never won a single game. It was the running gag of the bar.

When you gettin' that raise, Joe? Oh, 'bout the time Sam beats Marcus.

For some reason, the pair eased his mind today, made him smile. He pulled a chair over to the chess table and sat, facing the chair's back, drinking his beer. It was a "guy" kind of thing to do and that made him feel better. Who needed women, anyway?

"Ya happy? Ya got an audience now. Someone to watch you bite the big one, ya loser," Marcus taunted.

"Hey, Gabriel," Sam sighed. "Never mind Mr. Bigmouth. He's a complete ass."

"And you're a loser," Marcus reminded him politely.

Sam rolled his eyes and moved a pawn. Marcus chortled in delight.

Sam pointedly looked away from the board.

The game was obviously close to the final slaughter and he had given up.

"How's the bookshop?" he asked Gabriel.

"Fine. Your place?"

"Fine. Eddie's doin' a good job. He takes after his old man."

Gabriel nodded and took a swig of beer.

Then it struck Gabriel what he'd just said. Sam owned a shop in the French Quarter, too. These days Sam's son ran it, Sam being retired, but still ... it was a jeweler's, wasn't it? Sure.

Sam's Estate Jewelry. It was down somewhere on Chartes. Gabriel had never given it a second thought, not being the jewelry-buying type.

He waited until after Sam's next move, then he pulled the clay mold from his pocket.

"Tell me what you think of this," he said. He handed Sam the mold.

"What? You do this yourself?" Sam asked, obviously unimpressed.

"Yeah. It was a bracelet shaped like a snake.

Think someone could make a replica with that?"

Sam peered down his nose through his bifocals, trying to get a look inside the mold without opening it too much.

"Maybe. Possible," was the verdict. He handed the mold back to Gabriel.

"Checkmate!" Marcus hollered jubilantly.

Sam stared at the board. "Sonovabitch!"

Marcus rose. "Gotta visit the little boys' room.

Set us up for another round, hey, loser?" He walked away, still chortling.

Sam began to rearrange the pieces.

"Why do you keep playing him?" Gabriel asked.

Sam made a "what the hell" gesture with his hands. "I told myself ten years ago, I'd beat that bastard one day, so help me God, and I don't give up too easy."

Sam looked at Gabriel. "My father used to say—a promise you make to yourself is the most important kind." He touched Gabriel's chest with a liver-spotted finger to accent every word.

Gabriel shrugged. "I guess. Seems to me you'd get awful sick of losin'."

Sam pointed a finger in the air. "Ah, yes, but you see, Marcus can beat me a million times, doesn't matter. All I have to do is win once. Just once. The day I do that, I stand up, I walk away from Marcus and away from this bar, forever, and I walk away a winner. I will have beaten him, you

see?.Not just the battle, I will have won the war."
Gabriel smiled. He hoped he was around to see that. It would become the stuff of legend, assuming it ever happened.

"One time, one day," Sam went on, neatly aligning Marcus's black pieces, "luck will be on my side. Hell, even a monkey could get lucky after ten years."

Gabriel could have sworn he felt something in his pocket move. He sat up, startled. He patted his pockets.

And felt a small bottle. He pulled it out. "Lady Luck Gamblin' Oil."

Jesus. It was getting pretty damn hard to tell where his subconscious intuition left off and the Twilight Zone began. Or maybe this was all just one long extension of his dream.

"Hey, Sam, try some of this," Gabriel said dully, feeling like a fucking puppet. Okay. I'll read the script.

Sam glanced at the bottle, then took it.

"Lady Luck Gamblin' Oil. Hey, is this some of that Voodoo shit?"

Gabriel smiled. " 'S curiosity. 'Sail," he said.

Sam looked skeptical. "Did I ever tell you that when I was young, I had the biggest crush on this girl. Woulda died for her. She didn't give me the time of day. Thought I was a loser, like Marcus here thinks I'm a loser. Finally, I saved some money from mowin' lawns and whatnot. Took my balls in my hand and went to an old witch woman down the street. She gave me this pouch. Told me to bury it under the girl's front porch step."

"Did you?"

"Yup."

"What happened?"

Sam shook his head sadly. "She married me." He gave Gabriel a knowing look. "You don't mess around with that kind of stuff," he warned. He handed the bottle back.

Gabriel studied him, then tossed the bottle up with one hand and caught it. "Not even to get Marcus? Not even to walk out of here, today, a winner?"

Sam looked at him, then around the bar. It was filling up now, as evening fell. He looked at the chessboard. Gabriel could see the sweat of temptation break on his brow.

"Give me that," he said. He grabbed the bottle from Gabriel and went up to the bar. Gabriel watched as Sam ordered a bloody Mary, dumped

the contents of the bottle in the glass, and drained the concoction in one long draught.

Ten minutes into the next game, Marcus's ever-present taunts stopped.

Ten minutes after that, people started gathering around the chess table. It was happy hour, and the place was packed, but you could hear a pin drop.

Sam, he sat there with a look on his face that was part joy, part terror, like he knew damned well what was happening, and it scared the bejesus out of him. He did not falter. He studied the board and he thought, but with a confidence and a surety hitherto unseen on the countenance of Sam Lebowitz.

Marcus, he just kept getting paler and paler and more and more shrunken into himself, like a spider slowly rolling up into a ball after having been smacked hard by a newspaper.

When Sam finally took a deep breath and spoke the word "Checkmate," the entire crowd burst into frenzied screams of adulation.

Gabriel heard at least ten different groups of people calling bets due. Shit, he could have made a lot of money himself tonight, had he given it a second thought.

Marcus stood up and stared at Sam, his fists balled, his face on the verge of tears. Without a word he turned and left the bar, probably for good.

Sam watched him go, his own lips trembling, like a baby watching its mother's exodus. A dozen hands slapped his back in congratulations. Sam responded to everyone, shaking hands, making polite remarks, and all the while looking like he'd just eaten Drano.

"Knew you'd pull it off someday, Sammy Boy."

"You finally beat the little whiner!"

"You been holdin' out on us all these years, Sam?"

Gabriel waited until the melee died down and Sam returned, shakily, to his seat.

"Thank you, Gabriel," Sam said. It sounded more doomed than happy to Gabriel's ears.

"Think I'll have a drink now." Sam held up a trembling hand for the waitress.

"Sure." Gabriel nodded, swallowing hard. For Christ's sake, he'd just helped Sam win, and here he was feeling guilty!

"Guess I owe you," Sam said quietly.

That made Gabriel feel even guiltier. "Hell, not really."

"You want that mold thing taken care of?" The waitress arrived and served Sam ten drinks, lining them up like bowling pins, all courtesy of his fans. Sam nodded to the waitress blankly and picked up the first one. He looked determined to drink them all.

Gabriel pulled out the lump of clay. "That'd ... uh ... that'd be great," he said. The words stuck in his throat.

Sam took the clay, smiled sadly. "I'll have it here tomorrow. Whaddya want, gold?"

Gabriel blushed. "No, gosh. Silver, I think. Hell, even something that just looks like silver is fine."

Sam nodded. "Silver it is." He placed the clay on the table next to the drinks.

Gabriel stood awkwardly.

"Well . . . congratulations/" he said. Why in the hell did he feel so shitty?

Sam looked up, nodded bleakly. "Yup."

Gabriel felt a rush of pity and anger. "You won, Sam. You won. That stuff in that bottle? Water. Just . . . thought it would give you some confidence."

Sam looked at him skeptically. For a moment, he almost bought it. "Sure. It was me," he said. He didn't sound convinced.

As Gabriel slipped from the bar, he saw Sam descended upon by the 'well-wishers. He'd be all right, Gabriel thought. It was just a bit of a shock. The whole thing ending after ten years and all. Gabriel watched Sam nod while a big black man named Frank pumped his hand.

Sure. Sam'd be fine.

When he stumbled into St. George, all he wanted to do was go to bed. To his surprise, Grace was still there, despite the fact that the shop had closed a few hours ago.

"What are you doin'?" he asked her.

She put down a book she'd been reading and yawned.

"Got caught up in a book," she said. Grace was a horrible liar.

"Well, get on home now," he said gruffly. "I can't be payin' you overtime, you know."

She made a face. "You haven't paid me anything in almost a month."

He grunted.

"Anything interesting on the case today?" It came out after a hesitation, overly casual. So that's why she was hanging around.

"Can we discuss it in the mornin'?" he replied

tiredly.

Her face fell, and he immediately felt guilty. It was getting to be a habit.

"Just thought you might need something done," she said resentfully.

He wracked his brains, and came up with a long shot. He pulled out Max's veve.

"I do. I need you to check on this. See if you can come up with anythin' similar."

She took it. "What is it?"

"It's from the murders. And don't you show that to anyone, either," he warned.

"Yeah, right. I'll tell the mob outside there's no further news." But her sarcasm was betrayed by the curious little smile on her lips. She had something interesting to do. She was happy.

She headed for the door. "Okay, but I want a full report in the morning. Oh, and I ordered some take-out. Thought you might want the leftovers.

They're in your fridge."

Gabriel's stomach growled. "Thanks."

She left the shop and he turned out the lights and walked back to his apartment. In the fridge were three large cartons of Chinese take-out—chicken, shrimp, and rice, none of which had been touched.

He stood there and tried to figure her out. Last time he looked, she was pissed as hell at him for selling his father's painting. Now she was not only hanging out waiting for him to come home, she was feeding him as well.

Women. They made absolutely no sense.

Outside the shop, Grace paused to look up at a radiant moon. It was rising, large and bright, just a hair short of full. The accumulated heat from the day produced a hazy sheen all around it, like a large halo.

She turned to lock the door when a voice stopped her.

"Excuse me. I was just going in."

Grace turned and came face-to-face with enormous feline-gold eyes in a creamy face.

Grace took in a sharp breath, startled. "I'm sorry, the shop is closed."

"I'm not here for the shop, I'm here to see Gabriel," the woman replied, an amused smile crossing her lips.

Grace bristled. "Well, when I see him tomorrow, I'll tell him you stopped by."

She folded her arms over her chest and blocked the door. The other woman's eyes flashed with

irritation.

"Is he here?" the woman asked pointedly.

"He's never here," Grace said sarcastically. "But when I see him, I'll let him know one of his women friends stopped by. What was your name again?"

Behind Grace's tense little back, the door of the shop opened. Gabriel appeared and reached beyond her, taking Malia's arm.

"Say good night, Grade," he said in a warning tone.

He pulled Malia into the shop and closed the door behind them. Grace could hear the door bolt turn.

Inside, Gabriel started to reach for the light switch.

Malia stopped him with a gentle hand on his arm.

"Don't," she said.

His arm obediently dropped to his side. It felt weighted, tingling, as the rest of him did. Something tangible swam in the air, something electric and heady. His head suddenly felt light, the surroundings surreal, as if it was opium smoke in the air and he was succumbing. They stood and stared into each other's eyes in some mystical equivalent of dancing, and whatever chemistry was in the air deepened and intensified with that incarnate touch.

Soul to soul.

"Didn't think you'd come," he managed.

She smiled sadly. "Didn't have a choice."

She stepped into his arms and he found himself falling into her, as down a dark well.

Chapter 4

/ spoke to one who smelled of Death, he gave to me his ears,

And crosses that were marked were made into a veil of tears.

June 21, 1993

Malia had left early that morning. It had been, he thought, at about the break of dawn. He'd slept soundly with her in his bed; no dreams, no pain. After she kissed him good-bye, he'd slept some more. He'd forgotten how desperately he'd needed real, dreamless sleep until he felt the joy of swimming in it, just under the surface. He never wanted to get up.

But all good things must end. Around ten he pulled himself out of bed and stumbled over the empty cartons of Chinese food he and Malia

had fed each other after their first lovemaking session. He smiled to himself remembering it. Good food, good sleep, and a woman like that all in one night. He must be doing something right. Grace was in the shop as usual. She didn't look up from the account books as he got his morning coffee, or as he stood there drinking it.

He frowned. What was up her butt?

"Uh, Gracie. Did you want to hear about the case, or what?" he said.

She finally stopped messing with the books and faced him, her face as blank and neutral and pleasant as could be.

"Oh, do tell," she said.

And he did, or rather he gave her a highly edited version. He told her about the police's disregard for the Voodoo aspect, Mosely's "informant" being too scared to talk, Cazaunoux's grandmother's remarks about Marie Laveau, the lecture at Tulane, and Hartridge's response to the veve. He didn't tell her about Heinz Ritter. He didn't mention Malia's name at all.

Grace listened to his recital with great interest, her brain neatly snatching and filing away each piece of information. He could actually see her doing it. She was one scary woman.

When he had finished, she pulled an envelope from her book bag.

"That's very interesting about Hartridge.

Since you didn't tell me what the veve was when you gave it to me, I took a different research approach."

"You mean you checked on the veve? Last night?" he said, surprised.

She shot him a scathing look. Yes. I was working.

"I wanted to check the newspaper archives. I had no idea what to search under. Finally, I tried 'pattern.' This came up."

She pulled out a Xerox copy of an old newspaper article, handing it to him with a secret blush of triumph.

The article had been printed in the Picayune in 1910. The headline read "Mysterious Pattern Found at Murder Site." Below the headline was an old photograph of men standing around a bit of ground. They wore long woolen coats with thick lapels and tall, flat-topped hats with narrow brims. They stared back at the camera sternly, as if to say what serious business they were about. The reproduction was not great. Even so, what was on the ground was obviously a pattern in

white. It was mostly intact, at least enough to tell what it was. It was a veve. The same veve.

"Holy shit," Gabriel whispered.

Grace watched him curiously.

"Has it occurred to you that people who do things like this might not want to be found?" she finally said.

"I'm not the police, Grace. Nobody knows I'm looking into this. If and when I get enough to publish I'll change names and stuff. Maybe."

Grace didn't look particularly reassured, but she carefully shut her mouth. Gabriel folded up the article and headed for the shower.

The day was different than the day before. As Gabriel pulled out on his motorcycle, he had the impression that the damp heat had eased, like a fist drawn back a tad from one's face. He felt the cooler air rush past his skin as a relief, a kiss. But the deeper change on this day surfaced as a practical thing. Where am I going?

Yesterday had been fraught and harried. From sunup to sundown he'd been tugged this way and that, often at the same time. He'd been the bull running at the matador, blindly, relentlessly, driven by he knew not what. Today, all that had evaporated like so much dry ice. He had nothing particular to follow up on the case, and after last night, he wasn't particularly motivated to go dig something up. Instead, he grinned and let the bike meander.

He followed the promenade along the Mississippi, wanting to see the river flow. It was the water he went to when his soul was quiet and wanted to dissolve into something larger, or when it was particularly unquiet and he needed calming. But today the great muddy water was sluggish in the sun, low for the season, losing self to the atmosphere. It didn't seem healthy somehow, as if it had thickened like syrup by the long summer heat. It didn't balm his eyes or answer his soul. He felt a twinge of disappointment, and anxious not to spoil his mood, he turned the bike left, back into the Quarter. But, like a toxic residue, the feeling he'd picked up at the river went with him. The streets were harsher, brighter somehow, as if the sun had emerged from a haze. And it was hot after all, and getting hotter. The warm glow alight in his belly didn't merge well with the heat. Instead it became an origin point for a fever that spread to his face. He could feel his skin burn red, and a nausea

washed through him with the heat exhaustion. The angelic voices that had been singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" in his head all morning took up the beat of tap shoes on concrete and the distant wafts of brass-wailing blues, turning into the soundtrack from *The Omen*. His head spun. He pulled the bike to a curb, his hands trembling weakly as he leaned it into the kickstand. He looked for a place to get out of the sun. And he found that he was standing outside the Voodoo museum.

Dr. John was bigger than Gabriel remembered, or perhaps Gabriel simply hadn't been able to fathom what the man would look like standing up, which he now was. He was oiling some drum heads as Gabriel entered, and Gabriel smiled and approached him, feeling as if he were trapped in some Escher parody of the horizon line. Gabriel's height shrank with every step he took toward the giant. By the time he got close to him, he was staring at the man's nipples (not a sight he particularly cared to see), faintly visible under the rough linen.

"Dr. John. Nice to see you again," Gabriel said, hoping the man had forgotten about the ill-received photograph.

"Mr. Rnight. Welcome back," Dr. John replied smoothly. He had that blank pleasant look on his face again. That was good.

Gabriel nodded, still smiling, and looked around the museum. Why was he here? He'd been meaning to come back and check on a few things, but now that he was here, he was drawing a blank. He remembered Cazaunoux's story about Laveau being a front, but decided not to discuss it with Dr. John. He'd heard the man's Laveau lecture. Even if Laveau hadn't been all she seemed, Dr. John would never admit it.

"Um, I've been thinkin' about what you said about modern Voodoo? You know, gris gris and all that?" Gabriel said.

"Yes?"

"I was wonderin' if you could recommend a modern Voodooienne? Someone I could talk to in more detail about the current practice?"

Dr. John put down his cloth, smiled, and walked over to the desk. He took a card from a drawer and handed it to Gabriel. His hands were like God's to Gabriel's mere mortal ones.

"We do have a Voodooienne that works with us here at the museum. Her name is Magentia

Moonbeam. She gives lectures and is quite open about her practice. I'm sure you will find her enlightening."

"Great. Thanks." Gabriel looked at the card.

The address was on Dauphine, a few blocks away.

"Was there anything else?" Dr. John asked politely, picking up his oiling rag.

Gabriel remembered the marks he'd written down from the cemetery. He searched his pockets for the scribbles while Dr. John waited.

"Yeah, just a minute ..." He found the piece of notebook paper and unfolded it.

"This looks like some kind of code to me. I was wonderin' if you'd ever seen it before?"

Dr. John took the paper in one hand and looked at it. His expression did not waver, yet Gabriel could sense the man stiffening. Dr. John handed it back.

"No. It looks like garbage to me. Graffiti."

Gabriel looked at him curiously. Why would he call it graffiti? Gabriel hadn't mentioned where he'd gotten it. "Are you sure?" he pressed. "There seems to be a rhythm to the layout..."

"I forgot to warn you," Dr. John interrupted calmly. "About the cemeteries in these parts. They are quite dangerous. I would not go there alone, if I were you."

The two men stood and stared at each other; Gabriel looking up at the big man quizzically, Dr. John staring down blankly with huge dark eyes that seemed to bore through the smaller man's soul. Then Dr. John blinked and the veil dropped again. Gabriel scratched his head.

"Predate that advice," he said. Then he smiled at Dr. John. Dr. John smiled back.

"You deserve to be safe," Dr. John replied smoothly.

He was still smiling like that when Gabriel left the building.

* * *

Magentia Moonbeam's place had a sign in the front window advertising fortune telling and gris gris. She was a woman in her early forties, the kind that still thought she was twenty-three. Her long, unnaturally blond hair was held back by a gauzy kerchief. Her once-slender but spreading figure was obscured by a tie-died skirt; its celestial pattern aimed for the stars but only reached Haight-Ashbury. Her face was heavily painted with blues and gold and way the hell too much peachy face powder. Her

breath smelled of anise.

"Greetings, Seeker," she said when she saw Gabriel at the door. Jasmine incense rolled out into the street.

"Ms. Moonbeam? Dr. John gave me your name. I'd like to talk to you a moment, if I could?" Gabriel drawled charmingly (hoping that would make up for the fact that he didn't intend to actually pay her anything).

"Yessss. I sense you are in need. Please come in."

The parlor of the old house was decked out with fabric-covered tables, swagged draperies, Mardi Gras masks, boldly colored feathers, and mystical paraphernalia. It was the sort of decor where the lack of furniture of any real value was camouflaged by overambitious, homegrown interior design. On one wall was a rosary. On a table in the center of the room was a crystal ball and a deck of tarot cards. Against the wall was an old-fashioned pedestal bird cage, large and ornate. As Gabriel's eyes adjusted to the room's natural dimness, he realized that the cage contained, not a bird, but a large snake. The combination of these items with the French country florals and Moonbeam's own psychedelic garb was montage that would have made Warhol squirm.

"How can I help you?" Moonbeam expansively offered, as if any wish was hers for the granting.

"My name is Knight," Gabriel said, offering his hand. She shook it—hers was powdery dry and soft. "I'm researchin' material for a book? Thought I'd talk to a real Voodooienne."

She smiled indulgently. "The interest in Voodoo has never been greater. Your book should do well, Mr. Knight."

She waved a gracious hand toward a love seat and they both sat down.

"Tell me about your practice."

"I have a very loyal clientele. They come to me for everything from career advice to blessings for their children . . ." She smiled at him flirtatiously.

"Of course, love potions are ever popular."

"Are these murders in the papers havin' any effect on your business?" Gabriel asked smoothly.

She blushed. "No ... I've heard that it's had some impact on the 'walk-in' business of other Voodooiennes, but I myself deal mostly with regulars."

Uh-huh. That explains the sign in your window.

"And your 'regulars' aren't bothered?"

"They know enough about Voodoo not to draw any correlation between the murders and what I

do, Mr. Knight," she said with a self-conscious giggle-

"Are you aware of any . . . rumors in the Voodoo community about the killin's?"

Magentia looked uneasy. "No."

"What do you think about 'em?"

"I think ... I think someone has a sick sense of humor—killing people and blaming it on Voodoo! Voodoo believers do not sacrifice human beings."

She was obviously distressed. He believed her, and yet . . . was it his fertile imagination, or was the great Moonbeam scared shitless somewhere deep under that blue eye shadow?

He fished in his pocket for the veve Grace had returned to him that morning. He showed it to Magentia.

"You ever seen this before?"

She looked at it, genuinely clueless. "No."

He fished in another pocket and brought out the piece of paper with the marks from Laveau's tomb. "How about this?"

She took the page and smiled. "Yes. It's a Voodoo code. My mentor taught it to me when I was training. I haven't seen it in years."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. "It is a code?"

She nodded. "They used to use it in the old days to leave messages for each other, particularly during the slave days? Nobody uses it anymore."

Suddenly something occurred to her. "This isn't . . . this doesn't have anything to do with the Voodoo Murders . . . does it?"

He studied her carefully. That tinge of fear he'd sensed was now displaying itself in bright pink roses on her cheeks—bright enough to shine through the mask of matte.

"Not that I know of," he said slowly.

The pink spots faded. "Of course not. The murderers aren't Voodoos!" She still sounded nervous.

"Can you tell me what it says?" he suggested.

"Why . . . it's been years. I surely don't remember!"

He gazed at her intently. The look said he just knew she could do just about anything. "But my, it's important. Isn't there any thin' you recall?"

She sighed, tried to think. "I know each symbol stands for a letter. Let me go see if I can dig up a sample. I might have one in the old files. I never throw away anything."

"I surely do appreciate it," Gabriel said sweetly.

Magentia left the room with the piece of paper. Gabriel took advantage of her absence to go over and look at the snake in the bird cage. It was another constrictor—they seemed to be big with the local mystic population. The snake was modest in size compared to the museum's snake—maybe three feet long, six inches in diameter. It didn't look particularly happy. It lay in the bottom of the cage listlessly.

"Dreamin' of stranglin' some goats?" Gabriel muttered to the snake. He tried to get a good look at the scales, but the cage was in the shadows.

Then he noticed a shed snakeskin at the bottom of the cage, Magentia, apparently, didn't throw anything away. He reached in with a cautious finger and pulled the skin closer, removed it from the cage. The snake raised its head and watched. Gabriel slipped the skin into a pocket and met the snake's eyes. It raised its head farther and stared at him. Golden orbs.

"I f, pund something," Magentia said behind him. He turned from the cage hurriedly. "Nice snake."

She frowned a bit. "Thank you."

She stood there, holding the piece of paper in her hand and looking confused.

"Did you have any luck?" he prompted. He walked over and reached for the paper in her hand.

This caught her attention. She pulled it back and looked up at him, blushing.

"It's the oddest thing. I just opened those files and the whole alphabet conversion table was lying right there on top. I remember that sheet of paper, but I haven't seen it in years."

"Uh-huh," Gabriel said. He tried to sound supportive.

She sat down in her chair absently. The paper was still in her hand, facedown.

"Uh. Can I ... see that?" Gabriel said, reaching for the paper again. She looked up at him blankly, then realized she was still clutching the paper. She handed it to him, embarrassed.

He held it under a table lamp to see it better. It was the same sheet he'd given her, but she'd penciled a translation underneath the symbols.

"You see, part of it makes sense," she explained.

"The 'conclave tonight bring .. .' part. A conclave is what they sometimes call Voodoo meetin's?

Though these days we just call them services. You

know, like a church service?"

"Uh-huh."

"But this 'f-w-e-t-k-a-s-h' part looks like nonsense to me. Wet cash? Maybe the person who wrote this wasn't very good." She smiled at him as if to say she wished she'd had better news.

"Thanks. I really do appreciate your checkin' the files."

"No problem, sugar." Her momentary confusion was gone. She smiled at him with more interest now. Her eyes lingered on his jaw, went to his neck.

He felt a blush creep up from his navel.

"I have to go but . . . I'll be sure to mention ya'll in my book," he said. He offered it like a consolation prize.

"That would be real kindly of you," she said.

She put a hand on his arm. It was warm and sticky. He abruptly headed for the door.

Outside, Gabriel took a few steps from the house and pulled out the snakeskin and the scale he'd found at the lake. Moonbeam's snake was a dull mix of brown and cream tones. It didn't match the scale from the lake. He wasn't surprised. Moonbeam didn't even know what a veve was—her Voodoo knowledge was obviously of a carnival variety rather than truly African, unlike those who did the killings. But if she wasn't a real expert, then why did Dr. John turn tourists on to her?

Because she leaves just the right impression.

It was an odd thought, and one he didn't much care for. But Moonbeam had known the code.

Either she wasn't as dumb as she appeared, or her knowledge of the code was a fluke, something legitimate picked up by accident years ago.

Gabriel examined the translation again in puzzlement. The sequence "f-w-e-t-k-a-s-h" rang a bell for some reason. He racked his brain trying to remember, but the significance of it, if any, escaped him.

Gabriel swung by the Napoleon House to see if Sam had finished the bracelet. Sam wasn't there.

Nor Max. The place felt strange without them.

"Hey, Monty. Where's the new champ today?"

Gabriel asked the bartender.

"You mean Sam? He was in earlier. Says he's goin' on a trip back east."

"Really?"

"Yup. Left you somethin', though."

Monty brought a jeweler's bag out from behind

the counter and gave it to Gabriel.

"Thanks," Gabriel said. He hesitated. "Did Sam seem okay to you?"

Monty shook his head in bewilderment. "Had enough baggage under his eyes to clog Heathrow.

There's just no pleasing some people."

"Yeah," Gabriel agreed halfheartedly.

He stepped out into the light of day and opened the bag. Inside was a jeweler's box and inside that was a replica of Cazaunoux's snake bracelet. It was newer, shinier, but that was the only distinction.

The two heads were coiled there on the white cotton fluff. They gleamed up at him dangerously in the summer light.

Mosely was the one thing Gabriel knew he ought to do today. By now Mosely should have forgiven him for the badge escapade, and he needed an update on the police case. But for some reason, Gabriel just wasn't quite up to his balding friend. He decided to swing by the park and see if anything was up, maybe grab a few minutes of quiet on the grass and try to pull together what was an increasingly fragmented view of the case, maybe even recapture some of last night's glow. The park was crowded for a weekday. People made desperate by the unrelinquished heat of the week had finally broken down and sought the green. Their numbers annoyed him.

He managed to find an uninhabited spot on the lawn east of the Jackson statue, a spot that just bordered on shade. He sat down, laid back into the shady area, and tried to blank his mind.

It wasn't difficult. The damp thickness of the air gave sounds a muted tone, as if invisible cotton clogged one's ears; the remote sound of traffic, the occasional clop clop of a horse's hooves on the cobbled streets of the Quarter, Joe's brass ensemble—the ever-joyous notes only slightly the worse for wear in the heat—filtering over to where Gabriel lay, accented by the dull percussion pocks of a solitary African drummer even closer by, and the dull humming murmur of people being people in a crowded spot.

An image of Cazaunoux floated into his mind like the prow of some antiquated N'Orleans ship; painted lady, frail, ancient, paranoid. She would make a great character for the book, though he'd give her more of interest to say. And Moonbeam, perhaps when he told her tale her snake would mean something, something other than the sad

imitation of an exotic tradition she didn't really understand.

Hell, there was plenty of material. He could take what he had already and make up his own ending.

At this point, he'd probably come up with something more interesting than the truth, anyway.

No. You can't even imagine the truth. Besides, that wouldn't get rid of your dreams.

He felt a flush of panic. He didn't want to think about the dreams, nor how and why they kept intersecting with this case. Last night, near Malia's warm body, there had been no dreams. As far as he was concerned, that situation could go on indefinitely.

To distract himself, he took out his tape recorder and fished in his pockets for the tape from Hartridge's lecture. He popped it into the deck and rewound it. He'd been meaning to listen to it again anyway—particularly since he'd slept through most of it, and there was something else . . .

"The use of totems, or animal masks and markings, was not uncommon in the original African ceremonies. Now, though, all but the oldest sects have abandoned this practice."

He stopped the tape. Right. He'd known it somehow when Mosely told him about the leopard fur. Known it because of . . . because of the dream, somehow. He frowned at the thought. No, that's stupid.

Maybe. But they were wearing masks, this group, weren't they? Why?

He looked up into the sky, shading his eyes from the sun with his hands. The blue was unbroken at the moment by clouds, a light azure that marched away infinitely, giving his eyes nothing definite to latch on to.

Why masks? Are the members unknown to each other? . . . Doubtful. A leopard. And he'd bought a mask, hadn't he? A crocodile mask. Animals, totems. Drawing the power of totem animals? Loa possession, taking on the spirits of beasts? It was something like that, he felt, but what exactly it meant and how far it went, he didn't know. Hartridge said this was an African custom. This group had old roots then. How old?

And why exactly had he bought the mask?

He stared up at the blue, parted his fingers to let in a bit of the sun, because it hurt, and because he wanted it to hurt, for the light to blind him.

Because I intend to go to one of those things. I intend to be there, and when in Rome . . .

His finger found the PLAY button on the recorder and he started it again, not wanting to be alone with his mind, which was getting way the fuck out of control.

"Ritual objects used during the conclaves include the ritual gourd or asson . . . the ritual knife or ku-bha-sah . . . the ritual whip or fwet kash . . . and the ritual coffin or sekey madoule. These items are often optional, called for by the mamaloa/or specific magical rituals. In some Voudoun sects ..."

CLICK.

The blue was starting to swim with darker dots and bacteria-shaped intangibles.

Fwet kash. That was it. He hadn't remembered, because the spelling of it wasn't anything he'd imagined when Hartridge had said it.

DJ. Conclave tonight. Bring ritual whip.

That was it, he felt it in his bones. He could take a wild guess about the "DJ" part. The real question was this: Who, pray tell, was doing the writing? And did the message have anything to do with the murders or was "DJ" and his pals playing at cloak and dagger for the sheer romantic hell of it?

He sat up and his head ached with a sudden rush of blood. He was having trouble focusing after his do-si-do with the sun. He blinked and felt a chill go through his body for no apparent reason. He rubbed his eyes.

When he looked up, his vision was still fuzzy.

He looked around, stretching his neck and trying to focus. On his second head rotation to the right something caught his eyes. It was a figure, smallish, that had been looking right at him on the first rotation and it now caught his attention because it was still staring at him, seemingly frozen on the grass some eight feet away.

Gabriel fought to focus on the figure and the blurred edges fell into place one by one.

Yes, the figure was staring at him, sort of horrified, jaw slack. It was Crash, the kid from the police station. Gabriel got to his feet and started toward the boy. The boy promptly fled.

Gabriel watched Crash dive away through the crowd, nearly knocking over an old lady with a cane. Gabriel put his hands on his hips and watched him go. What was the kid's problem?

Okay, so maybe Gabriel was a reminder of a particularly bad day, but he was nonetheless over-reacting a tad, wasn't he?

Unless he's doing something he doesn't want a cop,

which he must think you are, to see.

Well, if the kid was selling drugs, Gabriel really couldn't give a crap. But he wouldn't mind a chance to talk to the boy. Maybe he'd get something more out of him than light-foot Mosely had managed. Making up his mind, he took off in pursuit.

And found himself playing hide-and-seek. He found Crash first outside the park, near the curb. He approached him and Crash promptly fled back into the park. Gabriel then followed him around the park, sometimes trying to catch up, which definitely didn't work, sometimes trying to hang back and see what the kid did. But Crash was better at this game than Gabriel. He'd run to get away from Gabriel's sight, but whenever Gabriel caught back up with him, even if he tried to hide behind someone or something, Crash always found him with his eyes and moved on. Whatever he was in the park to do, he wasn't going to do it with Gabriel watching, and he wasn't about to talk to him either.

They circled the park about four times this way. Gabriel began to notice that the kid was sick, really sick. He'd pause and hack into his hands in coughs that wracked his body. He looked feverish and sweating. His eyes were bright and desperate. The kid needed a hospital, yet he remained in or near the park with grim determination as if trying to board a life raft. Was he in withdrawal? Did he need a fix?

It was this, more than frustration, that made Gabriel finally give up the game. Crash obviously wasn't going to let Gabriel close enough to help, and going after him this way was a bit like chasing a dying dog with a stick. Gabriel let him go.

Then he had an idea.

He raced across the park and crossed the street to the mall buildings along the Mississippi. He took the elevator to the top floor, cursing its slow speed. He hit the overlook running and nearly barreled over the lip of the wrought-iron balcony railing in his haste. The binoculars took quarters and he cursed as he searched his pockets.

Nothing.

He pounded his fist into the brick wall in irritation.

And then he saw the quarter. It was lying on the floor of the roof, in the shade. He put it in the machine and trained the binocs on the park.

He had gone over the whole area once and

decided Crash had left the park after all, when he picked up the figure emerging from some trees and heading for the Jackson statue. Gabriel focused on the boy. Crash was looking around, his nostrils flared in alarm, waiting to scamper at the least provocation.

Which was not forthcoming. Like a beaten dog, Crash edged his way closer to the statue, looking around at every step.

What does he want with the statue?

But when Crash reached the statue, he didn't stop. He sort of slid along the circular fence that surrounded the horse, circling the tall brass figure, like a ring-around-the-rosy game, except he didn't go all the way around. An African drummer was sitting on the ground, the huge drum lying between his legs, beating out a monotonous pattern on its taunt skin head with the palms of his hands.

The drummer blocked Crash's progress around the statue, and Gabriel expected Crash to go around him, but to his surprise Crash did no such thing. Instead, he took a final glance around, then squatted next to the drummer and whispered something urgent and lengthy in the drummer's ear.

The drummer stopped drumming and listened, face blank. He nodded after a few moments and just barely pulled away from Crash as if to say You're done now. Go away. Crash got the hint and rose reluctantly, looked around again, and stepped back from the drummer.

The drummer paused another moment, then began hitting the drum again, this time with a new pattern. The beats continued for several counts, then the phrase began to repeat. It repeated again, and again, (^abnel watched Crash as he slipped north of the drummer, and farther north still. Gabriel's binoculars lost Crash as they reached the top end of their range.

But that was all right. Gabriel knew where Crash was headed.

St. Louis Cathedral was mainly deserted. A few petitioners sat in pews or knelt on the kneelers, heads lowered, thoughts unknown.

Crash was near the back of the church in a pew. He was sitting, nearly collapsed, eyes closed, mouth moving in an endless and panicked prayer.

Gabriel slipped into the pew behind Crash and sat for a moment, studying the boy. He was even sicker than he'd appeared from a distance. His light quadron skin had paled, and a bumpy white rash sprang up from underneath, so that his

complexion bore a cheesy color and texture. At the edges of the face were shadows that turned the skin a dark purple. The color was alarming, bearing echoes of bubonic plague. Tiny beads of sweat dotted the boy's upper lip and forehead, lent a sheen to his cheeks which seemed to hollow more dramatically by the moment.

The boy's face was becoming a death mask even as Gabriel watched. Gabriel swallowed the sick feeling that threatened to send him running.

"Crash," he whispered quietly.

Crash opened his eyes and whipped his head around as if expecting to see either Christ or Satan.

"Shit!" he said, as if disappointed. "Why can't you leave me alone, man!"

His teeth clattered. He tried to resume his prayer.

"If you're in the mood for confessing I'm all ears, boy," Gabriel said softly.

Crash snorted. "Fuck you! You don't know nothin' about nothin'."

"I know you're shit-scared. I know you're dyin'!" Gabriel said coolly.

Crash opened his eyes and glanced over his shoulder, eyes flashing with terror. "Not yet, man. I'm not dead yet."

Gabriel smiled thinly. "Look in the mirror, pal. You're just waitin' on the guy with the scythe to pencil you in an appointment."

Crash moaned in protest. "No! I sent word. I didn't tell the police nothin'."

"You mean the drummer?" Gabriel asked smoothly.

Crash moaned louder, clenching his fist. "Fuck you! You didn't see nothin'!"

"You know those binoculars across the park, Crash? Ever seen those?"

Apparently, Crash had. He began to weep, quietly and hopelessly. The tears that pressed between his fingers were pink.

"'S that the last straw, you think?" Gabriel asked quietly, when the boy would not stop.

The boy nodded inconsolably, his face still hidden in his hands.

"Not s'pose to let anyone see you do that, huh?"

The boy nodded again and hitched his breath, his crying raising a notch in sorrow.

Gabriel wanted to put a hand on the kid's shoulder, but he was supposed to be playing the bad guy and for some reason, he was sure he had

to. Besides, he didn't want to get too intimate with whatever disease it was that was eating this kid alive.

"I've seen those drummers before. Other places besides the park, too," Gabriel said.

Crash nodded again. "They're . . . they're all over the Quarter."

"They got a name?"

Crash shrugged. "Just call 'em Rada drummers."

Gabriel nodded. "You know where that message is goin' to, kid?"

Crash balked at this. He didn't answer, just shivered instead.

Gabriel pulled out the bracelet Sam had made for him. He leaned over the back of Crash's pew and showed it to him. "This look familiar?"

Crash looked at the bracelet numbly, then nodded his head. He raised a shaking hand to his throat and pulled down the lip of his grimy blue T-shirt. On his hairless chest was a tattoo of a snake. The design was similar to the snakes on the bracelet.

Gabriel looked at it and swallowed hard. "Who gave that to you?" he asked, trying to sound calm.

Crash only trembled on the edge of vomiting.

He didn't speak.

"Look, kid, I hate to point this out, but you're runnin' out of time. You want to die with the sins that're on your plate, or you wanna unload some, do a good deed, buy a last-minute E-ticket to the pearly gates?"

Crash snorted in disdain. "Heaven? Me? No fuckin' way."

"All right then, purgatory. An easier level of hell," Gabriel urged, betting that the kid was Catholic and would know what he was talking about.

Crash looked doubtful but he seemed to be considering the possibility.

"Christ! For that matter, just make sure you take the bastards along with you. Why not? What else can they do besides kill you?"

Crash began to cry again. "I don't want to die."

Gabriel felt the guilt tug at him again. Why was he tormenting this kid?

"I know," he said sympathetically. "I know you don't. No one does. Tell me what you know. Maybe it'll break the spell."

Crash looked up at him doubtfully. Gabriel tried to smile.

"Sure. Like Sleeping Beauty waking up, hey?"

It's a shot."

Crash licked his lips. He thought about it a moment, then apparently decided he had nothing to lose. He hitched his breath and looked straight ahead. He spoke low. "It's a cartel. They run all the illegal stuff in New Orleans. Drugs, prostitutes, stolen art, you name it."

Gabriel felt excitement rush through him. He hid it. "And they're into Voodoo?"

Crash laughed bitterly. "Into it? They're the scariest motherfuckers you'll ever meet! They can do fuckin' anything with that shit! Read the future, find their enemies ..."

"Kill."

"Why d'ya think I'm sittin' here turnin' into fuckin' Jell-O?" Crash said angrily.

"Who's at the top?"

Crash snorted at the naivete of this question.

"Don't know. I'm not on the inside. I'm just a runner."

"You been at their ... uh ... conclaves?"

Crash stared forward uneasily. "Once. They have a iemple—hounfour they call it. It's underground. I went there once, but don't even ask me where it is, 'cause I don't know. They . . . confused me."

Gabriel remembered the trouble he'd had finding the crime scene. "I hear ya. Did you see the masks?"

Crash grew even paler. "Yeah." He looked at Gabriel. Deep in his eyes, Gabriel could see pure terror. He whispered, "They become them you know. The animals."

Gabriel felt a chill of horror pass from the boy to himself. He changed the subject. "What's the tattoo for?"

"A sign. You belong to them," Crash said, shivering.

"Why're you in trouble with them now? You didn't tell Mosely anything. He said you'd been in there before giving information."

"Was s'pose to go there those times. Sometimes they have me do that—tell on some ignoramus who tries to start his own trade, doesn't know whose territory he's on. Police bust them usually, with a tip-off. If not, they end up like this."

He waved his hand at his own body. The motion seemed to stir something. He leaned forward, hacking horribly. A thick wad of blood and mucus hit the floor. Gabriel looked around. A few of the petitioners looked back toward them,

but then returned to their prayers.

Gabriel observed Crash uneasily. "Don't you think you oughtta be in a hospital?"

Crash was straightening up. Then he saw the blood in the mess on the floor and it nearly undid him. He scrambled back against the pew, mewling like a kitten.

"It's all right! I'll get an ambulance, okay?"

Gabriel said, trying to calm him.

But Crash had risen and he was trying to stumble from the pew. He doubled over with abdominal pain before he cleared the benches.

His head struck the pew in front of him and down he went.

Gabriel cursed and quickly exited to the aisle.

He knelt beside the boy. Crash was on his back on the floor between pews. He stared up toward the cathedral's ceiling. When Gabriel moved into Crash's eyesight Crash focused on him momentarily, the whites of his eyes filling with blood, his pupils small and bright.

Crash's arm came up and Gabriel clasped his hand. The skin was clammy, the grip weak. Crash gazed up at him for a moment, scared and alone and dazed, looking about five years old.

"I'll call an ambulance," Gabriel repeated softly.

But it didn't register. Something in Crash's mind had gone and what was left was a child that looked terribly wounded, terribly shocked by the pain. He gazed up in hurt puzzlement at Gabriel, as if wondering why he didn't make it all stop.

Then his eyes sort of fixed in space and he died.

Gabriel sank back on his heels into the aisle and leaned against the side of the pew. His gaze found the stained-glass windows opposite. The Good Shepherd gazed back at him, crook in hand, sheep grazing peacefully in the paradise of green hills beyond. Gabriel closed his eyes.

Take care of him, he prayed awkwardly. To whom the plea was offered, he didn't know. To whatever it was that was out there—hopefully something with an aspect of tenderness like the one in the window beyond.

He sat a moment longer, waiting for his limbs to stop shaking, for some notion of what came next to surface. But nothing was jelling in his head—and it wouldn't, not here with this pitiful broken shell of a human being. He needed to tell someone, that much was clear. Yes, and he knew who he needed to tell.

But wasn't there something to be done first?

Gabriel rose shakily and looked down at Crash. He looked around. No one was paying them the least attention. With a sense of disgust at himself, Gabriel withdrew his notebook from a pocket and, with unsteady hands, pulled the T-shirt up on the corpse and traced the lines of the tattoo. Mosely was in his office when Gabriel arrived at the station. He looked depressed and tired in a way that was unusual for the blithely blundering oaf. But Gabriel didn't have time to wonder about such things. He entered the room and shut the door hard behind him.

"What do you want?" Mosely said darkly.

"I just watched Crash die." Gabriel pulled the visitor's chair back hard, scrapping the floor, and plunked down into it.

Mosely was doubtful. "What are you talking about, Knight? I just let the kid go this morning."

"Yeah, and I just watched him die not half an hour ago. He's at St. Louis Cathedral."

Mosely leaned forward in his chair, finally getting it. "Are you serious? Christ! What happened?"

Gabriel started to open his mouth, but Mosely's earthy, home-spun face gave him pause. What had happened? More importantly, what would Mosely believe?

"I... I think he was murdered."

"Murdered? What, shot?"

"No. Maybe ... poisoned. He was sick. Real sick."

"Poisoned? Old ladies get poisoned, not drug addicts. Sounds like an OD to me."

"It wasn't an overdose," Gabriel said firmly.

"Oh, we're an expert on drugs now, are we?"

Gabriel blushed with anger. "So do an autopsy! Christ, no wonder you guys never solve any cases!"

"Don't tell me how to do my job, Knight!"

The two men glared at each other. Gabriel relinquished first, too eager to convince Mosely to keep his mouth shut for long.

"Look, pick up the body. Do an autopsy. Hasn't it occurred to you that yesterday you brought Crash in for questioning and today he's dead? That's a pretty goddamn big coincidence. He sat right here, scared out of his mind. Apparently, he was right."

Mosely frowned again. "Right about what?"

"What are you saying?"

"You know what I'm sayin'! The people you brought him in here to rat on made sure he could never do just that."

"Jesus!" Mosely was exasperated. "You said he died in front of you, right?"

"Yeah."

"And there wasn't anybody else around, right?"

"Yeah."

"And he was sick, that's why he died?"

"Uh-huh."

"That spells one thing: drugs. He was in here overnight, couldn't get anything, left this morning dying for a fix, found one, and overdid it. It happens all the time."

Gabriel gazed at him steadily. "Not this time."

Mosely sighed. He leaned back looking old and spent. "He'll get an autopsy, okay? That's routine. If it's drugs, we'll find them. If not, we'll look into it."

"Good," Gabriel said, satisfied.

Mosely fiddled with his pen. His problems, at least, didn't seem to be resolved.

"So what's your problem now?" Gabriel prompted.

"I gotta tell you something."

"What?"

Mosely wouldn't meet his eyes. "The Voodoo Murders case is closed."

Gabriel felt a sense of doom wash over him. No wonder Mosely had looked like a dog caught with his nose in the toilet ever since Gabriel walked in. He didn't know what to say.

Mosely glanced at him sideways. "I'm sorry, Bud. I'm as disappointed as you are about the book. There'll be another good case, though—a better one. You'll see."

Gabriel looked at his weaseling friend disdainfully. "I'm not gettin' the feeling here that the case has been solved."

The pink around Mosely's ears spread to his forehead. "It has. In a sense."

"Oh? What sense is that? The sense that you guys are a bunch of chicken-shits?" Gabriel's anger was rising.

Now Mosely's entire face took on the lumpy red blush.

"What I told you before was confirmed! The victims were all members of the Chicago Mafia. They were trying to get a foothold in New Orleans to run drugs upriver. Florida's become way too hot."

"And?"

"And, so the locals didn't like it. Made 'em feel unwelcome. They pulled out. That's the official word from a couple of sources. Chicago's pulled

out. The killings are over."

Gabriel stared at his adamant friend. "What about the murderers?"

Mosely shrugged uneasily. "They're part of our underworld here. We'll deal with them in our own time, always have."

"Your ambition astounds me," Gabriel said dryly.

Mosely looked even more sheepish. "Look, the guys in the department figure it this way, better the scum we know than somebody else's scum! They figure we were done a favor. You really want to see New Orleans become a drug shipping Mecca for the entire country?"

Gabriel snorted. He was so furious suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to lean over Mosely's desk and shake him silly.

"Save it for your macho man coffee Matches," he sputtered. "Seven people had their hearts ripped out and you guys can't get your head out of your asses to figure out who did it. You're fucking copping out—shit, I never even knew what that meant until now! You want to justify your chicken-shit attitude and your lame-ass failure, tell it to the mirror! Me, I'm not buying it."

With that he got up violently, knocking the chair to the floor as he did so. He stormed from the office and out into the street as quickly as he could, taking with him the mental image of Mosely's red face staring up at him with surprise and anger, yes, and a secret guilt.

About the third time another driver screamed obscenities at him, Gabriel realized that he was about to kill himself and probably take one or two others with him. He slowed down the bike, pulled over to the curb, and parked under a shady tree, letting the bike idle. He took a couple of deep breaths.

He couldn't remember ever being this angry before. He wasn't the "storming out of the room" type, not the violent type, yet he'd been ready to rip someone's head off and still felt the urge curled in his hands like a pup.

What difference does it make? The police weren't exactly helping you anyway.

But it ticked him off. Was he the only one in this town with eyes? The police had been hood-winked, or they allowed themselves to be. Even Mosely.

Not Voodoo, no, huh-uh. Oh, and by the way, we'll just let these nutty pranksters get off scot-free. What

the hey. They keep the Italian Mafia out. That was like saying "Let's keep the lion in the house, dear. It'll take care of the mice." As far as Gabriel knew, the Italians weren't in the habit of turning young men into a mass of liquefied flesh from across town or carving out hearts in semi-public places without worry of being seen.

No. Truth was, the police were scared. He'd seen it in Mosely's eyes. His own fear, yes, but more important was that guilt. Guilt for the back-shuffling of the entire force.

Look at it this way, Gabe ol' pal. If the N.O.P.D. is dropping it, if they're scared, what the hell are you doing keeping your skinny li'l ass in it?

"Gonna die young anyway," he muttered to himself. And the sound of those words spoken in the afternoon light on the ordinary city street, bike in idle, black leather booted heels spread on either side of the motorcycle and planted on the hot Louisiana asphalt, created a wash of displacement. He was suddenly looking down at himself from a third eye in the sky. The picture he saw was so goddamn perfect, so fucking chivalrous, so monumentally James Dean that his anger evaporated instantly and the writer in him broke into applause.

Fuck it. This is better than one of my goddamn novels. Do it alone then, you cheeky bastard. Do it alone. He watched himself like that, grinning, all the way home.

Grace looked pale when he entered. He went to the coffee machine, still in the midst of an exaggerated swagger.

Grace watched him. "Seen the afternoon paper?" she asked, chewing her lip.

"Nope."

"Police have closed the case," she said bitterly.

"Yup," he replied. He started humming and boosted himself up onto the coffee table to sit, legs swinging free. He watched his boots curiously.

She looked disappointed that her bombshell hadn't landed as planned. "That doesn't bother you?"

"Grace, ya gotta learn to lighten up, go with the flow," he lectured, demonstrating with fluidly waving hands.

She stared at him in disbelief, then a shadow crossed her face. It was obvious to Gabriel that it had Malia's name on it. She thought he was just too dumbstruck to care about anything. He didn't bother to correct her.

"Fine," she said flatly. "I assume we're done with the research, then."

"Wrong. I was going to ask you if you'd check out something tonight. Rada drums."

"Rada drums?"

"Yeah. What are they. Where they come from. In particular, see if you can find anything about drum codes. You know, like smoke signals, only louder."

He cracked himself up, nearly falling off the table. Grace observed him with the patience reserved for the insane.

"Okeydokey," she said. "So you're still on the case even though the police aren't?"

"Gracie, old gal, you and me . . . we don't need those losers anyway," he said in mock seriousness.

Grace pursed her lips and said nothing.

"Now why don't you skedaddle on down to that library right now, hey?"

"But the shop doesn't close for another hour!"

He rolled his eyes. "Please. I may be a crack detective but a bookseller, I'm not. Go on."

Grace shook her head as though completely baffled by Gabriel's behavior, but she gathered her things obediently and headed for the door. She put on her coat and paused to give him a final puzzled look.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He hopped down, loped over to her, and gave her a big hug. She stepped back, further alarmed.

"I'm Napoleon ice cream, doll face. Now get the heck outta here." He gave her chin a faux punch.

Grace fled.

Gabriel watched her go from the front window of the shop, laughing huffingly to himself. The laughter kept on coming, and coming and coming. After a while it sounded maniacal, even to him.

"Malia?" he whispered. The phone receiver was cradled in the crook of his neck. It was nearly midnight and he'd sworn he wouldn't use the private number she'd given him, not so soon, not so eagerly, but his body was damp from his second shower and the mere weight of the bed sheet made his flesh sing achingly.

"Gabriel?"

"Sorry it's so late."

"Can't sleep?"

"No."

She sighed. "Me neither. Come to me."

"On my way."

He hung up the phone, pulled on the first pair of jeans he stumbled upon on the dark floor, and exited to the teeming night.

Chapter 5

The road was blocked, the truth was shunned, the white flag had been raised.

Reversal cost me all I had, and everything I'd braved.

June 22, 1993

It was eight A.M. the next morning when Gabriel pulled up outside the shop. It was already open, and Gabriel felt a mild annoyance that Grace had come in early and would witness his unusual point of origin this morning. He thought about lying, but what did he have to excuse? His private life was none of Grace's concern.

So he entered, determined not to be made to feel self-conscious. He hung up his coat and headed for the coffee.

"You're out and about early this morning,"

Grace said. A slight frown creased the space between her eyes, but one glance at it told Gabriel it was a suspicion, not a certainty. Good.

"Yup," he said. He poured the Java with a splash and sent it straight to his lips. It was pure heaven. "Anything up?"

"I found a dealer in Philadelphia who had a book on Rada drum codes. It won't get here 'til tomorrow, though."

Gabriel didn't ask her how she'd paid for it. What was the point? He couldn't pay her back.

"Phone calls?" he asked instead.

"There was one on the answering machine this morning. From that Wolfgang Ritter person in Germany? He's really persistent."

Gabriel's heart gave a little lurch. Wolfgang Ritter—Granddad's brother. He'd nearly forgotten!

"Do you have that number again, Grade?" he asked quickly, not at all sure what he'd done with the last one.

Grace ripped a sheet of paper from a notepad on her desk and handed it to him.

"You're going to call him?" she asked doubtfully.

"No, just thought I'd memorize his number for the fun of it," he quipped.

Grace's frown crease reappeared. She studied him closely.

"Guess you were already out this morning when he called," she said carefully.

"Yeah. Probably just missed him," he responded casually, throwing in a yawn and stretch

for effect.

There. She'd done it. She'd gotten him to lie. He cursed himself inwardly. Women!

Her frown cleared a tad. "Any particular reason why you're suddenly interested in Wolfgang Ritter? Is it about the case?"

"No, Gracie, it's not about the case. You know, you need to get a life," he teased. He headed for the back room and the privacy of his studio extension.

But Grace didn't smile, she just chewed her lower lip again worriedly. His body wasn't buying it, either. Inside, his stomach had turned to lead.

The connection went through without a hitch. The ringing of the phone sounded close, as if it were across the street instead of across the globe. Gabriel's heart thumped four times for every bring.

"Schloss Ritter hier," a woman's voice answered pleasantly.

"Wolfgang Ritter, please?" he sounded young and nervous, even to himself.

"Ein moment, bitte."

He waited, trying not to think about the phone bill. Maybe it was night there, he hadn't the first idea. Or maybe the man—God, he must be in his eighties at least—was busy having a heart attack. Finally he heard someone pick up the receiver on the other end.

"Gabriel?" a man's voice said. The voice was old.

"Is this Wolfgang Ritter?" Gabriel asked, suddenly doubtful.

"Yes. Do you know who I am?"

"Heinz Ritter was your brother."

"And your grandfather. Good!" Wolfgang sounded excited. "He never told you himself, I suspect?"

"He was dead long before I was born. But, no. He never told anyone. I just found out a few days ago when I was goin' through some of his things."

Gabriel ended lamely, unable to think of anything else to say. He didn't know this person on the other end of the phone, and he suddenly wasn't real sure he wanted to.

"I don't know where to start," his great-uncle said. "There's so much to tell you about the family."

"Who is the family?"

"You and I. We are the only ones left. That's why it's imperative that you ..." Wolfgang

trailed off awkwardly.

"Yes?"

"There's so much to explain. And I'm afraid you're in great danger. Great danger!"

"I don't know what you mean," Gabriel said, annoyed that this man would call him up just to scare the crap out of him.

"You must leave New Orleans and come to Schloss Ritter . . . that's the family castle. It's the safest way, and we have much to discuss."

The old coot was stark raving mad!

"Uncle Wolfgang, I'm kinda up to my neck in somethin' right now. Even if I wanted to come, even if I had the money to come ..."

"I'd pay for the ticket myself, but I'm afraid I have no money either," Wolfgang interrupted.

"You must find the money, somehow. Leave today if you can."

His tone was so imperative, and the request so ridiculously unlikely, that it only increased Gabriel's ire.

"I can't come to Germany," Gabriel said firmly. He was determined to get through the brick wall on the other end.

There was a pause.

"Oh, dear," Wolfgang said. The imperial tone was gone. Now he only sounded frail.

That newfound emotion of guilt reared its head again.

"What makes you think I'm in danger?" Gabriel said, softening his tone. He could at least allay the old man's fears if he couldn't humor them.

"The dream told me. It started a few weeks ago. It took me a few days to track you down once I knew you existed."

Gabriel digested this.

"I thought ... I thought I was the last," Wolfgang continued. "I never knew Heinz had a son much less a grandson . . . I'm sorry about your father."

Gabriel was confused to feel a lump in his throat. "What did your dream tell you?" Gabriel asked, changing the subject.

"I see you dead in the dream. It's the family curse, only . . . not." Wolfgang sighed. "There are powers you don't understand. If you come to Schloss Fitter, I may be able to protect you."

It occurred to Gabriel that this conversation was getting immensely weird. "Not quite followin' you, Unc," he said.

"Damn Heinz!" The voice was surprisingly

angry. "There are things your grandfather should have told you! The family has certain obligations. Heinz thought he could escape, but as you can see, he did not escape. Your father was a victim, too. Your ignorance does not protect you. At least if you knew what you were, you might have a chance!"

"What I am?" Gabriel asked skeptically.

"Schattenjäger." The word made the hair on Gabriel's neck stand.

"Uh-huh," he said. "You'll have to translate that."

There was another pause.

"Shadow Hunter." Wolfgang spoke the words so ominously, Gabriel half expected a clap of thunder. "That's the literal translation. I'm afraid it will take quite a bit more effort to explain what it really means. I'd rather do it in person." Gabriel scratched his head. This was getting too intrusive. And too long. Dollar signs were dancing in front of his eyes.

"Look," he said, exasperation creeping back into his tone. "I'm real interested in hearin' about the family and all ... but now's a real bad time. Maybe you could write me a letter? Fill me in?" "I have already sent a package. It contains the journal of one of your ancestors. You must read it. It may begin to explain things."

"Okay."

"Please," Wolfgang pleaded, "if you won't come to Germany, promise me you will at least leave New Orleans. Get somewhere quiet and safe. Don't interact with anyone now. You must hear me." The old man sounded so sincere that Gabriel almost wanted to do what he was suggesting. But he knew in his heart that he would not. He wasn't going anywhere.

"Okay. I will," he lied. "You take care, now."

"God protect you," came the short reply. The tone sounded suspiciously like Wolfgang was washing his hands of his great-nephew's fate. Then the phone went dead.

Gabriel replaced the receiver thoughtfully. At least Great-uncle Wolfgang knew when he was playing to an empty house. But Gabriel hadn't the slightest clue what to feel about any of the rest of it. It simply left an empty space in his mind, a space waiting for some reaction, some emotion to fill it up, but the reaction didn't come. And somehow, it didn't even matter. What was in motion was in motion, this much Gabriel knew. If

this long-lost great-uncle had any relevance at all, it would become clear when it needed to.

He hoped.

Gabriel showered mechanically and pulled on his usual garb—white T-shirt, jeans, black boots. He was just finishing his morning coif, mind distracted with thoughts of what there was to do today, when he heard the phone ring. He let Grace pick it up.

"It's for you," her voice called back to him overly loud, in her New York fashion.

"Who is it?" he mouthed as he entered the shop.

"Hartridge. From Tulane," Grace hissed eagerly.

Gabriel took the phone.

"Professor Hartridge?"

"Mr. Knight! I have some news. Can you stop by this morning?" The man's arrogance was gone, replaced by a boyish excitement.

"News about the vevel Did you find out where it's from?"

"We shall see. I'm not done, not by a long shot, but I did identify a few of the marks."

"What were they?" Gabriel asked. He glared at Grace with annoyance. She was pressing close, trying to hear the conversation.

"Very old symbols for two common Loa, and another one I don't recognize—probably a tribal Loa that's not widely known. I've got some idea of a general region based on the symbols, but time frame and lineage are still on the slab."

"Two common Loa? That doesn't sound very exciting."

"Except that they just happen to be the darkest Loa conceivable. Even so, a Loa's characteristics change from time and place. If I'm not mistaken, these particular symbols represent these Loas' most horrible aspects." Hartridge laughed a little nervously. "Look, I'd rather get into this in person."

Gabriel's "person" was much in demand these days. "All right. I'm on my way."

"Good." Hartridge hung up.

"Well? What'd he say?" Grace pestered, taking the phone from Gabriel and returning it to its cradle.

"What, you couldn't hear? I coulda sworn you were close enough to smell his breath," Gabriel replied dryly. He walked to the front door.

As he put on his jacket he glanced back and saw Grace doing a strange little dance. She seemed torn about something, thusly hovering like a baby

bird not quite sure what to do with its various appendages, caught between moving forward and sitting down.

"Sit, Grade," he said dryly. "I'll be back soon enough."

Grace still looked like she were having a gas attack, but she did sink back down into her chair, albeit reluctantly. As he left he reminded himself to keep an eye on her. The girl was taking this whole business way too seriously.

The stone hallways of the science building at Tulane were cool and quiet. Gabriel had forgotten the way to Hartridge's office in this place where all the stairs and landings looked alike, every room had an equally unwieldy unmarked door, and every five feet of hall had an alcove that might, from a few feet away, be equally indicative of a rest room, a broom closet, an emergency exit, or a blank wall with nothing but a water cooler or trash can to justify the excess space.

Gabriel attacked the building, heading determinedly for the remembered center and finding himself frequently thrust back to the fringes, like so much flotsam washing back to the beach with the tide. His anticipation began to chill, then turn into annoyance, then to a sense of dislocation. The place was not merely quiet, he realized. Except for his own clicking heels, it was silent. It was, in fact, empty. Gabriel passed classroom after classroom, doors propped open, chairs and podiums markedly devoid of life. It was as if this place, so hallowedly built of stone on the Louisiana swamps, had been reclaimed—the bones of the frame left, but the flesh, the populace, along with their books and papers, condoms and chewing gum, sucked relentlessly back into the muck and mire, leaving only the impressions of their life force behind.

He found himself trying to recall the day of the week, hoping to justify the increasingly unreal absenteeism. But he didn't know what day it was. It couldn't be Sunday, since Grace had opened the shop that morning.

Had she? Or was that yesterday morning?

He stopped finally, feeling faint. He leaned back up against one of the thickly painted walls and tilted his head back, closed his eyes.

Relax.

His pulse slowed and his mind cleared a little. No, it wasn't Sunday, but it was summer. This explanation made him feel a great deal better.

When he opened his eyes again he saw the main entrance doors down the hall ten feet or so, and the left hallway stretching out from there, the hallway he'd taken the day of the lecture. Three minutes later he was standing outside Hartridge's office door.

When he entered, Hartridge was at his desk, leaning forward intently over some papers. Gabriel felt a rush of relief that was almost giddiness. He'd gotten a dreadful sense, out there in those halls, a horrible certainty that he would find Hartridge's office empty as well. Now the cobwebs in his mind wisped away for good. He had perhaps been working too hard, or his hallway tremors might be accountable to expensive brie cheese, the kind Malia had fed him last night, going a little sour in his plebeian pit of a stomach.

"Hey, Professor," he said happily. He walked forward to see what Hartridge was working on. It wasn't until he'd placed a hand on Hartridge's shoulder and still Hartridge did not move that the dread returned. It was the worse for having been temporarily exorcised. Gabriel shook the shoulder and the form jiggled. He tugged on the shoulder and Hartridge compliantly leaned back in his chair, his arms remaining on the desk, his eyes staring forward at nothing.

Hartridge's skin was the color and texture of bad cottage cheese. His pupils were shot through with blood, and a trickle of the same exited his mouth and made a quick run for the border of Hartridge's collar.

Hartridge was dead.

Gabriel uttered an involuntary little huff of a scream and drew back hastily, as if the body might grab for him.

But the corpse did not move.

As Gabriel waited for his brain to decide on some appropriate response (run, pick up the phone, mindlessly crash through the closed window), his eyes were fixed on Hartridge's face. Hartridge looked as though he'd been ill. That is, he looked like whatever had killed him had been inside not out. But Hartridge had sounded fine on the phone, nary a sniffle. Whatever it was that had killed him, it must have come on suddenly. And whatever it was, it looked a lot like what had killed Crash.

Gabriel made a wide berth around the front of the desk, almost tiptoeing with disgust, trying to

get a good view of the scene without pushing between the body in the chair and the back wall. He peered over the far edge of the desk. He saw, on the floor, a drying pool of blood, splattered and clotting. Vomitus.

The smell hit him then, a tang like rotting melon with some secret metallic human crevasse smell underneath.

Yes. Like Crash.

Gabriel turned and ran from the room, stumbling down nameless hallways, past empty classrooms, into the stiflingly hot but blessedly odorless air of the Louisiana morning.

Despite his experience of the day before, or perhaps because of it, Gabriel could think of no other place to take this new development than to the plate of Detective Mosely, however incompetent he might be. At the very least, Mosely would have the body picked up. Gabriel figured he owed Hartridge at least that much.

When Gabriel entered, Mosely was trying, in a clunky way reminiscent of a bear trying to use a spoon, to type something on his computer keyboard. The expression on his face as Gabriel arrived said not only wasn't he having a good time at this activity, he wasn't particularly thrilled to have Gabriel observe his awkward efforts, either.

Gabriel shut the door of Mosely's office carefully and sat down, not saying a word. Mosely turned from the computer to his equally unruly, albeit newer companion.

"Been thinking up fresh insults all night? Couldn't wait to get over here to give me more of the what for?" Mosely asked gruffly.

"Not at all," Gabriel said pleasantly. "Have you heard anything about Crash?"

Mosely prodded at a file on his desk. "Autopsy." Gabriel picked up the autopsy file and looked inside. On the front page was the easy-to-find bottom line, stamped in red ink. "Overdose: heroin."

Gabriel put the file gently back down on the desk. Mosely watched him as if he expected him to reach out and bite. Gabriel said nothing.

"Well?" Mosely prompted.

"Very interestin'," Gabriel said calmly. "I have a new one for you. He's a professor at Tulane University. He died at his desk sometime between nine o'clock this morning and about twenty minutes ago. I s'pose his autopsy

will say the same thing. Or maybe they're even cleverer than I thought. Maybe the same symptoms will mysteriously read 'heart attack' this time, Tulane professors not bein' big on heroin and all."

Mosely's eyebrows had gone up during this reasonably voiced revelation, crinkling up the skin on his forehead like a folding garage door. Gabriel had a brief wish that what was inside was something massive; something with monster tires and a front grid, but knew it could be better visualized as a Hyundai.

"Excuse me," Mosely piqued, "are you telling me you found another corpse? This morning?"

"Yup. This one was dead when I found him, though. That's a new twist," Gabriel said thoughtfully. "Having been up-close-and-personal with both dearly departed, I can tell you honestly that they went the same way. The same goddamn way. I'd bet my life on it."

Mosely leaned back in his chair and stared at Gabriel as if he were just discovering some new and not entirely appealing facet of his long-time friend. Gabriel didn't care for the look at all.

"And there's more," he continued. "You see, I went over there because Hartridge had information for me? Information about the veve, that pattern from the crime scenes? I had it reconstructed and gave Hartridge a copy. He'd/ownd something out about it, Mose. Do you hear what I'm saying? He knew something."

Gabriel was losing his calmness, but what was creeping in was not anger but fear. He pushed it back. "Now he's dead," he concluded simply. The two men sat quietly for a moment. Mosely's gaze was fixed on Gabriel and Gabriel found himself feeling guilty under it. Guilty! What the hell was Mosely's problem?

"I don't think you should tell anyone else about this," Mosely said after an unbearable pause.

"Kay," Gabriel said, puzzled.

"I only say that 'cause, being a police officer and all, I can tell you that it doesn't look good. You coming in here finding bodies like this, one after the other?" There was something twisted in Mosely's tone.

"Excuse me," Gabriel said, getting annoyed. "I happen to be on the trail of the serial killers you all have given up hope of findin'? That's why I'm stumblin' over corpses."

He found himself breathing hard for some

reason. "I'm gettin' close," he added, staring deeply at his friend.

And he realized that he was. Or he thought he was. The idea was, oddly, not comforting. Neither did it impress Mosely the way Gabriel thought it ought to.

"If I were you, I'd consider the possibility that you might be too goddamn close," Mosely said. It was cautiously worded, but it was a threat. Gabriel stared at him in disbelief. "What is wrong with you?"

Mosely shifted uncomfortably in his chair. At least it stopped his staring, which really had been getting unthinkably ugly, giving Gabriel a vision of Mosely that he would really rather not have.

"I'm just telling you. The Voodoo Murders case is closed. What you're bringing to me now is something new." Mosely paused for effect, staring at Gabriel. "And the only thing these two new things have in common is close contact with you."

"That's bullshit," Gabriel whispered. "And you know it."

And Mosely did relent, under Gabriel's righteous gaze. He let out a big sigh. "I won't say anything about this. We'll have Hartridge picked up and see what forensics says."

"Uh-huh."

"But maybe you should stop with this shit now. Don't you think? Before you get someone else killed?"

"You think it's my fault?" Gabriel said, flabbergasted.

Mosely said nothing.

"If you want me to stop findin' corpses maybe you should reopen this case!"

"Can't," Mosely said, shaking his head firmly.

"What do you need, a fuckin' neon arrow, Tick up bad guys here'?"

Mosely sighed again. "The department doesn't think the killers were legitimate Voodoo. Can you prove that they were?"

Gabriel thought. "Maybe."

Mosely didn't believe him. "Uh-huh. And there's also the vague notion that this thing was a onetime affair, that these people are no general threat to the general populace. Do you have information to the contrary?"

"A dead professor isn't enough?"

"Give me a break, Gabe! How am I supposed to tie that in with a series of ritual killings where people's hearts are ripped out? It's not the same

case."

Gabriel didn't say anything.

"And I need a lead. We beat the streets for weeks on that case. Seven crime scenes. Nothing. Not one single goddamn piece of physical evidence tying the deaths to anyone. I can't work with thin air. I need someone or something to investigate."

Gabriel thought about the message on Laveau's tomb wall, but he didn't think that was likely to do much for the N.O.P.D.

"Suppose I got you those things," Gabriel said, a challenge in his voice.

Mosely raised his eyebrows. "If you can do that, you'll have my complete support."

"You mean it?"

Mosely shrugged. Clearly, he didn't think Gabriel would come up with anything of the kind.

"You'd be better off dropping it. Or the next corpse might be yours. You hear what I'm saying?" Mosely did look genuinely worried.

"Thought you didn't think these new deaths were related to the case," Gabriel countered.

Mosely said nothing at all.

Gabriel's mind was churning by the time he left Mosely's office. Mosely wanted proof, and Gabriel had . . . what? A snake scale from near a lake; a reconstruction of the patterns found around the bodies, verified verbally as a veve of obscure African origin by an expert dead guy; a testimony, again verbally, again from a dead guy, that the murders were committed by an underworld cartel who sure-as-shit knew Voodoo; an old lady's grandmother's bracelet; a tracing of a tattoo; a message, in Voodoo code, which told somebody named DJ to take a whip somewhere.

In other words, he had diddly squat.

How could that be? He felt like he'd been working on this case for months. And yet, come time to call the cows home, the barnyard showed naught but a few decaying muffins of dung.

They're playing with you. The words came to him unbidden and bitter. You think you're chasing them, but they know you're there. You'll never find out anything you could actually use.

An image from the early days of the case, that of the veil that hung between the ignorant inhabitants of his world and those in the world of Voodoo mysteries, crossed his mind. The thought that he was no closer now than he had been when he'd first

glimpsed that veil depressed him utterly. He felt embarrassed, like a kid playing Tarzan in his yard suddenly realizing an older boy had been watching—and laughing at him.

And yet.. .

Grace's face appeared to him, eyes eager and brightly excited. And Mosely's face: grave, guilty, even scared. If I'm not close, why do they smell victory on me?

The veil trembled a bit then. It occurred to him that he'd been thinking exactly what they'd want him to think, that they might in fact be sending him those helpless why-don 't-you-give-up thoughts. And that idea, that they could reach into his brain and plunk something down there he'd label his own, that scared the shit out of him.

No, he thought defiantly. You're not completely in control. The press clipping Grace dug up from 1910, he'd bet anything that wasn't in their plan.

Nor the veve reconstruction, nor Hartridge's recognition of what it revealed. And the message on the tomb—it hadn't been Gabriel's imagination that Dr. John had lost his cool over that little item. And the scale was important. He felt it in his bones.

What did those things have in common? They came from unexpected avenues. They'd subdued the police, obviously, but they hadn't counted on him. Yes, there were cracks. He was probably being watched now, but they couldn't anticipate every direction he might probe. All he had to do was keep jabbing in unexpected ways.

That, and stay alive.

There was a lead he knew he must follow up on. It worried him, but he decided he had to take the chance that the veil was still intact there, that the game could still be played by the old rules, //they would be surreptitious and deceitful, perhaps he could use that to his own ends.

When he arrived at the Voodoo museum it was close to one o'clock in the afternoon. He entered via the street door and was momentarily confused. The short entry hall was dark, becoming pitch-black when the door swung to.

Was the museum closed for lunch? Had they forgotten to lock the front door? He listened and heard nothing.

He considered going back out the way he'd come in, but it crossed his mind that he might have come across one of those unplanned events of which he could take advantage. If no one_ was at home, might he not have the opportunity,

assuming he could find a light switch, of looking around? Digging a little deeper than the tourist displays?

He put out a cautionary hand to his left and found the wall of the hallway. Using it as a guide, he moved forward, toward the display room, shuffling his feet awkwardly, lest the world should drop away in front of him, and holding a protective hand up in front of his face. He found the doorway to the display room a few feet away, right where it should be (though slightly farther in the dark than he'd anticipated). If he wasn't mistaken, there was a switch just inside the door, somewhere above that small coffin. Wasn't there?

He stepped silently through the doorjamb, feeling pleased with himself for being so very stealthlike, and began to feel along the right inside wall.

Something enormously heavy fell on his head with the dull shock of an unexpected blow. First the gravity of the thing came—driving Gabriel to his knees. A second later, like a photographic delay, the pain and fear blossomed, and all he wanted to do was get out of the way.

He fell awkwardly to his right, trying to escape, but whatever had hit him, it was still there, draped over his head and shoulders, and now becoming an issue of suffocation in addition to the sheer physical violence of the blow. A sandbag? He reached up to push the thing off and felt cool, clammy skin.

It was the snake.

He redoubled his efforts to push the thing away, revulsion now spurring his movements. But the creature's body was pure muscle, and it had found his weak spot—that narrow, unprotected passageway through which mortal creatures drink life from the air around them. It had gotten two coils around his neck and was finishing a third. Gabriel's efforts to pull at the thing only caused it to tighten its grip. It began to squeeze, and the pressure on his windpipe became a burning, crushing vise. The trickle of air still getting through couldn't begin to meet the needs of his terror. He wheezed loudly, desperate for more, and struggled with the snake ever more weakly. He realized the deep shit he was in. The thing had only begun its deadly embrace and it was this bad. He was going to die. He couldn't shake the thing, so he dragged it

with him. He pulled himself along the floor, still wheezing, and trying to keep at least one hand prying at the loops of flesh around his esophagus, hoping to at least make the snake work harder if not actually delay the inevitable. He found the legs of a wobbly table, nearly brought it crashing down on top of them, and steadied it just in time. He reached a hand to the tabletop and pulled himself upward.

Things were going slow now. Despite the darkness of the room, he could feel his vision going darker still, a darkness that bloomed from his mind like ink from an octopus, and spread through his nervous system. Every action seemed weighted, every second infinite. And he had only seconds now, he knew.

He blindly groped for anything he might use against the snake. He remembered the dagger, but it was across the room and he'd never be able to reach it in time, even if he knew exactly where . . .

Turn on the light, a voice in his head spoke.

On the table he could feel the contours of the small coffin and for a moment pictured himself picking it up and smashing it, using a raw stake of a chunk to plunge into the thing around his neck. You don't have enough time to smash anything.

Turn on. The light.

Turn on. The light.

He didn't know where the light was! He groped along the wall. His legs were going numb.

He found a light switch. On the wall, above the coffin. He remembered it, yes. But it wasn't a light, was it?

He flicked the switch up.

And felt his heart sink. No light came! No relief from the darkness! Instead, from somewhere to his right, he heard the whack, whack, whack of a broken fan. Yes, he knew that! Fuck! A broken fan!

What a stupid way to die! A flunky of the Dr.

Denvil's memory training course!

He sank to his knees. A sob welled up from him, but it had no way out. It settled into a bitter lump, like badly swallowed pills, somewhere near his diaphragm. He tried to gasp but there was no passage at all for air anymore. He dropped to the floor, apologized to the universe for his ineptitude, and lay still.

The snake let go.

It took him a moment to realize he was breathing. Then he felt the thing as it slid past his face, going cautiously, then quickly. The raspy, scaly skin burnt the flesh of his chin like a rope

whipping through a fisherman's hands. Then it was gone entirely. He pulled in a huge gasp of air. The lights came on.

"Mr. Knight! I didn't know anyone was here. Are you ill?"

Gabriel picked up his head, which was now throbbing as the blood painfully pushed its way back through constricted veins. Dr. John stood in the doorway across the room, the doorway to the inner chambers Gabriel had never seen. The giant's face bore a remarkable expression—slight bewilderment mixed with just a shade of polite concern, and every bit of both as fake as a salesman's alligator shoes.

Gabriel pointed a shaky hand toward the wall with the fan, a bit of the snake was just visible under the table there.

"That... that thing tried to kill me!" he gasped.

"Oh, no!" Dr. John said, looking truly mortified.

"Did you hurt him?"

"Me? No!"

Dr. John crossed the room in two strides and helped Gabriel to his feet. Or, more accurately, he gave a halfhearted tug on Gabriel's arm and Gabriel sailed to his feet like a rag doll.

"You are extremely fortunate to have remembered the fan," Dr. John said smoothly. "Extremely fortunate." As he said this, he reached over and turned the switch off. The noisy thumping of the blades died down, then stopped. An overly loud, ringing silence descended on the room.

Gabriel looked uneasily toward the snake, but it did not emerge from the table. "What, he's afraid of the noise?" he gasped, still trying to catch up on his oxygen.

Dr. John smiled grimly. "Not at all. Snakes feed by vibration. To him, that fan sounds like a whole herd of cattle. Better pickings than one small man."

Dr. John's grin broadened as if Gabriel ought to find this amusing. Gabriel did not.

"Uh-huh. What was he doing out, anyway?"

"We are closed today, Mr. Knight. I do like to let him . . . roam when I can. I must have forgotten to lock the front door. I do apologize, but entering a darkened building is not particularly wise."

The smile was still there, but the eyes said something else entirely. "One must be wise about where one treads in this world."

"Yeah," Gabriel replied, rubbing his neck painfully. "Don't I know it. There are cracks everywhere." He offered Dr. John the sweetest smile he

could muster and was rewarded with a dead glint, like a shark's tooth, that surfaced in the man's eyes.

Gabriel left the museum. He managed not to run.

Gabriel realized, after he'd gotten far enough away from the museum to think clearly, that he'd gone there looking for something and had emerged, once again, with nothing. That they'd tried to kill him, that Dr. John's eyes had ceased to play their game, even if his voice had not, these were things that might ensure Gabriel himself that he was not going crazy, but they were not things Mosely would give a shit about. Just the idea, of trying to explain it to him was nauseating. Gabriel would prefer to wrestle with the snake.

The snake! He'd not only been close to the thing, he'd had his goddamn hands on it! Why hadn't he thought to check the scales?

Gee, I dunno. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that it was pitch-black and your windpipe was being flattened.

Yeah, but... damn!

He momentarily considered going back. He could even hear himself say something brilliant like "Maybe you'd let me pet him so I can get over my fear after that attack ..." but he knew that Dr. John would smell that one a mile away. No, he didn't think they knew about the scale—better to keep it that way. If they didn't know, they couldn't block his progress about it.

Assuming he ever made any progress.

Sighing, he made a left turn and headed out of the French Quarter, aiming for Tulane for the second time that day. The body ought to be gone by now, he reasoned, and he needed to search Hartridge's office, see if he had left something, anything behind. He should have done it earlier, when he'd found the corpse, but he had not, he had lost his nerve instead.

He only hoped it wasn't too late.

Outside Hartridge's building a few students tarried, looking uneasy and talking quietly among themselves. That they stood a cautious twenty feet from the brick walls indicated their simultaneous attraction and repulsion, and Gabriel felt safe in assuming that the word was out about the late anthropologist.

He did not spot any police vehicles, nor was there any trace of the N.O.P.D. inside the

building—not in the lobby, nor the hallways (which now seemed entirely logical, even quite small), nor at the door of Hartridge's office. This could only mean that the death was considered nothing but natural. Gabriel swallowed his growing ire. He could not believe that Mosely, after what Gabriel had told him, would not at least investigate Hartridge's death. He found himself wondering for the first time if he really knew Mosely. Could he have changed so very much? Or had a body-snatching alien invaded that hairless skull?

The door to Hartridge's office was not locked. Gabriel pushed it open, loath to walk through another doorway unawares. But the view of the room that was offered to him was harmless enough. The body was, indeed, gone. Light spilled in from the windows with their paint-chipped sills. Someone had even opened one of them an inch or so, and the odor of death was only barely detectable clinging to a waft of air here and there, being otherwise dispelled by a fresh, if overly warm breeze.

He glanced back into the hallway and, seeing no one, stepped into the room. He began to go over the area quickly. Still hanging on a stand in the corner was a suit jacket that Gabriel searched. Nothing. He looked around the desk and chairs for signs of a briefcase. He didn't see one. He pushed back the now-empty desk chair, feeling a thrill of regret well up as he did so—his overly vivid imagination perfectly able to conjure up visions of Hartridge still sitting there. Bending down, he looked under the desk, saw a wastebasket and pulled it out, went through its contents quickly. A couple of wadded-up tissues, used. A torn check. A couple of minimart receipts. Nothing.

He stood up. On the top of Hartridge's desk was a blotting pad, the kind that one could scribble notes on. Near the bottom middle edge was a stain. Blood. Gabriel squatted down to examine the stain. He called up his memory of Hartridge, as he'd first found him. Yes. The bloodstain would have been exactly under his head. It probably came from his mouth. Gabriel scanned the pad for other marks, but there were none.

None. That was odd, wasn't it? When he'd visited Hartridge that first day the blotter had been covered with writing. Hadn't it? He wracked his

brain, cursed his poor observation habits.

Hartridge had taken the veve, put it on his desk...

Yes, Gabriel was sure there'd been writing on the blotter. The kind of notes one takes when there's a phone nearby, as there was. Had there been writing on the pad this morning? He tried to recall, but all he could see was Hartridge's head, leaning forward, then staring up at the ceiling when Gabriel had pushed him back in his chair. Gabriel didn't think he'd even looked at the desk after that. Some investigator!

Frustrated, he examined the blotter again. It was the notepad type, the type where one could rip off the top sheet and start anew. This, apparently, had recently been done, since the bloodstain was the only mark on the top sheet.

Would it be so very remarkable if Hartridge had freshened his desk the very day of his death? Gabriel thought that it would. He remembered Hartridge's excitement on the phone. That was not the tone of a man thinking about house-keeping.

He bent and examined the pad again. The bloodstain was a dot that blurred at the edges, veining into the newsprint-quality paper. He pulled the top page up and looked underneath. There, on the next page, was the same stain, only a little bit smaller. He felt the smaller stain, then put the page down and felt the stain on the top page with a none-too-eager finger. It didn't have a film on top, but felt blotted, like the stain beneath. Either the stain on top had sunk completely into the paper or...

They'd taken the top page. Why would they take the top page?

So that you wouldn't. That's why.

Gabriel felt his heart sink. Damn it! He'd been right here in this room and had missed such an obvious thing! There'd been a crack and he'd lost it, given them time to cover. Hartridge had been working on the veve, certainly if there were notes on his blotter they might have been from that research.

He squatted down and riffled through the slim contents of the wastebasket once again. But no, they hadn't thrown the blotter page in there.

They wouldn't, would they? Still squatting, he tilted up his head and looked forlornly at the blotter. The bloodstain swam inches from his eyes, dipping the paper slightly there, as the wetness weighed down the thin material, and

beyond the stain . . .

Were other indentations in the paper. Gabriel stiffened and felt a surge of adrenaline. He focused his eyes narrowly, scooping his head to look even more directly across the top surface of the paper.

Yes. There were, there were indentations on the pad, the kind a heavy-handed writer makes. Particularly when doodling. Particularly when doodling on the phone.

Gabriel searched the desk and came up with a pencil. Eyes still level with the paper's edge, he carefully skimmed the pencil along the paper's surface, allowing it to lighten where the paper dipped away.

When he was finished, a grin spread across his face, and his skin glowed pink with pride and vengeance. There were things they forgot. He tore the sheet off, Hartridge's scribbles now intact, folded it up carefully, and went home.

Grace took one look at him when he walked into the bookshop and demanded to know what was going on.

"You look like the cat that ate the canary," she offered dryly. "Did Hartridge have some good stuff?"

This promptly erased his good mood.

"Uh, Grade," he said uneasily, "Hartridge is dead."

"What?!" Grace's light caramel-colored skin went a bit green.

"I found him this morning. Poor guy. Guess I.. I was kinda excited about somethin' else."

"He's dead? How did it happen?" Grace demanded. She was clearly afraid.

"Hmmm. Dunno," he lied. "The police will probably say it's a heart attack."

That's true enough, but you know it wasn't, don't you, Cube old man?

"Oh, my God," Grace said, still stunned.

"That's horrible. Are you sure it wasn't . . ." She looked at him searchingly.

He thanked his lucky stars that he hadn't mentioned Crash to her. She'd really be losing it now if she knew Hartridge wasn't the first.

"It was just one of those things, I guess," he said, shrugging sadly. He carefully removed the newsprint from his jacket pocket, walked over to her, and unfolded it gingerly on her desk.

"This is what I came back to show you. I need you to check it out for me."

Grace looked at the paper, her brow wrinkling at the oddness of the pencil tracings.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Hartridge's notes. This part up here relates to us, I think."

Past some old phone numbers and doodles of African masks on big-chested women (said doodles, as far as Gabriel was concerned, going a long way in explaining Hartridge's choice of scholarly subject matter), up near the top left corner was a sketch of the veve. It wasn't a very good sketch. In fact, it consisted mainly of two crudely drawn circles—one inside the other (like the dream), which is the only way Gabriel recognized it as the veve at all. Around the veve were scribbles. It looked like this:

"You think this is about the veve?" Grace said, her interest rekindled.

"Sure as shit do. Don't you?" he asked her. He told himself he was being only slightly manipulative. He wanted her to feel a part of things. It made her work faster.

She looked at the marks and flushed, then nodded. "Yes. Yes, I do."

"Good. See if you can find out anything about this ... 'Agris Benin' at the library. Close the shop and do it now ... if you want."

She studied him, suspicion lurking behind her pretty pursed lips. Gabriel didn't have any doubts what the look meant; it meant, Why aren't you being a complete asshole as usual?

He tried to duck away, such looks not being entirely comfortable, but her hand reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Wait a minute," she said. "There's something sparkly on your face."

He felt her nail scrape his chin. She looked down at her finger curiously. He followed her gaze and saw . . .

A scale.

"I'll take that," he managed, trying to sound casual. He quickly brushed the item from her index finger into his own palm and closed his fist around it protectively.

I have a scale. From his snake. Fucker tried to kill me and instead he gave me a scale!

But Grace wasn't done with him yet. Her hand retained its grip on his arm, her face frowning with concern. "What was it?" she demanded.

"Dunno," Gabriel lied.

Her eyes went to his chin, clearly not buying it.

They widened in alarm. "Jesus Christ! You've got this amazing bruise starting on your neck," she said, awestruck.

She leaned forward, her dark eyes peering far too insightfully at his exposed flesh. She was seconds away from hysterical panic, or so he thought. If she got the least whiff of what had really happened to him today . . .

"Probably just a hickey," he said slyly. He pulled his arm away from her roughly and gave her a stare that was sexual—and challenging.

"From last night."

He could actually see her back stiffen. Her face went blank, then she turned without a word back to the desk, picked up her purse, and left the shop, turning the "Closed" sign around as she did so.

She did not say good-bye.

When he was alone, Gabriel sat down at the desk chair. Its fading cover was still warm from the slender form of Grace's posterior. With a trembling hand he pulled the green-shaded accountant desk lamp closer and switched it on. He stacked the shop's books to one side and, after looking at the dark wood of the desktop in dismay, dug through the drawers for some plain white paper and placed a few sheets on the desk's surface. Next to the paper he arranged the magnifying glass and the long tweezers, both fished from the pockets of his jeans. All of these things he did with his one free hand. The other hand remained fisted in a painfully conscious balance between the twin horrors of losing and crushing the thing that was in there. Or, rather, that he hoped was in there, since he had not peeked at it yet, couldn't until everything was just so.

Now.

He poised his fist over a sheet of paper and carefully opened it. The scale was there, stuck to his middle finger as it uncurled. It did look sparkly, and pink against his finger, from the sheen of his own flesh shining through. He took the tweezers with his other hand and carefully plucked the thing from his skin and placed it on the paper.

There.

The other scale, the one from Lake Pontchartrain, was enclosed in a plastic bag in his jacket pocket. He retrieved said bag and opened it, placing the second scale cautiously to the right of the first, conscious that he did not want to mix the

two up. His brain had reached a conclusion when he'd first seen the museum scale on his middle finger, but he'd refused to acknowledge or hear the answer until his eyes could irrefutably stand witness. Now he stared at the two scales and allowed the knowledge to trickle down his cerebral cortex and further down still, to his thudding heart.

Faintly green with a tinge of dark red. The same. They're from the same snake.

Of course. Of course they were. He'd always known they would be, had he not?

This being an unfathomable and somehow frighteningly self-cannibalistic line of internal dialogue, he stilled it by fetching another bag from the back room, tucking both scales away, and labeling them. This activity felt more like a Grace thing—neatness not being his usual mode—and the labels ended up looking smeared and childish. Nevertheless, he was pleased with the results. He picked up the blotter paper, too, and carefully refolded it.

With these treasures, he headed for the police station.

Gabriel took it as a good sign that Mosely was already feeling guilty when he arrived. He actually got up from his chair, going so far as to walk over and shut the door himself, motioning Gabriel to a seat.

"Hey!" Mosely said in an overly robust fashion.

"Picked up that friend of yours—Hartridge."

He sounded like he was talking about a fucking out-of-town visitor in for the weekend.

"Good," Gabriel replied, watching Mosely curiously. "Did you see the body?"

"Yeah, uh, sure," Mosely said nervously. "I didn't, you know, want to get into it with the other guys. They'd think I was crazy, trying to link that up with Crash or, heh heh, the Voodoo Murders. Heh heh."

"Uh-huh."

"So, you know, you'll probably see in the papers just a notice about his death, nothing special. I mean, the department's not really investigating it. Officially, I mean. I did want you to know, though, that I spoke with the coroner, Joe? He's a pretty good friend of mine? Asked him to check it out for me on the QT. You know."

Mosely's brow (which encompassed most of his head) showed a sheen of nervous sweat.

"That's a real fine idea, Mose," Gabriel drawled

calmly.

"Yeah." Mosely finally sat and exhaled a big sigh, apparently relieved that Gabriel wasn't going to give him any more shit.

"Do you think he looked like Crash?" Gabriel asked coolly.

"Heh heh," Mosely laughed nervously.

"Wouldn't say nay, bud, but we'll see. You know. Heh heh."

Gabriel wondered what, specifically, was curling Mosely's toes. Maybe he'd finally sustained a real break in whatever lacquer it was the cult had managed to throw over the entire police force. Maybe he'd become a believer in the concept that ritual death could be a hell of a lot closer at hand than the full-blown clandestine orgies involving heart surgery he'd seen in the past. Whatever it was, Gabriel thought it could only make things easier for him. Assuming Mosely didn't break completely, that was. Or end up dead.

"Brought you a few things, Mose," he said.

"Yeah?" Mosely said, not looking thrilled about it.

Gabriel took the reconstructed veve pattern from his coat and laid it open on Mosely's desk, circling around to stand near Mosely. He could smell his sweat all too clearly from here, but he supposed he'd just have to deal with it.

"Item number one. This is the reconstruction of the pattern from the crime scene. An architectural student did it for me from all the bits and pieces of pattern you guys photographed at the seven crime scenes."

Mosely looked at the pattern, not enthusiastically. He didn't say anything, but at least he was really studying it.

"You said the police didn't believe the group was legitimately Voodoo. The pattern is called a veve. Every Voodoo cult—the more African ones, anyway—has one particular to them. The base of this particular veve is this double-circle pattern. Remember that? Those arcs?"

Mosely grunted, still looking at the pattern.

"And at different points around the circle, other marks are made. They represent Loas—Voodoo spirits. They can also represent other things."

Or so he thought. Gabriel began to sweat himself.

"We can look at the photographs if you want, but I think this is a pretty good reconstruction of that pattern."

Mosely shook his head. "I believe you. Still ... maybe they copied it from somewhere."

"If they went to all the trouble to get a legitimate Voodoo veve just to trick the police, why smear it?"

Mosely didn't answer. Gabriel continued.

"Plus, I showed this veve to Hartridge. He is—was—an expert on African religions."

Mosely grunted.

"Well, he got real excited about this particular veve. Said it was old African magic. He took it to research it better. I don't know what he found, exactly, but he made these notes about it."

Gabriel pulled out Hartridge's blotter page, unfolded it, and put it on top of the veve.

Mosely glanced at the paper and blushed profoundly. He took in the pencil tip technique and his eyes went down to the bloodstain, then he blushed deeper. He wouldn't meet Gabriel's eyes. Gabriel thought he knew why. He didn't confront him with it. At least Mosely wouldn't have any doubt these were really Hartridge's notes.

"This is Hartridge's drawing of the veve. He's identified a couple of the symbols. 'Damballah/ that's a Voodoo snake spirit. 'Ogoun Badagris/ uh, he's another Loa. An avenger or something, I think." Gabriel pointed to the question-marked symbol. "He didn't know this one. He told me on the phone he thought it must be a tribal-specific Loa."

Mosely grunted.

"Hartridge knew this veve was legit. It's not just Voodoo, it's like . . . Super Voodoo. Old African shit."

Mosely sat back. "Is that it?"

"Well, don't you agree?" Gabriel said, surprised. "Are you still going to sit there and tell me the killers weren't real Voodoos?"

"No," Mosely said tiredly. "I'm not. Even so, they killed Chicago Mafia."

"What about Crash and Hartridge?" Gabriel asked.

Mosely blushed.

"You don't seriously think I killed them, do you?" Gabriel asked with disbelief.

"No." Mosely sounded drained. "You're pretty whacked, but you're not that whacked." He looked disturbed and unhappy. Gabriel kept pushing.

"Then what?"

Mosely sighed. "There's nothing that links those

deaths to the killings."

"So you're still sayin' this group is not a general threat."

Mosely looked back at him blankly.

"Then explain this." Gabriel removed the 1910 newspaper clipping from a pocket and laid it out for Mosely.

Mosely looked at the photograph, then at the veve pattern underneath the clipping. He looked back at the clipping, up at the date on the newspaper. He scanned the body of the article. His face paled as he did so.

"These guys have been in New Orleans a long fucking time. It's not the first time they've killed ritually to protect their interests. I mean, come on! This week it's the Chicago Mafia and, oh, by the way, a drug addict and professor here and there! Next week maybe it's the school board because they want to change zoning, or the mayor for passin' antidrug laws."

Mosely just stared at the clipping, not saying anything.

"Or a cop who's not afraid to be a man instead of a puppet," Gabriel finished. His voice was quiet but his tone was scathing. It surprised him how scathing it was. The anger had been building in him a long time.

Mosely folded the newspaper clipping carefully, and the blotter page from Hartridge's desk, and the veve. He handed them back to Gabriel, not looking at him. He was silent for a moment.

"You don't know how it is," he said haltingly.

"The department ... they don't want to hear about it. I mean anything. It's like the thing never happened. Even the newspaper's dropped it."

He looked at Gabriel imploringly. "I mean, I even mention the word 'Voodoo' and I get looks you wouldn't believe. Like I'd just let out a big old fart in the middle of a party or something, only it had poisonous gas in it. They don't want to know."

Gabriel felt sorry for Mosely then. He'd been pushing him, pushing him hard. What he hadn't known was the extent of the barbed-wire wall on the other side of the balding ex-football hero's pudgy torso. Gabriel squatted down and met Mosely's eyes.

"So do it on your own," he urged quietly.

Mosely shrugged, looking lost. "I don't know where to start. You"—he waved a hand at the desk as if implying the items Gabriel had now put away—"you seem to get somewhere. Me, I can't

get a damn thing."

"You need a lead," Gabriel said.

Mosely nodded dumbly.

Gabriel pulled the two bags from his coat and placed them on the desk. He pulled out his magnifying glass and handed it to Mosely.

"Take a look," he said.

Mosely gave him an odd glance, but looked at each scale in turn.

"They look pretty similar to you?" Gabriel asked.

"Yeah," Mosely said uncertainly.

"They're snake scales—constrictors. You know, boas, pythons, the kind Voodoos like to use in their dances."

Mosely watched him intently. "Go on."

Gabriel cleared his throat. Now that it was time to finally share this trump card with someone, he felt oddly shy about it.

"Okay," Gabriel said. "Where do you s'pose these came from?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me, Knight. Eventually."

Gabriel swallowed. "Right. Remember that day at the lake?" The day I met Malta. "At Pontchartrain?"

"Yeah."

"After you guys left I looked around. Near one of the trees I found some indents in the grass—like marks from a wire cage? I found this scale at the same spot." He pointed to the bag marked "Pontchartrain."

Mosely's eyes took this in, then went to the label on the second bag, which said "Museum."

His skin paled again.

"I'm listening," he said quietly.

"The Voodoo museum on Ursulines and Chartres. I noticed they had a huge constrictor there. According to Dr. John it was 'for the tourists.' Yesterday I went there and the thing attacked me. Nearly killed me. When I got home, Gracie found this souvenir on my face. It's from the museum's snake."

"I went there once, early on." Mosely's voice had a vague trace of excitement in it that Gabriel hadn't heard practically since the case began.

"And you met him."

"Huge guy? Big teeth?"

"That's the one."

"And this is really from their snake?" Mosely asked, searching Gabriel's face as though to spot any sign of deception.

"Cross my heart," Gabriel said, returning the

gaze in what he hoped was a guiltless fashion. Mosely pushed back his chair. "All right. You win."

"I do?"

"Yup. I told you I'd support you and I will.

Listen up."

Gabriel listened.

"I've been thinking about this, you know. Particularly today after . . . you know." Mosely blushed.

"Uh-huh."

"The department's no use to me now. I mean, I can't even think straight in here, except when you're staring at me with your beady old eyes."

Gabriel took this as a compliment.

"I got a couple weeks vacation," Mosely continued. He was whispering now. "I'm gonna call an emergency and take 'em. I'll look into this museum for you, and this Dr. John guy. But I'll have to do it undercover."

Gabriel shrugged, enormously pleased.

"Sounds good to me."

"If I learn anything, I'll contact you. You stay low. This is getting way the hell too dangerous for a civilian."

"Sure," Gabriel replied smoothly.

Mosely's face had lost that haunting guilty look. He looked at Gabriel with a sparkle in his eyes, a determination Gabriel remembered from his pre-game stoke-ups.

"If I do crack it, I mean if we do, we'll still have that book, hey?" Mosely said, eyes shining.

"You'll be the next Elliot Ness," Gabriel replied confidently. He punched Mosely's arm.

Mosely blushed. "Huh. Yeah. Sure," he said this sarcastically, as if in denial, yet Gabriel could tell that Mosely, in his mind, was already accepting presidential laurels.

Which was just the way it should be.

By the time the lights went out that evening in the shop and Gabriel emerged from a gloriously long, gloriously hot shower, relished a luxuriant combing of his wet hair, and had admired himself a full five minutes in the bathroom glass, he was feeling utterly confident and virile, particularly virile in his swinging nakedness as he strode about the studio. So good had the day been, in fact, that he felt no qualms about going over to the phone by his bed and dialing Malia's number.

Why should he play hard to get? He was a magnificent catch, and he didn't need to prove it.

He listened to the phone ring, scratching at his belly, then pulling at himself absently as, by the fifth ring, a vague sense of uneasiness began to set in. He let the phone ring on for another ten seconds or so, then depressed the receiver button and dialed again. He might have dialed the wrong number.

But he hadn't got it wrong and there still was no answer. No reason why there should be. Malia hadn't said she'd see him tonight. She might, in fact, be out of town. And yet, as he replaced the receiver, the glow had vanished from the day. In the pit of his stomach he felt a dull ache; the knife of stress, an unfamiliar phenomenon mere weeks before, now a paying resident. It began to twist. He went to bed.

The dream came that night, of course, full-bodied and technicolor. He watched a woman burn, as if for the first time. Saw her change into a leopard. He saw the wheel-within-a-wheel circles of fire. He saw the medallion with the lion and the dragon, and the three drops of blood that splattered on the wavy dagger, the ku-bha-sah, then turned into three snakes and crawled away. He saw himself hanged from a tree on the peak of a hill.

Only something had changed—the woman in the flames. She had been someone else. The thing he couldn't and wouldn't remember upon waking was who.

Chapter 6

And then the night became as day, I glimpsed nature's reddest claw!

The face of fear looked back at me, as I gazed into the maw.

June 23, 1993

Gabriel awoke the next morning to an ear-piercing scream. He opened his eyes, heard nothing, and figured he'd been dreaming. He had not. From the direction of the front room came Grace's voice, loud and frightened. "Gabriel!" It was part call, part question. He pulled on a pair of jeans and hurried out to the shop. Grace stood, still in her coat, near the open street door. Her face was drawn and frightened. She seemed relieved to see him, but this did not dispel her fear. She pointed at the floor.

He rounded the corner of the desk and saw the cause of her scream. On the floor just inside the door was a grisly tableau. A plucked rooster lay surrounded by flour and feathers, roots and blood. The rooster was whole. It was in fact, Gabriel real-

ized with horror, still alive. One foot quivered and scratched weakly at the air. There were pins in the bird's breast—long silver pins that stuck out a half inch or so. There were nine pins, each deeply imbedded. They surrounded the bird's heart.

The scene struck him keenly. His breath left his body and nearly refused to return. He was sickened and deeply afraid. His first instinct was to check the shop and he did so, even returning to his room to check the bathroom and look under the bed. When he came back out, he hurried over to the front door, circling around the mess on the floor. He closed the door and locked it. This being done, and the light of day streaming in through the window, even the view of pedestrians out on the sidewalk, all worked to ease his mind. His panic began to abate.

Grace was staring at him.

"There's no one here," he managed, suddenly feeling foolish.

"Did you hear anything last night?" she asked, still ashen.

"No."

"There's nothing wrong with the door. It was locked when I got here. Did you ..."

"I locked it about six when I got home. Didn't touch it again all night."

"Are you sure? Because I wasn't here to lock it."

"I locked it, Grace."

The two stood and stared down at the scene on the floor for a moment.

"Did you give the key to anyone?" Grace asked quietly.

"NO. You're the only one who's ever had a key!" Gabriel replied shortly, knowing exactly whom she meant.

Grace said nothing for a moment. Then this,

"It's the veve."

It was, he realized. He hadn't recognized it at first, with the wounded rooster catching his eye, and all of the blood and feathers strewn about. It was the veve, underneath all that. The rooster lay inside the center circle. The veve had been laid down first, in flour.

It must have taken them a while to do that.

"Yeah," he said nervously.

"They know where you live now," Grace said flatly.

No shit, Sherlock. They probably watched me sleep.

"Why don't you go get us some coffee, Gracie?"

"I'll clean this up."

"I'll help you."

"No. I'll do it."

His tone was sharp. She looked up and saw that he was not kidding. She took another look at the scene, swallowed hard, and left. He locked the door again behind her.

Then he went into the back room and puked.

By the time he had sopped up the worse of the gore (the rooster was thankfully dead when he returned with the trash bag), dumped it in the Dumpster in the back alley, and gotten out of the shower, Grace had returned. She was sitting at the desk when he emerged for the second time that day, and she didn't look happy. Near the coffeepot, which was full, was one of those expensive coffee drinks in a plastic foam cup. Latte or whatever the hell they were. Gabriel sipped the hot liquid gratefully.

"I really, really, really think you should drop this case," Grace said. He could tell from her measured tone that she was deadly serious. She'd probably been rehearsing her speech for the past hour. "I mean, I'm beating a dead horse, right?" She looked at him, her brow was furrowed. "You know this. Right?"

"Don't worry about me," he said, still drinking. She was obviously trying to figure out if that was a confirmation or not. She decided not to take any chances. "It's not your responsibility," she told him. "You must have plenty of material for your book already. It's not worth dying for. Is it?" "What is?" he said enigmatically.

She frowned, that tidbit not giving her what she was after, either. "Let's close the shop," she urged. "Right now. You get on your bike and leave town. Just drive. Don't come back. Go up north somewhere and write your book." This surprised him. He looked up at her, puzzled. "Better yet, write something else," she pleaded. He tossed the empty cup in a waste can. "We'll see, Gracie."

He didn't want Grace to know how spooked he really was, that he was more than anxious to get out of town, way out of town. He had spun around at least five times during his brief shower, certain someone was standing there. He changed the subject.

"Anythin' else come up?"

Grace frowned at this attempt at normalcy. She sighed. "You got some mail."

He walked over to the desk and she pushed a

stack toward him. On top was a package from Wolfgang Ritter.

Get out of New Orleans, Unc had said. At least he was in tune with the Theme of the Day. The package was slender, book-sized.

"From that Ritter guy," Grace said, obviously not finding this particular item a threat.

"Uh-huh."

Underneath the Ritter package was another package. This one was from New York. Grace grabbed it. "Oh. That's just the drum book I ordered. I'll send it back."

Gabriel sighed, suddenly tired. "Gracie ..."

Grace's pretty face got very angry. "Gabriel!" she retorted pointedly.

She held the package tightly and tried to challenge him with her eyes, but he just wasn't up to it. He held out a hand wearily, and after a few minutes of glaring, Grace relented and handed him the package.

"I don't believe you," she said, clearly furious.

"I thought you were going to drop this."

"It's just a book," he said softly.

"That's not the poinfi" she spat back.

"It's a book, Grade!" he was getting angry himself. Why did he always have to justify himself to her? "I want to look at it before you send it back! Is that a problem?"

"Why do you want to look at it?"

"Because I do!"

This worthwhile exchange of ideas was abruptly halted when Grace, something catching her eye over his shoulder, looked toward the front door and screamed—a short, startled burst.

Immediately, the fear returned, leaping on Gabriel's back like a spiteful monkey. He spun around and saw a dark figure, dressed in a black overcoat and hat, slink away from the shop.

There was an envelope sticking from the door's mail slot.

"In the door!" Grace said, frightened.

"I see it," Gabriel replied in a shaky voice. He walked over to the door cautiously, and looked out the window, but no one else was lurking outside. The envelope looked like an ordinary envelope. He pulled on it gently and it fell to the floor. Both he and Grace jumped when it landed, as if expecting it to explode. It just lay there.

Gabriel picked it up and opened it. The only thing in the envelope was a single sheet of

paper.

Gabe: I've had to go deep undercover with this thing. Heard someone at my apartment last night. Not safe to stay there anymore. I'm sending you a key to my office. There are records and a few pieces of "equipment" there, if you need them. I'll contact you again when I have something. Keep your head down and leave this to the pros now. Detective Mosely.

P.S. save this note for the book!

Gabriel shook the envelope. There was indeed a key inside. He put it in his pocket. Something about Mosely's cloak-and-dagger routine suddenly struck him as funny. Hilarious, in fact. Had he actually been afraid? Seeing Mosely slinking away in that stupid hat and coat, after dropping off his little "secret message"? He'd probably been tiptoeing in those black Hush Puppies of his, like a bad Peter Sellers impersonator. Gabriel giggled.

"What'd it say," Grace asked nervously.

"It's from Mosely," Gabriel said, trying not to lose it. After a moment he did anyway, letting out a huge guffaw.

Grace stared at him cynically.

"He's . . . he's . . ." Gabriel attempted. "He's gone 'undercover,' " he managed, in an exaggerated stage whisper. This was followed by more hee heeing.

Grace folded her arms, annoyed. "It's not funny."

"I know," Gabriel said, his laughter dying down. "I know. But ... Christ! What a fuckin' goofball. And you . . . screamin' at him. Hah hah!"

Grace's frown deepened, but he could see a smile starting behind it. Pretty soon she was fairly eating her lips, fighting like hell to keep a straight face.

"Gabriel," she finally said, when she could manage a warning tone again.

"Look," he said, calming down. "I just have a few things to wrap up. Believe me, I'm not interested in gettin' in the middle of this. I'll leave town. I will. Soon."

Grace studied him skeptically. "You must."

"I will!" And he meant it. Absolutely. For one thing, he wasn't going to be falling asleep in that back room anytime soon, and how long could he hang out without sleeping?

He collected the two packages and went into the back room to open them. He took the day's

newspaper, too. Not to read, but to make sure Grace didn't see the headline. It read "Crowds Expected Tonight for St. John's Eve."

Wolfgang Ritter's package contained a very old journal. The binding was custom-made, with a leather cover that had been hand-tanned and had, somewhere along the way, suffered a little water damage. It had since been well preserved with oils and polishing. The contents consisted of a hundred or so sheets of heavy writing vellum.

Inside the cover was the following:

Gunter Ritter, born 10 February, 1660, ordained Schattenjäger 14 April, 1678, died 24 June, 1693.

The journal, Gabriel saw with some surprise, was penned in English. A section was marked with a Post-it late in the book, apparently by Wolfgang. Gabriel's curiosity pulled him in. He began to read.

18 May, 1693

I arrived in Charleston today. I barely had time to give a prayer of thanks for the solid earth beneath my feet before I was summoned to the work at hand. A group of townsmen on horseback met me at the dock. There had been another killing. They were to fetch me to the place of death that I might see for myself what had been done.

Such a beginning! Either the forces are on our side and hurry to lend us evidence, or they are confident of victory and eager to ensnare! We rode through the woods, perhaps three miles out of town. I observed the men beside me. They are rough ones, these colonists. There is a quality of hardness to them, of single vision that I have seen before. It is not a good sign, particularly when the forces are afoot.

We arrived at the scene after an hour or so. I was greeted by what I took to be the higher men of the township. In particular, Mayor Crodwell was there, who had hired me by letter. I did not take to him, nor (I think) he to me. I had but dismounted when he reminded me that I was there at the town's expense, and insisted that I look at the body and confirm that it was the devil's work.

I told him I would make my own judgments in my own time. He was not pleased.

I now put this down for the record. The body was laid out on its back, arms spread to either side and slightly raised. The head was turned to the right side. The upper torso was unclothed, the lower still dressed and shod. On the face and torso lines and circles were drawn in blood and a white paint. The chest was laid open and the heart removed. It was not to be found in the surrounds. The men confirmed this was like unto the other

murders.

The men had lit torches and stood spaced with them to illuminate the area. Still, I must go back on the morrow, when daylight lends a keener eye. What I could make out I will recount here. The area had been cleared of leaves and such. On the bare earth was drawn a pattern in flour. Some footsteps marred the pattern—particularly those of the curious townsmen who had trampled to and fro, not considering the importance of the scene. Still, I believe I detected a circular line to the pattern. Two, in fact; one circle inside the other. At points were other marks, but they were not clear.

Also in the area were quantities of blood and the feathers from birds, native roots, most of which I did not recognize, and spent candles.

After I observed the scene for a time, Mayor Crodwell again demanded of me "What is your determination, Witch-hunter?"

I told him it was witchcraft, that there could be no doubt. On hearing this, the men grew loud and angry. Curses and threats were mightily vaulted to the heavens, but such only covered their fear. I wished not so many had been present to be thusly fueled. This kind of work has never been a matter for mobs.

Crodwell himself was well satisfied by my answer. He expressed confidence that I would catch the witches. Ja. That much is certain. God help their souls.

While still at the scene a woman arrived, bringing a letter from Father which had been awaiting my ingress into town. It was a curious meeting. She was a colony slave—the first such I had seen. Her skin was indeed dark, as they say, but not black. It was the color of burnished copper. When she handed me the letter she met my eyes. There was intelligence there—great intelligence, and great beauty. I was strangely moved. Perhaps it was only a reaction to the disdain the others showed her. Oddly, she seems the most rational person I have yet met on this continent.

I shall go back in the day and try to draw the pattern more completely. I shall send it to Father. His letter is full of anger, of course. He told me not to come to the colonies and I did not listen. When he sees that the witchcraft is genuine—not a figment of ignorance and hate—I believe he will relent. After all, I am the Schattenjager now. I must do my duty as God instructs. Nevertheless, I am eager for Father's advice. I have never seen witchcraft of this nature in Europe, but I recall Father telling me of a case he once took for a French noble in St. Dominique. He spoke of witch patterns in the dirt in that case. Perhaps he will recognize this pattern here. God grant me the strength for this mission. Amen.

22 May, 1693

I have posted the letter to Father along with the pattern. I am frustrated by the width of the seas. It will be some time before I can hope for a reply. How I wish I had Father's journal with me now! The more I think on it, the more I am convinced that this case is very much like the St. Dominique case. The witchcraft on that island was African, that much I recall Father saying. Surely it was brought there by the plantation slaves. Might it not have reached Charleston the same way?

I have accordingly begun questioning the townsfolk about the local slave population. It is not a subject they relish, and they cannot fathom my interest. I tell them I am curious as to their customs. I do not wish to incite further ills upon anyone. When I have proof positive of guilt, then I will speak.

This is what I have learned. New slaves do still enter the colony, a few from Africa directly. This being a seaport, auctions are often held here. Men come from as far as Kentucky to bid on human flesh. Some of the newly purchased slaves also come from prior bondage in other slaving communities. On the whole, though, the population of slaves in Charleston is a mature one. As one man put it to me, it is "too much work" to break in the Africans and they are generally in poor condition after their journey and need much extra attention.

Included in the mature population are second, even third generation slaves. The colonists assure me that the slaves are Christians. They are encouraged to form their own services. This bears investigation.

26 May, 1693

I have been interviewing amongst the slaves for some days now. Many honestly do not recognize the magic. A few of the African-born show understanding when I speak of it, though they deny they ever practiced it, even while still in Africa. Indeed, they do all claim to be good Christians, all but the newest of them, which I cannot interrogate in any case for their lack of English.

I have not seen anything I could label direct guilt on any face, nor can I personally question every slave in Charleston. I am still convinced I am on the right tack, but on the morrow I will alter direction. I must investigate the lives of the victims themselves. Why were these men chosen for death?

The days are unmercifully hot here and the air filled with intolerable moisture. How I miss the mountain breezes of Rittersberg! Today I was on the Crodwell plantation near the end of the day and I saw a face I recognized in the slave quarter. It was the woman who gave me the letter from Father. I asked her for water and she bade me sit while she fetched it, saying I looked hot in "all

those clothes" A Schattenjäger's wardrobe is indeed uncomfortable in this clime, but comfort is not what our Lord promises.

The woman is called Eliza, though that is not her real name. When she brought the water she said, "You are the witch-hunter they speak of?" I admitted that I was. She looked at me simply and asked, "Why do you do that— hunt witches?"

She was so childlike in her frankness, I could not fault her. But, my God, this is a question for the ages! Have I not asked Father this a thousand times? Myself?

I told her what Father has oft said to me, "There are things which should not be." She only laughed and agreed that there are many things which should not be. Her tone brought her plight home to me, and I was embarrassed for the people of Charleston, the people who find no fault in such bondage, despite the words of the Prophet. But such things are not in my purview to amend. I can only fight that which I am ordained to fight, God willing.

Nevertheless, I was curious about how one such as she could have reached such conditions. Her beauty, grace, and intelligence would be a credit in any society. I asked her to tell me. At first, she did not believe I sincerely wished to know her story. Even when I assured her I did, she would only speak briefly. She'd been born in Africa, daughter of a chieftain. Her name in her language is Tetelo. They had prospered as a people until the slavers attacked. What was left of her people after the battle were put on slave ships. Many more died on the voyage. She herself had had two other white masters before Crodwell. I asked her if he treats her well. She asked me if I were mad.

I felt well about this talk. I have nothing to feel ashamed of, to speak honestly with a bright mind such as hers. Yet I did perhaps stay overlong. I had the misfortune to be there when Mayor Crodwell entered her cabin. He had clearly come for purposes which I had rather not known. He was angered by my presence. He seemed to suspect me of things of which his own conscience was burdened. I excused myself quickly, but I cannot banish the sense that our encounter there was an ill turn of events indeed. A man does not like his sins to be seen so plainly.

1 June, 1693

I begin to see a light, though I am not yet sure if it is for or against our purpose. I have compiled a list of the witches' victims, their names and occupations, their age, marital status, and so forth, using the methods Father taught me. I noticed very quickly that most of the five were seamen. This being a port town, this did not seem surprising. And there was one man who was noticeably not a seaman, but a laborer.

I betook myself to an establishment called The Crow's Nest, one of the many where sailors take their leisure. The beer was like water compared to home, but the conversation was instructive. The sailors are keenly aware that death stalks their ranks. They spoke of the victims willingly. Several had worked from the port for years and had been awaiting the leave of their next vessel. One man had only arrived in town the very day he was killed. He was not from Charleston, but normally worked from the West Indies.

I further learned that the laborer—Tom Clarke was his name—had been a seaman after all, a captain. One man told me that Clarke had once been a slaver but had given it up. "Too much blood in it for 'im."

I must learn more about the victims—where they were trained, what vessels they sailed, where they drank. There must be better reason for their selection than a simple hatred of the profession, or so methinks.

Other factors begin to come into play. Having left the slave quarters behind me the past few days, I am more aware of the mood in town. Everyone seems to know me. As I go about the streets I am often blessed. Just as often people cross the road to avoid me, as though I might arbitrarily point a finger at them. There is a distinct air of fear here. Word has apparently gone 'round that I said there were witches in Charleston. Many of the homes along the city's main thoroughfares have crucifixes affixed to or painted on their doors to keep the evil out. Tempers are short. Neighbors avoid neighbors. The streets are deserted by nightfall. Such moods are dangerous. Even I have been affected by the mood. That, or I am feeling my distance from home. I have been plagued by unease and loneliness, particularly at night. I long for a familiar face. The only face I can even recall as friendly is that of Tetelo, so she has therefore been much on my mind.

I have dared not indulge this simple weakness, particularly not with the way our last conversation ended. However, today I saw her on the street as I emerged from one of the shops which sell ship tack on Main Street. Her arms were burdened with packages, and I offered to help her carry something, quite politely. I prefaced this offer with the simple greeting "Mistress Tetelo."

One would think I had called her the devil himself! She hissed at me to call her Eliza if I spoke to her at all, which, she said, I should rather not do. She reddened so, it became clear she was embarrassed at my attentions and, indeed, others on the street, wives of the townsmen, were watching us keenly and with a disapproving air.

Is it my fault a simple courtesy toward another human being is not respected by these people? I apologized to

"Eliza," explaining that we had no slaves in my homeland and that I was unaware of the customs pertaining to them. Her response was singular. "We are not in your homeland, nor mine. If you owned me I would have to accept your attentions Since you do not, leave me alone!"

At this, she walked away abruptly. Accept my attentions! I cannot express how greatly disheartened this left me. I have only had the tenderest of feelings and the greatest respect for her person since I first laid eyes upon her I only felt that I recognized in her, for some reason unbeknownst to me, some vision of home, some understanding of heart Yet, however kindly I wish to express my respect, it is only fouled by the customs of this barbarous place It is better to do nothing at all, plainly It is enough to give me the uncharitable notion to board the next ship and leave this town to its fate God forgive me. Such thoughts are not worthy of a Schattensjager. Indeed, such thoughts are dangerous when dark forces lurk about.

2 June, 1693

Something has occurred. I must put it plain.

After I made my entry last night and had bedded down, I found I could not sleep Finally I rose and rekindled the fire, whereupon I sat at the hearth and reflected. The mood which gnawed at me was of the same flavor I described before. It had haunted me since my first night here, this sense of loneliness and longing. But its sting was merciless last night, making my very flesh crawl with restlessness.

I tried to name this feeling, my attention being called most keenly to it as it robbed me of sleep As I reflected, I noted that the malaise was sharpest when I thought of the day's encounter with Tetelo (anything other than her own name tastes like sand in my mouth) I realized this feeling, in general, stemmed from her, from the first time I met her, pricked and goaded by each time I had seen her I was astonished. In all honesty was I forced to admit that my thoughts on her were not blameless I had desired to give her my "attentions," even if I did not realize it when so accused, even if I would never press such feelings upon her the way another man might.

This made me loathe myself. I naturally questioned my so-called good intentions in the matter, recalling the "respect" I had claimed by my own hand on these pages mere hours before. And I found that it was not a he Despite my physical longing, I hungered more for her companionship, genuinely. Admired her, truly.

It occurred to me that this combination of responses might, in a saner setting, be called "love "

I had reached this point in my reasoning when there came a tapping on the door. I rose, thinking only that

another murder had occurred. But when I opened the door
it was Tetelo herself that stood at my lintel

She quickly surmised that I had not been abed.

"I couldn't sleep either," she said, and she smiled at me
most warmly

What could I do? I invited her in. She asked me to tell
her of my homeland, as if by way of apology for her
words of the afternoon. This was a strange request for the
middle of the night, but she seemed so trusting of a sudden
that I could not refuse her. I found myself talking and, in
talking, I told her many things, things one doesn't tell
easily outside the family. I told her about Father, about the
family, our role as Schattenjagers. When she asked me to
explain I told her that we fight the darkness, not just
witches, witch-hunter is only one of the ways we are
known. I even showed her the Ritter talisman that I wear
beneath my shirt

This all flowed forth easily. She was not even surprised
She told me she had felt the talisman's power Then she
looked at me and said she had felt my power as well. Her
eyes went through my very soul with their heat

I have never felt so weak. I wanted to leave the cabin
then, leave her sitting there. I wanted to leave because the
desire to take her in my arms was so overwhelming that it
clouded my mind. I couldn't tell if time had stopped, if I
already had her in my arms, if her lips were already parted
before me, or if the entire night was simply a dream, if she
wasn't really there at all.

I didn't run away, having too much pride to show such
fright of her! Perhaps I should of, but I did not Instead, I
got up and tended the fire I crouched on the hearth
poking at the flames as long as I dared. I called silently on
God to help me resist temptation.

But when I finally rose it was she who stood at my back,
not God. She read me as easily as a child and what I saw
in her face, too, I could not deny. She touched me and I
was utterly lost.

We made love and I will not apologize for it! I love her,
truly. God cannot fault that. Why did he make man and
woman but to love one another? I did not take her
cheaply and she was not cheaply offered. Indeed, we both
have yet to understand fully the pnce.

Tetelo told me a curious thing afterward. She told me
that they had a name for the way we felt. In her tribe
it was called "Zingsti," the Unbidden She described it
as the Universe bringing together a man and a woman
irresistibly. She says there is always a reason—a child that
must be born, a village to be saved, two families to be
merged. She says to fight such a compulsion is a living
death As she said that, I had a picture of Jonah in the
belly of the whale. He, too, fought fate, and failed.

But what can such fate be for the two of us? I do not doubt that God put this love in my heart. It is too pure and true to have come from anywhere else. Still, it will be difficult. I can see in her eyes that she is afraid of it, too. All I can do is hope that the case is finished soon. I will pay Crodwell for her, take her with me back to Germany, and there we will marry. In Rittersberg we can live in peace. So I believe.

Gabriel stopped reading long enough to answer a call of nature. As he put the book down on the bed, where he'd moved to at some point he no longer recalled, and stood to cross the room, the floor, the walls, even New Orleans swam ghostily around him. Unreal, like glimpses in a dream. His body did not seem his own. He operated it mechanically, washed his hands, looked at his face in the mirror and didn't recognize it.

Who was that? And how much of who he was, was merely a reflection of somebody else's history? Not even Wolfgang could have known what Gunter Ritter's tale really said.

Gabriel dreaded to hear the rest, feeling that he already knew more than it was sane for him to know. But he had no choice. He went back to the bed and read on.

22 June, 1693

The investigation proceeds. I shall quickly document the current facts in the case, since I have been negligent in my loggings.

I found the link between the victims. All five once served on slaving expeditions to Africa. More particularly, all five served on the slave route between the West Indies and Africa. Their careers seemed to conjoin there ten to twelve years past. I have learned the name of one vessel three of the men served on: "The Merchant's Pride." Two of them also served together on "Raging Glory." The connection, I believe, is one of these ships, perhaps even a single voyage.

Relying on the memory of other seamen has gotten me as far as it will do. I ordered ship's records from several of the larger shipping companies, but by the time they arrive, I have a feeling this will be resolved for good or ill. Praise be to God, I did find one particularly keen old man with a mind like a storage hold (and a face like rigging). He supplied me with the names of several sailors who sailed regularly on "The Merchant's Pride" during that time and others from "Raging Glory." (He himself was a ship's clerk and never left the dock—or he might not be alive to recall such things.) These names may be sufficient to bait the final trap.

It is well it were so. My situation in Charleston is

becoming intolerable. Crodwell has been insisting on a meeting for days and today I had no choice but to attend him in his office. He first attacked my profession, reminding me that I had been in Charleston for five weeks at the town's expense and "had not caught a single witch." He demanded proof of progress in the case. I was forced to disclose my theory about the seamen and my conclusions about the magic being of African origin.

Upon hearing this, Crodwell accused me of using the African theory as "an excuse to spend so much time in my slave quarters."

It is just as well he said it straight out. His antipathy for me has grown since its initial budding to a full flowering of hatred, and what lies in his slave quarters is certainly at the heart of it! I must admit, I ask God every day for the strength to not hate him myself. That my beloved is still at his mercy is unfathomable!

I had not mentioned buying Tetelo from him, hoping to postpone such delicate dealings until after our other business together is done. I thought she and I were keeping our mutual feelings private. She has most often come to me at night, but I have, once or twice, passed by to see her in the day, if I am near Crodwell's estate. Perhaps I should not have done so, but it is not in my nature to hide my most honest reactions! Whether through my own indiscretions or the spying of another, Crodwell obviously knows something. It is clear to me now that his interest in Tetelo will not be relinquished easily, though a sum sufficient enough for any reasonable businessman be proffered thrice over.

Yet I did not rise to his bait today. I ignored his insinuations and explained fully why I believe the magic is African—about Father's case and the pattern around the body. Though I sought to assure him, and to keep our conversation on the matter of the case, this only provoked new horrors. When the evidence became clear to him, when it penetrated past the issue he wished to pick a fight with me about, he suddenly grew livid, turning as purple as a thundercloud. The fact that I was saying the witches lay among the slave population, that slaves had killed white men, this appalled him to no end. In his fury he threatened to "kill every nigger in the state—the insolent bastards!"

It is this very single-mindedness I feared. It took me a good hour to calm him down, to convince him we were speaking about a very small coven—seven or eight witches at the most, and that I had determined that this coven operated well in secret, particularly from the other slaves. I had to resort to reminding him of the mere money value we were talking about in terms of pounds of flesh. God forgive me, but if I had not appealed to his lesser senses

there might well have been a massacre this very day! I promised him by week's end, I would present him with the coven. If I cannot bring this to pass, I fear greatly for the life of every slave in Charleston—particularly Tetelo's. No one is more vulnerable to fear than a man who keeps another in bondage. He will do anything to prevent justice from rearing its head—for he knows well what he deserves at the hands of those he subjugates.

My plans are already under way. I have placed the name of one of the men from "Merchant's Pride" on an incoming ship roster from St. Dominique, i myself will row out to the ship in harbor, board, and pretend to be this man, paying the other sailors to call me loudly and often by his name. Then, I shall get "drunk" and wander around the dock presenting myself as an easy target. Should this fail, I shall do the same with the other names I have—the ones from "Raging Glory" and the others from "Merchant's Pride." I pray for God's assistance and guidance. If I cannot bait the witches into an attack soon, I greatly fear what will result.

23 June, 1693

I make this entry now as my final confession and testimony. I will enclose this journal in a package to my beloved family. I pray God ensures it reaches them, for their sake if not my own.

I have lost all ability to either interpret or justify anything that has occurred. I will therefore set down the facts as objectively as I can and let God and posterity draw their own conclusions.

The first night of my seaman impersonation I was attacked, as I wished to be, by the coven. I had placed men strategically around the dock, disguised also as drunken sailors. At least one of these men was to have me in his sights at all times. I never learned if this plan failed or if my men were simply too shocked by what occurred to mobilize until well into the proceedings. In any case, this is what I recall.

I was staggering alone along a particularly dark street when the attack came. From nowhere I felt arms clasp me. They covered my mouth and bound my arms A blow struck my head and I went unconscious.

When I came to, I heard the sound of drums I could tell, even before I opened my eyes, that we were in the woods and that there was a fire burning For a time I just listened Voices chanted, mostly male. The words were guttural and terrible to hear. They called on one name "Damballah Oueddo" and another "Badagris" and still others that I would not even dare to write, but which suggested the devil's own legions! They had a language I could not understand. Someone drew on my face with a

slick finger. Paint or blood. My shirt was ripped open. I opened my eyes a bit, now very much afraid I knew what came next in this ritual, and my men seemed completely lost. I was aware that my hands and feet were bound to the earth. I was defenseless.

What I saw when I opened my eyes only whipped my fear into horror. At first it seemed that I was surrounded by strange beasts, then beast-men. I was certain demons from hell themselves walked the earth. Then I saw that the witches wore masks and skins and were otherwise naked, symbols painted on their dark flesh. The most terrifying of these was a woman who stood near me, apparently the officiator of the ritual. She chanted as she slit the throat of a goat. A male figure caught the blood in a wooden bowl. The woman wore the head of a great cat with long teeth that curved under her chin. Her arms were covered with a pelt and sported long claws which stuck out from her wrists like daggers. She was otherwise naked, this making her look only more wanton in her evilness.

I prayed silently to God the prayer of exorcism I prayed for the evil to stop. I have never in my life felt so intensely the power of the darkness. My own life, my belief in God, my powers for good—all of this seemed like nothing in the face of this evil. God help us all!

The leopard-woman knelt beside me, raised her awful dagger, and spoke in that strange throaty language, then in English. These were the words as I remember them. "O great Badagris! Vengeance is taken, power recalled, blood for blood as your thirsty jaws demand!"

She plunged the dagger toward my chest and a prayer burst from my lips. I called upon my God, Jehovah, to save me! The dagger struck the talisman on my chest so hard, I thought it had penetrated, but it was halted by the talisman. I could feel the energy crackle between the two metals. Sparks like tiny lightning bolts sizzled visibly in the night and the woman's arm was thrown back as if by an invisible blow.

This seemed to bring her out of some sort of trance. As I stared up, waiting for another attack, that clawed arm reached up instead and removed the leopard's head from her own.

Mary, Mother of God, forgive my sinfulness. It was Tetelo.

She, too, had just recognized me and in her face I saw my own horror reflected. I had darkened my skin with pitch and changed my dress so as not to be recognized. And yet, even had I born no disguise, I would not swear that she would not have attempted my life. She was something else entirely when she wore that mask. Only the energy of the talisman had recalled her to her senses.

Before I could say anything or think anything but a terrible denial of what my own eyes told me, my men attacked from the woods. Guns were fired, swords and clubs were wielded. The men of the coven howled and screeched and put up a terrible fight. Tetelo only crouched by me, looking around her for all the world like a terrified child.

All I felt certain of at that moment was that I could not bear to see her cut down right in front of me. I told her to run. She did.

I did not know what I was about. No one came to untie me until the fight was over. The coven was enormously outnumbered, yet they battled fiercely. Ten or so of my men were killed. In the end, two of their number died on the spot and the other six were bound to be taken into town.

I begged off accompanying this procession, telling them I had first to return to my cabin and bind my wounds.

Lies! One sin breeds others like mice.

I did not go to my cabin but to Tetelo's. To my surprise she was there, waiting for me. She would not meet my eyes, only begged me to hear her tale. I agreed to listen, hoping for some clue as to how I had been so deeply deceived. This is what she said.

Her father had not only been a chieftain. He was a bokor, a magician. Her people had worshiped "the dark gods" since anyone could remember, and they were the most powerful and feared tribe in the land because of it. But one year there came a terrible drought. All the water soaked into the earth and the heavens refused to open. The people prayed to the gods and performed rituals, but nothing changed. Finally her father "spirit walked" to ask Badagris for a price for rain. Badagris named it. The price was Tetelo herself.

At the time Tetelo was only a child. Her father loved her more than anything. He could not bring himself to sacrifice her, so he tried to trick Badagris. He transferred Tetelo's soul temporarily into the body of another girl her age and sacrificed that girl instead. But Badagris was not fooled. In his wrath at her father's betrayal he sent the white men. Tetelo's village was destroyed. Those that did not die immediately were enslaved.

She says there are only a handful of her people left, scattered in the colonies and in the West Indies. I recalled, as she said this, one or two other slaves I had seen in Charleston that reminded me of her—they had the copper color to their skin and her proud, regal lines in their faces. A beautiful race indeed, and so very evil. There had been my coven, and I had been too blind to see it!

Through the spirit of her dead father, Tetelo was told that Badagris is now willing to forgive them and make them once again his people. But before this can occur they must wipe out their shame so they can be worthy of Badagris's favor. They have been instructed to kill every white man who was on the voyage that enslaved them. This done, they shall be freed from their bondage and shall once again prosper and multiply.

With all of this confessed, Tetelo watched me keenly. I was not unmoved by the internal logic of her point of view, abhorrent as it was to me. And I had no love of slavers. Nevertheless, the truth was clear to me and I spoke it. I could not let her continue. And I could not forget what she had already done.

She insisted that she understood this. She said she had been following her father's instructions, living for the past, for her old way of life. She realized now that our love did indeed have a purpose. Why else would the witch-hunter and witch be struck with love for each other? We were both to leave our father's traditions and make something new—a new tribe, a new power—neither light nor dark but something without such illusions or boundaries. She would leave her father's path and I must leave mine. We must escape Charleston tonight and commit ourselves to this end. She suggested we remain on the continent and head west.

You cannot imagine my astonishment at this proposal! And the look in her eyes—so clear and determined. So . . . rational! I weakened. I was torn with doubt. Could she be right? Could this be the purpose of our affection? As I looked at her, I found that I loved her still, God help me! Despite what I had seen her do . . . be . . . with my own eyes, she still felt like my own kin, my own heart I shuddered at what that meant! What was inside of me that I knew not the dimensions of?

I was racked with indecision Like a coward, I sought for time where there was none! I told her I had to go think it through, and I left the cabin before she could stop me, wretched in my confusion. She urged after me to be swift in my thinking and return quickly. I could hear in her voice that she was afraid—of being left there alone, yes. Perhaps even of where I might go or who I might return with

And yet I knew she would not run. No, it was I who ran, into the woods, like Abraham cowering from the face of God.

I found a small clearing in the moonlight and threw myself upon the ground, dug my fingers into the earth, and shouted to God to end my torment I had always known right from wrong, God's word was there to guide me But where was he now? I felt as if I could not move a

step without committing further grievous sin. How could I betray the bride of my heart without condemning my soul to hell? Likewise, how then might my own father be betrayed? Clearly great evil had been done with these murders, but the path of righteousness was blocked by greater evil still!

I prayed for a sign!

And heard a hissing nearby I looked up to see a snake crawl through the grass, loathsome and hideous, and seeming to head straight for me I thought not, but yanked the dagger from my belt and threw it in revulsion at the thing.

But when it struck I saw that my eyes had deceived me. It was not a snake that was pinned to the earth by the point of my knife, but a white dove.

What did this signal mean? That I would make the wrong choice? What was the snake and what the dove? I called out for mercy, Dear God! But I was interrupted by the emergence of one of my men. He crashed into the clearing and saw me, ran to me much relieved

"Thank God I have found thee! There are bad currents astir in the square."

I asked him what he meant.

"They have captured the head witch and mean to burn the entire coven, but . . ."

"What witch?" I asked, my heart sinking.

"It was Crowell's woman, Eliza. He recognized her in the faces of the men, but that's not what I came to . . ."

I heard not his warning, for I was already running for town.

The rest of this, I am sorely ashamed to write. Evil upon evil, sin upon sin, mortal mistake upon mortal mistake I deserve not pity. When this is done, I shall only seek anonymity The best I can hope for is that I shall be utterly forgotten

God help me I arrived in town to find the entire population roused from sleep and the buildings lit up with firelight. In the center of the main square were seven stakes, each with kindling stacked high beneath. On six of the stakes were tied the men from the coven, still streaked with paint and now blood, having been beaten and kicked by God knows how many. Tied to the center stake was Tetelo My soul ached with fear and remorse. I tried to save her, God help me I did! I went straight to Crowell who stood near her I loudly demanded a fair trial for the accused, not this kind of barbarous execution!

He turned on me, the devil! The look on his face was evil and lewd. He grinned at me in triumph! He said loudly, so as to be heard: "Perhaps it is you who should be given a trial, Witch-hunter! Or is it witch-lover?"

The crowd quieted so as to better hear his words. I

could feel them waiting, watching us hungrily.
Croddwell said to me under his breath, "Should I tell the townspeople how their money was spent? On a man to be abed with their witch? Or perhaps you would like to tell them yourself?"

I had no words! My mouth was as sealed!

"Or were you merely a victim of her seductive power? Do you now see the error of your ways?" Croddwell further suggested. His piggish eyes bore into me knowingly.

Oh, vilest of men! Vilest of vipers! He had the crowd waiting for a word from his lips. I could be allowed to walk away, or a single gesture from his hand could consign me to the flames! He knew it, and so did I!

I pretend not wisdom and certainly not courage. What I said was this: "I merely wished to question the whore! If you wish to burn the witches and their secrets with them, then do so and be done with it!"

I turned and walked away stiffly, fearing hands on my person at any moment.

What came was not hands, but worse From Tetelo's lips a single cry—"Gunter." In the heart-shattering grief of that single word I saw what I had done

God have mercy on my soul.

The crowd let me out and closed up again behind me. I wanted to flee but I could not. I was rooted to the spot to watch and witness that which I had helped create.

They lit the fires. Flames crackled up the stakes.

Horror!

The men began to scream first, awakened from their beaten haze The smell of burning flesh choked me. The smoke turned white

Screams! Curses! Agony!

They lit Tetelo's fire last, making sure she first saw what the flames could do. I watched her face as a pall dropped over it. What had been lovely in her, what had longed and trusted, what had looked back at me sweetly from the crook of my arm, this left forever. What replaced it was what had been behind the mask, pure hatred, pure vengeance, pure evil

"Damballah, I call on you! Forgive your wicked daughter! Great serpent god, strike! Destroy this town and all within it."

She screamed chants to the heavens, the strange syllables tumbling from her lips. She called down the wrath of her gods. She cried for vengeance

Her gods did not answer.

At first the crowd was uneasy. But as her curses gave way to shrieks of pain and the smell of her roasting flesh joined the others (God help me!), they lost their fear and began to taunt her.

"Devil's whore!" "Speak your evil, witch!" They laughed!

They cursed her! They spat on her burning body!
I sank to my knees. When would this nightmare end?
When would the pain stop this endless descent, worse and worse, more hideous and ever more terrible? From the fear of my own life at the witches' ceremony, to the terrible discovery of Tetelo beneath the mask, to the confusion in her cabin, to the abandonment by God I felt in the woods, to my own fear of the crowd and denial, to the grisly horror of this moment. I had been given gall to drink, my own flesh to consume! I was in hell itself!

Before me I saw the faces of the townsmen, white and leering, filled with the demons of blood lust and perversion, as Crodwell's own had been. I saw the victims on the stakes, noble in their martyrdom, crying out for salvation from their relentless persecution! What had my love done but fight back? What had that gotten her but more ruthless torment? Her pain! Her abject humiliation on that stake, abandoned even by her gods and certainly by him who professed to love her! And the evil of these colonist devils who subjected her to their loathsome desires, then tormented her very flesh, took her very life!

My mind reeled This was hell My mind spake over and over, this is hell, this is hell, this is hell! And I myself had betrayed her. I myself stood, like Judas at the side of Golgotha! Even Peter had not denied Christ to his face! I reached the limit of my endurance. It could not. Go on. I did the only thing bearable. I took off my talisman and held it high in the air.

"Tetelo, I empower thee!" I screamed at her, screamed so the crowd, the world, would hear me! Let all the world abandon her, I would love her still!

A beam of light left the talisman and struck her, set her aglow. The flames died down around her. As she was bathed in power, a new light came, from inside her, changing the color and hue of my own, heightening it to an unnatural brilliance, painful to look upon.

The skies rumbled and boiled over. Lightning forked and leaped from the earth, rushing upward, impaling and burning anything in its path.

Then Tetelo stepped, like a burning goddess, from her pyre.

"Now, my brothers," she said in a dead and awesome voice that seemed part of the thunder.

From the other pyres stepped figures, blackened, even smoking, but now grinning and living still! And from the shadows others came, rag-clad figures with knives and pitchforks. Slinking out from the darkness at the call of the old gods, remembering who they were, raising to strike out at those who had taken that knowledge from them. I could not watch. I sank to my knees and stared at the

talisman in my hand, it being the only thing I could fix my eyes upon that might keep me sane. And around me sounds grew,- screams and shrieks, death gurgles and gunshots. Lightning snaked again and again. The heavens groaned.

And still, I fixed upon the talisman.

Until, finally, blood from the battle drew close enough to splatter my hands and the gold before my eyes.

Befouled, the talisman burned my hand in rage. I dropped it in the earth.

I was thus broken when two feet approached me and stood their ground. I did not raise my eyes.

"Look at me," she said.

I could not.

"Look. At. Me."

And I did. Her face was not Tetelo's any longer.

What was human in it was gone. "You betrayed me," she said.

"I saved you!" I pleaded, afraid of her now.

She picked up the talisman, closed her fist 'round it.

"Your guilt saved me and this. But you ... you betrayed me."

And yet I denied. "No."

"I loved you," she spat it like a curse. "I would have left everything for you."

I shook my head. I didn't want to hear this.

"What have I done?" was all I could say.

She looked at me as though I were a beaten cur. Then she looked past me as if I were not there at all.

"You have made me my father's daughter," she whispered.

And she walked away. She took the talisman with her.

This is a true account of what occurred on this day, 23 June, 1693. To my family I say that I have lost the talisman and my soul. I cannot see any way to go on from here, no way to recover what I have done, nor can I live with the knowledge of it. I ask you to forget me if you cannot forgive and know that I loved you more than myself.

Gunter Ritter

Gabriel closed the journal and put it down on the bed beside him. It ended there, and Wolfgang offered no further explanation, probably knowing that Gabriel needed none. The tears, which had been streaming down his face throughout the last entry, overwhelmed him, and Gabriel buried his face deep in a pillow and shook silently with a tide so strong he could not even name it.

After a bit, the storm passed. In its place a new idea dawned. Maybe, perhaps . . . reading the journal would make the dreams stop.

No. That's not what will make the dreams stop. You know what will make them stop.

He sighed. Yes. He was supposed to find the talisman. He was supposed to, somehow, redeem Gunter's sins.

A flame of anger sparked, like a match struck in the dark. How was he supposed to know what Gunter's sins even were? Gunter himself couldn't figure that one out.

1693. He tried to imagine all the generations that had come since. It was mind-boggling. All those lives tainted, all those endless nights. Had any of the other dreamers sought the talisman? Probably. Had any of them ever run into the circles as written with flour in the dirt? Leopard fur? Victims without hearts? How many times had this little drama played out?

But even as he thought this, Gabriel knew it was wrong. It hadn't ever been close—not since 1693. He didn't know how he knew that, but he knew. Something was happening here, now, in New Orleans. Gabriel didn't suppose Wolfgang really knew what was going on with his grandnephew. If he did, he wouldn't have stopped at a couple of phone calls. No, Gabriel was the only one who had the big picture now. Perhaps it was a second chance, or perhaps it was only the final crushing blow. He didn't know how many Ritters there had been when Gunter killed himself, but he knew he himself was close to the last one now. Just him and one very old man.

The buck stops here.

Yes. That sounded about right. He wished to God it didn't. Rooster or no rooster, there was no way he could back off now. They'd never let him. He had to beat it, die, or carry it with him forever. If the journal said anything, it said that much. No, Gabriel guessed he didn't have a choice about participating. The real question was, did he have a choice about the ending?

Gabriel needed a taste of daylight, and he needed something to do that didn't feel like sticking his head in a lion's mouth, something that felt like his choice. He hid Gunter's journal under his pillow (God forbid Grace should read it), tucked the drum book inside the back waist of his jeans, and headed to Jackson Square.

The heat had intensified all week—or maybe he'd grown increasingly intolerant of it. Today the heat blotted out even the sun. Not so much clouds as milky wisps of condensation obscured the sky.

There was no discernible cloud pattern; the sky was simply white, the sun simply gone.

Still, snotty-nosed brats and wailing blues in the familiar confines of the park worked their usual magic. Gabriel planted himself on the grass twenty feet or so behind the drummer. He took out the drum book and started thumbing through it.

He felt amazingly relaxed, he realized, as if some weight had been lifted off him. He now knew that he wasn't crazy. The feeling that fate had not only been beckoning, it had been leading him around by the balls, well, that turned out to be a pretty good summation. He didn't have to decide whether or not to continue—that was taken out of his hands. He also figured he didn't have to worry too much about screwing up. Surely he couldn't do any worse than had been done in the past.

That ain't why you feel better, boy. you have a purpose. First goddamn time in your life.

Yeah? Maybe I do. But it'll be my purpose, and fuck you very much.

He attacked the book thus surprisingly inspired, and flipped through mind-numbing explanations of drum types and geography. He'd never been able to read dry crap like this. The second half of the book was an analysis of drum code. The book broke the codes down into simple beats—little black stick figures dancing across the page represented the beat patterns. The writer compared it to Morse code, only the "phrases" as he called them represented concepts, not letters of the alphabet.

For example, one type of phrase represented locations. The location code always began with a triple beat pattern. What followed determined which of the locations was being set; the village (double short beat, long beat), the next village (double short beat, double short beat), the river (long beat, double short beat), the swamp (long beat, short beat), the big tree (short beat, short beat, long beat), and so on.

Other types of phrases included activities (such as meals, dances, hunting expeditions, and conclaves), times (morning, night, today, tomorrow, next moon, etc.), and the names of people in the tribe, each of whom had their own beat pattern.

After garnishing this much, Gabriel tried to fine-tune his ear to the drummer. It took him a

while to be able to distinguish the beats. Double beat (tap-tap) was different from two short beats (tap, tap) by virtue of the fact that it was much faster. Triple beats, too, were recognizable once he'd figured that much out (tap-tap-tap). Long beats seemed to be struck lower on the drum and with a heavier, flatter hand (thum).

Once he could hear the different beat types, he started trying to match the patterns the drummer was sending against the book. It was damn hard. By the time he'd identified the marker for a phrase type, the actual phrase itself was long over with and a new phrase marker was under way. It was giving him a brain cramp. This kind of minute detail work was much more up Grace's mental alley, he knew—Gabriel himself preferred the "big picture." But he stuck with it.

It took him two hours, but in the end he had translated the drummer's message. The drummer was sending the same thing over and over and over and over. Gabriel grew so familiar with that pattern he thought he'd never get it out of his mind, like the alien message from Close Encounters (da, da, da, da, DAAAA). This one was a bit lengthier (tap-tap-tap, thum, tap, tap-tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap-tap, tap, thum, thum, tap, tap-tap-tap, thum, tap-tap-tap, tap-tap, tap, tap, tap), but it had a good beat and you could dance to it.

It said "Conclave Tonight Swamp." Naturally.

It was St. John's Eve.

Gabriel headed out from the park. He thought he knew where "the swamp" meant, generally speaking. Hadn't Dr. John talked about the early Voodoos meeting at Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. John? Lake Pontchartrain was obviously still being used for conclaves. Or, at the very least, it was a good enough site for murder. Bayou St. John made sense, particularly for St. John's Eve. But where in the bayou? It was a protected area now, and not exactly small in scale. Hell, he'd barely found his way through the halls of Tulane when they hadn't wanted him to. He could wander in that swamp all night.

What are you thinking about, white boy? Whatever may or may not be happenin' in the swamp tonight, you're not invited.

This voice sounded amazingly like Grace. He ignored it. He hadn't dished out a hundred bucks for that crocodile head for nothing.

He aimed for the police station. He had Mosely's key and he wanted to take a look around

that office. Melodrama or no, Mosely thought there might be things in there Gabriel could use. Gabriel wasn't one to refuse a free offer.

When he entered the station, something didn't feel right. Officer Prick was at the counter, as usual, but he looked at Gabriel with lidded eyes, like a snake. Gabriel hadn't thought the man smart enough for an expression like that.

He tried to go through the swinging gate to the back offices, as he had been allowed to do for the past week. He wasn't surprised when Prick's voice halted him.

"You can't go back there," the man said firmly.

Gabriel smiled at him dashingly. "Really? I'm here to see Detective Mosely. Remember me?" Prick did not move. "There is no Mosely here. Get lost."

Gabriel stared at him, stunned. "You mean he's out?"

"I mean there is no Mosely on the force. Beat it." Prick's pudgy face was deadly in its fixed stare. He seemed dangerous, the way a small fluff ball of a dog can nonetheless be genuinely vicious.

Gabriel backed off.

"No problem. I get the message," he said. He backed all the way to the station's front door and ducked out.

It wasn't so much Frick that bothered him. It was the whole fucking scenario.

There is no Mosely on the force.

Was that supposed to mean he'd been fired?

Or did they think they could wipe out someone's very existence? For the first time, Gabriel found himself concerned for his friend. Mosely, with his secret notes and sinister black Hush Puppies. Mosely was playing a role all right—James Bond IX: The Voodoo that You Do. What Mosely might not get was that the rest of the cast was acting out something more like Nightmare on Bourbon Street.

There was nothing Gabriel could do about it now. He had no idea of how to get ahold of Mosely. Instead, he followed an alley back behind the police station. If memory served, Mosely's office had a window—one with opaque glass that was nearly hidden by papers and old case binders, but a window nonetheless. Gabriel found the wall in an alley that wasn't even an alley, just a gap between buildings about four feet wide. There

were three windows on the wall and Gabriel calculated in his head which one Mosely's might be. He chose the second window and tried to open it. Locked. He looked around and saw no one. Counting on the papers to dull the sound of falling glass, Gabriel picked up an old brick and broke the window.

The office was Mosely's all right. One look at the cobweb-covered files that appeared when the glass pane was removed told Gabriel that much. The hardest part was getting past the stacks of old records without shoving them all onto the floor and creating a racket, but Gabriel managed to ease past them with only minor casualties.

Inside, Gabriel crouched low and listened. Nothing. He stood gingerly and saw Officer Franks, inches from Mosely's office window and looking right at him. She was only five or so feet away and the office was light enough, having been made lighter by the now cleared and open window. He froze, knowing with a sinking feeling that the gig was up. But Franks only brushed some crumbs off her blouse, took a last, searching look into the window, and walked away. She strolled back to her desk and sat down.

It's a mirror out there, ya moron, Mosely spoke inside his head. Gabriel blushed. Yeah. Right. This put a bee up his butt, though. He began searching the room quickly. God knows what would happen if this bunch of blue boys caught him in here. 'Specially since "there was no Mosely on the force." That just about killed any of the dumb excuses he might be able to drum up.

The sheer volume of papers and files made him quickly give up that route. What could Mosely possibly have of use in his files and how could Gabriel ever find it? Nothing in the microwave, nor in Mosely's gym bag except odors he really didn't need right now. He thought about the computer, but he remembered Mosely's incompetence at the keyboard and doubted that ol' light-foot had any secrets on that hard drive. He checked the desk. More papers, myriads of chewed-on pens, rubber bands, paper clips, Post-it notes dried up with age.

What he was really looking for was a gun. He hadn't acknowledged that until now, but that was what had crossed his mind when he'd read Mosely's note, wasn't it? The reason he'd taken the risk of breaking in here? "Equipment." What

the hell else could that mean coming from a cop? But Gabriel wasn't finding a gun, and this pissed him off. It occurred to him that there wasn't any equipment of any sort at all in Mosely's office, that the big yahoo had simply thought the note sounded cool for the book and had dropped it off to be a "true life" episode that, nonetheless, had nothing more substantial attached to it than old gym socks.

Damn it, Mose!

He glanced up toward the main room outside and was gratified to see that no one was coming this way. There wasn't much of anything at all going on out there. Franks was sitting at her desk, hands in her lap, staring at her computer. Frick, beyond her, was sitting equally still at the counter. There was a uniformed male standing over by the bulletin board, apparently reading. There were a few others in desks farther away and to the left of Franks. They also seemed motionlessly absorbed in whatever was on their desks. A woman in motorcycle cop garb stood by the coffee area as if trying to make up her mind what she wanted.

So much for taxpayers' money, Gabriel thought. He pulled open the last drawer of Mosely's desk. It was a deep drawer, the kind that looked like two on the outside but was really one on the inside. Gabriel brought out an empty box of Kleenex that was on top and tossed it over his shoulder hurriedly. He was definitely getting the feeling he was running out of time.

He glanced up. None of the people in the outer office had moved.

Good. Now get out of here.

The bottom of the drawer contained what looked like a nest of cables, wires, and black, plastic-coated, high-tech units. There was a box of little silver buttons of the sort that usually said things like Have a nice day! or My Other Body Is Claudia Schiffer's but these buttons had nothing on them whatsoever. There were a couple of units that looked like remote phone receivers, and a black Nintendo-sized base unit. He wasn't sure exactly what it all was, but he had a feeling it had to do with spying. In any case, it was the only "equipment" of any sort he'd seen in the room, and he was damned if he'd leave empty-handed.

He grabbed a handful of the silver things and stuffed them into a pocket of his jeans. He picked

up the rest of the jumble, which, fortunately, were so co-entangled by their cords there was little risk of dropping one of the pieces. He tucked the mass under his left arm and straightened up.

He began backing toward the alley window, checking the office outside once more. At first glance everything looked fine. Then he realized with horror that still no one had moved. At all. The woman at the coffee machine still stood there, motionless. The man at the bulletin board too hadn't moved, and though his back was to Gabriel, the position of his arms and head didn't look right. Franks still had her hands in her lap, looking forward lifelessly, and Frick at the counter, back stiff, arms hanging down like a ... This was definitely not right. Gabriel reached the window and shoved at the files, sending them crashing to the floor, no longer interested in silence, only interested in getting out. Because if he made noise, lots of noise, that might give his brain something to remember, something to walk away with as the truth, something other than this . . .

A split second before he'd dumped those files, before he'd made any noise at all, every single one of those lifeless forms out there slowly, terribly, in unison as synchronized as any swim team, lifted their heads and turned their blank, expressionless faces directly toward him. The force of their dead eyes pierced through the mirror and saw him. All together, they saw him.

Gabriel dived out the window, landed badly with only his free right arm to stop the fall, but managed to protect the units he carried. He skinned a knee, tore his jeans. The kneecap hummed with pain as Gabriel limped from the alley to his bike. He kicked the blasted thing to life with much cursing and trepidation.

He could still feel the eyes in the Royal and Conti police station upon him, watching, as he sped away. They didn't follow. Neither sirens nor guns nor shambling zombies broke the ordinary morning in the Quarter streets. Gabriel made positively sure of this before stopping the bike to rearrange the tangled mass he had balanced on his lap.

The units he had identified as "remote phone receivers," when he turned one on, showed not a dialing display but something that looked like it belonged in a submarine; a full circle of light with a clockwise-sweeping light beam. A small blip

appeared at the dead center of the circle. The thing was emitting a soft beep in a staccato burst, and a small light under the display was pulsing a steady green.

He searched his pockets for the silver disks and tried an experiment. He put down the bike's kickstand and walked over to put the disks on a lamppost. He backed up toward his bike. The receiver's beeping took on a slightly slower staccato, and the green light flicked like a lightbulb just starting to go. The blip in the center of the screen moved from dead center to off-center.

It was a tracking device.

He played with the thing like a ten-year-old for about five minutes, then noticed that he was getting some odd looks. Sighing, he collected the disks from the various places he'd tried stashing them (under the garbage can, near a parked car's tire . . .) and shoved them back in a pocket, turned the receiving unit off.

Okay. Cool as all get-out but what the hell use is it really?

Obviously, the cops used the thing to track people who didn't want to be found. If he could get one of those disks on someone . . . but who? Crash had definitely attended his last snake soiree, and Gabriel couldn't even imagine trying to secrete one of those things on the person of Jolly Green. He'd end up planted himself—in a wall.

"Wall! Wall! Old or small, can't get over the garden wall!"

Gabriel frowned and looked over his shoulder. On the sidewalk, two pretty black girls he had barely registered earlier were now jumping rope. Their tight braids bounced lightly, their black patent shoes clicked on the concrete, their singing voices spurted in breathy rhythmic jolts as they landed and sprang, the ropes providing a tight whizzing accompaniment.

"Blood, bread, Johnny's dead! Lay him down in a wooden bed!"

Put the bed in a garden plot! Mark the wall so he can't get out!"

Gabriel's skin was swept, head to toe, with a chilled sweat. He turned from the girls quickly, so that he didn't have to see if they suddenly turned and looked at him, or perhaps started grinning, their eyes rolling back up into their heads, or maybe even started to jerk their limbs like prettily painted marionettes. He got on his bike and

pulled hastily out into the lazy traffic, ignoring the inevitable horn that followed, a horn that sounded lazy itself, as if the reprimand were merely a traffic-safety duty, no personal insult intended.

He'd gotten the message; God help the messengers. He headed for the cemetery.

When he reached Laveau's tomb he found it quiet. One plate of drying chick peas and the flies that were feasting on it provided the only signs of life. In fact, the entire cemetery was sparsely populated, no doubt a result of the stifling dog days of heat—St. Louis Cemetery #1 being less a place of green shade than of a land of baking stones.

He examined the tomb wall and found the marks, where they had been before, written on an otherwise clear chunk of space on the tomb's narrow rear wall. The marks looked different, though, and he pulled out his sketch with Moonbeam's translation on it to confirm this. Yes. This was a "new" message. He copied it down and placed it next to Moonbeam's translation. A number of the symbols were the same and he moved their corresponding letters over to the new message. Unfortunately, not all of the symbols on the new message were in the first message. What he was left with was this:

He studied this with a frown. When the translation struck him, swimming up out of the distracting lines and dashes, it was so clear and perfect, so frightening, it kicked his heart into overdrive. The rooster, the police station, the snake . . .

No, not the snake. "DJ" went a little past the "DONOTHAR?" directive on that one, which means he doesn't always obey the wall.

But "DJ" wasn't of primary interest at the moment, was he? No, the real meat and potatoes on the menu was still unserved. Who wrote "DJ KEEP EYES ON GK BUT DO NOT HARM" on the wall? And how did they know about him?

He had had an idea when he came to the cemetery, a tickling wisp of an idea that had a general direction but wasn't fully flushed out. Now, in the light of this latest, personal missive, the thing took on new solidity, new urgency, by the very reason of its audacity, its irony, its sheer in-your-faceism. He would leave a message of his own on the wall. A message for "DJ." But what would the message say? He pondered this problem for some time, squatting on the gritty, plaster-littered path across from the brick chalk marks. The idea had to do with the

tracking device, of course, but how he could make the two things relate, he hadn't quite figured out yet. His mind churned out a few feeble ideas that were duly rejected. Something on the order of "DJLETGKATTACHSMILYBUTTONTTOYOU" probably would not fly. Beyond that was nothing but blackness. Gabriel was finally forced to admit—with a dread not unlike realizing that you escaped the burning house only to find that you have to go back in for the baby—that he could not answer that question without another excursion to the museum. Could he really get away with one more foray into enemy waters? Or was something worse than the snake poised there, waiting, hoping he was really as stupid as he looked? Guess we'll find out.

He stood, shaking his partially asleep limbs into submission. The knee he had skinned earlier resisted the movement howlingly, being quite determined to settle down like cement into whatever position Gabriel left it in for more than thirty seconds. He winced and started limping back to his bike. He wondered if pythons were attracted to the smell of blood.

When he reached the Voodoo museum Gabriel couldn't believe his good fortune. The lights were on, the door unlocked, and when he peeked into the interior he saw not Dr. John but a young girl behind the counter, hair in an African-patterned kerchief and mouth full of gum. She looked harmless, and her blank, disinterested gaze at him confirmed this impression. His momentary elevation was tempered by the thought that if Dr. John wasn't here, he could only be somewhere worse. It's St. John's Eve. He's out there somewhere getting ready.

Ready, yes. But hopefully it wouldn't be too late for a last-minute change in plans. Gabriel gazed squintingly up into the snake cage behind the main counter. It was empty.

He surveyed the items in the place critically.

Fwet hash, whip; ku-bha-sah, knife; Laveau's wishing stump; gourds they called assons; the poteau-mitan—center pole.

Blood, bread, Johnny's dead. Lay him down in a wooden bed.

He raised the lid on the small coffin by the door, winced at the squeak, and checked the inside. It was about two feet by one foot. The inside was unfinished wood, sanded fine. The cross in the lid cut through, allowing the light from the museum to

cast a glowing crucifix onto the coffin's piney floor. Stealing a glance behind him to make sure the girl was not paying attention—she wasn't, he pulled one of the disks from his pocket. On the back was a tabbed adhesive. He pulled the tab and stuck the coin-sized device firmly to the inside top of the lid. The adhesive, no doubt invented to handle such resistant surfaces as oil-coated car undercarriages, took to the wood without a hitch. Now if only they don't look inside.

There was no way to hide the thing. He would have to count on Jolly Green's confidence in the sanctity of his own space. He lowered the lid as softly as he could, stole another glance at the girl, who was now reading Ebony magazine, and slipped, unacknowledged, from the building.

He returned to the cemetery, carefully cleared away the last brick message, and wrote the following in his best imitation of the style:

It said, "DJ CONCLAVE TONIGHT BRING SEKEY MADOULE."

When he got back to the shop, Grace was peering from the half window in the front door, eyes large and round like the Little Match Girl. She saw him pull up and her anxious white face disappeared, embarrassed. Gabriel couldn't blame her for being nervous. He himself had a hard time getting off the bike and heading toward the shop. An almost palatable shroud hung over the place now—even the cemetery he'd just come from seemed sunny and cheerful by comparison. Imagined or conjured, the gloom was hard to dispel.

"Hey, Gracie," he said with forced heartiness, stripping off his jacket as he entered. "Thought you might have gone home for the day. Gotten your hair done. Somethin' like that."

Grace's worried face shifted into sarcasm.

"Gotten my hair done? What is this, Leave It to Beaver?"

"Oh, right. I keep forgetting you New York types aren't real women."

Grace frowned at him from under her dark brows, but she wasn't taking the bait. She watched him hang up his coat with a preoccupied stare.

"Where've you been?" she asked.

"Egads. Shades of maternal instinct!" He pretended to be horrified. "I hear that happens to y'all when you're approachin' thirty?"

Her frown grew a bit deeper and more annoyed.

"I'm twenty-five, thank you very much. Are you getting ready to leave town?" she asked pointedly.

"Sure, sure," Gabriel said smoothly. He searched the service table for plastic foam cups and didn't find any. Grace was definitely not herself when such things went neglected. He looked up at her and she pointed with disinterest to a cupboard door under the table. He opened it. Foam cups.

"Did you ever get a chance to check on that 'Agris Benin' thing?" he said casually, wrestling a cup free of its plastic sheath.

Grace sighed. "Couldn't find any mention of Agris. Benin is the name of an African state—People's Republic of Benin. That's all I found out." She shifted forward in her seat, watching him as he poured his coffee and sipped its hot surface.

"You're not going, are you?" she asked. Her voice had a genuine lump in it. He felt guilty about it, then decided, fuck it. He never asked her to care if he lived or died.

"Grade, I will," he said flatly. He changed the subject. "Member those paints of yours?"

"Yeah?"

"Could I get you to paint somethin' for me?"

"Like what?"

He went over to his jacket and searched its pockets, coming up with the tattoo he had copied down from Crash's chest.

"This." He lay the piece of notebook paper down on the desk in front of her and smoothed it out. The snake looked back at them, its body curled as though around a caduceus, only the caduceus was missing.

"Pretty much greens—a little black around the edges," he said, pointing out said areas.

She looked up at him, her expression blank.

"And what does this get painted on, pray tell?"

Gabriel grinned at her and used a forefinger to trace a large circular area on his own chest. "You know, like a tattoo."

She smiled back at him sweetly. He could tell there was something rotten about it before she ever opened her mouth.

"When hell freezes over." She turned back to her books.

"Come on!" he whined.

Grace only made a noise with her lips, the New York equivalent, he guessed, of Psahh!

"Grade!" he warned.

"Forgive it!"

"How come? Is it the Voodoo thing? You can't really paint? What?"

She gave him a dark look but did not respond.

" 'Cause you know, if you're just worried about havin' to get that close to me, that I can understand. It can be a bit overwhelming."

"Only because you never bathe. Buzz off."

"Grade."

"Gabriel, I said no. I don't want anything more to do with it." She sat up for this last, piercing him, or attempting to, with the absolute, bottom-line intensity of her stare. "You'll do whatever you want. Fine. Me, I'm out."

He looked back at her critically. She ought to be telling the truth. Any person in their right mind wouldn't want anything more to do with it. Yet she was still here—she turned back to the books when annoyed rather than picking up her things and leaving. In fact, she'd been here, alone, all morning. That took determination. But determination for what? What did Grace really want? He tried, for a moment or two, to figure it out, to come up with the perfect manipulative thing that would hook Grace back in line. But he just couldn't. He had no idea why the hell she did anything. God—give him a million Voodoo practitioners to fathom, but don't make him have to understand the mind of a woman like Grace.

"I need your help," he said finally, having nothing left but the truth.

"Why?" she said sincerely. "Why are you doing this?"

"It's not about the book anymore. It's deeper than that," he said, hedging.

She still looked skeptical.

"You know me," he pressed. "I'm not a guy who goes out of my way for anything. Gracie, it's important. Really important."

She sighed, something in her eyes relenting.

Still, she didn't respond.

"Come on," he pleaded softly. "Mosely's disappeared. There's no one else I can count on."

"I'm just asking you to tell me why," she insisted.

"I can't do that. It's . . . there's too much to explain. You'll have to trust me."

Her frown returned as though this, truly, were the ultimate illogical request. Nevertheless, she picked up the sheet of paper, stood, and bent over for her carryall of paints.

"Let's go," she said, defeated. She headed toward his studio. "I'm sure as hell not going to do it out here where everyone can watch."

Gabriel gave a sigh of relief, then felt bad for pulling Grace into this thing, again. But what choice did he have, really? He followed Grace into the back room, well aware that such a measure was certainly no guarantee against being watched. Not anymore.

The natural light had dimmed by the time Grace put the finishing touches on Gabriel's "tattoo." She had shown, for her, incredible patience while Gabriel corrected her color schemes from memory. She turned on the overhead light to inspect her work.

"There," she said, satisfied. She went into Gabriel's bathroom to wash her hands.

"This place is a pit! You need a fire hose in here!"

"I got all the fire hose I need, baby," he quipped, studying his chest in the dingy antique mirror that was propped against the dresser. He didn't exactly have total recall about Crash's tattoo, but he thought, in the dark, Grace's replica would pass.

Grace emerged, her lips pursed wryly.

"It's getting late," she said. "You're not going to sleep here tonight, are you? Why don't you and your fire hose go over to your gran's?"

"Huh? Oh, good idea. Gran's. I'll head over there in a minute."

He caught her looking at the bed in the mirror, a puzzled expression on her face. He looked himself and saw the edge of Gunter's journal poking out from under the pillow.

"Why don't you go home, Grace?" he said quickly. "It's past closing."

"I'll walk you out," she said, folding her arms.

"How thoughtful. Would you mind, oh, waiting out front for a moment? Or are you really anxious to see me change my jeans?"

Grace frowned and headed for the curtained door to the shop. She gave him a final, suspicious glance as she exited.

Gabriel dug the crocodile head out from under the bed and placed it to one side. One tracking unit was dumped with a recharging base on the wall side of his dresser, but he didn't need it, he already had the other hand unit stashed on his bike. Tattoo, check. Just to be safe, he pulled the snake bracelet Sam had made him from his sock

drawer and shoved it in a pocket. He probably didn't need that and the tattoo, but it couldn't hurt. He glanced at his wardrobe, then figured his standard jeans would have to do. He didn't know what they wore to these things, but he didn't exactly have a huge variety on hand.

Feeling about as ready as he'd ever be, his heart already starting to pound a little too loudly, he picked up the croc head and held a couple of excuses at bay (Thought Gran might like it . . . fust gonna store it in her attic) for Grace's inevitable questions. Sometimes having a woman around was more trouble than it was worth.

Gabriel made his exit with surprisingly few theatrics. Grace didn't even ask about the head, or respond when he casually threw an excuse about it at her anyway. She locked the shop and he drove away, watching her disappear as she rounded the corner in his rearview mirror. She, at least, would be safe tonight. He wondered, with uncharacteristic morbidity, if he'd ever see her again.

A few minutes after Gabriel's bike disappeared from view, Grace's figure reappeared on Bourbon Street. She went directly to the shop, unlocked the door, and looked around as if for witnesses. She then went inside.

The lights did not come on.

Gabriel entered the bayou by the southeast corner. The entrance was a narrow paved road back here, a road that would have looked anonymous if it weren't for the signs on either side proclaiming the land state property and guaranteeing that all litterers would be hung; poachers, drawn and quartered. Darkness was taking its time settling in, like a graceful woman with a huge skirt. Gabriel could still make out the road clearly enough to drive without a light, though the bike motor's impression of a lawn mower in high gear made actual stealth unlikely.

Ten minutes in from the gate he could no longer stand either the noise or the suspense. He pulled the bike over, stopped the engine, and listened to the world go silent. Not even the rustle of bat wings broke the stillness of twilight. He unhooked the tracking unit from the bungee cord that held it to the back of the seat, pausing for a moment in his nervousness about turning it on. He'd made several mistakes—this much he knew. The most important was how late he'd put that message on Laveau's tomb. It had to have been two o'clock at least. Would DJ really have

gone over there to check for messages so late on the very day of the conclave?

Gabriel could already feel that ole black magic at work in the bayou. The lack of sounds, for one thing. Where were the crickets? The katydids? For another, the trees on either side of him had started looking identical about five minutes back. This was not altogether bad news. It meant he had interpreted their drum message correctly. Nevertheless, with that kind of weird work floating about, he was going to spin his wheels for a long, long time if the tracker did not work.

He switched the unit on, holding his breath.

A blip appeared immediately, right in the center of the readout. His heart jumped for a second, only to realize that was the disk he had in his pocket, the one that would mark the position of the bike.

He watched the green hand sweep around with apprehension. On the first pass he thought he saw something. It swept again. Yes! On the easternmost edge of the display was a very faint blip, almost not there, clearly testing the range of the tracker. Gabriel looked east and found himself staring into the thickest part of the bayou. No road there, kiddlie-winks, paved or otherwise.

He sighed, his momentary elation that there was a blip being quickly overwhelmed by the idea of tromping, God knows how far, through snake-infested swamp, in the dark. He pulled his bike off the road and hid it behind a tree. He slipped the disk from his pocket into the carryall behind the seat and pulled "Willy Jr." from his place over the back bar. He bungied the mask around his waist, settling the back of the croc head in the small of his own back, a neat trick that wasn't marvelously comfortable, but that did keep his hands free. Then he started to walk.

At first there was stumbling, and the parting of brambles, disgust when a foot sank into mud, particularly should that mud be warm, and the awareness of the darkness deepening. There was the straining for normal sounds, which did not come, an effect that was now at least contributable to his own crashing presence, but unnerving nonetheless. The blip that was his bike limped westward of center while the one he was headed toward grew less faint, more real. At some point, about fifteen minutes in, things other than the blips began to grow less and less real and things entirely unreal began to form. Shortly after that

Gabriel began to shut parts of himself down. He would never be able to talk about the two hours he spent in that swamp, nor what he saw there, nor what he imagined he saw, or felt, or heard in that darkness. For a long, long time he walked on in a kind of stupor, a trance in which there were only two things in the whole world—the next spot of ground he could put his foot down on and the green blip, whose purpose he could no longer recall, on a black thing he found in his hand.

This narrowing of mind was not the bored numbness of a body walking past its limits, nor an "automatic pilot" set to free a preoccupied mind. It was a gift, and where it came from he did not know. He only knew that if he opened his mind wider than that, wider than what was necessary for the next footstep and the blip, he would see the things that lurked in the blackness; the hissing things, the scaly things, the thing with glowing eyes larger than a cat's and far wilder, the thing that breathed hssahh-bu, hssahh-bu on his neck, and the tiny crawly thing that scuttled ahead of each footstep in a mocking way, as if measuring his steps and recording their position for some central intelligence, measuring and recording them, one by one.

These were things he knew and did not know, sensed and did not allow himself to sense. He was aware, in some part of his brain, that they were there, but he didn't give the larger part of himself the knowledge, because there was no easy way out of the swamp, even retracing his steps would take too long, and to really see those things with no way out—that way lay insanity. Besides, something told him that if he did not acknowledge them in any way, even mentally, they would have no power over him. He did not attribute this strange knowledge to ancestral memory, genetic ability, the gifts of psychic Schattenjager blood. He did not attribute it to anything at all.

What he did think about was the next footstep and the green blip. He knew the blip was supposed to get brighter and brighter and draw closer and closer to the center. He could no longer remember how he knew this, nor what the blip represented, if, indeed, it represented anything. That was not important and he did not search for that knowledge, for to do so would have meant widening. He had only a blind conviction that could he make the blip find the center, it would

mean the end of this sojourn in the wilderness, this terror in the night. And that should he fail, the darkness and the night and the things that lurked in it would never, ever, ever end.

It was the drums that began to pull him out of it. It took a while for them to register, but when they did he remembered, suddenly, that those were Rada drums, and that he was heading toward a Voodoo ceremony. That he had, in fact, found it.

He stopped where he was and stared at the display. The eastern lying green blip was not dead center, but it was pretty damn close. He was near the little coffin, the sekey madoule. He gradually let his mind unhook from its tethers and when it did, he found that he was alone in the woods, that there was only the drums and the glow of a bonfire up ahead. He could hear chanting now, not organized, but preparatory, fragmented. For all its strangeness, it was a human sound, it was real, and the other things in the night had vanished.

He fell to the ground, suddenly limp with exhaustion and relief. He lay there, half laughing, half sobbing to himself, oh, so quietly, and after a while he forgot what he had just experienced, released it like a cancerous balloon, the way a woman, holding her newborn infant, will release the memory of the pain. And gradually he became, once again, Gabriel Knight.

After a time, the noises from the bonfire grew more rhythmic, deeper. One by one, voices left their individual paths and joined the sweeping unison. Gabriel did not know the words, but he could understand the intent. The ceremony had started.

He rose on thighs shaking with exhaustion and unhooked Willy Jr. from his back. The mask had lost a few more scales, but it would be difficult for the thing to look more ragtag than it already had. He stripped off his jacket and T-shirt, removed his boots. The snake tattoo on his chest was still intact. He pulled the snake bracelet from a pocket and put it around his right forearm. He lowered Willy Jr. over his head.

And then he walked forward, toward the bonfire's glow.

He reached the edge of a clearing and paused there to adjust himself, through the rough filter of the crocodile head, to the sights and sounds before him. The clearing was about forty feet in diameter, shaped evenly in a circle. Around the

clearing, at the edges of the brush, were rocks, one to two feet high, that formed a boundary. It was not enough of a boundary to prevent crossing but something, nonetheless, that one would know damn well was a marker should one cross it.

Long ago the trees had been cleared from the circle's interior and now marshy grass was the only permitted usurper. In the center of the clearing was a natural tree trunk, its roots still deep in the earth, but it had been cleared of limbs and branches and leaves and wore carvings on its bark the way the humans around it wore paint on their skin.

Poteau-mitan.

Surrounding the tree was a circular area of packed dirt, about five feet in diameter. The bonfire was off to one side, allowing the poteau-mitan and its grassless collar to reign unchallenged in the center of the ring. The bonfire was large, though not as large as the burning pyre in Gabriel's dream. Its light was sufficient to illuminate the entire scene: trees, clearing, grass, pole, people.

People. Other than a vague notion of villainy and conspiracy, Gabriel had never thought to really picture the people. Here they were, those whose bare footprints would match the ones on file with the N. O. P. D. Here were those who had perhaps bound the victims, perhaps watched and sang and panted and encouraged while some guy in the dirt was getting his heart extracted. Gabriel didn't have enough faith in human nature to wonder that they could do it. What he found more puzzling was why. What motivated this cult?

What were their secrets?

He watched them and felt them and almost knew. Of the thirty or so people who danced and writhed and strutted to the relentless drums, features flashing in and out of the firelight, all were ornamented as some primitive spirit. There were wolves and snakes, scorpions, lions, monkeys, and more things he couldn't decipher. The figures were naked, colored paint making animal patterns on their skin, beads and pouches of leather wound around taut muscles, bouncing off full, oiled breasts and stomachs. The faces were masked, some with full masks, some with partial, some only with paint. Even so, the joy, the mindlessness, the ecstasy, the primalness washing over their features was not hidden, could never be contained.

It struck him like a fist—the power. He hadn't anticipated such power. He could feel the energy like a blast of hot air on his face, the hypnotic compulsion of the drums, the coiling heat and sensual release of the dance. To be young and muscled and beautiful and strong, to move, to move, for the gods and alongside the gods, even as a vessel to the gods. He wanted to, needed to move, wanted to fall into that energy and feed off it and be fodder for it. Power.

Power ye shall have, but power of thine own.

Remember thy purpose.

The voice came to him from somewhere beyond the drums and he did not question it nor marvel at it. He was past such things. But it did serve to recall to him the results he had seen come from the work of these people's hands, images like black-and-white crime scene photographs flashed in his head, blood, wounds, ripped flesh. To recall, too, the anger and frustration, even rage, at their cool dismissal of him. Yes. Him and them. Two sides. It was important to remember that. If he did not, he could be sure, in any case, that they would not forget.

Watch GK but do not harm.

He frowned, brushed that thought away, and stepped into the firelight.

He worked his way around the circle, staying in the rear, trying to move his body in imitation of the writhing and shuddering of the others. A moment before he'd wanted only to dance. Now, senses reasserted, he only felt how poorly he did it. The spirit had gone. He cursed great-great-great-whatever-granddad for breaking the spell. At least he could have waited until Gabriel had gotten in a few practice rounds.

But the mood of the place was changing now in any case. A new beat started, and it was darker, more difficult; less compelling, more crawling. A new language tumbled forth. Not French, probably African, like before, but this one was more guttural. He recognized the names of Loa: Damballah, Damballah, Damballah Oueddu.

From the trees on the east side of the clearing came a gigantic figure. As the flickering light flirted with its contours, Gabriel saw that the figure was that of a naked man, calves and thighs like tree trunks, arms like rock hammers, chest and stomach like a young Charlton Heston on steroids. The giant's deep black skin contrasted with the others in the circle, most of whom had a

lighter, redder cast, and it was painted with streaks and lines. Around the man's waist hung a beaded belt and from that belt hung a beaded gourd, knife, and pouch, the beads trailing down into the man's heavy, massive genitalia, darker black still than the black of his skin—a bull's or a stallion's coloring. But most disturbing was the man's head: pate bald and painted with deep white lines around the eyes and mouth—a pitiless death's-head. A ring of feathers surrounded the man's neck in a collar that only emphasized and made more terrifying the facial visage. More feathers adorned the bare anklets, wrists, thighs. He's an eagle. Dr. John.

The sight of the museum keeper shook Gabriel. Whatever he had sensed beneath the giant's passive calm, it had not been half of this reality. With his clothes removed and his skin painted, the man looked like a psychopathic monster, looked quite capable of ripping off Gabriel's head with his bare hands and laughing heartily while doing so. And no doubt, that was exactly what would happen should he catch a whiff of Gabriel tonight.

Did I really leave a message for this guy? Joke about his snake?

But Dr. John did not glance in Gabriel's direction. Instead he went to the poteau-mitan and removed the pouch from his belt. He opened the pouch and, drawing a white substance from within, began tracing lines in the dirt circle around the poteau-mitan. Gabriel edged forward to see, but he knew what Dr. John would be drawing and he was not mistaken. It was the veve.

And now the crowd was whirling, moving around the circle clockwise, and Gabriel went, too. Stomping and shaking out their arms, the men and women dancing on bent knees, a partial squat position that made Gabriel's muscles scream. And yet, as wild as the dancers seemed, Gabriel sensed that it was only a preparation, a building up of energies—not yet the real ecstasy, not yet the real mindlessness.

Dr. John finished the veve and stood, unfolding his length like some mechanical colossus. From another man he took a bottle that was tall and thin, painted white and adorned with symbols. Now Dr. John was dancing and shaking the gourd with one hand, the bottle in the other. He began to move counterclockwise to the spinning circle, passing the members and shaking his gourd at them. After a few of these "shakes," he would

take a swig from the bottle and spit the mouthful at a passing face, spraying it with liquid as from a nozzle. The recipients of this reacted as though it were a demented blessing, convulsing in a few jerky steps, then flailing out their arms, their faces tilted unnaturally back and looking heavenward, glazed grins on their faces. Gabriel quickly edged to the outer edge of the ring. He didn't want any of what was in that bottle. Worse, what if he should be recognized!

But he was in the mask and that was something. Willy Jr., hot and unmaneuverable, chafing his shoulders with its rough edges as he danced, its long snout making balance a delicate matter, particularly while trying to squat and tilt backward—well, thank God for the whole smelly mass of it. But Dr. John was systematic and the circle whirled on. The drumbeat was intensifying now, more urgent and darker still, black heart of darkness, black soul of the human race in that beat. And Dr. John began to wade through the circle in search of those who had not yet received the liquid. Those who had received it, Gabriel saw, had crossed that edge he'd sensed. Their eyes were no longer human, but took on the look of the species they embodied, or even of something far older and wiser, something not of this plane, Loa, perhaps. Their movements lost the minute quality of human control they had hitherto had, now spasming or leaping or prowling or coiling in ways no human flesh should be able to do. Gabriel barely avoided Dr. John on one of the man's forays, turning his back to the giant in a faked dance move. But as he danced on, still moving backward, he saw Dr. John staring after him, a flicker of something in his eyes. Not yet, who? Dr. John himself was a bit too far gone for instantaneous response, the giant's red-ringed eyes making that clear, the liquid, apparently, seeping its way into his bloodstream through the flesh of his cheeks. But it was something very close to who?—something that would shortly become who? glazed eyes or not.

I have to get out of here. NOW.

This came to him, not from some dead ancestor, but from his own instinctual survivor's mind. The bodies flashing around him were not sane anymore. It was a mere matter of minutes before the gate-crasher would be found and what would these other possessed dancers do to him then? Animals, they become animals.

He began to edge away from the dancers. Dr. John was still across the circle, still spraying. Gabriel fell back from the pace, still moving but dancing in place now, waiting for a moment when no one was looking, waiting for his chance to sidestep away from the circle and into the woods beyond. He saw a gap in dancers approaching him around the circle and was set to leap out when it reached him, was poised to go, when she appeared—the woman in the leopard-skin mask. She came in from the east, the way Dr. John had. She came dancing, regal and magnificent, with a huge snake draped across her shoulders and down her arms. The snake held its head upright near her left wrist, eyes staring out blackly, tongue flickering, tail trailing down like another kind of boa, from her right forearm. The one from the museum.

He couldn't be sure at this distance, in this light, but he was, all the same. His gaze went beyond the snake, for it was the snake's mistress that truly fascinated him. The mask she wore was like a hood fashioned from leopard skin. It had large circular holes, as heavily stitched as surgical wounds, through which large, dark eyes flashed. Two small leopard-skin ears on top of the hood enhanced the illusion. Not a woman, not a leopard, but something in between.

Her body was bare except for a bit of leopard skin belted at her waist. It hung asymmetrically across her hip, covering her most vulnerable parts but barely, dark shadows flickering teasingly as she shuddered and stomped, knees bent, shoulders and back curved dramatically backward over her buttocks. Her skin was of the redder cast, painted with black and gold in panels and spots. Her breasts were ripe and full, her nipples were gilded.

When she reached the poteau-mitan, a man with a basket appeared. From the basket she withdrew a rooster, holding it by its feet, its wings aflutter. A second rooster followed. The man tossed away the empty basket and removed the heavy snake from her shoulders, holding it for her like a prized schnauzer, while the leopard woman whirled, tossing her body around in a circle as if the wind would catch her fall, bare feet churning in the grass, spinning the birds aloft by their feet, spinning them like Chinese noisemakers, around and around until their fluttering wings drooped and then stopped.

Her whirling ended abruptly with a final crossing of the birds over her head. She knelt at the edge of the veve and laid the birds down on the pattern. Then she removed a ku-bha-sah knife from her belt and slit their throats, blood spilling out while the birds barely jerked, hypnotized by the spin. A bit of the blood was allowed to drizzle on the white pattern lines, then a second man caught the rest of the blood in a wooden bowl.

Gabriel had forgotten to leave, hypnotized by this spectacle, mesmerized much like those two cocks. He'd forgotten, even, to move. He stood like an ice sculpture in the flickering shadows at the edges of the circle's light. A larger shadow engulfed him, cutting off his line of sight to the mamaloo. This broke the spell and Gabriel looked up.

Dr. John stood before him. The death's-mask's eyes fixed upon him maniacally. He drew back his macabre head . . .

Gabriel prepared himself for a blow but what came as the head flew forward was not pain, but the spray. Liquid spewed from the giant's mouth, splattering Gabriel's mask, aimed accurately through the eye holes and gaping croc mouth. Gabriel's own face and eyes were soaked with the stuff. It penetrated his nose, his mouth. It smelled antiseptic, medicinal—tasted like nothing, like evaporated alcohol, yet with a cloying, gaslike burn. He sputtered, coughed, pulled back, choking.

Dr. John moved on.

Get out, someone said, or so he thought. But he was having a hard time hearing. His ears rang, the drums echoing like cymbals—too many clashed too often. He was choking, his lungs and esophagus filled with liquid fire. His skin broke out in a clammy sweat. Darkness threatened the edges of his vision. He was going to faint, really, if he didn't get out of this goddamn . . .

Get. Out. He heard it clearly this time, but it struck him as absurd. The drums were throbbing in his head like low voltage leads, the kind they stuck in the brains of rhesus monkeys and rats. How could he get out? Wasn't he a rat? A rat in a maze? And why would he get out, when across the circle lay the answers to everything. The knife, the snakes, the circles, the fire, the screaming leopard, the talisman.

Can't breathe.

He reached up with numbed hands and pulled the heavy mask from his head, swaying to stay upright. His feet were no longer attached to his brain; the grass, the ground, even his own soles, were no longer accessible as sensory input. The cool breeze struck his skin—fresh air, not tainted through the long-dead cells of a reptile. He gasped, filling his lungs for what seemed like eternity, as if they were bottomless wells and he would soon be lifted off the ground by the sheer weightlessness of his billowing lungs.

Free.

The rhythms buoyed him, lifted him, moved him. He felt the bodies rushing past him as one would feel flies buzzing past one's face. He began to stutter-walk, and the dark forms whizzed by, barely avoiding collision, for he was not moving clockwise anymore, nor even counterclockwise, but inward, toward the woman in the mask, toward the lines in the dirt, toward the poteau-mitan.

He had to know.

Was he here? Or was he in his dream now?

Walking, feet planting somewhere far below, even though he couldn't feel them? The dream was different and yet the same, different in form a bit, in heart the same, but more important was this—he was aware this time, he was not forgetful. He knew about the woman in the mask. Better still, he could and was walking toward her of his own will, no longer a bound victim watching it all play out. He could approach his demon, finally, and look it in the eyes, and put a face on the dreaded unknown. The woman was being handed the lead of a goat now, a black male goat, its scent penetrating even Gabriel's dazed mind, mixing with the peculiar copper aftertaste in his mouth, becoming the smell of his ecstasy. He could feel the small smile on his lips, feel the flesh around his eyes being stretched by the wide-set gaze he had locked into.

Dream. Dream. It's all a dream.

He watched as she tilted back her leopard head and spat strange homilies to the sky. He did not hear them, they were beneath the drums. Still he stepped forward. In slow-motion she drew her curved dagger across the throat of the creature, its eyes rolling in panic, the red blood oozing out in rich globs, slowly and thickly, like red honey, spilling into the bowl the bowl the bowl.

She was standing and turning and he was right behind her now. She faced him and the eyes in the

mask met his. Locked. They were crazy, like the eyes of those who danced. Not human, but beyond human. Not a leopard, but something darker and wiser and more bitter than that. They narrowed on him, the face under the mask curled as if smelling him, smelling. He reached for the hood with one lumplike hand.

Those dark eyes flew open with recognition and disbelief.

"Witch-hunter!" the voice hissed. It was the voice from his dream, guttural, insane, malevolent, mocking.

His fingers found the edges of the hood and he pulled, not feeling or caring if he was being gentle or rough, as stumbling as a bear cub batting at a hive. The hood came off. Malia's face appeared before him. His heart sank like a stone; broken, numb. I knew it would be you. Knew it had to be, but still I hoped . . .

And yet ... as he looked at Malia, Malia was not what looked back. It was Malia's face and not her face. It was her physical form, as familiar to him as his own, yet the eyes were not Malia's and the curled, mocking lips not his beloved's either.

"I smell his blood in your veins!" the thing hissed. The voice bore no trace of Malia's silky timbre—it was brittle and harsh, like sandpaper on his ears. For the first time since that liquid had hit his face, he began to be afraid. He felt suddenly the chill of the breeze, the vulnerability of his unshielded face, realized he was not in a dream and he was not welcome here. He could not comprehend what it was that stood before him, the not-Malia thing. He had thought if he could see what was behind the mask, it would dispel the demons. Instead, it had only made the demon see him. A laugh like fingernails on glass issued from the creature's mouth. The dagger came up in both hands, poisoning over Malia's head.

"I should have ended your bloodline years ago, puny coward spawn! Traitor gizm! Son of mongrels!"

"Malia!" he screamed at the thing, horrified. He thought the eyes flickered briefly with something he recognized, something that recognized him, but the human spark was quickly extinguished. Yet the arms, the arms paused in the air as if weighted.

And he was running, stumbling backward. He caught a glimpse of a few stunned faces—bodies halted awkwardly among the whirling majority who danced still. They stared at their priest-

ess and the stranger uncomprehendingly. Even Dr. John, face and arms slack with disbelief, across the circle, watched him run with glazed, dazed eyes.

"Where is your treasure now, Witch-hunter? Where are your pretty, pretty gems?"

The mocking laughter trailed him as he burst into the underbrush, crashed through trees and brambles, and fell, sprawling, down a slight embankment. His head struck something hard and unyielding, and he had a second to feel grateful that he was blessedly, blessedly, blessedly passing out.

Chapter?

My lastslly laid to waste, I ran toward the light. I prayed for one to change my path, to give me strength to fight...

June 24, 1993

He surfaced into consciousness in his own bed. He could hear the annoying hum of his bedside clock and feel the lumps of his mattress. He vaguely wondered why his head hurt so badly—maybe it was the flu. He began to turn over onto his stomach when he became aware that there was someone else in the room. His eyes flew open.

"Well. That was abrupt. Do you always wake up like that?" Grace was seated in a chair she'd pulled in from the front room. She looked like she'd spent the night there.

The night.

He sat up carefully, remembering in a flood all that had happened last night, or most of it, anyway, and wincing at the thud of blood in his skull.

"I remember falling ..." he said blankly.

"Good, because you did. Hit your head, too, but not hard. I think it was the drug and the shock that made you pass out."

He looked up at her as best he could without turning his neck.

"Thank you, Dr. Welby," he said dryly. "I assume that means I wasn't taken to a hospital?" Grace rolled her eyes. "Don't be such a baby."

"My head is killing me," he protested.

"It's called a hangover. I'm telling you, you barely grazed that boulder."

"How do you know?" he said, irritated. He was searching his head for lumps or blood with his fingers, but wasn't finding anything but day-old hair gel and dirt.

"Uh, I saw you?" Grace said pointedly. "How do you think you got home? Did you think they'd spirited you back here just so you could live to be tormented another day?"

He stopped searching his scalp and looked at her in sheer disbelief. "No way. You weren't there."

"Was."

"Grace, that's impossible."

"Apparently not," Grace said dryly.

"Do you know what I went through to find that ceremony? What the hell are you saying, are you one of them?"

"Don't be absurd!" Grace said, very annoyed.

"Because there's no way you could have found it otherwise," he concluded firmly.

Grace sat up straight and turned the full force of her blazing eyes on his. "What, you, Great White Detective, can find it, but I, lowly Femme At The Desk, cannot?"

Gabriel sank back on his pillow, the argument raising his blood pressure and making his skull throb more painfully. He forced himself to speak calmly.

"I had to decode this drum message, then plant this device, then leave an encrypted message with crosses, then wander through the swamp endlessly with . . . well, it wasn't easy, and have a mask, and a tattoo ..."

"Can / help it if you do things the hard way?" she interrupted.

He shut up and glared at her. "Go on."

"Okay, I knew something was up last night."

She leaned forward, her voice tinged with excitement. "Like, duh, with the tattoo. And a crocodile head? Do you think I'm blind? So I searched your room last night..."

"You what?"

".. . For which you should be grateful because otherwise you would have been lying out there waiting for them to get sober enough to come take your withered little heart out."

He didn't say anything, just gave her a look that said she wasn't done paying for that sandwich yet. She ignored it.

"And I found Gunter Ritter's journal. Read it."

This piqued his curiosity. Now that she had read it, he'd be interested to hear what she thought about the weirdness of it all, but she wasn't lingering on the subject.

"I knew what you were up to then, of course. It

was only logical. Stupid and rash, but logical from your point of view. I also found the tracking device and knew how you planned to do it. I drove over to the bayou and turned on the unit, drove around the perimeter until the signal was clearest. I found your bike first. That didn't take long. Then I knew for sure it was the other signal. I drove around to get as close as I could to that one—went into the bayou from there. They were only half a mile in from the main gate on the north side? And they had a nice, clear trail all the way to the circle. You, on the other hand, must have had a heck of a walk, judging from where you left your bike." There was a trace of smug satisfaction in her voice.

Gabriel stared at her blankly. "You didn't ... see anything? In the swamp?"

Grace looked perplexed. "I saw plenty, but not until I got to the circle. Did you see something?"

Gabriel ignored her. "And how, pray tell, did you know they'd be at the bayou?"

"Yesterday's newspaper? The one you took out of the shop, like I wouldn't notice? It said in the old days the Voodoos held ceremonies for St. John's Eve at the Bayou St. John, so I took a shot. As for the mask and tattoo and all of that crap, well, I went to watch—from the trees. I don't know why you felt you had to, you know, get up there and boogie with them."

Gabriel rolled onto his side, turning his back to her. "Fine," he muttered.

"What's your problem?" Grace said in disbelief.

"Nothin'. Head hurts."

"Look, sweet cheeks, we don't have time for wounded male ego. You need to figure out what your next move is. You know? Because they know where you live and they know you know who they are. That's not a healthy scenario."

Gabriel didn't turn back over, but he did feel his flush tuning down a bit.

"Malia was there," he said simply.

"In a big way."

He pushed himself up and sat on the edge of the bed.

"It wasn't her, though. Somethin's goin' on with her. It think it's . . . somethin' about the Voodoo Lofl."

"Yeah. Right. The woman holds a dagger over your head and you say, 'she's just not herself.' "

Grace's tone was bitter. Gabriel didn't say anything.

Grace sighed. "Priority one: you need to call Wolfgang Ritter. Tell him everything that's gone on down here. He knows more about the ramifications of that journal than you do. Between the two of you, you might be able to piece together the big picture."

"Good idea," Gabriel said tiredly.

Wolfgang was more than glad to hear from him. Gabriel hushed his eager questions and recounted everything, holding nothing back this time.

"It's happening again," Wolfgang said in an awed voice.

"I kinda got that impression myself."

"We've been told several times that there would be a chance for redemption. My God, I wish you had told me everything before!"

"Yeah, well. I was sort of preoccupied yesterday."

"You said the woman at the ceremony, the mamaloo, she was Malia but not Malia."

"That's what it seemed," Gabriel said, now doubtful after Grace's remark.

"You must trust what seems. That's your instinct talking, your powers."

"Uh-huh."

"It has been exactly three hundred years. Did you know this?" Wolfgang was getting more worked up.

"I s'pose."

"Three hundred is a number of high occult power—three is particularly associated with redemption, repentance."

"Kay."

"Gunter Ritter also thought Tetelo was 'not herself at the ritual he witnessed. She was being ridden by a spirit. What spirit, he never said."

"Damballah? Ogoun Badagris?" Gabriel suggested.

Wolfgang paused thoughtfully. "I don't think so. They're both major entities. That would be like someone claiming possession by Beelzebub himself."

"Oh," Gabriel said blankly, having no idea who the hell Beelzebub was. "Who then?"

"We believe Tetelo's rider was the spirit of her father, working through her to redeem the damage done by his own crimes. Ancestor worship is a way of life among animistic faiths."

"You think Malia was being ridden by Tetelo's father?"

"No. You were there. You looked into the spirit's eyes. You know who it was."

"I do?"

"Yes. Blank your mind and think of those eyes.

Let the name come to you."

Gabriel stared at the receiver skeptically.

"Unc . . ." he began, "I really don't. . ."

"Do it!"

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "All right. Hold on."

He put the receiver down on the desk and closed his eyes. At first all he could hear was his own thoughts and doubts. But he located a whiff of sincere desperation amid the skeptical jumble and he grabbed it, enlarged it. A calmness descended, the other currents dying down.

Blank.

When he felt the calm covering the surface of his mind like a still lake, he pulled up the image of the mamaloa's face, focused on the recognition he'd seen in those dark eyes.

His blood turned cold with horror. His own eyes opened slowly and he picked up the receiver.

"Tetelo," he said.

"Very good! I felt that, too, just hearing you describe it."

"Yeah," Gabriel said shakily. "So what do we do now?"

"You've found her—Tetelo. Do you know how long we've searched for some trace of her?"

"Uh, three hundred years?"

"Don't be smart, boy! It is our mission to recover the talisman. Not only is our family power severely curtailed without it, but her power is enhanced by it. It's disgraceful—like letting a criminal steal your gun."

His great-uncle's voice grew dire. "Even if you and I both have to die, even if the family ends, recovering that talisman from her power is everything—it's our duty. Do you understand?"

"Uh . . . sure," Gabriel said. He wasn't exactly sure he was willing to sign up for that load o' guilt, but this wasn't the time to argue. "So how do we find it? You want me to ask Malia?"

"No! You stay as far from her as possible! She has all the power and you, hardly any. The talisman will be kept in a sacred place, somewhere associated with Tetelo's tribe. In fact, it's probably buried with her bones—that's what gives her spirit, her Loa, such power."

"That's pleasant," Gabriel said dryly, but his heart ached with sympathy for Malia. Had she ever had a choice about all of this?

"Tetelo's bones and the talisman may be buried

in New Orleans or maybe Africa," Wolfgang was saying.

"Why would they leave her buried in Africa?"

"Because Africa is the source of the tribe's power. Certain areas have tremendous power—it's called 'Geomancy.' But you have a point—they may have moved the bones and the talisman to New Orleans, especially if something's happened to their sacred land in Africa. Can you think of a place they might keep them there?"

Gabriel thought. "I've heard the cartel has some sort of underground hounfour, but I have no idea where."

"Hmmm. Usually they don't bury their dead at a hounfour."

"A cemetery?"

"Yes. But only if it were a particularly sacred location to the tribe. Do you have an idea?"

"Maybe. What about the Africa angle?"

Wolfgang sighed. "We've been working on that one for a long time, too. The only trace of Tetelo after Gunter's journal was a record of a ship that was stolen in Charleston that night. The name of the ship was St. Catharine's Wake. We found records of a ship of the same name and description being found abandoned near St. Dominique months later, but we weren't able to trace Tetelo past that point, or find out anything about her before Gunter knew her. We know nothing of her tribe, or where its location in Africa might have been."

"Benin. People's Republic of Benin."

"What!"

Gabriel filled Wolfgang in on Hartridge's veve research and the notes from his desk blotter that said "Agris Benin." His great-uncle was more than enthusiastic.

"I cannot believe this! You know, we never had a copy of that veve\ Who would have thought that would be the key!"

"Unc? It's okay," Gabriel said, worried about his great-uncle's heart.

"No, but I must go! I must search the library! We've collected many volumes on Africa, if I could pin down the location of the tribe ...!"

"So what, you want me to call you back once I've checked out my thing and you've checked out your thing?" Gabriel suggested.

"Yes ..." There was something doubtful in Wolfgang's voice, but he didn't give Gabriel a chance to pursue it. "Listen to me. The castle,

Schloss Ritter, it will be yours when I die. You will be Schattenjager. Do you understand?"

"Well, you know, we'll see ..." Gabriel said doubtfully.

"You must come here to study and learn."

"From you, you mean?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

"I hope so. But if not, the library will give you what you need."

"Unc? What're you ..."

"I must go. Be very careful there. Don't try to look into the talisman if it feels too dangerous."

"But you said . . ."

"Wait, at least, for me to get back to you. That's a good boy."

The receiver went dead in Gabriel's hands and he put it down, perplexed. The old guy was going to be less help than he'd hoped. Wolfgang was clearly a few cellos short of a concerto.

Gabriel picked up a few tools from his studio—a beefy screwdriver, a small pick, and a flashlight. His episode in the bayou had taught him something. He exited to the shop and gratefully took the coffee and aspirin Grace offered, then managed to slip out with relatively little resistance. It didn't occur to him until he was standing on the street that Grace's inquiries had been halfhearted at best, and that she'd been sitting at the desk with the other phone extension right next to her throughout the long-distance call.

He was about to go back into the shop and accuse Grace of spying when he realized that his bike was sitting, newly washed, at the curb. He was, furthermore, wearing his jacket—picked up as usual from the St. George coatrack—whereas by all rights it should be lying on the ground somewhere, lost and moldy.

Damn, she was good. Gabriel sighed and mounted the bike, retrieved the keys from his jacket pocket where he usually kept them, and started the engine. He headed for St. Louis Cemetery #1.

The sun was schizophrenic today, coming in and out of the low-hanging cloud cover as if unable to make up its mind whether to show itself or not. The shadows at the cemetery thus lengthened and shortened, lengthened and shortened, in pulses that looked a little like time-lapse photography. Gabriel might have taken this as a sign that things were speeding up—had he bothered to notice. But he had things other than shadows on his mind as he made his way through the graves

to the Gedde monument. He reached the tomb and paused, checking for signs of life. There was nothing.

To the left of the tomb's marble doors was a small covered box that had a key lock on it. It must, Gabriel thought, cover the switch that opened the doors. He was about to get out the pick and screwdriver and attempt his first break-in when he found, much to his amazement, that the box was not locked. He had checked it idly by attempting to flick down the cover and, lo and behold, down the cover had gone. The lid swayed on loosened hinges, hitting the marble wall with a dull little thwack.

Puzzled, Gabriel examined the lid and saw that the lock mechanism had been jimmed, the lid broken. The hinges had been damaged in the process. Any ideas he might have had about this development were interrupted by a muffled tinkling sound.

Huh? Gabriel looked around nervously, but he didn't see anyone. He was starting to feel more than a wee bit anxious. He was still raw from his experience in the bayou last night—those ... things—and the cemetery was not exactly a comforting spot, daylight or no. Feeling paranoid, he decided—rather illogically—that it would be safer inside the tomb than out. At least he'd be less exposed. He pushed the red button and the tomb doors slid open.

Once inside, the doors shut automatically behind him, leaving him in impenetrable darkness. Panic welled up instinctively, and he fought to calm himself, searching the wall to his right for a switch. This was starting to feel way too much like the day of his attack at the museum.

She has all the power and you, hardly any. He found the switch he'd anticipated would be there and flicked it up. No light came. Uttering a low groan, he pulled the flashlight from his coat pocket and turned it on.

The beam illuminated dark gray marble in every direction. He whipped the light around the room, heart pounding. But all four marble walls reflected back at him blankly in the beam's glare. He was alone.

He wiped the sweat from his upper lip, focused on slowing down his heart. It was an empty tomb, that was all, and no one knew he was here. Still, it would be a good idea to check the place out quickly and leave. Malia might decide to visit

her mother at any moment.

Malia.

He stopped that train of thought as one would turn off a faucet. There wasn't time to step into that morass of want. Instead, he turned his attention to the back wall of the tomb. Mounted into the marble surround were a series of drawers, each bearing a plaque. He swung the beam around the other walls to confirm that there was no other place in the tomb that could conceal anything. Sheer, seamless marble stared back. There was not. If the talisman was here, it would have to be in one of those drawers.

He stepped forward to examine the drawers and heard something crunch beneath his boots. He swung the flashlight down. It was broken glass. Aiming the beam upward, he saw the remains of a broken bulb in a socket over his head. At least that explained why the light switch didn't work.

This was somehow comforting, that it wasn't magic, it was only a lightbulb. He stepped toward the drawers again with a firmer tread. The drawers had marble facings and centered brass plaques. He read the names as they flicked through his flashlight's beam: Helene Gedde, Rosamund Gedde, Kisila Gedde, Cecelie Gedde, Ariane Gedde, Jacklyn Gedde, Zellia Gedde, Celeste Gedde. Not exactly a deluge of married surnames, and where were the men? Husbands? Sons? None of them sounded like an acronym for Tetelo, either.

The drawer in the center of the wall did not have a name on the plaque. Instead it had a circle on it, two circles in fact, one inside the other. It was a styled representation of the veve. Gabriel's eyes narrowed. Okay. If I'm going to find anything here, it'll be in that drawer. Right, Unc? He moved the flashlight to his left hand and reached for the drawer's handle. The thought of being moments away from seeing Tetelo's bones was not particularly pleasant. Wouldn't they have power or something? Would they get up and move? Probably won't open. They probably seal these things...

The drawer moved slightly under the tug of his hand.

He rucked the flashlight between his legs and grasped the drawer's handle with both hands, paused reluctantly.

Don't think about it, just do it.

He blanked his mind and pulled on the drawer hard. It slid out smoothly on silent, oiled gliders. He couldn't see much of anything at first, just a vague impression of something in the drawer. He moved the flashlight back to his right hand and took a cautious step to the side, raised the beam to illuminate the drawer's interior.

The bones of Tetelo were not in the drawer. What was in the drawer was the body of Detective Mosely. It was laid out, still in that Peter Sellers black trench coat, face clam and pale, eyes shut forever.

Gabriel choked out a scream, stepped back badly on his right ankle.

The flashlight escaped his grip and crashed to the floor, rolled, light swinging wildly on the lower walls.

Jesus Christ! They got Mosely!

What had he been playing at? What the fuck did he think he was doing? And why? For the sake of his stupid goddamn stubbornness, for some stupid family he didn't even know, his best friend had lost his life. He thought he was sneaking in here to look for her bones? How easily she had matched him—saw his bet and raised the ante.

Jesus, Mose. I am heartily sorry.

This thought, like a last confession, was the final act of his conscious mind before the blow came, striking the back of his skull with a dull thunk, and sending him, crumpling and unconscious, to the cold, hard floor.

When he opened his eyes it was to excruciating light, hitting his pupils full on and nearly blinding him. He groaned, winced, and turned aside, rolling onto his back. He screamed out loud at the pain that resulted when the back of his skull connected with the marble floor.

"Damn it!"

He was, he realized, lying on the floor of the tomb. The light that had been in his eyes was the beam of the flashlight, now glaring down on his right shoulder. His heart began to pound wildly, as if on command. He crawled over to the flashlight, grabbed it, and swung it around the room, but the tomb was, once again, empty. The only sign of disturbance was the drawer he had opened, still pulled out from the wall, and the glass on the floor, a few slivers of which were now embedded in his right palm and probably—though it didn't bear thinking—in his leather jacket as well.

What the hell hit me, then? He moved the beam to the ceiling but didn't see anything hanging down, didn't see anything at all.

He felt his skull, which was screaming bloody murder. The lumps and blood he had missed this morning were there now all right—there was a knot on the back top of his skull the size of a quarter, and the skin had been cut open a few centimeters. He got to his feet unsteadily, eager to get out of this macabre fun house. He went to push the drawer, which was still rolled out, shut.

Mosely's body was gone. Gabriel stared, stunned, at the empty drawer. Had he imagined it? Or had someone struck him down and then removed Mosely's body? If so, why? He felt like one of those doomed housewives whose husbands were always trying to drive them insane in noir fifties films.

He touched the drawer's metal interior as if expecting to feel Mosely's body even if he couldn't see it, but there was truly nothing there. The metal was cool to the touch. Toward the back of the drawer he did feel something, something leather.

A pouch? The talisman in a pouch?

But it was only a wallet, a man's wallet. He opened it and saw Mosely's driver's license. Hz's body had been here, then. Unnerved, Gabriel pocketed the wallet and exited the tomb.

He drove straight back to the shop, his mind churning. The talisman wasn't in the Gedde tomb, and he had absolutely no fucking clue where else it might be in New Orleans. Wolfgang had mentioned Africa. If he was going there, so was Gabriel. In fact, getting out of town seemed pretty much the only solution. The truth was—and he acknowledged it only as he entered the shop and Grace glanced up, struggling not to look concerned—that he didn't want anyone else to die. Not Gran and certainly not Grace. His physical absence was the best possible safeguard he could think of against that.

"What... um . . . anything new?" she asked.

"Did Wolfgang call?"

"No."

"Would you call Gran and make sure she's all right?"

"What happened?" Grace now sounded alarmed.

"Just call her, please? I'm gonna take a shower."

He washed his wound along with the rest of himself and managed to style his hair despite the

bird's egg, touching antiseptic to the wound cautiously. It was probably a concussion, or so he mused, but he didn't have time to mess with a doctor now.

He came out of the bathroom and listened for sounds of Grace on the phone, heard nothing. He picked up the receiver in his studio and dialed Wolfgang's number. The woman on the other end of the phone told him, in a voice that sounded very tight, that Wolfgang had left on a journey and would not be back for some time.

He put the receiver down angrily and went into an anxious pacing.

Damn it! Wolfgang had gone to Africa without him! And Gabriel had no idea where! He must have found something in his library. Gabriel thought of calling the woman back, but probably she was just the housekeeper or something. The castle will be yours when I die. The library will give you what you need ...

Gabriel paused, frowning in worried thought, then pulled Mosely's wallet from his pocket. He opened it and thumbed through the contents. Ten bucks in cash, some stained receipts, a condom from the seventies, ATM records, VISA card. Mosely wouldn't have anything on that card, Gabriel reasoned. All you had to do was look at the guy to know he never bought anything new. Feeling a mild wave of guilt and offering up a silent apology to his dead friend, Gabriel went to the phone and called the travel agent.

Fifteen hours later, Gabriel Knight was driving a rental through a gate in the protective walls of Rittersberg. The town was barely a dot on the southern Bavaria map, as if reluctant to be known, and the fortresslike layout of the village encouraged that notion. Narrow, cobble-stoned streets and huddled, half-timbered buildings lent the town an air so quaint it bordered on preciousness. Just past the main square he got his first view of Schloss Ritter.

From the road the castle was impressive, even intimidating—gray rock forming a large square citadel, and towers with narrow windows that looked down protectively on the village below. But by the time Gabriel was standing on the castle's doorstep, the picture it painted had begun to quite literally show its cracks. The masonry of the castle was in deplorable condition—wide seams gaped between rocks in places, probably due to some catastrophic settling of the founda-

tion that had never been repaired. The stones were mossy with age and worn with weathering so severe it hinged on ruinous. Perhaps it was this decay or perhaps it was something less tangible, but it was apparent that the family curse lie as heavily upon this place as the moss that coated the stones. No wonder Wolfgang was so anxious to reverse the tide.

The woman from the phone answered the castle door. Gabriel could see by her face that he had good cause to be worried about Wolfgang. She was younger than he'd expected, mid-thirties perhaps, and very pretty, blond-haired and straight-featured. There was a reserve about her that seemed to befit the guardian of such an ancient edifice. Nevertheless, he could easily see distress in the paleness of her skin and the redness of her eyes.

"My name's Gabriel Knight? I'm related to Wolfgang?" He smiled at her sincerely.

"Yes, Herr Knight. My name is Gerde. Please come inside." She was obviously surprised to see him, but she accepted his presence with a heavily laden resignation.

He surveyed the large stone hall Gerde led him through and found that the interior of the castle wasn't much better off than the exterior. Bareness was the theme, and it was not one that worked. A few plain pieces of furniture stood alone in the enormous hall. The floor was devoid of rugs and only a few old weapons broke the expansive emptiness of the walls. The masonry was in no better condition here either, though attempts had been made to keep the moss at bay.

"You may stay in Wolfgang's bedroom." Gerde led him to a wide stone staircase.

"No, really. I'd hate to take his room," Gabriel protested as they climbed.

"There are only two bedrooms in the castle which are livable, Herr Knight. The other one is mine."

Wolfgang's bedroom was the closest thing to "cozy" he had yet seen in the castle. It had a large fireplace and a domed Gothic window on the exterior wall. A good-sized bed was festooned with old, but freshly laundered linens. A small dressing table completed the furnishings. The most interesting feature of the room was a door in the rear. It had a large stone lintel mounted by a lion's head and a carved phrase in German. The

door itself was old and massive. An ornate key-hole topped the iron latch.

"You should be comfortable here. There's plenty of wood for a fire. You may start one yourself, if you wish, but I normally lay a fire in this room in the early evening. You'll need the warmth. The castle is very drafty."

"That's nice. Thank you."

"I'll be downstairs if you need anything." She started to turn from the room and he stopped her, perplexed.

"Wait a minute. I wanted to talk to you about Wolfgang."

She turned back to him obediently. "Yes?"

"He didn't tell you where he was going?"

"No."

"Have you heard from him?"

She sighed lightly. "No, I have not."

"Do you expect to?"

Her face remained calm but he detected anxiety nonetheless. "I hope so, but I cannot say for sure. He used to report in on such trips, but he has not been on a case for quite a few years."

The word "case" sounded odd in conjunction with Wolfgang.

"How old is he?" Gabriel asked.

"Seventy-two." Gerde looked past Gabriel, as if she were speaking to someone else. "Oh, he is still very strong in the mind, but in the past few years his body has begun to ... to slow down. Schloss Ritter is not so good a place for the joints ... or the lungs."

She looked back at him piercingly.

"Is he sick?" Gabriel said, concerned.

"He is not a young man," she said firmly.

"What about the library? Wolfgang mentioned a library?"

Gerde's eyes flickered momentarily toward the door behind Gabriel's back. "The only library in the castle is the Schattenjager library," she said with some hesitation.

"Right," Gabriel said, already eager to see the old volumes he anticipated such a place to have.

"Where is it? Is that it, there?" He pointed to the door at the rear of the room. Gerde flushed.

"Yes, but it is the Schattenjager library, Herr Knight."

He considered her quizzically. "Am I ... missin' something here?"

"It is forbidden for anyone to enter the library except for the Schattenjager."

"How come?" he said, annoyed.

"It is so written," she replied with a sigh, as if he were a persistent child. She nodded toward the lintel. "The door. It says: 'Only the purest here may pass. He whose heart is pure as glass. He whose soul is pure as fire, through this portal passes higher.' "

"That's quaint, but you know ... on the phone? Wolfgang told me this castle would be ..."
Something in her face stopped him. He tried again.

"I mean, I guess I'm his last livin' relative? And he mentioned that he'd like me to ... to become a Schattenjager. Now, I'm not sayin' I will, but. . ."

"Herr Knight," Gerde interrupted. "Wolfgang informed me himself that he hoped you would join in the family traditions, but he must take you through the training himself, and he is not here. Until he does, you are not Schattenjager. Wolfgang is still the Schattenjager."

Her eyes had a quiet little blaze going on in them now. He had, he realized, stepped on some toes quite unaware.

"Of course he is. Thank you. Thank you very much."

He smiled at Gerde gamely and was rewarded by a quick little nod of her head before she exited. She closed the door behind her and Gabriel was left to stand there, alone in the room with nothing but the bag Grace had hastily packed for him. He felt his momentum, which had seemed to be spinning wildly out of control in the past few days, roll decidedly to a stop.

Well, he was here, Wolfgang was not, and the library was off-limits. Now what?

He paced the bedroom for approximately five minutes before being drawn, inescapably, to the lion-headed door. Feeling guilty, he tried the handle. The door was locked. Sighing, he gave up and went to the window, opening it to a tremendous view of the Alps—their farthest peaks adorned with caps of snow, even in June. Just outside the window a stone gargoyle held a basin that still contained water from the last rain. For birds, he supposed, though they'd have to be birds that liked butt-ugly gargoyles.

The dressing table was where he hoped to find some clue about Wolfgang, but there were no letters or records in the drawers. Those sorts of

things, Gabriel suppositioned bitterly, were no doubt in the library. What was revealing was the expensive grooming set on the tabletop. There were only a few pieces, but they were modern and expensive. There was a pair of hair-clipping scissors and a razor, neither of which Gabriel saw himself needing anytime soon, as well as a men's hairbrush, camel's hair shaving brush, and a mirror. The implements were perfectly arranged on a fresh doily.

The set had been a gift, Gabriel reasoned. A man with a castle this pointedly barren would hardly buy such luxuries for himself. But who would have given Wolfgang such an intimate gift, and why had the items been left behind? Did Wolfgang leave the items here because he knew he'd never return?

Gabriel rejected such morbid imaginings with some uneasiness. He turned to the last item on the dresser top, a floral-painted ceramic pitcher and basin. It dawned on him with some dismay that they probably represented the "shower" in this antiquated fortress. Even worse, they were no doubt the entire bathroom.

He descended to the main hall on quiet feet, feeling the dimness come over him like a shroud. Where Wolfgang's bedroom had let in the light, the main hall devoured it. Gerde sat on a threadbare love seat, already engaged in trimming potatoes, presumably for the evening meal. Gabriel watched her for a moment, wondering that she didn't slice off a thumb in the poor light.

She looked up at him and gave him a small smile. A sign, he gathered, that she did not harbor resentment at his blundering. He smiled back, then wandered around the hall, examining the weapons on the walls. Broad swords, shields, daggers, even a crossbow, were displayed, many of them quite old. Gabriel wondered that they had survived the apparent sacking to pay the property taxes. They must be the weaponry of the Schattenjagers. This was not a comforting thought.

There were several doors leading off the main hall, all of which he found locked or boarded up, save the last. This opened readily enough and he walked through it, expecting a kitchen or dining room and found, instead, something he never could have anticipated.

He had discovered a small chapel. Here the gloom and the grayness were absent, replaced by

colored light that streamed in, in prismatic beams, through an enormous stained-glass window. Reds and purples, blues and greens, silvers and golds, fell into the room alone and mingled, creating a tangible presence, like walking on and in and through the end of a rainbow. Five polished wooden pews faced the window on each side of the red-carpeted center aisle, and in the very front was a large wooden altar. The bareness of the castle, too, was banished here. Fresh flowers, roses and lilies, bloomed in marble pots on the altar and down the aisles, hues awash in the colored light. A red velvet cloth adorned the altar, and an ornate prayer book served as its centerpiece. Even the side walls were not left bare. Three large tapestries hung on each side, each showing cryptic symbols that Gabriel didn't recognize. But it was not the tapestries that drew his interest at the moment, it was the stained-glass window itself. Specifically, it was the image that filled the window. It was that of St. George fighting the dragon.

St. George. Like the bookshop.

The warrior's armor was from the age of chivalry, glinting silver and black in a hundred tiny shapes. His back was to the viewer as if to archetype the fighter, but the set of his spine, the firmly spread stance of his legs, and the righteously wielded might of his upraised sword gave the full measure of the man inside the suit. His crystal blade was alight with sacred wrath. The dragon, three times the size of the human before it, was bent subtly back in surprise, even amusement, but the beast was quite obviously not alarmed. The scales of its skin were made with jewellike glass fragments in greens and blues and purples. Trails of smoke and flames danced around its snout, and its eyes glared down with redly blazing evil wisdom.

Feeling a little cowed himself, Gabriel approached the altar, the sacredness of the space around him as thick as a deathbed hush. He opened the prayer book carefully. The first five pages were covered with handwritten names and dates; the first entry dated 1210! He paged through the names of Ritters carefully, conscious of how old the book was. He saw Gunter's name, among the others, and, at the very end of the written list, Wolfgang's.

The responsibility, the sheer time of it, over-

whelmed him. Did Wolfgang really think he, Gabriel, could do this? Some part of his brain tried to lighten the load. Look at it this way, you can't do any worse than Gunter did. But that thought was unfair and he felt immediately guilty for having voiced it, even in his own mind.

He continued to turn pages. Beyond the list of names and the blank page that followed was an ornately lettered poem, centered and illuminated with symbols. To his surprise, it was in English, though very old English. He read it haltingly, struggling to update the language.

St. George, patron of the light,
who hunts the shadows of the night,
upon my blood I call thee now,
purify me, for I avow
to set my feet upon thy road;
thy sword I take up for mine own.

He looked back up at the stained-glass window. St. George. He's the patron of the Schattenjagers. A chill went through him at this thought. He closed the prayer book carefully and backed out of the swimmingly lit chapel, backed out into the main hall where Gerde was watching him. She went back quickly to peeling her potatoes.

"Gerde?"

"Yes, Herr Knight?"

"That chapel... St. George?"

"He is the patron saint of the Schattenjagers," she said calmly.

"Uh-huh." Gabriel swallowed, hard.

She looked up at him with some curiosity. "It is a lovely chapel, is it not?"

He was at a loss for words. "Uh ... am ... peachy."

"Yes," she said, smiling. "Wolfgang loved to spend time in there. It is a good place for meditation. Sometimes, in such places, answers come."

"What about those tapestries?"

"The chapel panels? They represent the steps of initiation. Schattenjiiger initiation. So I was told."

"Initiation? Is there a ceremony or somethin'?"

"Oh, yes! It is an important time. It is not often that the mantle of Schattenjiiger changes hands."

"Have you been to one? An initiation?"

She blushed. "No. The last was Wolfgang's and that was long before my time. I believe they are private, in any case. Only the old Schattenjäger and the new." She paused and a pleasant

smile crossed her lips. "Except for God, of course."

"Oh."

She gave him a sympathetic look. "I am sorry about the library."

"It's all right," he said.

"I myself have never been inside the library.

Not even to clean."

"I understand. Really."

She gave him an encouraging smile and went back to work.

Feeling as directionless as ever, Gabriel wandered around the castle some more, but he didn't find anything new the second time around. In desperation, he stepped outside the front door and took in the sunlight, already chilled by the castle's unique refrigeration ability. He looked down at the town below, tempted to go for a walk, but he was finding it impossible to relax. Something had to be done! It itched at his brain as if there were a giant chicken pox on his cerebral cortex, but he'd be damned if he knew how to scratch it!

Wolfgang loved to spend time in there. It is a good place for meditation. Sometimes, in such places, answers come.

Why had Gerde said that? In such places answers come. Was she speaking generically or was she trying to tell him something? He pulled open the castle door and went back inside, slipped into the chapel. Feeling a little foolish and out of place—he'd never been much of a church-going guy—he took a seat in one of the pews. He chose a spot on the right where the silver light fell, preferring it to the dragon colors of red and green. He slid down in the bench, finding the wood pleasantly molded from centuries of use, and propped his knees up on the bench in front of him, let his head lean back, closed his eyes.

St. George, he mused. Curiouser and curiouser. His mind lulled into a state not unlike the soft colored light around him. From where he was sitting, the silver glass let in enough of the sun that he could feel it warming his face. It felt wonderful, luxurious, and it enticed him into a light drowse. He went nowhere for a few moments, drifting into a light sleep, and when he surfaced, it was to the sensation of the warm light on his face. He had a vague, dreamy sense that he was in the passenger seat of a car, with the sun coming in

the window, drowsing while somebody else drove.

He knew, of course, that he was not in a car. He was in a pew in the St. George chapel. But the imagery was so tangible and so sweetly comfortable that he stayed with it, enjoying the sensation. It must be the energy of the chapel, he mused, even as he fully explored the very real sensation of leather beneath his flatly splayed hands, the cool surface of the glass window against his right cheek. The chapel felt like an engine, felt like something alive and moving, but safe and smooth, humming beneath the pew. The tangible realness of the car imagery intensified as he explored it. He could open his eyes, in his mind only, and literally see the Alps passing outside the window, the green trees as they sailed past, leaves whispering in the wind.

I'm sure it helps that I just saw that same view, on my way here, his critical mind reasoned. But this did not dampen the wonderment of it, the uniqueness of this lucid dream state.

It slowly occurred to him to wonder who was driving the car.

This was not a fearful thought. The driver, he already knew, was someone safe, someone good. In fact, he knew it would be someone quite wonderful. Anticipating now, and hoping he could maintain the illusion long enough to get his answer, Gabriel rotated his head slowly to the left on the passenger seat's headrest. He waited until he was sure he must be facing the driver, then he opened his mind's eye and looked at the driver's seat.

Heniz Ritter drove the car. He was dressed in a casual white cotton knit polo shirt and loose khaki pants. A straw Panama was perched on his head and Indian-grass loafers were on his feet. He turned to look at Gabriel, a broad smile on his face. He nodded his head in greeting.

"Hello, boy."

"Hey, Granddad."

Gabriel felt tears well up in his eyes. A large drop slid down his cheek and he fought to keep from blubbering like a baby.

"No need for that, son. Not at all, not at all."

But the voice was reassuring, loving, and not without a trace of tears of its own.

"Sorry I left you, son. I feel real bad about that."

"It's all right, Granddad."

"And your papa, too. He would have come himself, but he didn't know much about what you need now. That's my fault as well."

There was genuine regret in the old man's voice and Gabriel felt badly for him.

"I don't blame you for wantin' out, Granddad."

"You should. I was wrong, Gabriel. I never did escape it, and I missed this place terribly the rest of my life. You know, I used to sit right there? Right where you sit now?"

"You did?"

"Yes, but enough of that. I have something to tell you, and we don't have much time. You must go ahead with the initiation. It's time."

"But I have to wait for Wolfgang!"

His grandfather frowned. "There's no use in that, son. No use at all."

"But I don't know what to do!"

"You can figure it out. You have brains, boy, and the sight. What matters most is the intent. Wolfgang's going to need you. He's going to need you soon."

"Why? What's goin' on? Do you know where he is?"

"Follow the path," his grandfather said. He turned to look at Gabriel. His eyes were like black holes. "Do what I didn't do. Follow the path. I love you, Gabriel."

Abruptly, Gabriel's eyes were open and he was in the chapel, looking left, toward the tapestries on the wall. For a moment, he wanted only to get back to that car, to say good-bye. He shut his eyes tightly. He tried to will himself there. But it was gone. Irretrievably gone. He wiped his eyes and sent the thought out anyway.

"Loveyou, too, Granddad."

Then he sat up, took a deep breath, looked around to make sure Gerde had not witnessed his sleep—or his embarrassing emotionality—and prepared to do what he had to do.

Gabriel studied the panels in the chapel, as Gerde called them. From the rear to the front, left to right, the imagery was drawn in plain, simple strokes, almost like Egyptian hieroglyphs. The first showed a pair of hands and three blue drops. The second showed a lock of yellow hair and the edge of a blade. The third showed a golden chalice sitting on blue waves. The fourth showed the golden chalice again, only this time on a plain background, with three red drops above it. The fifth showed a kneeling knight. The sixth showed

a large book, like the prayer book.

Gabriel's eyes went from panel to panel, once, twice, three times. Then he took another deep breath, fingered his bangs, turned on his heel, and left the room.

Gerde looked at him curiously as he strode into the main hall and ran purposefully up the stairs. He entered Wolfgang's bedroom and looked around, anxious now. He grabbed the scissors from the dresser top and, after a moment's thought, the basin. God only knew where he'd find a golden chalice in these parts.

He ran back down the stairs, through the main hall, and into the chapel. He put the scissors and the basin on the altar and looked back up at the panels, thinking.

Gerde was starting to look definitely puzzled when he emerged once again into the main hall and began searching through the weaponry on the wall. He found what he was looking for—a gold-handled dagger with a lion's head carved on the blade. He took it carefully down from its mounting.

"I need to borrow this for just a sec," he said hurriedly. "I won't hurt it."

Gerde looked at him thoughtfully. "You may have whatever you wish."

He took the dagger back into the chapel and laid it on the altar. Looked back up at the panels once more, frowned. Waves?

Perplexed, he wandered out into the main hall and approached Gerde.

"Gerde, are we near an ocean?"

Gerde looked amused. "No, Herr Knight. Germany is surrounded by land."

"How far away is the nearest..."

He trailed off, spying something on the floor near her potato pot. "Uh ... Gerde?"

Gerde looked down and got an incredulous expression. She leaned over, picked up the salt shaker, and handed it to him without a word.

"Thanks," he said, feeling a bit sheepish. He hurried back to the chapel and picked up the basin, carried it back through the main hall and up into Wolfgang's bedroom. He opened the window and scooped a little of the water up from the gargoyle's bowl and put it in the basin. Then he dumped in some salt, and swirled the basin around to mix the two.

"It'll have to do," he muttered.

He paused when the basin water was mixed,

glanced at the gargoyle, and then set the ceramic bowl on the floor. Taking another deep breath, he leaned out the window and let the biting air fill his lungs.

"Here goes nothin', Granddad," he muttered. He calmed his mind and put both hands in the basin, rubbed them vigorously in the water. Pulled them out and shook the water from them.

"Amen," he muttered, not sure what he was supposed to say, exactly, to make it "official." He leaned back inside, closed the window with his elbows, and picked up the basin with his two cold, damp hands. He carried it carefully downstairs and back into the chapel. Gerde, he noticed as he went through the main hall, had finished her work and had disappeared.

In the chapel once more, he placed the basin on the altar. He looked at the arrangement and sensed that it wasn't right. He moved the prayer book to the right, centered the basin with the "salt water" in the middle of the altar, and arranged the scissors and the dagger to its left.

He paused to put his mind back in a prayerful state, breathing deeply, and shaking out his muscle fatigue. Glancing at the panels again, he slowly picked up the scissors and cut as small a bit of his hair as he could, hating the sound of it. He put the lock next to the basin and put the scissors back in their position. Next, he picked up the dagger and held it over the basin, pricked his left index finger with the tip, and let three drops of blood fall into the basin. They expanded, wispily, into the salty mixture. He felt there ought to be more, but that was all he could make out from the panels. He put the knife down and slowly knelt. He folded his hands in a prayerful gesture and read aloud the prayer from the prayer book, fixing his eyes upon the stained-glass window as much as he could while reading the lines.

St. George, patron of the light,
who hunts the shadows of the night,
upon my blood I call thee now,
purify me, for I avow
to set my feet upon thy road;
thy sword I take up for mine own.

The words sounded echoey in his ears and the chapel, hushed and expectant. He lowered his head and closed his eyes, not sure what would happen next, but sensing something. Around

him, the atmosphere of the chapel felt charged, the brightness of the window seemed to heighten on his face, deepen through his closed eyelids. Yes.

Behind him he heard a loud roar. The dragon! He jumped to his feet and spun around. The noise was coming from the hall? The growl ceased, suddenly, and Gabriel stood, heart pounding, while the door opened.

There stood Gerde, peeking into the chapel a bit guiltily. Next to her was an old, dinged-up vacuum cleaner.

"I was just starting to ... to sweep. Am I disturbing you?" She smiled and looked with obvious interest beyond Gabriel at the strange arrangement on the altar.

Gabriel's face blazed with humiliation. Dragon! What the hell did he think was going to happen? A heavenly chorus? Just because he'd mixed some table salt and blood in a piss pot?

"No. Forget it. I was done anyway." He couldn't keep the discouragement from his voice or the underlying anger. He brushed past her, aware enough to see her face fall, but too pissed off, and too tired, suddenly, to care.

Thanks a lot, Granddad, he thought bitterly. And that, too, had been imagined, he was now certain. Wolfgang and Voodoo and all of this mystical crap was turning him into the world's biggest fool! He went up to Wolfgang's room, shut the door overly hard, and stripped, feeling very angry—so angry that it surprised even him. He didn't like being fucked with—particularly when it was his heart strings being plucked—particularly when it was his own goddamn imagination doing the plucking.

He went to bed and fell, with the determination of someone who's seriously courting unconsciousness, into a deep sleep.

Chapters

Inside a hidden chamber where I had no right to be I found the wheel at last, or could it be the wheel found me?

June 26, 1993

By midnight the sky outside Rittersberg was an inky, unbroken black; black with no moon, black with no stars. A dense bank of fog had crept in, enshrouding both the village and the castle that loomed over it like an unfinished sentence. The bank had drifted down from the north, gathering wisps to itself like a rolling

snowball, from the Arctic Circle past Norway and beyond, past Denmark and Hamburg, Nurnberg and Munich. It reached Rittersberg and stopped, settling securely up against the Alps like a car parked obediently in line at the Austrian border.

Gabriel had been sleeping now for seven and a half hours, through the long afternoon he had slept and now on into the deepest part of the night. Perhaps what was about to happen was the effect of jet lag—of his mind, yawning and stretching and seeking the light it anticipated would now be filtering through the closed eyelids, and finding instead only utter darkness, turning back in confusion, and by such confusion fermenting, like milk souring, the thoughts in the space of the dreamer.

Then, too, an explanation could lie in the fact that the body on the bed was made of DNA linked and multiplied within these walls, his life strands crocheted, perhaps, upon the very mattress on which he lay. Were there memories awakening in the nucleus of his cells? Memories that were now wafting up in trickles to his mind the way gas bled from a valve that had been jarred loose? Shouldn't his first night in this castle, his first unconscious dive within the walls to which he was prodigal son, have some profound effect and import?

Or was the explanation, simply, that he was the world's biggest fool?

He had been dreaming about the castle. Only, in the dream, the castle was vast and maze-like, and he was lost in it, wandering from room to room, trying to find the library. But the corridors were like the ones at Tulane: blankly alike, empty, and confusing. It was after a seemingly endless hunt that he found himself in the chapel.

Except that it wasn't the chapel. The pews and altar were gone. Everything was gone except for the stained-glass window far up ahead, shining in the darkness. The space he had entered felt like an attic, like an enormous top floor that stretched the length of the castle. Beneath his feet were wooden planks, and he could feel the vastness of the black space surrounding him by virtue of the hollow echoing moan of the wind as it moved in and through the rotting beams of the roof.

Conscious that the floor might be just as

rotten, he inched toward the window, though he wanted nothing other than to turn around and leave. But something (Wolfgang) made him continue. And then, quite abruptly, he was there, looking up at the hundreds of dazzling pieces in the window's pattern, gems glittering in the moonlight.

He had no more than reached the spot when there came a noise; an earsplitting, screeching noise. He clamped his hands over his ears, screamed once at the excruciating pain of it, then screamed again when he saw the source; the screeching was that of glass and metal bending. The dragon in the window was turning its head. The beast looked down at him from its place in the window, its red glass eyes sparkling with disdain. Then, to a further cacophony of noise-pain, it turned its body and pulled loose from the window, one massive clawed foot landing on the wooden floor with an earthquakelike shudder, then the other. The window screamed again as it pulled its wings free from their surrounding blue glass sky.

The dragon towered over Gabriel unsteadily as it changed. The glass smoke became real puffs, the flames real sparks, as its nostrils solidified. Its body expanded into three dimensions, filling out and back and around like an illusion of invisibility being slowly withdrawn. Its scales still reflected like glass shards, but now they overlaid and defined real meat. When it had stretched and filled to its content, it settled its newly massive frame down onto its light-throwing haunches, like a lizard squatting on a rock.

To Gabriel's surprise, the dragon spoke.

"Your soul smells, Gabriel Knight."

The voice was deep and dank and decayed. It echoed in his brain, conjuring up the image of a deep stone pit where the living are thrown to die amid the jutting bones of corpses. Gabriel could see the beast's gigantic nostrils breathing him in, weighing him by the subtleties of odor, the way a jackal might judge a deer. If the curl of its teeth-laden lips were any indication, it found his aroma particularly unpleasant.

"You wish to be Schattenjager?" The question was incredulous, insulting.

"I do," he replied. He considered fear, but decided against it. He had the measure of his opponent as well, and he wasn't going to let some

overgrown satanic iguana intimidate him.

"You seek purification. How much sin do you have to burn?"

The dragon drew back its head and expelled a jet of fire, drawing a line, left to right, between itself and the human before it. Gabriel looked at the line uneasily, unsure of its purpose. The fire sucked at him as if it were sucking at a draft, pulled at him greedily, and the flames began to rise, and rise, pulling at him and fanning upward, past the height of his knees, then his hips, then his waist, still sucking at him, flickering the flames upward, taller than his chest, then reaching eye level, and still sucking and stoking, higher and higher still, until the wall of flames towered over his head, twelve feet at least, and the sucking pull on his body began to peter out and finally die.

Through the wall of flames the dragon's body was still visible. Its head glared down at him still, being taller than the flames.

It was laughing with menacing pleasure. Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh.

Gabriel felt his face burn with shame. "So!" he countered, challengingly. "I'm sure there have been worse!"

The dragon stopped laughing and looked down at him, eyes narrowing.

"Do not be so sure. You have used people all your life, Gabriel Knight. Never committed to anyone. Yet you seek to be a servant, a beacon. Do you even know what you ask?"

"I know."

"Yesss. So you say. There are only two things that redeem you. First, that you have Ritter blood in your veins. Second, that three women have loved you purely."

The dragon looked at him with utter disdain.

Gabriel held his chin up defiantly and crossed his arms.

"You asked for purification," it continued, "and you shall have it. But you will not be Schattenjager until you have earned it."

"How?"

"I cannot show you the path, but I can tell you that you will have to let go of the greater part of yourself. Gabriel Knight." It spoke his name as if it were being forced to swallow feces.

"Fine," Gabriel replied.

A chuckle rumbled from the dragon's mouth.

"Good. You may start now. To be purified, you must

burn away the past, swallow the flames you yourself have created. Enjoy."

The voice was deeply satisfied and soaked with anticipated pleasure. The dragon drew back its head, inhaling an enormous breath.

And it occurred to Gabriel what purification meant.

"Wait a minute!" he screamed.

But the dragon did not wait. It ended its inhale and reversed it, blowing out a mighty breath. The wall of flames whipped toward Gabriel in a whooshing sheet of fire, igniting the human matter before it as eagerly and explosively as if he were the driest of kindling, a wax-coated wick. He screamed at the agony of it, for it was beyond all comprehension. Before him and below him and beneath him, flames danced. He was in the center of a conflagration and the heat was tremendous. His flesh was being seared on every inch of his body, each one of a million nerve endings singing its own song of pain. It went on and on. He could not get out, and the flames would not be merciful. He could do nothing but scream, was nothing but a scream. He felt his flesh blacken and fall, in clumps, his very bones ignite. He closed his eyes and felt them bubble shut with their own juices, felt even his teeth hop, blackened, in his mouth, like Mexican jumping beans in a frying pan.

The pain!

And long after it could not go on any longer, it suddenly did not. The pain and the fire vanished, instantly, as if they had never been. He was standing on the attic floor and the world was suddenly dim, being flameless. He held out his arms cautiously and saw that they were whole, even shining, whitely glowing in the moonlight spilling in from the window.

Before him the dragon was laughing and laughing, mocking him, impersonally, as if it had just witnessed the funniest thing, as Gabriel himself might have laughed at seeing someone slip on a banana peel. The window was still there, too, still splayed open, the figure of the knight bent and twisted in its metal casing, the sword sticking straight up at the blank space where the dragon had been.

Fury came upon Gabriel as greedily as the flames had done. He reached out and grabbed the sword, tore it free with hate and wrath, and turned to ram it, up to the hilt, into

the belly of the loathsome green monster in front of him.

But the dragon only continued to laugh, harder and heavier, nearly crying with it now, as if this act were further hilarity, was amusing beyond expression, even as it began to sink upon itself, deflating like a balloon, getting smaller and thinner, shriveling up and dissolving into a green mass, amorphous matter, shrinking until it was the size of Gabriel himself.

Then the mass shifted, took shape, and became Gabriel; Gabriel in green glass, his own doppelganger—with red, ugly eyes and an evilly curled lip. His own double, down to the jutting bangs, in putrid green, similar in all ways except for the crystal sword that was buried where its belly button should be. And still it laughed, laughing at him, himself at himself. Horrified at the ugly condemnation in the image, Gabriel rammed the sword farther in and the shape blessedly dissolved once more. Green flesh returned to green mass, and still it shrank, expanding up from the floor now, becoming a dark greenish blob at the end of his blade, shrinking and glinting. It stopped, finally, and spun, and what it became was a key, a large golden key, which hung from the end of his blade by virtue of its looplike handle. Then key and blade and man were falling, through the disintegrating attic floor, and into blackness.

He awoke.

He sat up in the darkness and groped for the candle and matches he remembered were on the bedside table. He found them and struck a light. His watch said it was three A.M. It must be correct, for there was no trace of dawn outside, but it seemed to him that the night had already gone on forever.

Goddamn nightmares. "I'll take my old one back, thank you very much.

He shoved aside the covers and swung his feet down on the cold stone floor. His bare foot landed on something hard and painful. He looked down and saw a key—a large, golden key, with a loop-shaped handle. He stared at it a moment or two, picked it up, and carried it, skin prickling in the chill, over to the library door. It fit the lock.

Well. At least he now knew what he was going to do until the sun came up.

The library was even better than he'd imagined.

At first, he simply walked around, lighting the candles that surrounded the room and staring at its treasures with awe. It was a large, cavernous room, and every wall was covered with shelves from floor to ceiling, shelves that spilled forth books. In the middle of the room was a large oak table, obviously used by Wolfgang as a desk. Stationary, pens, and a few books were neatly arranged on the tabletop. Gabriel looked at the books on the table first, but they were in German and didn't seem to have anything to do with Africa.

Fortunately, when he examined the shelves themselves, he found that many of the volumes were in English. Indeed, it appeared that the Ritter family had collected tomes from all over the world. As with the weapons in the main hall, money problems had not been allowed to touch this part of the castle. For the first time Gabriel got a true sense that he might be a Ritter after all, for he himself would have done the same.

He found a section of Schattenjiiger journals. The dates on the binders ranged from the eleventh century?! He allowed himself to pull just one, a volume dated 1520-1553, and saw that it, too, was written in English, as Gunter's journal had been.

He found that very odd.

Yeah? Maybe they knew you were coming.

He did not find that thought either logical or comforting. He put the journal away. Whatever was in those logs, it would take some time to digest, and time was something he did not have.

Sighing, he turned back to the other shelves and began to search for what he knew was there, somewhere; a vast number of books on Africa.

It didn't take long to find them. They were on the rear wall and filled two of the massive book-cases. He searched until his eyes were sore, running his sight along the bindings with his head tilted to one side, certain he would see something that struck a chord. At last, he did. It was a book about ancient African tribes.

Republic of Benin, the entry began. Before slaving devastated the region, it held within its borders some of the most powerful tribes Africa ever produced: the Fans, the Adja, and the terrible Agris.

The Agris! They were a tribe, and in Benin as well.

The tribes of the western region were vicious and xenophobic and almost constantly at war. This part of Africa is called the Red Basin because of the vast amount of bloodshed that occurred there over the centuries.

He could find nothing else about the Agris so he returned to the shelves. Searching again, he saw a volume on the lowest shelf entitled Red Basin, Red Heart. He grabbed it and leafed through its pages. Yes! It was the same "Red Basin" the other book had mentioned, and this volume's map gave its location—a circular area in the northern end of Benin.

In Egyptian time, 4000-2000 B.C., the Red Basin region was peopled by sun worshipers. We know a little about this mysterious cult by the remnants of ruins far older and of a culture far more advanced than any that exists in Africa today.

Sun worshipers? Hadn't Hartridge said something about sun worshipers? On impulse, Gabriel abandoned the Africa section for the library's section on religion. Here were books worthy of the Schattenjagers, everything from archaic occult tomes to ancient translations of the Torah. He pulled a book on man's earliest religions and found a section entitled "Sun Worshipers, Africa." Triumphantly, he turned the pages.

The African sun god was violent and terrible, and so became his worshipers. They practiced a particularly bloody form of ritual sacrifice, much as the sun-worshipping Aztecs did centuries later and thousands of miles away. The most brutal and grisly tribes in African history descended from this sun-worshipping cult, though the cult itself expanded to include many other deities, merging with other African religions to become Voudoun.

The most fascinating archaeological site related to sun worshipers is in this region. It's the snake mound in the Republic of Benin, located fifty miles south of the border to Burkina Faso. Thirty miles northeast of Natitingou. Unlike the snake mounds of North America, the Benin example is a double snake mound.

A double snake mound?

Heart pounding, Gabriel leafed through the book looking for a photograph, didn't find it. Cursing, he stuffed the book back on the shelf and ran over to the section on Archaeology. He knew as soon as he looked at the shelf which volume it was, for one was slightly pulled out from the rest,

as if hastily returned.

The book's title was Ancient Sacred Sites. He pulled it out and riffled the pages from back to front. And found it. It was the centerpiece of the book, a colored photograph that was spread out on both pages. The shot had been taken from a hilltop and it overlooked a brown, dusty valley. Low, mounded hills surrounded the basin, and in the valley's center were similar mounded shapes, but these were, had to be, man-made. They were two earthen rings, the outer ring a perfectly round "O" and the second ring, a simple, domed structure, positioned perfectly inside the first. At the closest edge of the outer ring was something that looked like a mouth—the mound's entrance. Between the inner and outer rings, narrow straight structures ran, probably interior hallways. There were six of them, evenly spaced, like the spokes of a wheel.

Wheel-within-a-wheel.

Yes. This was their birthplace, this was where the talisman was. It had to be. And Wolfgang, he would have known it, too.

Chapters

And then the wheel went round and round, I could not find my way.

Twelve and three and turn the key. I heard the madman say.

July 28, 1993

People's Republic of Benin

The cabbie, whose name was Behanzie, chattered cheerfully throughout the thirty miles from Natitingou to the Red Basin valley. It took them three hours, driving on roads that were dirt at best and more often plain old mud.

Throughout this jostling, stickily hot ordeal, as on the plane, Gabriel found himself experiencing pangs of self-doubt. They were made worse by the inescapable memory of the message in Gerde's eyes as he'd left the castle. Find Wolfgang. Bring him home. As if he, Gabriel, were supposed to be rescuing Wolfgang. Didn't this start out the other way around?

It was, Behanzie explained, the rainy season.

They had been passing through green fields and semitropical forests. It was, therefore, a bit of a surprise when they at last peaked a short climb and Gabriel found himself looking out over the Red Basin valley. As in the picture, the valley was brown, a place of dust and dried grass, rainy

season or no. The double snake mound lay coiled below, and a narrow, winding river cut a path just beyond its rings, to the south.

"What happened to the trees?" Gabriel asked his guide.

But Behanzie's cheerful prattling had ceased and he only shook his head in the negative, the smile still plastered on his face.

Behanzie parked off the road a few hundred yards from the snake mound's entrance and got out. Gabriel joined him and stretched, trying to look and feel like this was a perfectly pleasant excursion on a perfectly pleasant and reasonable trip. But the snake mound's pull on him was stronger now. He could literally feel it tapping at the shoulder of his psyche, like a repressed memory that was waiting to say "boo!"

"I wait here, man." Behanzie settled himself on the car's trunk in a semblance of lazy ease that was no more convincing than Gabriel's stretching had been.

"Don't leave," Gabriel said.

Behanzie shrugged as if to ask why he would be so foolish as to leave a perfectly easy mark. This was the best assurance Gabriel was going to get, like it or not. He licked his lips nervously, sized up the mound before him, and headed for the gaping black mouth of the outer snake ring.

As soon as he entered the mound, Gabriel could feel the energy pulsating in the walls around him. What had Wolfgang called it? Geomancy? He'd imagined it in the Schloss Ritter chapel, that humming energy underneath, and now here it was again in a much darker, denser form. The soul of this place pressed upon him, like wet cotton settling down to smother his senses and dampen his reasoning. And there was something seductive in the pull, something that made you want to give in and follow the flow, as one surrenders to the dark numbness of chloroform.

All the more reason to get done and get out of here then.

He took a deep breath to clear his head and looked around the room. Daylight entered, in a dim fashion, through the entrance arch. The room was further illuminated by burning torches set in holders on the walls.

The room itself was about twelve feet long. It

was rectangular for the most part, except for an eye-bending curve at the edges of the room—a curve more pronounced on the longer outer wall than the shortened interior wall. The floor, ceiling, and walls were all made from earth, as if it were the sand castle of some monstrous child, scooped out and then abandoned to bake in the sun until it had obtained the texture of terracotta pottery. The edges of the rooms were littered with stones and earthen clumps. On both sides of the room earthen archways led off into the farther reaches of the mound. The interior wall of the ring was directly ahead and it was blank except for a depressed area centered around a hole about the size of a quarter. Gabriel looked at the hole but was unable to determine what it was.

He took the passageway to the right and he found himself in a second room very similar to the first. It had the same torches, the same hole and depressed area on the interior wall, and the room was the same size and had had the same curving shape as the first. But the inner wall of the ring had shifted to the left a bit and was now tilted slightly more on the curve. And there was something entirely new—an earthen niche was carved into the outer wall, at approximately the same place where the exterior door had been in the first room. In the niche was a carved, human-like form. It was hewn from the earthen walls the way a carving might be done in a tree trunk. The rear of the statue and the bottom of the feet were still connected to the walls, only the front portion of the bodies and the head had been carved free and defined. The statue's face was in agony, the body in mid-pose. It looked like a snapshot of someone who had been buried alive in lava, a shot taken at the moment of death. For a second Gabriel had the impression there was a real human body under that baked mud. But the face and form were a little beyond reality. It had been modeled from human imagination, not human anatomy. This did not make the figure any less repulsive.

He pulled his eyes away from the mutely screaming face and continued on through the next archway. The third room was identical to the second, except that its inner wall was tilted farther on the curve, and its statue differed slightly from the one before—a new agonized face, a uniquely tortured posture. Ditto the

room after that and the room after that and the room after that.

He was beginning to be puzzled. What about those spokes to the inner circle? Shouldn't he have hit at least one of those by now? And where was Wolfgang? Gabriel thought about calling out, but something about this place made that act unthinkable, as if there were something sleeping here that one didn't want to wake up.

In the seventh room from the entrance he at last found something a little bit different. It was the hole on the interior wall. The interior wall was directly south here, which meant he was now at the top of the circle. There was something in the depressed area in this room—a stone. At first he didn't notice, because the color of the stone was the same as the color of the wall, but there was a pattern on the stone and it was this pattern that drew his eye.

He examined the stone curiously. It was a square tile, about eight inches on a side, and it had four nests of snakes drawn on it in black, the pattern baked into the stone's surface. The stone looked like this:

At the tile's center was a hole, a quarter-sized hole, and that hole fit directly over the hole in the wall. The tile itself fit the dimensions of the depressed area exactly. Clearly, it was meant to go there, but why? And where were the tiles for the other walls? He tried to pull on the tile to see if it came off, but it didn't budge.

He continued around the ring, heading down the circle's other side now, through an eighth room and a ninth, through a tenth and into the eleventh. In the eleventh room a tall, rectangular-shaped mural was on the interior wall. It consisted of a sun with stylized rays at the top and dancing figures below. Oddly enough, the mural still contained the quarter-sized hole and the depressed area around it—it appeared in its usual place, which in this case was just below the sun. Odder yet, there was a tile in this one, as there had been in the room at the top of the ring. And as in that room, this tile would not come off the wall. It looked like this:

Gabriel stepped away from the sun mural, perplexed. He felt he was close to the entrance now and he continued to move forward. The next room was indeed the entrance room—daylight filtering in from the archway to the outside

world. He had come full circle. There were twelve rooms in the outer ring. In none of the other rooms had he seen a trace of any other exits or entrances—either to the outside world or toward the interior mound. Nor was there any sign of Wolfgang. Had he misjudged Wolfgang's research? Or had the older man already been here—been here and vanished?

What would Wolfgang have done here?

He would have started out by walking around the ring and checking each room, as Gabriel had done. Then?

Gabriel went back into the room with the sun mural and stared at the patterned tile with a thoughtful frown, then retraced his steps back to the room at the top of the ring and looked at that tile again, too. He began to search the rubble in the rooms, the clotted earth and rocks, hurrying from room to room. What if treasure seekers and tourists had cleaned out the lot?

But they had not. He found more of the patterned tiles with holes in their centers. Each tile's pattern varied slightly, as the hideous earthen sculptures in each room varied. He realized, after picking up a few more, that it was the number of snakes in the pattern that was different on each; one tile had one snake, another had five, and so on. In some rooms he found several of the stone tiles; in others, none. When he was done searching he had ten tiles.

And there were already two on the walls. That means there's one for each room.

He studied the tiles and got an idea. He went slowly from room to room, putting tiles on the walls until every tile was mounted and every wall had a tile.

Twelve rooms, twelve tiles, twelve patterns.

Yes! The snake mound was a gigantic clock. The room at the top of the mound had a tile with twelve snakes on it, which meant that the entrance room, the room at the bottom, was six. The room counterclockwise from there was five, then four, then three, and so on back up to twelve. Beyond room twelve came room eleven, then ten, and so on, down to the room with the sun mural, which was already marked room seven. It was the number of snakes in each tile's pattern that told him what room the tile went to.

When Gabriel was finished, he wandered around the entire circle again, looking at his handiwork. It

felt right, but what did it mean? What did it do? As far as he could tell, putting the tiles on the walls had not accomplished anything. He tried sticking his finger into a couple of the tile's holes, his over-active imagination offering him pictures of said same being bitten off, but this did not occur. On the other hand, it didn't accomplish anything either. Discouraged, he went back to the entrance room and out into the fresh air. The valley might be alive with negative impulses, but it felt like an absolute inspiration after the air inside the mound. Behanzie was fast asleep on the car's massive trunk.

Gabriel walked over to the car and plunked down in the shade made by the old Buick's girth. He leaned back against the tire and cleared his mind. He was tired, hot, and hungry and he was in the middle of fucking Africa. Oh, the joie de vivre. He sighed and started doodling in the dirt. If Tetelo's people were the Agris, and if they had lived here, and if they were descended from sun worshippers, then ... The thoughts petered out. He tried again.

Then if this was their numero uno sacred site, Tetelo's bones should be here. And the talisman. But where? Had Wolfgang already found them and left? Where would he have found them? They wouldn't have been just lying around on the floor of the outer ring. No. Gabriel was definitely missing something. That inner mound. Why have an inner mound without an interior? Had the book said archaeologists had been inside the inner ring? He didn't think it had mentioned one way or the other. He thought about the rooms again. He was certain there was nothing on the floor—the floor was just unbroken, packed dirt. No trapdoors, no hidden staircases, no buried treasure—at least, nothing that had been unearthed in the past century. And the outer walls of the ring—ditto, unless there was something about those statues . . . The interior walls? That made the most sense, given the shape of the ring—those spokes would be on the interior walls. He stood up and gazed over the mound again, then got on the hood to see better. His weight tilted the car a little, but Behanzie slept on.

The added height allowed him to just see over the rim of the outer ring. Yes, there were six spokes. The entrance was directly between two of them. Judging from the size of the outer ring's rooms, he would say one spoke would be in room "five" and

one in room "seven."

Room seven has the sun mural.

The mural could hide something, couldn't it? It was made of stone and was tall and rectangular.

Door-shaped. Yes! But how to get it open?

He jumped down and nearly scuffed out his doodle in the dirt. Dust puffed up around his shoes and he glanced down at what he had been drawing.

It was a doodle of one of the patterned tiles:

He nearly tripped over his own feet running for the mound's entrance. He flew around the ring clockwise, abruptly skidding to a stop when he found what he was looking for—the mound room in the clock's "three" position. He stared at the tile on the wall.

Three snakes.

First the wheel from his dream, now another dream icon—three snakes. This had to be what it meant, why it kept coming up in his dream, and in his father's painting, and . . .

Granddad's clock.

Yes! Three o'clock and turn the key opens the drawer. Where had Granddad's subconscious mind come up with that design? It had to have something to do with the talisman!

Palms sweating now, he put a finger into the hole in the mounted three-snake tile and felt around. The hole was deep, going far into the wall. For the length of his finger there was nothing on the sides of the hole but smooth earth. He searched his pockets for something that would give him more depth and came up with nothing. The dagger he'd taken from the castle had too thick a blade to fit into the hole. Then he remembered something about one of the earthen statues. It had been holding a metal rod.

He searched the rooms and found the rod in the hand of the statue in room ten. The rod was about a foot long, and it was tarnished green with age. He hadn't noticed it because it looked so natural, held up in the raised fist of the terrified statue, as if warding off a blow. Gabriel tugged at the rod, and it came free, pulled from the closed fist like a candle from a candle holder. When he had it down he realized that the top of the iron rod was slightly flattened and triangular. Like a snake's head.

He took it back to room three.

And inserted the head of the rod into the hole in the three-snake tile. Deep and deep, and turn it, turn it.

Click.

From off in the mound, the small click was answered by a thunderous grating sound that echoed through the mound like Joshua's trumpet. It was the sound of moving stone.

The door!

Gabriel pulled the rod from the hole and had just turned to head for the archway, eager to get to room seven and the sun mural, when the attack came.

It hit him first like a fist in the chest, a huge invisible fist. The blow was physical, and it threw him back against the wall, knocking the breath from him momentarily. But the physical force of it was nothing compared to its emotional residue—anger, rage, deadly rage, oppressive hatred, murderous wrath.

He felt like he was choking and gasped for breath. That was when he noticed that the air had dimmed, the torches had gone down to tiny, lifeless blue flames, as if their function remained but the light they gave off was being snatched away in midair.

And in this light, this unreal nonlight, shadows were being cast. His eyes searched for a source.

The figure in the wall was moving.

He choked back a scream and ran for the archway. Behind him he heard the sound of crumbling hardened earth, faint and soft, pitter patter on the floor. The sound was unbearably obscene.

As he entered room four, its statue was already stepping from the niche. It turned its blind face toward him and took two halting steps in his direction. He dodged to his right and avoided the thing, ran past it to the archway to room five.

And now he didn't give a flying fuck about the goddamn door or the inner ring or the sun mural or anything else to do with this cursed place. He wanted one thing and one thing only: to reach that exit to the outside world. Not all the bad dreams, long-lost relatives, or dead friends in the world could stop him from getting in that car, driving to the airport, and getting as far away from this entire freaking continent as he could without becoming an astronaut.

Five minutes ago you could have left, could have walked away. Now, however, skin-o'-mine, you've really pissed her off.

He ran through the archway to room five, hearing the thing behind him turn to move his way, and it sounded faster now, like it was maybe

warming up.

And the one in room five. This one was waiting for him, just inside the doorway, as if it knew he was coming and from whence he came. As he tried to dodge around it, he felt its hand on his arm, and it was dry and hard and achingly cold, sending shock waves down into his very bones.

The grip of the grave.

He threw himself away from the creature, tugging at his arm with superhuman strength born of sheer panic and revulsion. The thing's grip broke—but barely. Gabriel stumbled forward toward room six, practically feeling the breath of the earthen monstrosities behind him, knowing that he was not going to have the slightest chance against these things if he didn't get out of here. Now.

Room six. The door to the outside world was shut.

He stared at it a moment, in utter disbelief. It had shut. A stone panel had slid over the exit, fetched from the interior of the wall, dust and dirt on the floor testifying that this had caused some significant disruption. The outside world was gone.

And there was a statue in the doorway to room seven, and two more of them entered the room from behind him.

Gabriel felt his mind snap. Something issued from his mouth that was like the warrior shriek of a cornered badger. He tensed himself and plowed, head down, into the thing in the doorway in front of him. He launched himself, sprang, his feet pressing against the earthen floor as if it were a repulsive thing and he was thrusting himself from it. He was flaming anger, charged with adrenaline, ready to die if he could just tear their stupid mud-pie heads off, one by one.

His right shoulder struck the creature in the middle of its torso, cold knocking into him like a shot of Novocain. He and the creature went flying into room seven.

He landed on his back, thudding onto the earthen floor and sending a cloud of dust swirling up around him, breathing it in as he gasped for air, choking on the texture of it, waiting for the sensation of cold hands around his neck.

"Get up, boy! Now!"

He sat up quickly, spinning to face the room. The doorway to the inner ring was open. The

sun mural had disappeared into the wall the way the exit door in room six had come out. And standing near the open doorway, a torch in his hands—a glowing, living torch—was a dandy old man in a sweeping black cape.

Wolfgang.

He was holding off two of the earthen monsters with the torch, though with diminishing success. Another of the creatures, the one Gabriel had tackled, was lying on the ground attempting to get up, but both its legs had broken off in the fall. Two more were coming in the doorway from room six.

"Grab that torch! Hurry!"

Gabriel was amazed to find he was still clutching the snake rod in his partially numb right hand. He stuck it in his waistband and took a torch from its holder in the wall. The blue flame flickered back to life in his grasp. He backed toward Wolfgang. The two creatures from room six headed for him, but seemed to be confused when he waved the torch in their faces. He had a feeling it wouldn't take them long to figure out that earth didn't burn.

"Back into the passageway!" Wolfgang yelled.

Gabriel backed to the opening, side by side with his great-uncle.

"Now see if you can find a way to close the door! We're running out of time!"

He left Wolfgang the task of fending off the four attackers while he quickly searched the doorway. On the wall of the passageway just inside the door was a sun carved into the earth. In the sun's center was a quarter-sized hole.

"I think I have it," Gabriel said.

"Good. Shut the door!"

Gabriel put the head of the rod into the hole and turned it. There was another click. The sun mural began to slide from the wall with a thunderous sound. Gabriel pulled Wolfgang inside just as the door slammed shut.

The spoke's passageway was narrow and dark. The two men moved forward and were dumped out in a large room.

"The inner wheel," Gabriel said, somewhat awed.

"Yes," Wolfgang answered, sighing. He moved around the room and touched his torch to the torches on the wall. Slowly, the room lit up. Wolfgang took Gabriel's torch and stuck it and his own in the holders.

The room was a full circle. Torches were evenly spaced around the walls. The spoke's exit was the only exit in the room—the other spokes in the wheel being false, it seemed. In the center of the room was a large round table made of stone. On the floor was one of the earthen figures, frozen back into a lifeless posture.

Gabriel toed it. "It's not moving," he said.

"Golems are tied to specific traps. They only had life while that door was open," Wolfgang said. He sounded weary, as if the battle had exhausted him. Gabriel himself felt exhilarated.

"Golems? You mean you knew what these things were . . . are?"

"Yes. Golems are very old magic. Rare, but I'd read about them. They can be made of earth, stone, sand. Any natural substance."

Gabriel tried to absorb this and found his twentieth-century brain getting in the way.

Better to drop it until he'd acclimated to the new climate—that of La-La Land.

"Where were you? I looked all over the mound for you," Gabriel asked, changing the subject.

"I simply stayed out of your way. It wasn't hard to do."

"Why?"

Wolfgang looked at him critically. "I wanted to see what you'd do. I'd been here a few days myself and was drawing blanks. I was hoping you'd trigger some fresh ideas."

Gabriel felt a rush of pride. "It was the three snakes thing. You know, that image from the dream?" Gabriel explained about the clock design of the mound, the tiles, and the three-snake tile trigger.

When he'd finished, Wolfgang was smiling at him with a trace of amusement.

"Yes, Gabriel. You are correct. The thing I was still trying to figure out when you arrived was how to trigger the door without waking up the golems."

Gabriel felt his face flush. "Oh."

The older man put a hand on his shoulder affectionately. "Never mind. We survived. Sometimes there is no other way but the hard way, you know. That's something that gets harder to face the older you get."

Gabriel looked at Wolfgang quizzically. No wonder Gerde was so attached to the old guy. He was still handsome, with weathered features that looked a lot like Gabriel's own, and long, thick

white hair. There was still a dignity, a regalness about him, the look of a commander. But age had made its mark. Around the eyes and mouth there was a tension that had once been iron resolution, but had now faded down, softened a bit, like warm wax. Gabriel felt an unexpected longing well up inside him, as if he were mourning something he'd never even known he'd missed.

"You were sent here for a reason, Gabriel—no doubt it was to force my hand. And so you did. My God, it's good to see you at last."

The old man hugged him awkwardly. Just as awkwardly, Gabriel responded. For the first time since this thing started he felt like he did not stand alone. That someone else, someone who knew what the hell they were doing, might actually be at the helm. It was a tremendous relief.

"Man, this is weird. I have so many questions."

"Yes. But not here," Wolfgang urged. "This is her place. Can't you feel it?"

Gabriel realized that he'd felt such relief about reaching the inner circle, escaping the golems, and finding Wolfgang, that he'd been effectively blocking any other signals. Now that he paused and became aware of the room, he felt the oppression of it. It was as if he were at the center of an underground sepulchre.

"We're still in danger," he said suddenly.

Wolfgang nodded. "More than ever. She's aware of us now. Wherever she is, she's watching this room."

"What can she do?" Gabriel asked nervously.

"It will take her a little while to figure that out.

The golems were a magical trap, very deliberately and painstakingly laid. Such magic is much harder than you can imagine. She can't easily vivify them without extensive preparation. But . . . she'll think of something. She's got to."

"Yes," Gabriel said softly. For they were at her throat now, weren't they? Somewhere in New Orleans, Tetelo was going berserk. Gabriel found himself hoping that Grace was somewhere, anywhere, other than the shop.

"Let's get on with it, then," Wolfgang said.

The older man crossed to the table in the center of the room. It was made from an enormous stone, flat and round, like an overgrown calcified Life Saver with no hole. The table sat directly on the floor and reached a height of about four feet. Six inches from its top a seam ran around the entire table, separating the base section from what

looked like a lid. At intervals around this seam were four square holes. A trough four or five inches deep dissected the top's diameter, running from table edge to table edge. In the very center of the lid the trough widened out into a circle.

"What's this trough for?" Gabriel asked.

Wolfgang looked thoughtful. "I believe this is a sacrificial table," he said. He was going around the stone table, examining the hieroglyphic shapes around the table's base. "It looks like it's marked with the story of Tetelo's people."

Gabriel looked at the carvings. There were lots of stick figures, and a strange, large-eyed idol image kept reappearing in the different tableaus.

Wolfgang followed the story. "A man found an idol in the jungle one day . . . brought it back to the tribe. They were afraid of the idol because it brought storms with it. They worshiped the idol and built it a temple—this temple. Then the sun shone on the people."

"What idol?" Gabriel asked.

"Good question." Wolfgang looked pensive.

"Tetelo's people had power before she took the talisman. The idol may have been its source."

"But where did it come from?"

Wolfgang shrugged. "God? Satan? Aliens? A prehistoric tribe? Who can say?"

"Was it... you know . . . evil?"

Wolfgang waved a hand at the table. "Human sacrifice isn't a particularly nice request for a god to make."

Gabriel nodded. "I see your point."

"I think this table was built for the idol. It would be vital to protect their source of power—as important as our talisman is to us. But I don't think it's here anymore."

"Do you think..."

"Yes. The idol is probably with the tribe in New Orleans. Tetelo's bones are in here now. Her bones, and the talisman."

Gabriel felt his heart lurch. Could they really be this close? This close to the end? He put a hand on the table and thought he could feel it—could feel the talisman in the table's center like a low-voltage current.

"I can feel it, too. It gives one courage, does it not?" There was a pride in Wolfgang's voice that made Gabriel smile.

"Let's open it," Gabriel said. He looked around the room and saw a rack on the wall, a rack

containing two large bars. He went over and started dragging one free. The thing weighed a ton.

Wolfgang came over and helped him. Together, they fitted the bar into one of the holes at the lid's seam. It went in smoothly, sliding all the way in and back out through the opposite hole. They repeated the process with the other bar.

"Is that it?" Gabriel asked, struggling to regain his breath after all the heavy hauling and lifting. He looked over at his great-uncle. Wolfgang was very pale and pain was etched into the lines of his face. He was struggling to keep up.

"I hope so," Wolfgang gasped. "We shall try it. In a moment, please."

Gabriel allowed his great-uncle time to rest. He watched him nervously.

Don't die on me now, goddamn it. Not now when I've just found you.

But Wolfgang seemed to regain his composure. His face slowly blushed pink again.

"Shall we?" he finally offered. Gabriel thought he detected a hint of embarrassment in that voice.

Wolfgang grasped the ends of the bars on his side of the table. Gabriel grasped his own ends. On the count of three they lifted, straining against the weight.

The lid would not budge. Worse, Wolfgang grew pale again, paler this time, with the effort. Gabriel had a strong realization. This was not working.

"Unc ..." he began.

"It's no use," Wolfgang said breathlessly. "It won't come off. Not if we had the strength of ten men."

"What's the problem?" Gabriel felt a tide of frustration engulf him. They were so goddamn close! He could feel it!

"It's the table," Wolfgang replied. "The lid has a locking mechanism. It won't open unless ..." He trailed off. He sounded a little bit lost.

"Unless what? What the hell is it?"

Wolfgang sighed. "This is a sacrificial table. I saw one like it in Mexico—in an Aztec temple. I was hoping ... The trough is for blood. The circle in the middle is for a heart. A human heart." Gabriel stared at Wolfgang, his jaw dropping.

"Are you fucking serious? A human heart? Are you telling me this thing won't open without a human heart?"

Wolfgang nodded. He looked about as thrilled

as Gabriel.

"Give me a break! What the hell is wrong with these people?" Gabriel said, enraged.

"No depravity is beyond the imagination of the dark gods, or those humans who serve them," Wolfgang said softly. Then, more to himself, "I've seen worse."

"Fine! So you've seen worse and we're stuck with a table with blood lust! Where the hell are we supposed to get a human heart? I've got a cabbie out front, but I don't think he'd be amused!"

Wolfgang turned his back to Gabriel and took a step away from the table. He stood there, head lowered and hand up, as if feeling the effects of a headache, or thinking deeply.

Or shutting out his pain-in-the-ass nephew. Gabriel felt guilty suddenly. Had he really thought Wolfgang was at the helm? The poor guy was probably having a hard enough time just staying on his feet.

"Sorry," Gabriel said. "I didn't mean to get pissed off."

Wolfgang turned. "Don't apologize. Your anger won't always help you, but it doesn't usually hurt, either."

Wolfgang seemed lost in thought. There was a light in his eyes that Gabriel couldn't quite put a name to. "No, sometimes anger works."

He looked up at Gabriel slowly. His face wore a determined expression.

"Here's what you must do," he said. "Go across the room and cut the heart from that golem on the floor."

Gabriel looked at Wolfgang doubtfully. "The golem? Wouldn't that just be ... a clump of dirt?"

Wolfgang smiled sadly. "Sometimes symbolic gestures work, yes? Go on."

Gabriel gave one of the bars in the tabletop a halfhearted tug, but the thing was immovable. He searched his pocket for the dagger, shot Wolfgang a highly skeptical look, and went over to the golem on the floor, not at all pleased.

Not gonna work, Unc. Even I know that.

But he knelt beside the creature. He looked down at it with disgust, and plunged the knife to the hilt in the creature's breast, half expecting it to come to life and scream.

There was a scream, in a short, breathy burst. It was followed by an awful gurgle. But it didn't come from the golem, which crumbled

into dust under his blade. It came from across the room.

Gabriel felt his stomach drop out from beneath him. He looked toward the table and saw Wolfgang sprawled across the lid. And knew.

"No!" he screamed. He hurled the knife away and ran over to the body of his great-uncle.

But it was too late. Wolfgang had sunk his own knife deep into his breast and had died within seconds, his heart's blood spilling out into the center hole and coursing down the lines of the trough.

"NO!" Gabriel screamed to his great-uncle, enraged and horrified, as if there were still time to stop Wolfgang, to tell him what a stupid, pointless idea it was, to make him understand it wasn't worth it, that it would royally screw up all those afternoons Gabriel had pictured them sharing in the library.

Beneath the limp body, the lid shifted as the lock mechanism, oiled by the arterial blood of an old man, let go. Gabriel cradled the body of the last Schattenjager, took it off the hideous table, and lowered it to the floor. Gabriel laid Wolfgang down, tears streaming down his face unnoticed, and pried Wolfgang's hand free of the knife, then the knife free of the frail rib cage. He laid both of Wolfgang's hands across his chest. Then Gabriel stood, grasped the bars with both now-bloody hands, and heaved, letting loose a howl of grief and rage, and pushing against the lid with all his might.

The stone top slid to one side.

Gabriel plunged his arm down into the table's narrow opening, like a doctor reaching in to turn a breech. When he pulled it out again he brought with it a handful of human bones, scraps of cloth, and a gold chain. The talisman swung free and shot out rays of light in the glow of the torches.

Gabriel raised the mass to the sky and addressed the air.

"Tetelo! I know you feel me now! Feel me grinding your bones! So hear me: You're gonna pay for this. Do you hear? You're gonna pay for this—you BITCH!"

Chapter 10

Deep in the earth I faced a fight that I could never win.
The blameless and the base destroyed, and all that might have been.

—Gabriel Knight

Behanzie was awake when Gabriel staggered from

the mound, carrying the body of his great-uncle in his arms. The cabbie helped Gabriel load the body into the back seat of the Buick without saying a word. He only looked at Gabriel the way he had looked at the mound, and didn't say much of anything at all, all the way to Natitingou.

Gabriel arranged to have Wolfgang shipped back to Schloss Ritter. He called Gerde and told her the news. She did not protest or weep. She only thanked him in a quiet voice that was worse than all the recriminations in the world. When he boarded the plane for New York, he was carrying the talisman and an anger that burnt like an ulcer in his gut.

He slept through much of the flight. And dreamt fitfully of death and bones and blood.

Later, crossing the southern United States, he tried to come up with a plan and found that he could not. He had the talisman. He had a score to settle. More than that, he did not know. He had taken some power from Tetelo when he took the talisman, presumably he had that power for his own use now. Trouble was, he hadn't the slightest clue how to use it. The gold medallion with its battling dragon and lion hung under his T-shirt. It felt heavy and warm on his chest, like a living thing. It felt good, but frightening, too. The weight of it wasn't something one could get used to, or forget.

He was looking out of the window when the plane descended for landing in New Orleans. It passed over the Mississippi, climbing down from the air. It flew over Jackson Square. Gabriel looked down at it, a smile touching his lips for the first time in days.

The smile did not last. As the plane banked and the square became fully visible, dead-on below, Gabriel truly saw it for the first time. The outline of Jackson Square—its wide, circular path around the rim and the smaller circular path with the Jackson statue in the center, the Mississippi like a winding serpent directly below it ... It was shaped exactly like the veve, like the Benin snake mound.

June 29, 1993

By the time Gabriel had picked up his motorcycle and made his way to the French Quarter, it was late afternoon. His body was now in extreme protest against the jumping cycles of day and night and too long spent in compressed air at high altitudes. His stomach grumbled a deep threat

and his eyesight was blurred. He ignored it. He pulled up outside St. George's Books and saw that the "Closed" sign was in the door. For a moment he nursed the hope that Grace had left the shop closed the entire time he was gone, staying tucked away in her apartment, wherever it was. But the door to the shop was unlocked. Inside, the lights were turned on, despite the full daylight. At first all he saw was the empty desk and the picture above it—Grace had bought back his father's painting from Bruno. Gabriel smiled at this and started to cross the room.

Then he saw the chair that had once been behind the desk. It was lying on its side up against the back wall as if tossed there by a heavy wind.

And he knew they had taken Grace.

Gabriel had barely had a chance to register this when he heard a sound from the back room. The curtain in the doorway swayed slightly. Gabriel took a step back.

"Who's there? Grace?" he called out nervously. But he knew it couldn't be Grace, unless she'd been knocked cold and just this second come to. There was no way Grace and that ass-over-end chair could both exist in the same space for longer than five minutes.

He pulled the talisman from under his shirt and held it up wardingly. "I have the talisman!"

The curtain parted and a figure slunk out into the light.

It was Mosely.

"Stay away!" Gabriel said. He took another step backward.

The corpse was not amused. It put its hands on its hips. "What the hell is your problem?" it said. Gabriel stared at the thing. It looked as ordinary and real as anything, right down to the way Mosely's feet turned out slightly and bulged over the insides of the foam-rubber soles of his Hush Puppies.

"You're . . . you're dead," Gabriel said finally.

"What? I beg to de-fer, Knight. Though I've come pretty damn close as of late." It rubbed its hands over Mosely's puttylike face.

"I saw you! In the Gedde crypt!"

Mosely stared at him, flushed a deep red, then began to laugh. "Kee-rist! Was that YOU?"

"What?"

"I was searching the tomb and I heard someone messing with the entry box. I hid in this empty

drawer and I... ha ha ... I thought it was one of them! I pretended to be dead, then hit the intruder over the head to get away. HEE!"

Mosely was snorting.

Gabriel dropped his guard. No golem or zombie or corpse could ever snort like that.

"You fuckin' idiot! You nearly cracked my skull open!" he said, not sure whether to be happy or pissed off.

Mosely only cackled louder.

"Shut UP!" Gabriel said.

But Mosely was on a roll now. He looked ready to pee his pants.

Gabriel folded his arms angrily. He was relieved, truly, that Mosely was alive. He'd even feel happy, maybe even give the big guy a hug, if Mosely wasn't already being so damn irritating.

"Look, you moron," he said calmly. "Grace is missing. Did you notice that, Mr. Policeman?"

That did the trick. Mosley's laughing immediately went down to a few leftover titters, then stopped altogether with a sigh. "Yeah," he said, recovering his hitching breath. "I know."

"Were you here when ..."

"No. I just popped in about ten minutes ago.

Last time I saw her was yesterday afternoon. I'd stopped around to see you, actually. She told me you were in Germany."

"I was. What else did she say? Didn't you tell her she shouldn't be here?"

Mosely shrugged. "I didn't think she'd be in any trouble. 'Sides, I got the impression she was waitin' around to hear from you."

Gabriel felt his face burn. He hadn't called her. Not once.

Mosely seemed to think it prudent to change the subject. He rilled Gabriel in on his progress. The underground cartel had deep ties to the local government—the mayor, the chief of police, several high-powered attorneys, various citizen boards.

"This shit goes very deep," he said seriously.

He told Gabriel that there was no way they would get help from the city. The only thing they could do was try to get some paperwork: books, ledgers, bank records of payments made to officials, things like that. Then they'd have to take it way the hell out of New Orleans. Like maybe the FBI.

Gabriel let Mosely talk this out. He weighed the value of the material in his mind.

"FBI?" he said.

"Yeah."

"To bring down the cartel?"

"Right." Mosely looked at him warily.

Gabriel sighed. "Here's the thing. I just don't give a rat's ass about the cartel anymore."

"Excuse me?"

"Grade. I want Gracie back. And I have a score to settle of my own. But it's not with the cartel."

Mosely stared at him as if he were insane. "You fucking wiener! What about all those big speeches about 'letting the killers go free'! What about that?"

"The people in the cartel are not the root of it. They're like robots. They do whatever Tetelo tells them."

"Who?"

Gabriel waved this away impatiently. "Look. They have an underground hounfour, and I think I know where. We have to go in there and find Grade."

Mosely looked at him, face pink. To his credit, he did not protest. "I'm with ya. Where is it?"

"I don't know. I mean, I know where it is, it's underneath Jackson Square, but I'm not sure how to get down into it. I'll have to nose around a bit."

Mosely nodded. "We'll need a few things," he said.

Gabriel pondered for a moment. "Is that tracking equipment still around?"

Mosely nodded his head toward the curtain. "I saw 'em in the back."

"Good. You take one of the hand units. When I find the entrance to the hounfour, I'll leave a signal thingie there to mark it."

"All right."

"And don't take all day. I'm gonna need you if I get in there."

Mosely made a face. "No shit." He didn't sound particularly confident about their chances. He started to ask something further, then apparently decided he'd rather not know. He turned to go. At the door he paused.

"I am sorry about Grace," he said in his I-hate-being-sensitive voice. "And about that knock on the head. If it makes you feel any better, I lost my wallet that day."

"That's too bad, Mose. Really," Gabriel said with a straight face.

It was almost worth the bump on the head. When he got to Jackson Square, the sky was turning a purplish-gray. It was the kind of cloud pattern where there were no clouds, not the

visible puffy kind, in any case. There was only the dense color that was not sky. There was a summer storm brewing. The thunder was as of yet a mere tickle on the ear, but the air hung thick with the promise of rain.

The park was sparsely attended, perhaps because of the color of the sky. The Rada drummer was still in his spot, but his impassive eyes never as much as flicked in Gabriel's direction. No one else paid much mind either as Gabriel walked around the lawn, staring at the grass and kicking at a sprinkler head occasionally, as if expecting to find lumps of gold in the Louisiana soil. He checked out the sidewalk, and the Jackson statue, but the plainness of each was so obvious and so long-standing, he felt like an idiot even looking for some sort of secret passageway. The statue was enormous and heavy, solid as ... well, a horse. The sidewalk was not the least subversive-looking.

When he was sure there was nothing in the square itself he began to wonder if an entrance might not be found elsewhere. He looked out at the surrounds with a new eye. To the east was the Pontalba apartments—but they were quite a distance away, across the street. To the south was the Mississippi. To the west was another street, then more buildings and apartments. To the north was St. Louis Cathedral.

He studied the church with a cautious air. It had come up frequently in his investigation—nearly as frequently as the park itself; the artist's drawing had been of the church and Crash had died there. It was also where he'd pinched that collar and shirt to fool Cazaunoux.

But... it's holy ground!

He considered. Would that stop them? Or would that be precisely the point? If they could take the power of the talisman and twist it to their own ends ...

In any case, he didn't have any better ideas. He headed across the lawn for the church, acutely aware that the chance of Grace being dead multiplied like dividing cells every moment he failed to find her. Tick took. Tick tock.

The church was dim from the darkness of the sky outside. There were only two penitents in the church, both seated in pews near the altar. A third was walking down the aisle. He disappeared into a confessional.

Gabriel slowly walked around the outside of

the aisles, looking for a sign. He passed by sturdy stucco walls and stained-glass windows. Candles flickered in the stations and at a niche for the Madonna. He stopped to glance at her (Mary, Queen of Heaven) and she smiled back, serene and unperturbed. He could see nothing odd about the table she was on. Besides, it would be a pain in the butt to move all those candles.

How do they get down there? And where? And when?

The way Crash had talked about the hounfour, it sounded like more than just a ceremonial place. It sounded like HQ. That meant access had to be easy and fast and could be at any time. Gabriel didn't think the church ever closed its doors, which was a point in favor of there being an entrance here, but it didn't make sense that they would have to crawl over pews and candles to get to it. That wouldn't work.

Think!

A door. It had to be something very much like a real door, otherwise it would be too difficult to get into and too obvious. And yet ... it would have to be discreet enough that the uninitiated would never find their way down. He stopped near the altar and swept his eyes over the room. There was the door to the priest's office—but that was in the front, near the altar. Not particularly subtle. There were the doors exiting to the park in the rear . . . the door on the side . . .

There was a smaller door, at the side rear of the church. Gabriel had never been through it—never even noticed it was there. He hurried over to it quietly and opened it. A flight of stairs led up. He took them and found himself in an organ and choir loft. He searched the loft quickly. Nothing. Unless the massive pipe organ moved to reveal a stairwell, and this did not breathe of "easy access," the loft was a bust.

Tick tock. Tick took.

Okay, let's play a game, shall we? No? Sorry, you don't have a choice. Here's how it goes: We put you in this little cage and run you through the maze of obstacles. Meanwhile, we're going to kill each and every person you know—hell, we'll even throw some new/o/fcs into the equation, say a long-lost relative or two. Sound like fun? Okay, ready . . . go!

He walked over to the edge of the loft and looked down over the nave. His hands gripped the edge of the balcony so hard they turned white, but he wasn't aware of the gripping or the whiteness.

Below him, a woman entered the church and went into one of the confessionals.

What is it you want, Tetelo? The talisman? Is that it?

Was he willing to hand the medallion over in exchange for Grace's life? That was one obscene question. Wolfgang had cut open his own heart to get that talisman back in Ritter hands. The answer would be easy if it were Gabriel's own life. He felt perfectly capable of spitting in Tetelo's face and letting her butcher him to keep the talisman safe—and not even for the family, either, but just because it would piss her off. But to play with someone else's life to keep it? That wasn't his currency to offer.

Below him, someone exited the confessional and left the church. He watched this with no more notice than he took of each candle's flicker. Then something about it struck him, cleaving through his bitter musings like a knife. It hadn't been the woman he saw go into that confessional a moment ago. It was somebody else.

There were two confessionals, both with a pleated wooden shutter for a door and a small light to indicate whether or not they were occupied. Between the two confessionals was a small door leading to the priest's box. Gabriel glanced around him nervously, but didn't see anyone watching him. He pushed open the door on the right side confessional, the side the woman had exited, with some wariness, afraid there might be somebody else in there, occupied light or no. But it was only a box, an empty box. He stepped inside and pulled the door shut.

The confessional was a narrow space the size of a coat closet. A padded bench against the right wall provided a seat. On the left wall was a meshed window and a small ledge where one could place one's hands. Below both of these was a velvet-padded kneeler.

It was perfect. A door that was not a door. Who would notice who entered and left? The walls were covered with cherry-wood paneling. Gabriel searched it quickly, running his hands along the meshed window and the ledge, up toward the edges of the ceiling, down at the base of the floor, beneath the seat and the kneeler. It was on the back wall side of the seat, hidden in the shadows, that he found it; an apparent knothole in the paneling. Quarter-sized.

But does cherry have knotholes, good brothers and

sisters? No it does not.

He had left the rod from the snake mound at the bookshop, in his duffel bag. He had taken it from the mound, not even realizing it was stuck in his back pocket until he nearly impaled himself on the plane.

He went back to the shop and got the rod.

While there, he noticed the Rada drum book on his desk and, after hesitating a moment, brought it along, too. He pulled the bike up outside the park and ran through the drum code book quickly, torn between thinking it prudent to figure out what they were saying and being sure he didn't have the time to fuck with this. Not now, when there was that knothole.

But the phrases came to him quickly this time.

In fact, several were ones he'd heard before. It only took him another few minutes to identify a new phrase.

Conclave tonight hounfour.

The rod fit in the hole exactly, as Gabriel had known it would. When he turned the snake's head, the back wall of the confessional opened up smoothly, revealing a staircase going down. He stared at it a moment, then pulled one of the silver tracking disks from his pocket, secured it under the bench, tucked the rod under there, too, and scribbled off a quick note for Mosely.

Then he took a deep breath and went down into the depths below Jackson Square.

As he reached the bottom of the staircase he became aware of a low white-noise hum. There was a small light panel and sliding door in front of him. He pushed the panel and the door slid open to reveal a startling antechamber. It was not at all what he expected. The room was the size of the rooms in the Benin snake mound, and generally of a similar shape, but that was where the similarities came to an abrupt halt. The place felt something like a spaceship. The walls and ceiling were of a white, high-tech material; seamless and antiseptically spotless. The floor was white marble. An ultra-modern stainless-steel console table was against the wall to the right of the stairwell door and it displayed large, beautiful pieces of African art; a large pot and two dancing figures made from iron, the way a museum might display them. A second sliding door and light panel was set in the smaller, interior curved wall. The only distractions from white in the room were sunken lighting that illuminated in a merciless, fluores-

cent glare from the ceiling, and a stainless-steel vent near the ceiling in the back of the room. The humming was the air system.

Gabriel looked around nervously for cameras, but didn't see any. He moved to the second door, paused nervously, then pressed the panel. The door slid open.

He stepped out into a hallway. The hallway was made from the same materials as the antechamber had been, but the hallway ran around in a broad sweeping circle, disappearing around bends in both directions. The configuration felt even more like a spaceship. Behind him, the door to the antechamber slid shut. He turned to look at it. A small white plastic plaque above the door marked the room. The plaque had six tastefully stylized snakes on it.

He broke out in a light sweat. This place was creepy—like a modernized version of hell.

But the hallway was not a great place to hang—creeped out or no. Anyone might come by, and he didn't suppose his presence would go unchallenged. He hugged the exterior wall and moved forward toward room seven. The priority: find Grace, get her out. Preferably before the place started filling up for the evening festivities.

Room seven's door opened willingly at the touch of the light panel, sliding away as silently as if it had been a mirage. He held his breath, visualized himself coming face-to-face with a room full of Voodoos. But there was no one in the room. He ducked inside and the door closed.

Room seven was a supply room. On neat, stainless-steel shelves were bags of flour and grain, herbs, and candles. From a longer section of the rack hung robes. Above them were animal masks. It seemed a fortuitous opportunity, just in case he didn't make it out before tonight. He grabbed two of the masks: a boar and a wolf shape—taking the extra just in case Mosely showed up. The ones he chose were hood masks, like the one Malia wore. They were easily flattened and tucked into the sides of his cowboy boots. He ducked out into the hallway.

The door to room eight did not respond when he pushed the light panel. The light only turned red momentarily, then went back to white. He tried it again and got the same response. Then he noticed a card slot, like that of an ATM machine, at the bottom of the light panel. The damn thing was locked, and with some sort of strip card.

Reluctantly, he moved on.

The door to room nine was not locked. Inside was a single bed, tightly made with starched and pressed linen. But the bed was on a steel frame with wheels that made it look disconcertingly like a hospital bed. There was also a small steel nightstand. A second door in the bedroom led to a steel and tile bath with shower. He looked at the room in puzzlement. A guest room for hungover cartel members? For prisoners? He backed out of the room uneasily.

Room ten was the animal room. The walls inside were lined with built-in Plexiglas cages. There were live goats and chickens, roosters. Even the boa was kept here. It raised its head and looked at Gabriel blackly through its clear cage walls.

Gabriel stared back.

Remember this neck, pal?

The snake seemed to reply in the affirmative. It slithered a bit closer to the Plexiglas and raised its head up, as if hungrily sensing his vibrations through the glass. Gabriel hated that snake.

Room eleven was locked. Room twelve was identical to room nine—that same antiseptic bed and bath, and just as empty. The room marked one was locked.

By the time Gabriel reached the door to room two, which was not locked, he had let down his guard, having not seen another human being since he entered the place. The hounfour felt as empty and anticipatory as a high school on the day of the big dance.

It came as a shock, therefore, when the door to room number two slid open and Gabriel found himself looking at Dr. John. He was naked and painted and feathered, the way he had been at the bayou, and he was kneeling on the floor at a makeshift altar. His back was to the door. Frantically, Gabriel pressed the light panel again and the door slid closed. Gabriel bolted down the hall and into room twelve. The door shut with its silent hiss and he stood there, heart pounding like a national anthem in his ears, listening to the hallway.

But no sounds came. Dr. John had not seen him. Gabriel let out a deep breath. That had been too damn close!

Now that he knew he was not about to die, the image in his brain of the room he had just seen begged attention. Unlike the other rooms in the hounfour, the walls and floor and ceiling of room

two were covered with an organic material, literally stitched together in seams with thick black thread. They were skins, hairless skins. Gabriel thought that they might well have been human. There was nothing else in the room at all except for a large elephant skull that hung on the wall and beneath which Dr. John had been praying. In front of him had been candles and incense, and things Gabriel had, thankfully, not had time to identify other than that there were organic.

And across the room from the door ... a strip card. On a chain.

Damn! He had a feeling that if Grace were down here, she'd be in one of the locked rooms. But how to get the card? He'd never be able to cross the room and get back to the door without attracting Dr. John's attention, prayer time or not.

The question idled in his frontal lobe for a few minutes, but a brainstorm was not forthcoming. Gabriel decided to finish his exploration of the hounfour—albeit more cautiously—and let his subconscious work on the problem for a bit. He slipped out into the hallway and snuck down to room three.

The door to room three slid open to reveal a bedroom, but of a different sort than the "hospital bed" rooms. It looked empty, so he stepped inside and let the door slide shut behind him. The bedroom was done in soft magentas and creams. The bed was prettily dressed and a vanity and velvet-padded chair was against the wall. On the far side of the bed was a painted screen. Gabriel went around it and found an altar on the other side. Unlit candles—at least thirty of them, in various colors—were arranged on a table amid a tangle of other items. There were photographs of several beautiful dark women tucked into twine and propped up against candles. There were small glasses of clear and golden liquid and what looked like herb packets in little gauze bundles. In the center was a small dirt mound, like a little hill. At the top of the mound a large, unbroken egg was perched.

There was also a door behind the screen, in the back wall of the room. Gabriel glanced at this and saw, with some alarm, that the light panel was blinking.

He ran around the screen and ducked down behind the bed. He heard footsteps as someone

entered and then heard a match being struck. He tried to peek over the bed, but couldn't see anything that was going on behind the screen—there was only a thin shadow of someone bending over the candles. Then he caught a thin whiff of scent: perfume. It was Malia.

Before he could move or say anything, her voice rang out firmly.

"Tetelo, come to me. Your daughter requests an audience."

He crouched back down behind the bed, wishing fervently that he were anywhere else.

A second smell assaulted him now. It was an odor like the bowels of the earth; an odor like ... like the walls of the Benin mound.

"What is it, daughter?" The voice was the gravelly voice from the bayou. Tetelo.

"I've heard that Gabriel has returned to New Orleans."

"He has. But you need not concern yourself."

"I'm asking you to leave him alone until I can speak with him. I will ask him for the talisman.

There is no need to have him killed."

Malia's voice sounded firm and sure, except for a bit of a quiver on that last sentence. It was something only a lover would notice—as Gabriel noticed, because he'd never heard her be less than confident before. He peeked over the bed at the screen. To his horror, he saw two shadows behind the screen. The second shadow spoke.

"It is too late for that now, daughter. His blood is mine!" Tetelo's voice rose in a maddened shriek just barely controlled.

"Why? I can accomplish what you want! I'm certain he'll give me the talisman—he's ... he doesn't even know this family. And I can convince him to leave the city and never bother you again."

"No! He has hurt us! He must pay!"

Malia's voice rose angrily now, too, if only to penetrate Tetelo's fury.

"He has paid! You told me of his uncle! And his assistant will die tonight! That is enough, even for the gods!"

Tetelo's response was a venomous shriek. "IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR ME!"

The words were so intimidating in the force of their hostility that Gabriel flushed with fear and embarrassment. There was silence for a moment.

Then Malia spoke calmly: "Tetelo, hear your daughter. I ask you to choose another vessel. I

cannot go on like this."

Tetelo was enraged. "You will never be free!"

"I WILL!"

"Listen well: I said those very words the night of my burning! I called forth my own father and told him I was abandoning our tribe, our gods! I did this for love of a man and that same man spat in my face! You think you can leave the darkness but the darkness is inside you! This man is blinded by the light. In the end it is his nature to despise your nature!"

"Maybe that's true!" Malia's voice was confident now, loud and clear. "You know what? I don't care! I don't expect to be with him—all I'm asking is that his life be spared. For the sake of all I have done for you over the years, I expect this much in return!"

"He is not worth such selflessness. When you see him betray you, you will understand this. You shall see. You shall see."

The voice died down and the smell of earth left, like a light going out. Gabriel peeked over the bed and confirmed what he sensed—there was only one shadow now. Tetelo's spirit had left.

"Damn you! I won't do it!" Malia screamed to the air. But even Gabriel could tell there was no one listening. Malia choked back a sob of frustration and ran back through the doorway she'd come in through.

Gabriel was alone.

He sank down from his heels and sat numbly on the floor next to the bed. He wanted to go after Malia, and yet he could not. Just as he had not tried to contact her since the night at the bayou. He hadn't even allowed himself to think much about her, had shut her and the pain of her from his mind.

Why?

It wasn't because he felt betrayed by Malia. She had tried to keep him from her life, then from the investigation. She hadn't wanted him to get close to the danger. She had fought Tetelo with the dagger when he was endangered. And it wasn't because he despised her. He couldn't blame her for the belief system she grew up in. Even the killings; Gabriel had a sense Malia's consciousness was rarely present during those kinds of ceremonies. She could have fought her role, yes. And perhaps she had. She certainly was fighting it now.

No. The reason was not that he had stopped

loving Malia after learning who she was. In fact, he longed to speak to her, to talk to her frankly about all of this—even about Gunter and Tetelo. He had faith in her, he didn't think she would purposefully harm him or do him evil. He even empathized with her position. The truth was that he had not gone to Malia, and would not go to Malia, because he was scared shitless of the thing that was inside her—of Tetelo. He had cut off Malia like unplugging a phone, because he wasn't willing to face the possibility of getting close to Tetelo. Not even for love. Not even to save Malia from what was obviously a terrible oppression.

Not at the risk of his own skin.

He sat on the floor and realized that he was doing exactly what Gunter had done. Saving his own ass.

You have used people all your life. Never committed to anyone!

He sat there, blankly staring at the wall in front of him for a time. Then he got up, very slowly, and went on.

The last two rooms did not hold Grace. Rooms four and five were both offices. Expensive desks, filing cabinets, computers, and phones were organized in the space like regimental battle stations.

The two rooms were connected by an open archway between them. And they were empty. He turned to leave, disinterested, when he remembered what Mosely had said about ledgers. He tried a couple of filing cabinets, but they were locked. Then he spotted a black leather-bound book on one of the desks. He picked it up and glanced through it. It had a list, in the front, of the cartel members and what looked like a drum code signal for each.

It was some sort of proof, in any case. He slipped the book into a pocket and left the offices. There was one last place in the hounfour that he hadn't checked. Unlike the Benin snake mound, the "spokes" to the inner wheel were very apparent here. In the hallway of the outer ring, on the inside wall across from every odd-numbered room door, were open doorways leading to white halls. He knew where they would all lead—to an inner ring room—but he hadn't been quite ready to face that until he'd gotten his bearings on the rest of the hounfour. Besides the locked rooms (and he still didn't have an answer to that conundrum yet) he'd run out of excuses. He ducked

back out into the hallway via the door to room five and ducked across the hall to the spoke hallway.

The spoke hallway was narrow and brightly lit; white and empty except for the vents and the relentless humming sound. It led to a large circular room.

The center of the hounfour was more elaborate than the other rooms had been. It was made from the same material, but African figures in black adorned the walls, like ancient cave wall paintings done anew. A large poteau-mitan was in the room, but it did not claim center stage. The pole and a steel bonfire pit and vent were off to one side of the circle. The dead center was taken by a reproduction of the sacrificial table in the Benin mound. It was made from gray marble, tombstone marble, and had the same carved figures around the circumference of the base—though, like the paintings on the walls, the artwork had been updated and improved. Six inches from the top, the lid's seam ran around the table. And the top of the table had a trough and central hole—just like the table in Benin.

They still do the same sacrifices. Eight here. And this table had not been abandoned years ago. It would, in fact, be used tonight. With Grace. He forced himself away from the table. The thought of Grace ending up the same way Wolfgang had—that thought was too obscene to let linger. He forced himself to go on. Across the room opposite the poteau-mitan and fire pit was a set of large Rada drums. He walked over to look at them, more to get his back to the table than out of real interest.

Tick took. Tick took.

Why did it always seem that no matter how much he progressed, he was still no further ahead?

What was the point? Find Grace! She might not be here at all, but there were still three locked doors.

Then he got an idea. He looked at the drums, pulled the black book from his pocket and scanned it, then glanced around at the spoke hallways.

Did he have the balls to do it?

Did he have a choice?

Dr. John was broken from his dark meditation by a distracting sound. He surfaced enough to recognize it, then slowly opened his eyes and listened.

It was the drums in the ceremonial room.

Surely, it wasn't that time yet. He frowned and broke out the message.

Summon. Hounfour. Dr. John.

He rose quickly. Why hadn't they simply come to his room if he was wanted? He was beginning to feel alarmed.

He exited his room and crossed to the spoke hallway opposite room three. But when he reached the ceremonial room it was empty. No one was there. The drums were silent.

He walked out a different spoke hallway and strode around the entire outer ring hall, checking for signs of a problem. But there was nothing amiss and no one around. It would be another hour or so before the others began to filter in. He checked the ceremonial room again. Nothing.

He began to doubt his own senses. He had been meditating, perhaps it was the gods who called him . . . He decided to go back to his room and await further developments.

It was this last part which was the trickiest.

Gabriel heard Dr. John going into his room from his position just around the bend in the hall. He waited for him to come out again, yelling bloody murder because his key card was missing. But he did not come out again and Gabriel allowed himself a moment of triumph. He might still notice it was gone, but he hadn't looked—not right away.

The reason for room one being locked was apparent as soon as the door opened. It was a vault. Wire shelves lined the walls as they had in the storage room. But it wasn't flour on these shelves, it was money. Stacks and stacks of twenty-, fifty-, even one-hundred-dollar bills filled the shelves to absolute capacity from floor to ceiling, in rows and rows. There were cash bonds running in the thousands—stacks of them.

There were even large bars of gold bullion.

Gabriel began to count and got lost in the sheer dazzle of it. Millions and millions.

Where does drug money go when it dies?

He had an irrational image of stuffing himself full of bills and going back up to the church to dump it out in some safe place, and returning to do it again, and again, and again. Instead, he simply picked the highest face-value stacks of bonds he could find—three of them—and stuffed them in his inside jacket pocket. He

added a few dozen stacks of hundred-dollar bills, for good measure, as much as he could handle without feeling incapacitated with lumpiness.

It wasn't, he supposed, the act of a Schattenjager, but the Ritters had been impoverished for three hundred years. Tetelo owed them something. And there was the castle to consider. Not to mention Mosely's VISA bill.

Room eleven was something else entirely. The door slid open by the power of the key card, and the scent of formaldehyde immediately assailed him. Inside were Plexiglas-faced freezer drawers built up against the wall, one on top of the other. Inside, behind the frost on the glass, Gabriel could make out naked corpses. The focus of the room, though, was a steel autopsy table with a trough around its edges that emptied out into a steel bucket. On the side wall was a sink and glass-faced cabinets that contained drugs and other odd bottles. In one of the cabinets was a series of glass jars containing hearts.

Gabriel left the room quickly. He couldn't begin to fathom the point of it, except to store the bodies of the victims they sacrificed inside the hounfour. But why hang on to the corpses? And why the autopsy equipment? And the organs?

Unless there was an element of necromancy in the Agris tribal worship as well—a few magic spells using parts of corpses, recipes shared with their fun-lovin' cousins in the Cult des Marts.

It occurred to him only after he'd left the room that Grace might have been in one of those drawers. But Malia said she was to die tonight. That had to be at the conclave. Besides, he had one more room to check before he would allow himself to abandon hope.

The door to room eight opened smoothly after he'd inserted the key card. The room was one of the hospital-bedded "guest" rooms. On the bed was Grace, lying very still.

"Gracie! Grace!" Gabriel shook her shoulders but Grace was not waking up. She was warm, and her cheeks were flushed, so he didn't think she was badly hurt. She simply was not coming to.

On an impulse, he took off the talisman and placed it around her neck.

Whether it was the act of Gabriel trying clum-

sily to get the chain over her head, or whether the medallion really had some kind of power, by the time he'd gotten it fully situated on her chest, Grace was batting his hands away and sitting up.

"What are you doing!" she said, annoyed. Then she saw the room and a more urgent question presented itself. "Where the hell are we?"

She sounded confused, but not particularly alarmed. She gave a big yawn and looked past Gabriel's shoulder. "Hey, Mosely," she said. Gabriel about leaped out of his skin. He turned to look and, sure enough, Mosely was tiptoeing in through the hall door like some sort of nerdy rendition of a mountain cat. The door slid shut behind him.

"I thought I saw you duck in here," he said to Gabriel in a hush. "Man, can you believe this? Do you know where we are?"

"I have the general idea," Gabriel said dryly.

"Well, I don't," Grace said.

"We're underneath Jackson Square," Mosely whispered, obviously enjoying the drama of it, as if he'd thought up the location all by himself.

Grace's dark brows pursed together in a frown.

"That's weird. Is this like . . ."

"Their headquarters. That's right, ma'am."

Mosely answered in a voice that said "It's terrifying and horribly dangerous, but I will protect you." .

"Excuse me?" Gabriel said. "I hate to interrupt, but I have it on good authority that Grace is on the menu for tonight's barbecue?"

"There's a ceremony tonight? Just for me?"

Grace said, impressed.

"I didn't say the ceremony was just for you I said you were on the menu. We should, you know, leave?"

"Right," Mosely said firmly. "Why don't you take Grace up. I want to look around."

"I already did that," Gabriel protested.

"What's with this 'take Grace up' stuff? I want to look around, too!"

"Be quiet," Gabriel said suddenly.

He got up and went over to the door and listened. He hadn't been mistaken. The drums were being sounded. He could also hear the sound of low voices passing by in the hall.

"Damn it!" he whispered. "The cartel members have started to arrive. None of us is goin' anywhere!"

He reached under his jeans and pulled the masks from his boots. "I have a couple of these, but we don't have anything for Grace," he said worriedly.

He tossed the boar's mask to Mosely. Mosely looked at it skeptically.

"They wear these things," Gabriel explained.

"We might not be recognized if we put them on."

Mosely nodded. "Good idea. We can slip past 'em/" he said. "I'll go ahead in the hall and when the coast is clear, you can bring Grace."

Gabriel thought about it, playing with his bangs nervously. "No, that won't work. They'll be coming in through the stairwell pretty steadily now. I don't think the coast is gonna be clear long enough to get Grace all the way down the hall and up those stairs."

Mosely pulled open his blazer and revealed a gun. Coming from Mosely, the gesture had the absurdity of a flasher's. "We may be seen," he said ominously. "That doesn't mean they can stop us."

"Why don't we just proceed with the ceremony as planned?" Grace offered brightly.

The two men looked at her as if she'd just spewed forth lizards.

"Come on! This is the Ritter talisman, right?"

She took off the talisman, gazed at it admiringly, and handed it back to Gabriel.

"Yeah," he said, putting it back on his own neck.

"Well, so you got it back, now you're supposed to confront her, right? Isn't that what you were planning?"

"I'm a little lost here," Mosely said. "I thought the point was to rescue Grace and get some paperwork for the FBI."

"It was. Is," Gabriel said.

"What about Tetelo?" Grace demanded.

"Who is Tetelo?" Mosely said.

"I'll deal with her later," Gabriel said tightly.

"Why?" Grace said. "Mosely and I are both here to help you. Right now. Tonight. You might as well go ahead and get it over with. If you don't do it now, she'll only come after you. Tonight you might be able to surprise her."

Gabriel shook his head. "Forget it. This isn't your fight, Gracie. Mosely's either."

"What are ya'll talking about?" Mosely demanded.

"Look," Grace said patiently. "I'll pretend

to be unconscious and let them take me in. You guys mingle in with the crowd in those masks and then when you give the signal, Gabriel, we'll. . ."

"We'll what?" Gabriel demanded.

Grace frowned. "Well, Mosely can hold off the crowd with his gun. I can hold Malia physically, while you get Tetelo's spirit out of her. You can . . . you know . . . banish it, or whatever you're going to do."

"Gracie, I don't know what to do. That's the point."

But there wasn't going to be time for a plan B. Dr. John's voice echoed in the hall, greeting one of the other cartel members. Grace pointed at the bathroom with silent panic and Gabriel pulled Mosely into the small annex and closed the door.

A second later Gabriel and Mosely heard voices in the bedroom.

"Good. She is still out." The voice was Dr. John's. "Carry her into the prep room and put her in a gown."

"Yes, Brother Eagle."

After another moment of barely heard bumps and fabric whispers, the room became silent once more. Gabriel opened the bathroom door and peered out. Room eight was now empty.

It looked like they would be attending the ceremony after all.

* * *

They waited until they heard the drum rhythms intensify, waited until ecstasy would have begun to dull the senses. Gabriel wasn't concerned so much for himself—there were enough white bodies in the cartel and he was wiry enough to be inconspicuous. But Mosely, boar mask or no boar mask, would blend in at a Voodoo ceremony about as well as a fox in the henhouse. At first, Gabriel looked at Mosely's clothes, shook his head, and told him to take off the shirt, tie, and jacket—and, of course, the Hush Puppies. But Mosely's Pillsbury Dough Boy body, complete with belly roll, love handles, concave chest, and accountant tan at the neckline and wrists, was even more conspicuous than the polyester jacket. Mosely's feet were just as bad. They were white and hairy with long toenails—the feet of an underground gnome. The shoes went back on and Gabriel and Mosely put on the hoods and snuck down to room seven for robes. They would have

to do.

They took one of the spoke hallways to the inner ring and slipped into the back of the writhing mass of dancers. There were about thirty people in the room, and they were all dancing to the drums. They hadn't begun to move in a circle yet, or maybe they didn't do that here. In any case, Mosely and Gabriel were able to stay near the outer wall. They both moved in imitation of the other dancers.

Mosely's attempts were too painful for Gabriel to watch. He could only pray that nobody else looked, either.

The center table was bare. Gabriel didn't see Malia. He found his stomach constrict at the thought of her. What was he supposed to do? How could he attack Tetelo without hurting Malia?

Then the music changed and the ceremony began.

Dr. John entered from a spoke hallway across the room. He was naked and gleaming, his chocolate flesh painted with his eagle stripes. He was carrying Grace casually in his arms like a first-aid dummy. She looked unconscious—Gabriel could only hope it was faked. The sight of her in the grip of the enormous, obscenely naked Dr. John was like something out of a Tarzan novel except that it wasn't exciting or titillating, it was only horrible because it was real—she was really vulnerable, Dr. John was really serious, and the thread of her life was really between two closing blades.

"If he hurts her ..." Mosely warned under his breath.

She had been dressed in a white robe that was tied together at the sides, revealing bare skin underneath. The thing smacked vilely of a surgical gown. Dr. John laid her on the stone table. He might have just as easily broken her spine over it with a simple, graceful move, like breaking a loaf of bread to start a feast. Gabriel felt his throat constrict until Dr. John's hands were off Grace and he was moving away. He cursed himself for not getting her out of here—for leaving her in New Orleans in the first place. This wasn't a game anymore. The chances of her leaving this place alive were very slim, and Gabriel knew it.

Dr. John began to draw the veve on the floor, using flour from the pouch around his waist.

Two men brought in a cage with chickens. The snake entered, handled by two naked women. They paraded the snake around the circle so that it could be admired and kissed by the other attendees.

Then the drums changed and Malia entered. Except that it wasn't Malia, it was Tetelo. Gabriel could tell by the straightness of the back, the cock of the head, the curl of the lips—Malia's body was not her own.

Mosely whispered to him. "Christ, is that ... Malia Gedde?"

"No. That's Tetelo."

The two women handed Tetelo the snake and she began to dance with it. The frenzy of her moves—the way her thigh muscles twitched like they were caught in an electrical current, the way her back bent behind her, the jutting tilt of her neck—it wasn't natural. Gabriel felt a wave of anger at the way Tetelo abused Malia's mortal frame.

"What do we do?" Mosely hissed.

"I don't know," Gabriel replied.

And Dr. John was done with the veve now, and he took a bottle from a man and began to spew his drug.

"You go around that way and I'll go this way," Gabriel hissed, pointing Mosely off around the circle to the right.

"And?" Mosely said.

"Just have your gun ready."

Gabriel turned and began to make his way around the circle to the left. Dr. John, he noticed, was heading more in Mosely's direction. They didn't have long.

Tetelo was chanting in a loud voice that out-reverberated the drums. In that dark, guttural tongue, calling on her Loa. Damballah, the cursed one; Ogoun Badagris, the merciless.

She took a ku-bha-sah dagger from her belt.

Things were happening very quickly now.

Gabriel glanced over at Mosely, who was trying to edge away from Dr. John, against the back wall, but Dr. John was spraying his liquid in massive head shakes, like a lion shaking a deer, and he was closing in on Mosely. Mosely's hand wavered near the hole he'd torn in his robe for his gun. He searched for Gabriel frantically. If he got a dose of that spray, he'd be useless. And Malia was raising the dagger over Grace now, raising it and screaming curses . . . curses wrapped around

Gabriel's own name.

Gabriel took a heavy breath, pulled the chain of the talisman over his head, discarding the hood as he did so. He planted his feet resolutely and held the talisman up and out like a sword.

"TETELO, I CALL YOU FORTH!"

It sounded a bit melodramatic to him, but it worked; everything changed instantly. The drummer stopped and silence fell on the room as the dancers wavered in confusion, their eyes seeking and finding him, recognizing him. The upheld dagger Tetelo wielded paused in midair, held in clenched fists. Her eyes found him and widened, turning black with rage, and the dagger flew down in a violent arc. But Grace had opened her eyes and was slipping from the table. The blade missed her back by inches and struck the marble surface of the tabletop, drawing sparks and sending the jolt up Mafia's arms. Grace reached her feet to one side of Malia, and took up one of her tai chi stances, waiting to attack, but wary of the knife. She watched Malia's face. They all watched Malia's face.

Gabriel had no idea what the talisman was capable of. As he held it up, he began to feel a bit silly. It wasn't large enough to be a shield, it hadn't forced Tetelo out of Malia, and it wasn't exactly throwing out laser beams to smite down his enemies. What it had done and did do was draw Tetelo's gaze.

"Dr. John—kill her!" Tetelo screamed, not taking her eyes from Gabriel. In a second Dr. John had crossed the room to the table. Grace drew up her leg and kicked him hard in the stomach. It was like a bird pecking at a rottweiler. Dr. John did not even flinch, he just drew his other hand across his body and sent the back of it flying forward, whipping Grace across the face and sending her sprawling to the ground, blood gushing from her nose and mouth.

"BASTARD!"

This shout came before Gabriel could even feel anything but shock, and it was followed by a strange popping sound. Gabriel glanced to his right and saw Mosely, hood off, pointing his gun at Dr. John. Just. . . pointing it.

Gabriel looked back at Dr. John and saw the giant standing there, looking at Mosely with an annoyed, confused expression, as if he were wondering where the hell that nerdy little man came

from and what he was playing at.

Then Gabriel noticed the hole in Dr. John's chest. Noticed it because an arc of blood flew from it suddenly, catching his eye. It caught Dr. John's eye, too. He looked down at it blankly. Then he fell across the stone table, face first, like a tree crashing to the forest floor.

Tetelo's howl echoed through and around the room. It was the cry of the damned, of the dead. It was the wail of a banshee.

"YOU WILL PAY!!!!!!!!!"

And the conclave members, who had watched the past few incomprehensible minutes with utter blankness, began to run for the hallways, pushing at each other in their terror, screaming as they fled. Whether it was Dr. John being shot by a still-functioning gun, or whether they were simply wise enough to know that Tetelo's wrath was becoming unfocused and monstrous enough to smite every one of them in its path, Gabriel could not guess. Within minutes the room held only Malia's body, Tetelo's Loa, Grace, Mosely, Gabriel, and the corpse of Dr. John.

Gabriel watched with horror as the lid of the marble table slid smoothly upward on hydraulic arms, activated by the heart blood of Dr. John. His body slid from the table's lid and crashed to the floor. Tetelo stalked toward Gabriel.

"GIVE IT TO ME!" she screamed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gabriel saw Mosely aiming his gun carefully at the striding Tetelo.

"NO! Don't shoot!" Gabriel cried out to him. He held the talisman up wardingly and Tetelo paused.

"Why not?" Mosely screamed back. But he edged toward Grace, still aiming the gun at Tetelo, and helped Grace stand. Grace leaned against him, wiping blood from her face.

"Just take Grace out of here! Now!" Gabriel said.

But Tetelo turned just as quickly. A new glimmer in her eye.

"They shall never leave! Give me the talisman now, or your friends will die right here, right now! I can do it with my mind alone!"

And he knew that she could. He paused, confused.

"Don't you dare!" Grace screamed at him, her voice thick and hoarse.

Mosely lodged his own protest. He was taking aim again at Tetelo, who was busy watching Gabriel with triumph in her eyes.

"DON'T SHOOT!" Gabriel shouted to Mosely.

He drew the talisman back to throw it.

"NO!" Grace screamed.

"Tetelo, catch!" Gabriel shouted.

And he sent it sailing into the air, before he could change his mind, before he could think about what might go wrong. The medallion flew, end over end, the way it spun up from the wheel in his dream, in the dreams of all the Ritters; the chain floating spread wide, the talisman turning and turning, lion and dragon and blankness, again and again. It flew over her grasping hands and was caught by Mosely, on the other side of her. He snatched it from the air while her fingers still sought it, the way he used to snatch the ball over the head of his kid sister. He hadn't forgotten. Gabriel breathed a prayer of relief.

Tetelo, much as Mosely's sister, was not amused. A second, soul-numbing shriek split the air. She pointed both arms at Mosely and Grace in a deadly gesture. Mosely held the talisman up toward her as if to ward her off and pushed Grace behind him. Whatever Tetelo threw at them, convulsing and screaming from ten feet away, it did not harm them, though Mosely's face turned a bright beet purple and he looked about ready to piss his pants.

Tetelo gave up and shrieked again in rage.

So the talisman did something after all. Gabriel wasn't sure what would have happened to Mosely and Grace had they not had the thing, but he had a feeling it would make Crash's and Hartridge's deaths look like happy hour.

"Take Grace OUT! NOW!" Gabriel screamed at Mosely.

Mosely was more than ready. He began backing away from Tetelo, pushing Grace toward one of the hallways.

"Gabriel, you have nothing to protect you!"

Grace protested.

"Yes I do! GO ON!"

The two disappeared into the hallway's mouth.

Tetelo remained facing that direction for a moment, head tilted like a child listening. The posture in her stance changed, relaxed. Gabriel could almost feel her smiling. When she turned, he saw that he was not mistaken. It was a horrible,

wicked smile.

"I will get it back, you know. You will be dead, and they have no idea how to protect it. You've wasted many lives for nothing."

He pushed her words from his mind. They might end up to be true, but there was no time to worry about that now.

"Malia, I want you to listen to me. MALIA! I know you're in there. Fight her!"

Tetelo's eyes widened in mock alarm.

"Oh, how brave you are! Calling on your 'love' for help! Malia cannot help you! Will not help you!"

"You've caged her, like you've done all your daughters. She doesn't want you anymore, and without her you're nothing! Malia, push her out!"

Tetelo advanced on him. She reached out an endlessly long arm and clenched a fistful of his hair with a grip like iron. She began to walk toward the stone table, dragging him behind her like a misbehaving puppy. Her physical power was enormous. He couldn't escape her without ripping out half his scalp.

"Malia, hear me! I know you can fight her!" he said, struggling to keep his feet under him.

"SHUT UP," Tetelo snapped. She dragged him to the table, but the lid was raised. This seemed to annoy her—it was too high for a proper altar now, and the blood of Dr. John made it slick. She shoved him up against the table's side, obviously determined to kill him beside the table rather than mess with it.

"MALIA!" he screamed, trying to reach her.

Tetelo took the ku-bha-sah knife from her belt and raised it in the hand that was not ensnaring his hair. He was going to die.

Then he saw that the arm that held the knife was shaking, fighting with gravity like a ball hovering by itself in midair. Tetelo's face changed. He looked up into Malia's eyes.

"I'm not strong enough," she said sadly, her eyes desperate. "I can't hold her!"

"You can! Help me!" he urged.

But she was losing it. Tetelo flickered across Malia's expression like candlelight. Malia managed two more words: "The idol."

They were no more out of the mouth than the same lips twisted with rage, spat curses.

"GODDAMN YOU TO HELL SHUT UP!"

The arm flew downward in a stab, but the other hand, the one holding his hair, had loosened

when Malia surfaced and Tetelo hadn't had time or thought enough to reclench it. Gabriel pulled away to his left, hard. For the second time that night, Malia's arm took the jolt of knife striking marble full force.

Then Gabriel glanced over the edge of the open table and saw it—the raised lid revealed a small platform. On the platform was the figure he'd seen on the stone table at Benin—a squat, ancient stone figure, ten inches tall, with huge, staring eyes and a jutting barbed penis. He grabbed it.

"NO!" Tetelo screamed.

And then he was lifting the idol over his head; still sprawled on the floor, lifting it and bringing it down with all his might against the lip of the table. The figurine shattered into a million pieces in his hands, like shrapnel exploding.

The response was instantaneous. From deep in the bowels of the earth a voice called in a bel-lowing rumble. The room began to shake in a massive earthquake, the lights flickered once, twice, then went out. He clutched at the floor in terror, found himself sliding across its surface like a pebble skipping across the top of a pounding drum head.

There was a horrible crack! and the stone table split in two. The floor beneath it split as well, the edges of the earth pushing upward. A chasm was opening up and out from the center of the hounfour.

Someone screamed in terror.

He could find nothing to hold on to. The tilting angle of the floor sent him rolling into the wall. He tried to protect his head as pieces of plaster and rock cascaded down all around him. Finally, the movement and the rumbling stopped. What was left was the cracking of fire and the cloying suffocation of dust.

Someone screamed again. "Gabriel!"

It was Malia's voice. He was bleeding from several deep gashes, having been cut at some point in the deluge that he couldn't recall. He pushed himself up from the dust and saw that the crack in the floor was now well above him. He crawled up the side of the fissure. As he neared the split in the earth the light intensified; it was the flicker of flames. He saw two light copper-colored hands clutching the lip of the chasm and made for them mindlessly, like a man swimming for a lifeboat.

He pulled himself up to the chasm's edge and looked over.

She was hanging from her two hands. All trace of Tetelo was gone from her now. It was his own Malia that looked up at him, eyes filled with terror. Below he could barely look down into the chasm for the brilliance of the light. It was a mass of flames far below her feet. The gates of hell had opened.

He reached out a hand and grabbed her wrists. He had to hold himself up by bracing his upper arms over the lip of the chasm, because the tilt of the floor wanted to roll him backward and he had nothing to brace his feet.

"Let go of the edge. I've got you," he screamed. Malia looked up at him anxiously and he saw trust in her eyes. She did not even hesitate. She let go of the edge and grasped his forearms with first one hand, then the other.

For a moment an image flashed in his mind, an image of himself letting go of her arms, of Tetelo's vessel falling into the flames. And anger answered, Yes!: anger for Gunter, for the talisman, for Wolfgang. But he rejected the image forcefully. This was Malia's flesh. He had committed to himself in her bedroom an hour before that he would not hurt her. No matter what it cost. And he would not.

He levered himself against his upper arms and began pulling her up and out.

He had her pretty, anxious face level with the chasm's edge when her expression rippled before his eyes and Tetelo returned, staring back at him from inches away with sheer and utter hatred.

"Yow will not save her, W'itch-hunter! You will betray her!"

One of Malia's hands let go and Tetelo reached down, pulled the knife again from her belt.

"Don't let go! Malia, I can't hold you like that!" he screamed at her.

But Tetelo was in the driver's seat now. The knife came up and plunged into his arm, the arm that still held Malia.

He gritted his teeth at the pain and grabbed Malia's unweaponed arm with both hands, continued to pull her up, moving as fast as he dared. Tetelo stabbed his forearm again and again. She wasn't cutting deep, didn't have the right angle, but he could feel his muscles and nerves trembling under the assault, the blood sliding down

his arms.

"MALIA, STOP IT!" he screamed.

And, suddenly, the knife did stop. The hand opened and the ku-bha-sah dropped, end over end, into the gorge. Tetelo was looking up into his face, he could see that it was still Tetelo, but she looked puzzled now.

"Why don't you let go?" she asked softly.

And the look on her face was so hurt and baffled and lost, as if there was something obvious and important that she had entirely missed. Some part of him quickened at that expression. They looked at each other for the space of a few heartbeats, Tetelo and he, and he could feel something, someone, stir inside him, unfurling like a spiritual fetus. His eyes welled up with tears.

"Forgive me for being such a coward," his mouth said. "I love you still."

And Tetelo's eyes changed, softened and saddened and . . . relinquished. She slowly dissolved and Malia reappeared.

She slipped in his grasp.

"HELP ME!" he screamed at her. The slickness of his blood was loosening his grip. He didn't dare let go with one hand to grab her other good arm because he couldn't hang on to her with one hand, even for a second. He was barely doing it with two.

"Put your arm around my neck!" he screamed.

But she didn't move. She only watched him with eyes that seemed newly peaceful, looked at his face, inch by inch, as if storing it away somewhere, while her arm was slipping inexorably from his grasping hands.

"Grab me!" he urged, dumbfounded.

"Thank you for trying to save me," she said quietly. "But it must end here. With me."

He couldn't believe what she was saying.

"Malia, don't you DARE!" he screamed. "We've almost won!"

She smiled sadly, that same tragic little smile she had given him at the cemetery. "But we have won." She paused, then. "I love you, too."

And she released her hold of his bleeding arm.

He clenched at her more tightly, screaming in grief, but it was no use. Her slender arm, wet with his blood, slipped out of his grasp.

And Malia fell, floating, downward and downward, into the brilliant flames below. Her eyes were on him, her face quiet, up until the moment

she disappeared.

Epilogue

Gabriel and Grace stood on a wrought-iron balcony that overlooked Jackson Square. It was the same balcony with the binoculars that Gabriel had watched Crash from, back when he had not known what a Schattenjager was, had never seen someone die, and hadn't been out of the forty-eight contiguous states; back when he'd been somebody else. It was night, starless for the storm clouds that had overwhelmed the sky and were finally letting go. The rain was cool and abundant, and he let it pour down his face and body, like the tears that were too large to shed; for Malia, for Wolfgang, for himself, for Tetelo and Gunter, for the end of a long, long road.

Beneath them, sirens wailed as a confused fire department sought to deal with the hairline fissure that had opened up in the middle of a perfectly ordinary park, a fissure that was emitting steam and occasional shooting flames like a lidded frying pan whose contents were busy turning into charcoal.

"Do you think Tetelo is really gone?" Grace asked.

"Yup," he said.

Grace didn't say anything for a minute, then . . .

"I'm sorry about Malia."

She even sounded like she meant it. Gabriel did not say anything. He wouldn't know where to begin.

"Are you going to do it? Be Schattenjäger?"

There was a hint of excitement in her voice. He was surprised to hear she was still capable of it after what they'd been through. He certainly wasn't. But maybe he was just tired.

"I have to think about it," he said.

But that didn't feel right, either. Not after what Wolfgang had done. It felt really wrong.

"Yeah," he said, amending himself. "I guess. I need to spend some time at the castle. Figure out what it's all about."

"I could help," Grace offered. "I mean ... I'd like to learn about it, too,"

He looked at her, surprised. "What about school?"

She chewed her lip, looked away as if embarrassed. "They can't teach me about things like this. Real things."

She glanced at him nervously. "If you don't mind, that is. I'm very good at research."

He actually smiled. "I know you are. I'd be grateful if you stayed."

And it was true. It was something the man he had been a month ago would not have said, or even felt.

They sat until dawn not saying anything more, just watching as the firemen, and the rain, put the fire out.

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