
let That Be Your Border

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The fear o' hell's a hangman's whip
To haud the wretch in order;
But where ye feel your honour grip,
Let that ay be your border.

-- Epistle to a Young Friend, Stanza 8, Robert Burns

Dean Hamilton sighed, and belched contentedly. "Take it as a compliment," he replied to his wife's frown. He pushed back from the table. "Another fine dinner, punkin. Haven't lost your touch."

Helen came back to the table from a trip to the sink, and gathered more of the dishes, blowing aside a stray wisp of grey hair that had escaped its restraint. "Well, I'm glad you're not tired of my cookin' yet," she teased, giving him a coy grin.

"If I ain't tired of it after forty-seven years," he replied tartly, "I ain't likely to tire of it any time soon." He slid open the top drawer of the Welsh highboy in the narrow hallway outside the kitchen, and tucked a pack of Winstons and a brass lighter with the L&N Railroad logo engraved on it into his shirt pocket. "I'm goin' out to the screen room for a bit, punkin."

"No more'n one'a those, now," she scolded.

He paused in the hall. "I'm seventy-two years old, woman --"

"And if they ain't kilt you yet, they ain't gonna," she finished. Helen dried her hands on a captowel, and followed him into the hallway. "I know, I know, but hold yourself to one anyway." She stretched up a little to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "And brush your teeth when you're done." She wrinkled her nose at the thought of the smell.

Dean let himself out onto the screen porch. He paused a moment to admire the sunset. One of the advantages to retirement, he thought, was that you had the time to appreciate the beauty of God's handiwork. One of the advantages of retiring from the railroad was that they took proper care of you. His pension not only kept food on the table, although Helen's deft hand at the stove could have made a feast out of scraps -- and had, more'n once, in their early years -- but took care of the difference between the rent they received on their old house and the payment on this one. Helen had been dubious about buying a new house after his retirement, but after seeing this new development down by Hickory Hollow, she'd decided maybe it was a good idea after all.

Yep, he told himself, as he eased down into a ladderback rocker, nice quiet neighborhood, rolling lawns, a couple teenagers not afraid of honest work willin' to mow the yard for a decent price, close to that big mall with all the stores. Definitely a good idea.

He stuck two fingers in his shirt pocket, popped the bottom of the pack with his thumb and snagged the cigarette that sprang up between his fingers, stuck it between his lips and reached back in for the lighter. A snap of the wrist to flip it open, then a flick of the striker --

And thunder boomed from across the road. Light blazed through the windows of the house opposite, then the glass burst out in glittering sprays. The roof rose up on a column of fire, soaring up like a rocket, as the walls burst out, brick, masonry and wood turned to shrapnel. A hot wind roared

through the porch screens, slapping the cigarette from his lips, fanning back his hair. Then the shockwave struck.

Dean had seen an explosion close-up once before, when a tanker at the yard went up, and he'd opened his mouth and exhaled automatically. That was all that saved his hearing. The pressure wave threw him back into the rocker, sent the chair skidding across the porch. Dimly, he was aware of cracking sounds as the front windows gave under the force of compressed air, but his attention was riveted on the fireball still expanding across the road.

The car in the drive turned brown, then black, caught fire. Its tires exploded with sounds like gunshots -- then the gas tank went, and the car was thrown like a toy end over end by the force of the blast. The grass all the way down the lawn had scorched.

The front door slammed open. Helen burst out. "Dean!"

"Uh," he managed.

She bent over him, tears streaming down her face. "Dean, can you hear me?"

"Yuh, I hear you," he muttered, shaking his head to clear the daze. "I'm all right, woman, save your worry for the people over there." He nodded at the raging inferno. Bits of falling roof struck sparks in the air as they caught fire, a shower of fireflies descending into the blaze.

Helen turned, and the knowledge of what had happened struck her like a blow. Her knees went weak; she caught at the rocker, and Dean pulled her onto his lap. "Oh!" she managed. "Oh, dear Lord..."

"Best to call the 911, I suppose, although I don't see how's anybody could have lived through that," Dean said.

Helen managed another "Oh!" as Dean slid out from under her, leaving her limp in the rocker, as he went inside to make the call.

The faint light of the crescent moon riding low overhead was lost in the orange glow of sodium vapor, and its silver glow did not touch the brick and cast-iron facades of Third Avenue. Earlier, the pavement had been crowded with traffic, and pedestrians dodging among the cars, the night business of the District -- that area bounded by the river on one side, Third Avenue on the other, Broadway at the bottom of the long hill and Union Street at the top, a narrow zone flanking the restaurants, nightclubs, and antique malls of Second Avenue, the only part of downtown Nashville to show any signs of life after dark. Now, in the quiet hours between the closing of the bars and the opening of the banks, hardly anything moved on the streets. Here, a lone patrol car passing through, its bored driver thinking of the upcoming shift change; there, a cat patiently stalking a rustle in the garbage that might prove to be an early breakfast.

And high above, another hunter, patiently stalking: between the concrete outer wall and the decorative metalwork sheathing the old Third National Bank building, perched on one of the structural members that held the ornate steel filigree in place, was a figure more human in appearance than the cat, but no less a predator. Clad in light grey and brown urban camouflage, he kept a watch on the loading dock of the bank's counting house branch.

Vincent sighed, and checked his watch. Ten minutes since the last time he'd done so. Dammit, it had to be tonight. Friday had been payday, and Steve had cashed his check instead of depositing it --

Ah. There. An unmarked van pulled into the loading dock, moving out of Vincent's line of sight. He flicked on his pocket television, its two-inch screen lighting up with the view from the tiny remote camera he'd placed three days previously.

Inside the building, the van's doors swung open, and three men in blue jumpsuits and firemen's

oxygen rigs emerged, carrying toolboxes and folded green duffel bags. A fourth man in a Third National Bank security uniform, also wearing an oxygen mask, met them at the loading dock security booth, and led them further into the building.

Hm. A flick of the channel selector brought up the central security room. Among the banks of monitors and alarm panels, yet another man in oxygen gear, wearing the uniform of a well-known cleaning service, moved among the collapsed forms of uniformed guards, turning off cameras, patching in VCRs to the feeds, and rerouting alarm circuits. Clever, these people. Two men on the inside, one to release the gas and knock out the building's occupants, then let the rest of the team in, and another to ensure that false data fed into the recorders and the remote-feed lines, so that the security team at the main building four blocks away would see nothing out of the ordinary. No one would know about the robbery in progress until shift change, another four hours away. Except the watcher in the metalwork.

Now, the decision: whether to call the police and let them make the collar, and collect his fee from the bank, or to let the robbers complete their business, capture them himself, and collect not only his fee from the bank, but the twenty thousand dollar Federal bank-robbery reward as well. The choice seemed obvious.

So, Vincent sat back against the building to watch the latest installment of Candid Crooks, triggering his own VCR, a battery-operated remote unit in his car parked across the street. Never hurts to have plenty of evidence. Shame he hadn't been able to place a camera in the vault as well, but it just hadn't been possible. Getting the remotes into the loading dock and the security monitoring room had been difficult enough, even with the use of those extra abilities that kept him in demand. The clients were never told how he could slip past their security so easily, and never would be, but even the use of telepathic hypnosis wouldn't erase images from videotape, or convince cameras that he wasn't there, and the vault area was just too well monitored. Placing a camera without the bank security people knowing about it was impossible.

An hour and a half later, the five men were loading full duffel bags into the van. Obviously, they'd skipped the safety deposit boxes, and must have also ignored a lot of negotiable securities and smaller bills. The complete holdings of a clearing house would fill far more than just that one van. More and more clever, these people; slick, careful, covered all the bases and didn't succumb to greed once they got in, and try to take more than they could easily carry. Shame they never thought to look up...

A faint sparkle surrounded Vincent as his clothing and gear shifted state, ceasing to be real and becoming a possibility; no more light than the flare of a match, hopefully not enough to attract attention. The van was just coming around the corner, and the flicker was very high above it. If they did look up, at this point, all they would see would be a very large bird of some sort. The possibility shift had its drawbacks -- the flash, the extra effort required -- but it was so useful, having your clothes available when you shifted back to human form.

And the hawk spread its wings and launched into the night, soaring on the thermals rising from the cooling pavement, gliding after the departing van.

Some distance from downtown, Fourth Avenue becomes Lafayette, passing as it does through some particularly rough terrain -- projects infested with drug dealers, sleazy motels infested with hookers and body lice, and liquor stores infested with unrecoverable alcoholics. Beyond this local answer to Beirut, Lafayette turns into Murfreesboro Road, and passes through an area of apartment complexes, nightclubs, and slightly cleaner and more expensive motels boasting a higher class of prostitutes. Into the parking lot of one of these went the van, sliding neatly into a spot halfway down the row from the office, on the far side of a Winnebago.

The driver gave the wheel and the door a quick wipedown with a disposable kitchen cleanup rag ("Removes grease and fingerprints from glass and all polished surfaces!" boasted the label), while the

erstwhile security guard stepped into a hotel room and the other three began moving the duffels and toolboxes to the Winnebago, their actions screened from the office's view by the RV's bulk. One went into the Winnebago to arrange the load, while the other two continued moving items from the van.

The driver went up to the office to check out, and the two loaders followed the guard into the hotel room. The loadmaster completed his work, and was ready to follow them, when a whine at the door caught his attention. He followed the sound to discover what appeared to be a large grey dog pawing at the doorstep.

He grinned, and ruffled the animal's ears. "Hungry, boy?" A whine. "Well, c'mon, I think I can find you something." Claws on metal followed him into the RV as he went to the refrigerator, took out a pack of steaks, turned --

And a fist exploded into his jaw. The steaks flew to the side, bounced off the window and landed on the table as the loadmaster crumpled back onto the floor by the bathroom. The man who'd hit him straightened his brown-and-grey camo jacket and grinned.

"There's room here for a line about the wolf at your door," Vincent told the unconscious body, "but I'm not touching it."

Moving quickly, he dragged the loadmaster into the bedroom at the stern of the RV, and dumped him unceremoniously on the far side of the bed, out of view, fastening plastic restraints about the man's ankles and wrists.

The door opened, and the guard came in, now dressed in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt. "Harry, get a move on! We only got ten minutes left before we gotta clear this place!" No response. "Harry?" He moved into the hallway, noting the duffels on the bed, the toolboxes beside it. "Harry?"

Then the door to the bathroom flew open, a hand clasped across his mouth, and stiff fingers rammed up under his jaw. The world went grey, then black.

Vincent dumped the guard in the bathtub, once again after restraining the man in case he woke up. That artery pinch was tricky; too short a time, and the guy woke up long before you were ready for him to; too long, and you had brain damage. Better to err on the side of caution. Well, it only had to keep him quiet for a very few minutes.

Again the door, again the RV creaked and shifted as two men entered. This time, Vincent didn't wait for them to investigate; he attacked from the driver's chair, smashed their skulls together, and let them drop. These two went into the bedroom, on the bed, hidden from view by the duffels.

The driver finally emerged from the hotel room, and came around to the other side of the RV. He swung up into the driver's seat, closed and locked the door, and fastened his seatbelt. "You guys ready back there?" he called.

Be Still. The command reverberated inside his skull. He fought its injunction enough to turn his head, to look back over his shoulder --

Into a pair of burning red eyes that pierced his mind and held it like a butterfly pinned to a display board. "You will be quiet and wait for the police," Vincent said, putting all the weight he could muster behind his words. "You will tell them everything they want to know that is within your power to answer. You will forget that you saw me, and forget these instructions except to obey them. Do you understand?"

"I .. understand." The words seemed to come from very far away, to be dragged out of the depths of the driver's mind. He gave up the struggle, overwhelmed by the crushing weight of Vincent's mind against his own.

Vincent turned away, and sagged against the galley bench. Time for a phone call and then a snack. This had been a hard night.

The pay phone by the office proved amenable to the offering of a quarter, and the line at the other end rang. "South Sector." Beep, said the monitoring device on the line.

"Major Crimes, Sergeant Goodlark."

"One moment." Beep.

Click. "Goodlark, Major Crimes." Beep.

"Tony, Vince. Got one for you."

"What?" Beep.

"Bank robbery. Third National counting house. Got the perps under restraint in a Winnebago at the Briley Parkway Motor Lodge."

"Mm-hm." Sounds of a pencil scratching. Beep. "Okay, I'll roll a unit. You gonna wait for me or turn'em on over to the uniforms?" Beep.

"I'll talk to you later. This one's going to get messy, press and all, so I'm gonna make myself scarce early, if you don't mind."

"Not at all." Actually, the police preferred citizens that disappeared before the press could arrive. Glory hounds that yapped to the papers before the department could issue an official statement were a royal pain in the ass. Vincent's penchant for avoiding the media had endeared him to more than one officer of the law. "I'm assuming you'll want the Feds notified?" Beep.

"If you would. I know, you hate to have the Feds brought in on a local bust, and they may take it away from you --"

"They probably will. Bank robbery's a Federal offense, you know." Beep.

"Yeah, I know. I also know they pay twenty grand for a conviction, and there's enough evidence here, plus I've got some tape I'll drop off with my secretary for delivery, to assure these boys a nice long stay at the taxpayer's expense."

"Right. You're a mercenary, Vince." Beep.

Vincent laughed. "Hey, everybody's gotta make a living somehow. Later."

He hung up, and dialed again. A few minutes later, after the Winnebago and its contents were safely in the hands of two uniformed officers, and just as the first press contingent arrived, Vincent departed in a taxi.

"Where to?" asked the driver, a portly black man with the decayed stub of a cigar clenched in his teeth.

"Up Lafayette. I'll know it when I see it."

The driver grinned. "I'll bet you will."

Vincent grinned back. Yes, he was looking for a prostitute, but not quite for the usual purpose...

A few minutes later, he had the driver pull over. After paying, he exited, and strolled up to a young woman leaning against a lamp post. The leopard-print slit skirt and the red satin bandeau top, together with the overdone makeup and her cheap plastic purse would have been enough to identify her profession, but the way she leaned against the post as if it were the pole on the stage of a strip club assured Vince that he'd made no error. This was no policewoman; her mind lacked the stamp of rigorous discipline, and her intentions, while predatory, were oriented toward sex and not justice.

"Evenin'," Vincent said.

"Evenin', sweet thing," she purred. "Lookin' for a date?"

"That I am. Step aside with me to this motel, if you would, and wait for me by the office."

The desk clerk accepted ten dollars for one hour, and handed over a key. Vincent led the way to room 16, which proved to be as tacky as he had feared: purple shag carpet left over from the 60's in need of a shampoo, orange bedspread, chipped furniture with the veneer peeling off, and the smell of old stale sex pervading. Well, he'd dined under worse conditions.

A turn, and the woman came into his arms readily. "Fifty for straight up," she said, "a hundred for around the world, and two hundred for all night."

"Oh, this won't take long at all," Vincent said, and sank his fangs into her neck. She gasped, and went limp, as the chemicals in his saliva that kept the wound from clotting also released a surge of beta-endorphins into her brain, a natural high cleaner and purer than any drug ever manufactured.

Someone pounded on the door. "Police, open up!"

No response. A blow to the door, and a splintering noise. Another heavy impact, and the door crashed open. Two uniformed officers charged in with guns drawn, expecting resistance, but the woman lying sprawled across the bed was in no shape to resist anything. A dazed grin plastered across her face, she couldn't even sit up until one of the policemen assisted her.

"Okay, Sylvia, where's the john?" That there had been one was obvious from the fifty dollars stuffed into the woman's cleavage.

"I dunno, Roy," she said, her eyes not tracking, "but I hope I see him again. Whoo, what a ride..." Her voice trailed off as she slumped against the officer, and giggled.

"Nobody in the bathroom," the other officer reported. "Where the hell did he go?"

"Don't matter, we got a picture," Roy said.

"Aw, what the hell good is that gonna do?" the other officer said. "All we got with that is probable solicitation, and you know there ain't no budget to run the picture and find'im. Shit, we lost this one."

Sylvia giggled again. Outside, Vincent strolled off down Murfreesboro Road to the Waffle House, to call another cab. That had been a bit too close. If he hadn't finished feeding and sealed the wounds before the police barged in, things could have gotten difficult. Damn. And this had been one of his favorite feeding grounds, too. Well, life is what happens while you're making other plans. Time to go pick up his car, drop off the tape at the office with a note for his secretary, and then get home before the sun came up on him. He really didn't feel like spending another day in the trunk, wrapped up in a body bag. That was just too risky, and he'd been pushing his luck too hard lately. Better to play it conservative for a while.

Fat chance.

The civilised keep alive the territorial war
(See the light ram through the gaps in the land)
Erase the race that claim the place
And say we dig for Ore
Or dangle Devils in a bottle
And push them from the Pull Of The Bush
(See the light ram through the gaps in the land)
You find them in the road
(See the light bounce off the rocks to the sand)
In the road

-- *The Dreaming, Kate Bush*

Fourth Avenue is an odd, clashing mix of the old and the new. On the west side, 1950's glass and steel rises into the old section of the Third National Tower, while on the east, a few remaining 1800s cast-iron structures raise their narrow silhouettes among 1970's commercial kitsch and brick cubes. Sandwiched between a greasy-chopstick fast fooderie in a decaying imitation of a Cape Cod, its fanlight

windows and upstairs shutters disagreeing with everything else on the block, and the grey concrete imitation-Egyptian facade of Prudential-Bache Securities, is a meticulously restored cast-iron six-story, the home of Fisher Investigations. The street level windows are wide and square, relics of a dry cleaners that formerly occupied the space, but have been replaced with tinted glass that at least tries to blend in with the rest of the facade. A set of brass doors set in their midst leads into the ground level. To the right, a fire door with security warning stickers bars access to the stairway to the upper floors. The company name stands across the smoked glass of the main entrance in calm green, edged lightly with gold, just enough to stand firmly without being ornate. Below the name, the motto: Discreet, Confidential, Thorough.

You'd better be all of those, Henry thought as he opened the door and stepped from the heat of the noise of the street into air-conditioned quiet. The foyer was small, but well appointed, with large, comfortable-looking chairs upholstered in deep mauve, the carpet a medium grey flecked with matching mauve checks, and plants (real ones, Henry noted approvingly) on the cherry side tables. A uniformed security guard looked the newcomer over appraisingly from the chair nearest the door, nodded once, and returned to the latest issue of Guns and Ammo. The thin, nervous man who'd entered was carrying no weapons, and had the body language of a new client, someone who'd never dealt with a P.I. before. His mid-back length black braids and copper complexion were noted and filed for future reference.

At the far end of the foyer, behind a cherry desk of simple design, was an attractive woman in a green silk blouse that perfectly matched the corporate logo reproduced on a brass plate on her desk. Another plate next to it quietly stated: Lori Cardelli. She gave Henry a welcoming smile, polished teeth gleaming brilliant past copper lipstick and warm brown skin tones.

"May I help you?" Her voice was professionally courteous, offering assistance without being intrusive.

"Yes." His nerves steadied. He was here, there was business to attend to. He reached into the inside pocket of his black suit jacket, and produced a silver card case inlaid with turquoise. It was Navajo work, not Cherokee, but at least it was Native-made, and there were worse role models than the Dine'.

"Henry Touch-The-Sky, Cherokee Tribal Council. We need your services."

Lori took the card in slim, elegantly manicured fingers, and examined it. Linen-finish cream-colored stock, the Cherokee sigil embossed in silver, and Henry's name, phone number, and the title "Tribal Representative" engraved. She indicated a chair with the card.

"If you'll have a seat, sir, one of our investigators will be with you momentarily." She touched a button on the PBX and spoke quietly into her headset mike.

A few minutes later, a heavy-set blond man in his mid-forties, in a blue off-the-rack suit, entered from the hallway behind Lori. He put out a hand to Henry.

"Don Inboden. Let's talk." He indicated the hallway with a jerk of his head, as Henry took his hand, found his grip to be dry, cool, professional, firm but not crushing. Henry followed the P.I. down the hallway, mauve walls and grey carpet, the long blank left wall decorated with framed reproductions of New Yorker magazine covers, to the second (and last) door on the right.

Beyond was a wide but shallow secretarial office, numerous file cabinets and a desk all in cherry, and a stern-looking older woman in a cream silk blouse brooched at the throat with a cameo, typing on a PC. She looked over the tops of her half-frames as Don and Henry came in.

"We'll be in my office, Leola."

"Very well," she replied. "The new client packet is on your screen."

Don gave her a nod, and ushered Henry on through the left of the two doors behind the secretary, into a plain, spare office. The ubiquitous cherry furniture dominated the room. Two paintings, one a reproduction of Van Gogh's Starry Night, the other a Paul Klee reproduction, flanked the desk like

guards. Between them, three framed certificates made a column. Beside the usual items on the desk -- blotter, stapler, pencil holder -- there was only a single coffee cup, glossy black with gold lettering: Gun Control Is A Tight Grouping.

Henry took one of the two chairs in front of the desk, mates to the ones in the reception area. Don leaned against a file cabinet, his arms folded.

"So, what can we do for you?" he asked.

Henry sighed. "You must understand, it was a difficult decision for the council to make, to send me here. Not only to a detective agency, but, well, to white men." He spread his hands apologetically. "Many of the elders have memories of bad experiences with the white man's world."

"So what brings you into it?" Don picked up his coffee cup, sipped, grimaced. "Coffee?"

"Tea, if you have it." A wise man, Henry thought, using social gestures to give him time to collect his thoughts.

Seating himself behind the desk, Don punched a button on the intercom, and gave instructions to his secretary. "So," he continued to Henry, "you're here representing the tribal council. Why us, specifically?"

"Honor." The word stood by itself, but a little explanation never hurt when dealing with non-Indians. "Your firm has a reputation for holding fast to agreements that it makes, even when it is not to your advantage to do so." He made a discarding motion with his right hand, tossing away advantage, and gathering up pride and respect. His eyes turned to his upraised fist, and what it symbolically held. "The elders required that we approach someone who understood these things, who would speak the truth and hold fast to their bargain."

Leola came in with a service tray, and set out a cup for Henry.

"I'm glad our firm has such a good rep, but that still doesn't tell me why you're here." Don sipped from his cup again, after Leola had filled it, and found it more to his liking. "Ahh, much better. Thanks." Leola departed.

Get to the point, Henry told himself. "Are you familiar with the Delaware Farms proposal?"

"Isn't that some sort of business park they're supposed to be putting in somewhere?"

"Yes. Out beyond Hickory Hollow, towards Almadale. They're still attempting to buy up the land for it, and that's the problem."

Don put down his cup. "Let me guess. Ancestral burial ground."

A pained look. "Exactly. It's a documented burial ground and ceremonial site, now on private land, and unfortunately not qualified for Federal protection due to several technicalities. Among others, it's been in a particular family's hands since before the ratification of the Tennessee Constitution."

"So buy it yourself."

"Several problems." Henry held up a finger. "One, the owner is an elderly woman who's become somewhat fussy, and isn't quite clear about a number of things any more." A second finger joined the first. "Two, her heirs are being difficult to locate. They set up a blind trust to pay for at-home nursing care, and live out of state. They apparently want very little to do with her or the potential inheritance."

"Old feud?" Don was taking notes at this point on a green legal pad.

"Could be. We really don't know." A third finger. "Three, the owner doesn't like the idea of selling to us. Apparently she's quite proud of her ancestor's efforts in taking it from us in the first place, and feels that it would betray him to give it back."

Don gave a derisive snort, and waved his pen at Henry. "Go on, go on."

"Well, she's not of a mind to sell to the consortium, either, fortunately, since we could hardly match any offer the developers might make. What we want of you, really, are two things. First off, we need the owner's heirs located, so that we can negotiate with them, see what sort of pressure they might

be able to bring to bear. Secondly, we need to know everything you can find on the developers involved."

Don looked up sharply. If he'd worn glasses, he would have been staring over the tops of the lenses. "So what you want, basically, is some ammo to use in bargaining."

Henry argued with himself briefly, and finally admitted it, as much to himself as to Don. "Yes. Whatever dirt you can turn up that might break up the consortium, muck up the deal, whatever -- anything that we can use to protect our sacred ground."

A slow nod. "You realize, of course, that we don't have the same powers as the police, that we're under far more restrictions, and that we may or may not be able to locate anything useful by the legal means available. Basically, our services are offered as-is. Results are not guaranteed."

"Yes. We also realize that you're one of the more expensive firms in this region, and that you wouldn't be able to charge such a fee if you weren't successful more often than not."

"Okay, well, with that understood, let's get the formalities out of the way. I'll need some information from you to fill out our standard contract, and then some specifics on the case."

A half an hour later, Henry left the firm, his tribal-account checkbook lighter by the retainer fee, convinced that the council had done the right thing in sending him to these people. Don filed the contract and the check, and went off down the hall to talk with the firm's research staff.

I used to be of human kind,
I had a life to lead
But now I'm frozen in a dream
My life is lost it seems
She turned the key
Of endlessness and locked me
In a dream, Infinity

Infinity so beautiful
Has turned my soul to ice
And crystallized eternity
For all my future time
She turned the key
Of endlessness and locked me
In a dream, Infinity

-- *Hawkwind, Infinity*

Evening settled over downtown Nashville, bringing little relief from the miasmatic heat of the day. The streets radiated back the solar energy they'd absorbed, and the still air left the humidity and the rush-hour exhaust fumes to stew in the cauldron. Nashville sits in a valley surrounded by mountains, and frequently the air stagnates for lack of high-altitude winds. But the rush of business folk going home was over, and the rush of business going to the District had not yet begun, giving what passed for air a chance, if not to clear, at least to settle.

On the top floor of the Fisher Investigations building, as the rays of the setting sun were blocked by the Third National tower, Vincent awoke from a day's sleep troubled by dreams of old fears and formless new ones yet to come. Oddly, he had difficulty recalling the dreams, and they faded from his mind as he reached for them. Since his Turning, he'd normally been able to remember his dreams in

perfect clarity and detail. The few times they eluded him had been either periods of great emotional stress, or immediately before a great change in his life, usually a violent one. He was reasonably happy with his current situation, so that left only the other possibility. How to prepare for a danger when you don't know what form it will take?

Start with a shower. Follow that with clean clothing; underwear (no starch, tumbled, not pressed), socks (pressed), shirt (light starch, collar pressed with none), slacks (the crease knife-sharp) and tie (silk). Conclude dressing by having a remarkably attractive woman, a natural brunette with hazel eyes, adjust your tie and hand you your jacket.

"Good evening, Traci."

"Evenin', Vince. Got the mail sorted, your messages in the folder and breakfast coming up to room temperature on the bar."

He paused a moment to consider his personal secretary. Five-eight, trim, elegant tonight in a lilac blouse with a paisley scarf and a rich purple silk skirt. How had he been so fortunate as to have found such an efficient, unshakable mind in such a beautiful package? He said as much.

Traci grinned. "This looks like a good time to ask for a raise," she said, as they exited the bedroom for the massive main room that took up most of the top floor.

"Mm." Vincent collected the crystal goblet off the free-form bar that occupied most of the north wall, and extended into the room. Crossing the parquet floor noiselessly in his stocking feet, he laid his jacket across the back of a black suede couch before sinking down onto it himself. He sipped from the goblet, held it out and curled a lip at it.

Traci snickered. "Out of date?" she asked as she took a seat in the matching overstuffed armchair opposite the couch.

"No," Vincent replied, putting down the goblet and reaching for the mail. "It's just that somehow heparinized O-positive doesn't seem quite the same after a live meal."

"You didn't --"

"No, no." Traci relaxed, the worried frown smoothing itself from her face. Vincent continued, "I left her quite alive and happy, and I even paid for my meal like a normal person. It's been a very long time since I killed, you know."

Traci began to speak; Vincent interrupted. "If I don't confront it, I can't say that I'm controlling it. I've killed before, and I will again. I have no illusions about that. But it's when I choose to."

His secretary sighed. "As long as you're sure --"

He laughed, a single humorless bark. "I'm never completely sure. That's why I have to test myself occasionally. Also, last night was exhausting."

She nodded. "Yeah, Tony told me about it when he came to pick up the tape."

"He got that okay?"

"Yeah."

"Terrific. Sent the bill to Third National?"

"Out in today's mail."

"Excellent."

"Serious business, Vince." She leaned forward. "You may not be in any real danger from the perps, but you've got to watch your rep with the press. Sooner or later, someone's going to wonder about a man who can take down five armed men by himself."

He shrugged. "They split up, and I took'em down one at a time, except for the two I got from behind. That's how I'll testify, anyway. Oh, did Tony say when the taping would be?"

She referred to a steno pad she'd left on the chrome and smoked-glass coffee table. "Um, Tuesday, eight o'clock, here. That okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Yow, I'm glad they decided to allow videotaped testimony from unavailable witnesses. Used to be such a mess, hanging around the courthouse all day, dodging windows, trying to stay awake -- now all I have to do is record a tape and then go out of town." He tried another sip from the goblet; this one apparently wasn't quite so bad. That, or he was getting used to the heparin aftertaste. "What's in the mail tonight?" He picked up the stack and leafed through it.

"The electric bill. I've attached a check authorization."

"Mm." Vincent signed the form and went to the next item.

"The phone bill. Ditto."

"Who did Valerie call in South Korea?" He raised an eyebrow at the invoice.

"Adoption agency. It's been billed out to the client."

"Oh, right, that family reunion thing. She said something about that in the report, didn't she?"

"Mm-hm."

"How did that turn out?" He signed the payment authorization, and went to the next item.

"They located the girl's brother, and the family is now arranging to adopt him and bring him over."

"Terrific." A series of magazines he didn't have time to read were laid aside on a growing pile.

"That's it?"

"Light day."

"Mm." He reached for the messages folder, flipped it open. "Okay, tell Mrs. Dubrowski that the owner says that we absolutely, positively do not do divorce cases. Make it clear to her that she should have believed the previous people she spoke with." Traci made a note on her steno pad.

Next message. "Hm. Tell Third National that I'm completely unavailable for lunch for the next, oh, four weeks. I'll be out of town for part of that. Let them know I could show up at their club some night, but it would have to be unannounced, as my schedule permits."

"The busy-boss routine?" Traci grinned.

"Yeah, they ought to understand that." He took a pull at the goblet, flipped to the next message - and choked. The goblet was put down abruptly, the liquid within nearly slopping over and the glass itself perilously close to the edge of the coffee table.

Traci rescued her boss's breakfast. "There a clot in there or something?" she asked, studying the goblet's contents suspiciously.

"Hmph -- mmhm -- very funny." He raised an eyebrow at her. "This came in last night?"

"Yeah, while you were on stakeout. Who is this Stasja person, anyway? Old money or something?"

"You could say that." Vincent looked back to the message, and sighed.

"She's got the attitude --" Traci began, then broke off, giving Vincent a sharp look. "Wait a minute. I could say that, but you wouldn't, right?"

Vincent gave her a nod of affirmation, still staring at the message.

"Aw, shit. She's another vampire, isn't she?"

"She's my Maker." Vincent let the simple phrase hang between them until the air began to stagnate. "I haven't seen her in over eight years. Barely a tick of the clock for her, of course, but a long time for me."

"You sound like it hasn't been long enough."

"It hasn't." He stared off into space for a moment, debating with himself. "Look," he said finally, "you know more about me and about vampires in general than most breathers ever suspect."

"However?"

"However, there's a lot of things I haven't told you."

Traci's eyebrows rose. "Like this is news? Vince, there's a lot of things I don't want to be told."

Does this fall under that classification?"

He sighed again. "Possibly."

"I was afraid of that," she muttered.

Vincent ignored her. "Stasja is old nobility, White Russian. She's been around for a very long time. It's impolite to ask a vampire how many years it's been since they were Turned, and she never told me, so I don't really know. The problem is, in all that time, she's never matured from the court butterfly she was at her Turning."

"Ick." Traci went to the bar and poured herself a brandy.

"Ick indeed. I haven't told you about my own Turning, and if Stasja is in town, you'd better know about it."

Traci sipped her brandy, then held it up. "I had a feeling I was going to need this."

"Anyway," Vincent continued, reaching for his own glass, "ten years ago, I was working security for a very exclusive party. The client had some, well, peculiar demands, like all the guards removing their silver jewelry and carrying ammo the client provided. We didn't ask questions since the client paid extremely well, I got a whacking big commission on the job since I was bossing it --"

"This is when you were with Eagle?"

"Yeah." Vincent bit his lip reflectively, handing off his goblet from right to left and back again. He still hadn't drunk from it since he'd picked it up. "Well, to cut to the chase, there was a woman there who seemed very interested in me. I made arrangements to see her the following night, as I wasn't going to go fooling around on duty. The next night, I went to see her at her hotel. She invited me in, and then she bit me."

"Just like that? No foreplay or anything?"

"Just about. Hello, how are you, she wrapped her arms around me and sank her teeth into my neck."

"Geez, talk about a quickie!"

Vincent grinned. "Well, sort of. The entire process took a bit longer than that. Anyway, what Stasja was after was a new pet." His expression went grim. "She attempted to bond me to her, as a new member of her coterie. Apparently she liked the idea of having her own personal security guard."

"Nice person."

"It didn't work."

"What?" Traci sipped her brandy.

"The bonding. It didn't take, and she was left with an angry security specialist. Well, she got me calmed down, and took me on as a fledgling anyway. Taught me the basics of what I needed to know, even tried to introduce me to her level of society."

Traci rolled her eyes. "I can guess how well that went."

Vincent snickered. "Yeah, well, she tried to introduce me to the right people. I just don't run with that pack."

"Comparing them to wolves? Is that good or bad?"

"Both. Neither." He shrugged. "I guess it all depends on your point of view. There's an alpha leader in every group, and a definite order of precedence, but pack members are loyal to each other, especially in the face of opposition. Threaten a vampire and his entire coterie are abruptly there with him, ready to open up a can of whipass on you."

"But you don't have a pack."

"Coterie."

"That's what they call it?"

"Yeah. And no, I don't have one. See, there's also a code of behavior that allows the leader of the

coterie to toss out any member who breaks the laws of the vampiri or in any other way fails to measure up to the standards of the pack. Stasja told me that while I was nice to look at, I just didn't fit in. So, she pensioned me off."

"She paid you to leave?"

"More or less. Basically, she couldn't toss out a fledgling without providing some resources for him without breaking her own personal code. So, she set me up with a portfolio."

"And that's how you bought this building?"

"Yep. Cashed it in after a year or so, when I was sure she wouldn't be dropping back by any time soon, bought the building, set up the firm, and the rest, as they say, is history."

"Except that history has a way of repeating itself."

"Yeah." Vincent started to put down his goblet, then tossed off the contents. He shuddered, making a terrible face, and set the goblet aside. "I have this horrible feeling," he said when he got his jaw unclenched, "that she's going to drag me to another party."

"Can I come?" Traci asked. Vincent gave her a look that made her wish she hadn't.

"No. They'd assume I'd brought you as a party favor. Bad idea."

"Ah." She turned away, and gave serious attention to her brandy. A few images had come across in that look, and as casual as she tried to be about Vince's diet, it still got to her sometimes.

"So I'll have to go."

"You can't beg off somehow?"

He shook his head. "Traci, she's the one who Turned me. To refuse any vaguely reasonable request from her could result in this building being set afire at high noon."

Shocked -- "She wouldn't!"

"No, she wouldn't. But one of her coterie might have it done as revenge for the insult to his leader." He sighed. "And I just know it's going to be at a really inconvenient time..."

Don set his briefcase down on his desk and opened it. The pocket photocopier went into its stand to recharge. The Subway bag he set aside for later attention. He pulled out a folder full of copies, some standard size, some long strips held together in bundles with paper clips, and sat down to collate his research.

Reaching into the Subway bag, he laid out his dinner, and began the tedious task of assembling the hand-held copier's narrow strips into full-page images.

Two hours, a roast beef sub and two bags of barbecue potato chips later, he looked up from his work to check the clock. Eight p.m. The Wrangler should be in by now. Like Vincent, he was rarely seen around the office until well after dark, but for different reasons.

Don shoveled his dinner leavings into the wastebasket, bundled his copies back into their folder along with the notes he'd made while studying them, and set off for the third floor.

The elevator let him off into a hallway dimly lit by indirect fluorescent fixtures with smoked filters. The cave-like atmosphere was enhanced by the medium blue walls, light grey ceiling tile and dark grey carpet. No framed posters here to break up the left wall's sweeping expanse; it was left to make its own statement. The thick pile muffled his footsteps as he strode past a metal security door on the right, another, and came up to a third door. This door differed from the previous two in several important ways. First off, it had a palmprint reader instead of a card-access lock. Secondly, the driving beat of Jane's Addiction pulsed through it despite its solid construction. Third, unlike the previous two unlabelled doors, this one had two signs. The upper one bore a familiar black on yellow emblem and the legend

"Extreme Radiation Hazard: Protective Gear Required". The lower sign had a small tag hanging from it that could be flipped to change the wording. Currently, the composite read: The Neuron Wrangler Is Online.

Don laid his hand on the reader. After a moment or two, the door opened inward slightly. He was amazed that the decibel pressure from within didn't slam it back shut again. Shaking his head at today's youth in general, he stepped into the sanctum.

The walls had once been a medium grey. Now, they were papered over with posters (Fugazi, Alice in Chains), flyers (Defcon, Summercon) and printout tacked wherever had been convenient at the time. Two bookcases loaded with technical manuals and binders of printout flanked the door; a table likewise overloaded stood to the left. It was anyone's guess as to which would collapse first, drowning the room in a paper tsunami. In one far corner, an aging IICx drove a printer, the screen showing the print queue. In the other corner, a 21" color monitor dominated a massive L-shaped computer hutch. An external modem sat next to the monitor, where its status lights could be seen and its power switch easily accessed in an emergency. The computer that drove them stood in a tower case on the floor, out of the way. The rest of the hutch was buried in a drift of paper, Post-It notes, crumpled sandwich wrappers and cheap plastic toys. A garbage can and a recycle bin occupied the floor to the left, both overflowing.

"Wrangler!" Don shouted, to be heard over the noise.

"Yo!" The room's occupant reached up to the shelf over the monitor and spun the volume knob on a truly monumental boombox, bringing the level down to where conversation was possible. He spun in his ergonomic swivel chair to face Don.

The person addressed was in his late teens, with unruly brown hair that badly wanted a comb, and a sour look on his narrow features. He wore a faded Metallica tour shirt, jeans with the knees ripped out, and moccasins with no socks. "What?" he demanded.

Don raised an eyebrow. "If you can spare the time," he said archly, "I've got a job for you."

The Wrangler rolled his eyes. "If I can spare the time, he says." He spun back to the keyboard, and with a few quick keystrokes, saved the file and exited. "S'okay, I've been on this bagbiting bug hunt for only three hours tonight. Got some damn subtle twitch in the code I can't fucking well trace." He grabbed the nearest soda can, shook it; crumpled it and pitched it in the general direction of the recycle bin. It banked off the wall and added itself to the pile on the floor. "I could use a break. Whatcha got?" He eyed the folder as if it were a Christmas present.

"Real estate consortium." Don tossed the folder on the desk, sending two wind-up walking toys into the limbo behind the monitor, probably never to be seen again. He flipped open the folder. "Got half a dozen people, venture capital types and developers -- "

"Delaware Farms." The Wrangler closed his eyes. "Twelve point four six in capital holdings, including land purchases, options sold on one-third of the total expected development, currently halted due to inability to buy key plots, under investigation for zoning irregularities and maybe for murder." He opened his eyes to see what effect the last pronouncement had on Don.

The older man blinked, opened his mouth, closed it. "Murder?" he said in disbelieving tones.

"Yep." The Wrangler spun back to the keyboard, grabbed the mouse and clicked through a series of windows. The bubble-jet printer on the shelf next to the boombox quietly slid a page into its tray. Inboden took it, looked it over.

"Story's been put on hold," the Wrangler said. "I'm betting it gets spiked before the morning edition's put to bed."

"You got this from the Tennessean?" Don's eyes flicked from the story to the Wrangler and back.

"Yeah. Check it out."

Inboden read through the brief article. Mrs. Ellie Borden had died the previous evening when her

house had exploded. An unnamed source in the Fire Department had termed the blast "suspicious". That phrase applied to fires usually meant "The arsonist got away." By the time Inboden was done reading, the Wrangler had fired up a telecom program, spun through an outdial and logged into the Tennessean under the city editor's account.

"Okay, he's still got it flagged as hold. Hasn't spiked it yet. Lemme see what I can get here." His concentration sharpened as he navigated the system. "Got it." A download window popped up on the monitor. The Wrangler gave a contented sigh, and looked up at Inboden, who'd put the article down and was leaning over his shoulder to watch.

"One of my better pieces of code," the Wrangler told him. "Lets me emulate the editor requesting a copy over the LAN."

"I'm assuming that means you can copy a file without it showing up as having gone off-site?"

"Right. The sysadmin will only see a request from the editor, the file being sent to his inbox, reviewed and deleted."

"So what is this you're stealing?"

The Wrangler grinned. "That's a harsh word from someone who wants something from me. Besides, how can you steal something that's still there when you leave?"

"I'm not getting into that debate again. What is it?"

"The reporter's notes file for the story. If the story gets spiked, the notes file gets either archived or deleted, and that makes it much harder to retrieve. Figured -- whoa!"

The download had completed, and the captured file presented itself in a subsidiary window. The first line: Traces of high explosives -- lots.

"Suspicious, my ass," grumbled Inboden. "They're holding the lid on a murder, all right."

"Why?"

"So the murderer thinks he got away with it. Perps who don't think they're under suspicion do stupid things." He gathered up the folder. "Go on and see what you can find on the consortium. I think half this case just got solved for us."

"Oh?" The Wrangler was only paying half attention as he browsed through the notes file.

"Yeah. No problem finding the old woman's heirs. They'll be coming here."

Sgt. Greg Murchison had been on duty in Dispatch the previous night, and when he first took the call, his immediate reaction was Oh, no, not again. The explosion last night had tied up ten units, plus fire, EMS, coroner and Bomb Squad.

"Is the fire spreading?" he asked, trying to get some useful information from the hysterical woman on the other end of the 911 call. Then he really began to listen. No, there was no fire, the house was coming apart in pieces, and her neighbor was screaming loud enough to be heard over the noise and the wind.

Wind? Yes, it had to be a tornado or something, the woman insisted. Well, units are on their way, Sgt. Murchison assured her, and when he hung up, glanced up at the TV that was kept tuned to the Weather Channel. Seventy-six degrees, down from a high of 91, humidity 68%, winds from the west at five. Forecast tonight, clear and mild, tomorrow, clear and hot. Tornado? What the fuck?

What the fuck? Officer Steve Gallaci asked when he arrived on the scene. Two other units were already parked on the street out front of the lot, takedowns strobing blue into the night. Their drivers were directing traffic as other emergency vehicles arrived.

Bits of house were scattered across the massive front yard, smashed wood, chunks of brick. A patch of shingles rested in a hydrangea bush, and half of an easy chair dangled by its upholstery from an oak nearby.

"What happened, another bomb?" Gallaci asked as he approached Pete Claiborne, who was directing the parking of an EMS unit.

"Fuck if I know," Pete said. He shrugged. "Weren't no smell of explosives or smoke or nothin' when I got here. Smelled kind of like a storm."

Gallaci glanced up at the cloudless sky, and back to Pete. "Whaddaya mean, a storm? Pete, there ain't a cloud in the sky!"

Pete shrugged again. "Naw, to the left!" he shouted to the driver of the next vehicle.

Gallaci left him to his problems and headed up the lawn, picking his way carefully, checking not only his path but to the left and right with his flashlight. Mess like this, there could be chunks of more than house lying around.

He was the first to reach the house proper. Sure looked like a tornado -- place half ripped up, pieces torn off, windows blown out. He made his way carefully into what was left of the house, sniffing the air for smoke or explosive residue. Not a whiff. Pete was right, it had that electric smell of a storm.

Then his light passed over a dark streak on the wall. Back to it, fast. Brownish-red, glistening. Still fresh. Something had hit there, above the couch, landed on the couch where there was a damp spot. Blood trail led off toward the stairs -- no, those splashes were made coming from the staircase. Good thing, too, half the stairs were gone.

Gallaci gave a low whistle. The stairs were smashed through, wood splinters and tattered rags of carpet in a pile below the gap. If you dropped something really big and heavy, like a safe, maybe, from the top of the stairs, and it hit midway down, you'd get a smash-through like that.

The blood trail leaving the room went down a hallway. Again, Gallaci stopped, amazed by the damage. This time, huge gouges had been ripped in the walls and floor. He'd have said they were claw marks, but the thing that made them would have had to have a paw spread the size of a leaf rake.

He moved on through into a dining room, identifiable only by the china cupboard in the corner, and that had part of a chair sticking out of it. The rest of the furniture in the room had been smashed into toothpicks. More blood splashes, be careful where you step, don't track up the evidence -- and a hand.

Gallaci paused for a minute to settle his stomach. Don't throw up on the evidence. The severed hand lay in a pool of blood, under a splash on the wall. Closer examination revealed that it hadn't been cut off -- it'd been torn. Okay, deep breath. Where did it come from? A good distance, from the size of the splat on the wall. That, or thrown hard. Track it back --

"Holy shit." Assuming the hand had been flung or thrown in a more or less straight line, Gallaci had looked down to discover more massive gouges in the floor. These had bits of wood from the table driven into them, crushed into the marks. Blood spatters surrounded the gouges, giving a partial outline of what could possibly be a foot -- the size of a lawn rake. Something really big -- no, something fucking huge, had stood here, torn off a man's hand and tossed it away. Gallaci pulled his gun, for the first time feeling that his military-issue full-auto Colt .45 ACP wasn't going to be sufficient firepower. Noises from the hallway --

"Steve?" Thank God, it was Pete. Backup. Good idea. Excellent idea.

"Steve?" Pete asked again. "You okay?"

In answer, Steve turned his light on the hand.

"Jesus." Pete drew his gun, looked at it, then at Steve. "Ron's coming in behind me. Wanna wait for him?"

"Yeah." Waiting for Ron meant not having to go any further just yet.

Pete started across the room toward the hand. Steve blocked the way with his flashlight, then flicked the beam to the spatters on the floor. "Careful."

"Jesus." Pete bent down to examine the gouges. "We got a bear loose in here or some-such?"

"I dunno. You wanna go get the shotguns?"

"Shit. No, we've got to find out what's here. If it is a bear, we can get out with these" -- he raised his pistol -- "and let somebody else use the heavy artillery."

"I'm calling it in." Steve pulled the mike off his epaulet. "Dispatch, three-one."

"Three-one, dispatch."

"I'm on the scene, looks like we got a wild animal attack. Advise officers backing me up to bring heavy firearms."

"Ten-four, three-one. Will advise."

Another voice crackled from the radio. "Three-one, this is three-three. Be advised I'm coming in with a spare for you. Ten-twenty?"

Steve clicked his mike on. "Three-three, I'm holding with three-seven. Follow the trail to the left."

"Ten-four, three-three."

A few moments later, a third officer emerged from the hallway. He handed a riot shotgun to Steve, who quickly checked it for load and safety while Pete directed Ron's attention to the tracks.

"Fuckin-A," said Ron. "Let's go." He clicked off the safety on his gun as Steve led the way into the kitchen.

First impression: smell of copper, sour milk, open sewer. Steve gagged, got himself back in control, held his light out away from his body so as not to make a target of himself and flicked it across the room. Blood splashes across the stainless steel appliances, trickling down the sides of the cooking island in the center of the room. Beyond, the room was open to the back yard, a hole smashed through the wall big enough to drive a pickup through. Then the mess on the counter resolved -- wet gleam of spilled intestines, raw torn flesh, shards of bone, and the lump at the end had a single eye gazing out at him next to a smashed ruin oozing grey matter.

Trained reactions took over as his mind shut down in the face of the atrocity. Steve moved off fast to the right, crouching to present a smaller target, using what cover he could find as he went. He clicked off the light, and headed for the hole in the wall.

Just outside, amid the wreckage of wood, brick, and foam insulation, were more gouges -- and square in the middle of the flowerbed, a footprint. Pete and Ron came up behind him, covering his advance, and stopped short, staring.

The print was a foot and a half in length with ease, and the five clawed toes spread over a foot wide.

"The fuck!" Pete was the first to recover his voice.

"Damn if I know," Steve replied quietly. "Check the yard?"

"Fuck, no," Ron said. "I ain't goin' out there after that thing. Let'em call the Animal Control people."

Steve turned slowly to him, looking like he'd just eaten a raw snail. "Ron, only animals in the world have five toes're apes and humans. You ever see a monkey that goddamn big?" He indicated the print with his shotgun.

"No, but it ain't human, either."

"Damn," said Pete. "I hope not."

There were few things, Vincent had long ago decided, more boring than accounting. Somewhere on the planet was a person who actually enjoyed moving numbers from one column to another, and if he could have gotten away with it, he would long ago have found this person and turned over the financial paperwork with great relief. However, as few of the strictures of the vampiri as Vincent paid attention to, this was one he held inviolate -- thou shalt handle thine own books, and no other. Not that he was doing anything illegal, but a breathing accountant might wonder who the perpetual trusts were for, and why so much money was put into bearer bonds and password-access Swiss accounts. Trying to explain the problems of immortality in a paper-infested society was simply out of the question.

So, here he was, spending his night like he did every Tuesday, plodding through the scut work of finance. It was almost time to pack it in and go meditate for a while, searching for some vague intuition about the stock market, when a window popped up over his spreadsheet.

ENTRY REQUEST, it announced. Palm print and voice confirmed (97.5%) Inboden, Donald.

Now what could Don want? It was, obviously, important enough for him to interrupt Accounting Night, and with a personal appearance instead of a memo through the office computer net or a phone call. Vincent saved and exited his spreadsheet, acknowledged and okayed the entry request, and rose from the computer station that occupied the north end of the bar as the security door opened. The receipts and printout spread out on the bar around the computer he ignored. Don wouldn't be able to read any of them from the other end of the room.

"Sorry to disturb you, Vince, but it's important," Don said as he entered. The security door quietly closed itself behind him.

"Obviously." Vincent poured himself a cognac, held the bottle over a second glass, glanced over at Don, who shook his head. Stoppering the bottle, Vincent continued, "It's not often I see you on a Tuesday. So, what is it?" He picked up his cognac and took a sip, savoring the smoky overtones.

In answer, Don laid a thick folder down on the bar and opened it. The top sheet was the Tennessean story. "This morning," Don said, "I got a new client. Cherokee Indian, tribal council rep. He says his people are trying to keep a real estate developer from buying an old burial ground and building an office park on it. He tells me the old woman who owns the place won't sell it to the Indians." He tapped the paper with a finger. "Last night, the old lady died. This story got held by the city editor. Wrangler says it'll be spiked by morning, and I agree."

Vincent skimmed quickly through the story. "Suspicious. Hmph. That usually means deliberate."

"Yep. It gets better. The reporter's notes file said there were traces of explosives at the site. Lots of explosives."

"So you think the client killed the land owner?"

"No." Don shook his head decisively. "It doesn't make sense for him to do so. First off, why hire us, if he knew she was already dead? Second, it weakens the tribe's position. Apparently the old lady's kids didn't get along with her. In my book, that means they're more likely to sell to the developers. The tribe hasn't got the money to match an offer from a development consortium."

"The Feds can't help?"

"No. Some sort of technicality over length of possession or somesuch."

"Hm." Another sip of cognac. "What all are the Indians having us do?"

"They wanted us to find and make contact with the old woman's heirs, and dig up some dirt they could use for ammo with the developers."

Vincent frowned. "Stay on it," he said at last. Then the intercom beeped. He reached over and punched it. "Yes?"

"Been listening to the police band?" the Wrangler asked.

"No. Why?"

"Check your printer. The story's been spiked, and they're running a clip on page eight of the local section calling it a gas leak. What a load of bullshit."

"What about the police radio?" Vincent prompted.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, uh, they found one of the consortium developers spread all over his kitchen. House looks like a war zone, and they put in a call to Animal Control."

Don and Vincent traded looks. "I'll assume you're running a tape?" Vincent asked.

"Yeah."

"Get it to Traci for transcription as soon as the situation is closed out, and pull anything related from both papers. Also, are there any TV news crews on the scene?"

"Uh, yeah" -- rustling of paper -- "Channel Five, but they're bitchin' at their control about not being allowed on the site."

"Fine. Let me know if anything else develops." To Don: "Stay on it, like I said, and call your client tonight. Give him a progress report, and sound him out about the murders. Somehow, I don't think the Cherokee are responsible, but check it out anyway. I'm going to go catch the late news."

Don took the folder with him as he departed. Vincent went off into the bedroom for clothing more appropriate for sneaking into a TV station.

The Burial Ground Committee of the Cherokee tribal council met in the auditorium of the reservation's elementary school, the room being of sufficient size, and more important, free. A few years down the road, the Federal land lease on much of Eastern Tennessee would expire. The tribe had no intention of renewing the lease. The lands that would convert to Cherokee ownership would make the tribe wealthy enough to afford a proper council hall, as well as better food, schools, and Native physicians to replace the BIA-supplied whites who did not understand the link between body and spirit, and thought you could treat just an arm instead of the whole patient.

Down the right side of the table sat the matriarchs, the wise old women who spoke for the physical world. The left side was reserved for the shamans, the men who spoke for the spirit world. At the head of the table, Susan Canook held the talking stick as council leader. She picked up a soup can, spat a stream of tobacco juice into it, and thumped the stick on the table.

"Council begins," she stated, giving a nod to John Skyhorse. The other shamans took up a rhythmic beat on the edge of the table with their hands, and set up a background chant, as John closed his eyes and leaned his head back. The chant shifted to a low humming as Skyhorse invoked Bear and White Buffalo Woman to guide the proceedings, the liquid syllables of the Cherokee tongue hanging in the air for a moment after he'd pronounced them.

The room became quieter, its edges not as sharply defined, as the shamans ended their chant. Canook shifted her mass uncomfortably. At three hundred pounds, it was hard to find a chair she could sit in for more than five minutes without it becoming painful, and the damn Federal surplus junk the BIA had pawned off on the tribe this year was worse than usual. Well, it was going to be a short meeting.

She raised the talking stick. "We have only one thing to decide tonight. The burial ground. The white woman who owned it is dead. Her daughters will soon arrive to divide her goods. Touch-The-Sky bought the service of the white hunters this morning, so they are only begun on the trail. We must decide what we will do to protect our sacred ground." She passed the talking stick to Patsy Climbs-Rocks, now in her 60's, arthritic and no longer able to live up to her name.

Climbs-Rocks took the stick in gnarled fingers, and placed it on the table before her, laying her hands on it. "Do we know of any progress from the white scouts?" She looked down the table to where

Touch-The-Sky sat at the far end of the men's side.

"No, grandmother," he said respectfully. "The hunter gave his word he would tell us as soon as he found the trail."

"Hmph." The wiry old man next to Henry was dressed in a leather vest and worn jeans, his long dirty-grey hair flowing free, a sharp contrast to the dress shirts, pressed slacks and neat braids of the other men. "The word of a white."

Climbs-Rocks raised the talking stick. The old man glared at it, but desisted.

"So," Climbs-Rocks said, "we have no news from the scouts. The white woman's daughters will be here soon. We should consider doing something ourselves." She passed the stick to the next person, a rail-thin woman in men's clothing with the foreboding name of Sally Sings-With-Fury.

The new speaker took the stick in a calloused hand and planted it vertically on the table with a decisive thump. "We cannot wait for the white man," she said, her voice rough with years of cigarettes and shouting to be heard at the lumber mill where she worked. "If we do, we will lose more land. This has always been so. I say that we should use the white media" -- she pronounced the English word with distaste, preferring Cherokee -- "as our tool. We can shame these people into doing what is right. It has not always been so, but more whites have souls now than before, and care more about saving face before the world. We must call attention to our problems, with an act of resistance, as we did when the whites looked for a new place for their garbage pit." She thrust the stick at Judy Blue Duck, who took it slowly and meditated upon it for a time.

"We have waited," she said finally, still focusing on the stick and speaking more to it than to the council, "two hundred years to reclaim this land. I do not see what waiting a few more days will harm."

The old man at the end of the table began to object, then remembered that Blue Duck still held the talking stick, and subsided.

"We have scouts who will tell us if the land is threatened," Blue Duck continued. "I say we should wait for our current plans to bear fruit or wither before we consider replanting." She sent the stick on to Lucy Stillwater, who simply said, "Agreed," and passed the stick over to the men's side.

Henry shook his head. "You know where I stand." He passed the stick to the next speaker.

The old man's eyes blazed as he held the talking stick aloft. "We cannot count on or trust the whites! If we follow their path, will we not cease to be ourselves? The spirits are with us, and will make us strong again, strong enough to take back what is ours. I say we drive the whites from the land as they drove us from it long ago! I tell you, the spirits will help us if we are true to our own ways!" He shook the stick at the council members.

John Skyhorse took the stick, earning a freezing glare from the old man. "Walks By Night rides on the path of war, and I do not. But I agree that we cannot wait for or trust in the whites. I stand with Sings With Fury." He sent the stick on to Kevin Sun-Goes-Down.

The old hunting guide turned the stick thoughtfully before speaking. "I say that it is foolish to ride out before the scouts have returned, but when you know where the enemy is camped, you may scout for yourself on the way to ambush. Let us strike first and be assured that we shall sing the songs of triumph." He gave the stick over to Canook.

She nodded slowly, considering the stick's engraved patterns. "Then we shall act. Gather tents, food and water, and speak to those who will hear. We leave tomorrow night."

The shamans thanked the spirits who had watched over the meeting, and the committee adjourned, most going out for a smoke and the usual after-meeting gossip and politicking. Henry drew Skyhorse aside.

"What was Walks By Night talking about?" he asked, switching to English now that they were out of the meeting.

Skyhorse shook his head. "There's no telling," he said, glancing about quickly to be sure that they were alone. "He hasn't been all there since he spent that winter out in Colorado. Claims it was some big medicine powwow, but I think him and his buddies spent the whole time out in the mountains chewing datura and bullshitting about the women they'd slept with. Just ignore him. Everybody else does."

Henry gave Skyhorse an odd look at that, for such disrespect to an elder, even in private and regarding such an obviously whacked-out one as Walks By Night. "If you say so," he said at last, and took his leave. He had to call Don at Fisher Investigations, find out what had been discovered so far, and warn him about the tribe's plans. It didn't do to keep your scouts too much in the dark about your own troop movements, not when there was a good chance of one overrunning the other.

John watched him go, then went looking for Sun Goes Down. He found the older man off in a quiet corner of the playground, leaning on the monkey bars, thoughtfully smoking a pipe.

"Kevin, we gotta talk."

"Let's try to move in a little closer."

The voice came from the television. Vincent lay sprawled comfortably on the sofa, shoes off and his feet on the coffee table, remote in one hand and cognac in the other, watching. He'd opted for the projection system rather than the Curtis Mathes on the entertainment unit against the wall, trading off fine resolution for enlargement. The cameraman who'd shot the footage was a really terrific guy; highly skilled, courageous, enterprising, and quite happy to make a copy of the tape for some total stranger who'd shown up in the editing room at the station without so much as a guest pass, but with fifty bucks in his hand. No questions, just run the duplicate and get back to business. Useful person to keep track of.

The onscreen point of view had advanced halfway up the lawn, under the cover of a line of shrubbery. Vincent made a mental note to update his files. He hadn't been aware that TV news crews were carrying available-light cameras.

Then the phone rang. Irritably, Vincent paused the VCR, rolled off the sofa and headed for the bar.

"Vincent."

"Vince, you got a minute?" Tony sounded worried.

"Sure." He sat down on a barstool. "What's up?"

Sigh. "I really don't know," Tony said. "We've got a truly weird one here. Thought you might be interested."

"Wouldn't be that wild animal attack, now, would it?"

Tony laughed. "Been listening to the scanner again, huh?"

"Something like that. So tell me about it."

"You sittin' down?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Palmer Dobbs was found in his kitchen. Well, most of him was. There was a hand in the dining room, and part of his face in the upstairs bedroom. The coroner's report isn't in yet, but he said part of the body was missing, including the left leg. Now, right now we're passing it off as a wild animal attack, but Forensics made casts of the damndest footprint I ever saw. C'mon down, if you got the time, and I'll show'em to you."

"Well," Vincent said, "I'm sort of expecting an important phone call tonight --"

"Old girlfriend?"

"Something like that."

"Vince, that's the second time you've said that. Let's get some of these cleared up, okay?"

"Which one first?"

"How about the first one first?"

"Okay. You sitting down?"

"Uh-oh."

"Yeah." Vince tossed off the last of his cognac. "We're already on this case, from another angle."

"How much can you tell me?"

"Without violating client privilege? Well, considering this may be a murder investigation..."

"It is. Quit fishing and get on with it."

"Okay, okay. I didn't buy the wild animal story."

"C'mon, Vince, cut to the chase."

"Be patient. Don't rush me. You know that Dobbs was part of the Delaware Farms consortium, right?"

"Yeah."

"You looking into connections between Dobbs and the Borden bombing?"

Long pause, sigh. "I'm not even going to ask how you knew it was a bomb. Probably wouldn't tell me."

"Right the first time." Vincent grinned. "Gotta protect my sources."

"So, anyway..."

"So, anyway, we picked up a client this morning" -- he glanced at the clock -- "um, yesterday morning, who wanted us to look into both Borden and the consortium."

"Hm." Sound of a spoon in a ceramic cup. Slurp. "Think your client might could know something?"

"I don't see them as being responsible. I mean, it makes no sense, hiring us to look into the situation after the fact."

"I dunno, Vince, the world is full of crazies."

"Crazy enough to hire us after a murder? I doubt it. No, I think our client's clear, although somebody connected to them might be responsible. Tell you what, Tony, why don't I pursue this from my end, you follow it from yours, and we'll swap notes?"

"My thoughts exactly."

"If my client is responsible, after all, I need to know so that I can get my firm clear. I'm not going to get hung up in the middle of a murder because of one loose nut."

"Good thought. Okay, well, how about tomorrow to look at the footprints and the pictures, and we'll swap notes then. That'll give me time to get some stuff together."

"Fine. Usual place?"

"Same bat time, same bat channel."

"Okay. See you."

"Bye."

Vincent hung up the phone, and went back to the couch. It was some time before he went back to the tape, though, sorting mentally through the possibilities. He didn't think Henry himself was to blame, but there was more than one Indian in the world. Maybe someone else on the Council? Or someone not on the Council, that didn't approve of the direction they were taking. Could be more than one person -- could even be more than one faction, for that matter. There were more than two sides to this story, and he had to get them all nailed down tight and be sure where his firm stood in this mess.

At long last, he put the tape back on, watching closely as the cameraman worked his way almost to the door before the police spotted him and sent him back to his truck.

Don left his '91 Pontiac Sunbird in the All-Day Park on Third as the city began to waken. He'd just beaten the rush hour traffic, and now had plenty of time for breakfast before the courthouse opened. He bought a paper from the machine in front of the MacDonald's on Fourth, and went inside.

A few minutes later, he was settled at a table off to the side, well away from the two TVs blaring the Morning Show, with his paper open to page 8 of the Local section. Sure enough, there it was, just like the Wrangler had said. Obnoxious kid with lousy taste in music, but he could make a computer sit up and beg. Damn lucky find for the firm. Gas explosion, my ass. No obit yet. No mention of survivors. Well, if he couldn't find Mrs. Borden's kids faster than the police or the insurance company, he'd turn in his license.

There was a feature article on the front of the Local section on Dobbs. No speculation about where a wild animal that big would have come from, no commentary on the state of the house, and no pictures. Another one with a tight lid on it. Well, no sense in causing a panic. One of the primary rules of journalism was to tell the people what they wanted to know, but not enough to scare them. The average citizen really didn't want to know the truth. He wanted to be patted on the head, and told, there, there, it's okay, all the monsters are locked up safe away.

Don shook himself out of the cynical funk he'd drifted into, finished off the last bite of his hash browns and the last swallow of coffee, and took his tray to the trashcan, leaving the paper behind for the next person. MacDonald's never had enough morning papers.

At the courthouse, he obtained copies of the Borden children's birth certificates from the Registrar, then spent the next half an hour going through old city directories until he had their last known local addresses. He walked down to the Kefauver Federal Courthouse, paid a fee to the Social Security Administration and received their Social Security Numbers and last three places of employment. Armed with that information, he headed back to the office to spend the rest of the morning on the phone.

"Hello, my name is Paul Clark, and I'm with Prudential. We have a life insurance policy that's come payable, and we're trying to find the beneficiary. Do you remember a Darren Borden, used to work there?" People were always glad to help someone get a check. By lunchtime, he'd placed Darren in Tulsa, Oklahoma, working at a tax service, Juline in Omaha, Nebraska, wife of an auto mechanic, and Patricia in Philadelphia, where she was teaching elementary school. He'd have to wait until this evening to contact two of them. Might as well do all three at once. On to the next business.

He took his hardhat out of the file cabinet, along with a folder of three-part forms, and headed out to Bellevue, where there were lots of construction sites owned by members of the Delaware Farms consortium.

Don identified himself to the guard at the gate as an inspector for the Electricians' Union, and was promptly waved through. No guard would ever stop a union rep on official business. His union card was even legit, dues paid and all. Granted, the Wrangler had built the files it was based on, but the card itself was real enough.

He put a form on the clipboard he kept in the back seat, put on his hardhat, and strolled into the site, pausing every now and then to poke at a junction box or exposed conduit. Passing workers from other unions read his badge and went on about their business, glad he wasn't from their union. Finally, he located a pair of electricians, one on a ladder with his head and shoulders through an opening in the suspended ceiling, the other handling several reels of wire threaded on a pipe, their ends disappearing up into the opening.

"Morning, boys," Don said as he strolled up.

"Morning," the wire handler replied. His badge read SPIVEY, J. (Journeyman). He was a young

man barely into his 20's, with the heart-shaped face and buck teeth common in East Tennessee. His plaid flannel shirt was already dusty and soaked with sweat.

"They runnin' you hard, there?" Don grinned. He stuck out a hand. "Jack Purvis, Local 221."

Spivey rested one end of the pipe on a ladder step to shake Don's hand. "Jeff Spivey."

The man on the ladder came down a step and reached down to shake hands. "Phil Ochs. What's up?"

"Aw, we got a report that management was dickin' around on the contract, so I got sent down here to talk to folks, find out if there was any truth to it." Don shook his head wearily and sighed. "Could be nothing," he said, waving off the situation, "or we could have a problem. You seen anything you wanna talk about?"

Phil glanced about quickly. "Jeff, go get us a coupla Cokes, okay?"

"Right." Jeff put down the wire rig and headed off further into the complex. Phil came down the ladder the rest of the way, rested his elbow on an upper step and leaned on his arm.

"Don't do to talk about some things around a Journeyman, you know?" he said by way of opening the subject.

"Yeah," Don agreed. "So, what's up?"

"Well, not much more'n the usual. We're havin' to rewire this whole section 'cause some damfool in management ordered a lot of defective wire." He picked up a length of multistrand copper with hot-pink PVC coating from a pile at the foot of the ladder. "Now look here at this." He flexed the wire; it bent smoothly. Phil then pulled out a lighter, flicked it, and passed the flame under the wire, not close enough to melt the PVC but close enough to heat it. He put the lighter away, and straightened the wire. The PVC coating cracked in several places, chips of hot-pink plastic dropping to the floor.

Don raised both eyebrows. "Now that just ain't gonna do it."

"You know it." Phil waved the wire for emphasis, pointing out more or less the path of the conduit he'd been working on. "This's supposed t'be medium-load multistrand, supposed t'carry the load for all the ceiling light panels in this section. You turn on all those lights at once like it's wired up for, the insulation'll cook right off and bang! The whole damn thing shorts to the conduit."

Don looked away in disgust. "Now how in the hell did that get past the codes inspector?"

Phil rubbed his fingers and thumb together, holding his hand where it couldn't be seen by the nearby security guard. "You tell me'n we'll both know. All I really know is, we ran a test load through the system and then Chris went off'n talked to th'foreman, 'n next thing I know is, the company's authorized overtime to pull all the wire in this section 'n replace it with a lot from a different manufacturer."

"That'd be Chris Walton, your shop steward?"

"Yeah. He's up on three today, wirin' in the breakers for the elevators. Old guy with a Union cap 'n a spit can."

"All right. Well, thanks for takin' the time." Don shook hands with Phil again. "We appreciate your keepin' track of things like this."

"Hey, the union's took care of me real well. I figure I owe it whatever I can do to keep it runnin'."

Jeff came up then with three Dr. Peppers. "S'all they had left in the machine," he explained.

Don laughed. "Guess there's a legitimate grievance here after all," he said, accepting one of the cans. Jeff and Phil chuckled along with him.

When blood sees blood
Of its own

It sings to see itself again
It sings to hear the voice it's known
It sings to recognize the face

-- *Blood Sings, _99.9 F_ by Suzanne Vega*

Night had fallen across Nashville once again. Vincent put aside the report Don had sent to his printer, having trouble focusing on it. He wasn't very good at the Sight. His talents lay more in the present, in the touch of mind to mind and reshaping of the body -- but there were dark forms in the back of his thoughts lately, bad tidings of troubles to come. It could just be general anxiety, or it could be something serious, that he'd really rather avoid...

Then the intercom buzzed. "Fisher," he said, slapping the connection open.

"Mr. Fisher, the Countess Anastasja Ludmillyevna Dubrosov to see you," said an unfamiliar voice.

Oh, good God, she's here. No second call, no warning, she's just here. He punched the door-access. "Escort her up." Quickly, he crossed the room, vaulted the bar, scooped up the documents spread across it and dropped them in the safe, then tossed two bags of B-negative into the microwave, setting it to bring them to 98 degrees. The temperature sensor option had been expensive, but was about to pay for itself.

Seconds after the mike beeped, the security door opened, and Stasja made her entrance. A slight figure, narrow-hipped and high-breasted, she swept through the doorway in a flurry of sea-green organdy, her dress looking more appropriate to the Swan Ball than a social call. Her long dark hair was caught up into loops and swirls more befitting a Frenchwoman than Russian nobility, held with pins and combs of ornate gold filigree, encrusted with tiny emeralds. More emeralds glittered at earlobes, cleavage and fingers. "Vincent, darling, how haf you been?" she declaimed.

Vincent stepped around the bar, set side the silver tray and its goblets, and submitted to the inevitable embrace and kissy-kissy. "Doing quite well, Stasja. And you?" Good God, all these years in America and Britain, and she still has that Russian accent.

"Oh, it's just been such a rush! Lord Bathingthwaite's fete' was an absolute smashing success, of course, but there was so much work involved, it was simply exhausting, and before that ..." She prattled on about her social calendar as she flitted about the room, picking up a few objets d'art and putting them absently down elsewhere, glancing over the titles on the bookshelves, admiring the painting over the fireplace.

Vincent waited for her to wind down. "May I offer you some refreshment?" he said finally, offering her one of the chalices.

"Oh, of course, why thank you, dear, how thoughtful of you." She took the goblet and sipped delicately.

Thoughtful, my ass, Vincent thought, carefully keeping it from showing on his face or the outer layers of his mind. She'd become irritable if she couldn't read his surface thoughts, but he'd long ago become adept at holding his shields a few layers in, where he could show one attitude to the world while maintaining quite another privately. As well, the chalices were quite obligatory. It would have been the height of insult not to offer his Maker a kill, or the next best thing, when she arrived on his hunting grounds. That she'd accepted the chalice meant that she wouldn't demand live prey to be produced, or seek to procure such for herself. That was a load off his mind.

"So," she said, settling on the couch, and patting the cushion next to her in invitation, "this ... firm of yours, it is doing well, yes?"

"Quite." Odds were she wouldn't demand to see the books. She'd never had a head for figures, and had a tightly bonded member of her coterie that did hers for her. "We're very well established, selective of our clientele. In a few years, I should be able to retire and live on the proceeds until it becomes necessary to assume a new identity."

She sighed daintily. "I do wish you'd not invested in such an active pursuit, but if you're doing that well..."

"Quite." Good, that was another hurdle leaped. Since she'd pensioned him off and tossed him out of her coterie, however politely, she really had no right to dictate the management of his financial affairs, but she could still make suggestions that he'd have to take seriously, or risk insulting her.

"And I suppose this agency will be useful when it comes to changing identities," she continued.

Vincent controlled a frown. This was going entirely too well. What was she building up to?

"In fact, you're doing so well, perhaps it's time to introduce you to a few people."

Oh, shit. There it was.

She sipped from her chalice again, pinky extended, careful not to smudge her lipstick. "Cynthia Parr is giving a party, really a very small get-together, tomorrow night. You'll be there, won't you?"

Oh, shit. "Stasja, this is terribly short notice --"

"Oh, piffle." She brushed aside his concerns with a languid wave. "It's not much, really, but all the right people will be there, and you simply must get out into society. I'm certain that whatever you had planned can't possibly be as important as this." She turned suddenly, and met his eyes, abruptly direct, focused. "You will be there, won't you?" she asked for the second time.

There was no other answer to give. "Of course," he said. "Who's driving?"

"I'll send someone around at nine-thirty. The party actually starts at nine, but no-one important will be there until ten or later."

Of course, the old game of looking important by arriving late. The later you got there, the bigger an audience there was for your entrance. One of these days, a party would be given, and the guests would be caught out by the dawn, all trying to outdo each other in arriving late and looking important. "I'll be ready."

She stood. He followed suit. "Well, it's settled, then," she said, setting the chalice aside on the end table. "Until tomorrow night, then, darling." Another embrace, more kissy-kissy, and a Grand Exit.

Well, not quite what he'd hoped for, but it could have gone a lot worse, Vincent thought, as he watched her limo pull away from the curb. He turned away from the window, and took the tray over to the bar. As he cleaned up the chalices, a thought suddenly struck him, that might explain these vague premonitions of doom. The last time she'd used the phrase, "all the right people", had been just before the last party she'd taken him to, right before she pensioned him off.

That party had been at the estate of Richard and Cissy Wilder, a vampiric couple wealthy enough to get away with being reclusive in the gregarious South. They'd arrived about half an hour late, long enough after the party had started for Stasja to make a proper entrance. A butler had escorted them up the front steps from their limo, down a long hallway with hardwood floors, hideously expensive Oriental rugs, two hundred year old furniture and a gallery of portraits of previous Wilders, who all seemed a little perplexed at the idea of their family name surviving into the next millennium with no further offspring. It was an odd thought, really, the line ending with Richard and Cissy and yet having the potential to survive all the other great names of the South.

Well, not all, Vincent revised his train of thought, as the butler opened a twelve-foot high door and announced them into the ballroom. Ironic how he'd always thought of one particular landowner as vampiric, the way he sucked his tenants dry, and here the man was, a glass of fresh blood in his hand, looking over the buffet with a jaded eye.

Stasja swept into the room, dragging Vincent along in her wake. "Hello, so glad to see you, Vincent, this is Senor Estebar, and his consort DeLucia, and His Excellency Hsi-Ten ..." The names blurred together into a stream of faces as Stasja worked the room, Vincent sure that he'd never remember any of these people the next day.

There is a feeling you get when something large and dangerous comes up behind you. The hair on the back of your neck prickles; your fists clench, your muscles tense, ready for fight or flight. There's no name for this feeling, but it swept over Vincent like a tsunami. He whirled, ready to meet the threat --

And found himself looking down at a slender man in an impeccable London-tailored black suit. Barely over five and a half feet tall, the man had a swarthy complexion, jet-black curly hair neatly trimmed in the modern Business Cut, and a well-groomed (if somewhat bushy) mustache. His shirt was blazing white and crisp, his tie obviously silk, and his tie tack a large, flawless ruby in a simple gold setting. The only oddity Vincent could immediately spot was the gold hoop in the man's right earlobe.

"Excuse me," the man said, in a smooth tenor, an odd accent that spoke of a cosmopolitan life flavoring his words. Stasja spun to face him, and lost her composure completely. Vincent had never seen her flustered before; now her eyes went wide, and her mouth worked like a drowning fish before she could get a word out.

"Count Drakul!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea you'd be here! Please --"

He held up a hand, forestalling her apologies. "I seek only a few moments with your protege. If, of course, you do not mind?" He inclined his head toward Vincent, swept his hand out to the other side, awaiting her answer.

Vincent's mind churned frantically. Count Drakul? Vlad Drakul? So he was real? This guy was a legend. What was the proper form of address for a Count? What did he mean, a few moments? With him? Ack. Double ack.

Stasja dropped a curtsy, at just the perfect level for a noblewoman of high standing showing respect to someone of higher rank. "Of course not." To Vincent, then, "I shall be around when you are done." And off she went, almost in haste, as if she was glad to be out of the company but didn't want to offend the person she was leaving.

"Um," Vincent began.

"Please." Again the hand, forestalling questions. "Address me as Wlad." It wasn't quite a V sound, but it twisted less than a W. "Walk with me, please." He turned and set off toward the French doors at the far side of the room, the crowd parting before him like water with no seeming effort on his part. Vincent, feeling very much like he'd been smacked in the head with a large rubber mallet and thrown into a lion cage, followed.

Wlad led him out onto the veranda, and strolled a distance down it, to where it overlooked the gardens still, but was out of range of most of the noise from the open French doors. Vincent stopped with him, and waited to see what the man would do.

What he did was to lean on his elbows on the stone railing of the veranda, clasping his hands with his fingers steepled, and sigh. "Do you know," Wlad said, "I had gardens like this, a very long time ago." It didn't seem to be a question. Vincent opted to keep his silence.

"A very long time ago." Another sigh. "There are some things that you never cease to miss, no matter how many years you walk this Earth." He cocked his head to one side so that he could see Vincent, standing to his left and slightly back from the railing. "You are newly Turned, yes?"

Oh, hell, what was the rule about that? Screw it. "Yes, sir, about six months."

Wlad smiled faintly. "Please. Do me the favor of addressing me as I requested, without honorifics. We are not in Wallachia, and you are not my subject."

"Okay, I can do that." What was all this about, anyway? The big boss sizing up the new junior

executive trainee, or something else altogether? Where was this going?

"That is the problem," Wlad said, addressing the rows of flowers below the railing. "We are not in Wallachia." Back to Vincent. "Of all of the things that I have lost to the flow of time, I find that it is my homeland that grieves me the most."

"Really?" It was awkward, but the situation demanded an answer, and Vincent couldn't think of anything better.

Wlad's brows drew together, anger flickering over his face like lightning across a stormcloud. "Do you know what they have done, those wretched Marxists? They have torn the peasants away from the land. They have burned the churches. They have desecrated the ancestral shrines. They have done their best to reduce all the land to the lowest common denominator, and have very nearly slain the spirit of proud Wallachia!" He realized abruptly that he'd raised both voice and fist. With a sigh, he let his hand drop to his side.

Vincent relaxed a little. He'd been ready to run when Wlad had rounded on him, for all the good that bolting might do. Wlad might be angry at someone distant, but there was no guarantee he wouldn't take it out on whoever was handy -- and right now Vincent was far too convenient.

But Wlad shook his head, and he turned away, walking a few steps further down the veranda. "We held off the Turks, when I still walked in the daylight, and we were outnumbered ten to one. Over the centuries, we held off a host of other armies as strong. But we could not hold off a war of ideas, and political maneuverings, and after the Second World War, Wallachia was split down the center. My homeland is divided like spoils of war, and given, not to conquerors, but to bureaucrats. It is a deep wound, and it will not heal without help." He turned, strode back to Vincent, laid a hand on his shoulder. The impact of his aura very nearly drove Vincent to his knees.

My God, this is when he's not even trying, Vincent thought. If he was seriously ticked off at me -- That didn't bear thinking about.

"Vincent," Wlad said, "I know that your first loyalty must be to your Maker, and secondly to your own ethics. But I ask you this: If I called for your help, would you be loyal to me?"

Blink. Astonished, Vincent asked, "Do I understand you correctly? Are you asking me if I'd help with a restoration of Wallachia?"

"Yes." The simple answer was shocking in its brevity. "I have located a descendent of mine -- yes, I sired children while yet I breathed. Do not look so surprised. This man is a direct successor through the male line, although he does not know it." A wry smile. "Somewhere in the centuries past, my kin have decided it would be best to forget their ancestry."

"So you want to restore the throne, not just the country?"

"Exactly. A man of my line cannot possibly do worse than the fools who are currently in power, and I believe he would do better by far."

"Wlad, I'm -- I've only been around for a very short --"

"Of course." His hand slid down Vincent's arm to clasp his elbow. "You are still adjusting to your new existence. It has been so long for me that I have very nearly forgotten those first few years." His gaze wandered off into space for a moment, then focused back on Vincent's eyes, stunningly direct. "You will at least consider what I have said."

"Of course."

Wlad steered Vincent by the grip on his arm back toward the party. "And if in the future you feel that you are up to the challenge, you can find me easily enough if you desire to do so. You have the potential of being a fine warrior, young Vincent. A fine warrior."

Vincent had spent the rest of the night in something very similar to a cold sweat. He'd thought of himself as being a hardened veteran of the security and investigation industry, capable of handling pretty

much any situation, but when Wlad had taken his arm, he'd felt six years old and made of glass.

And now Stasja wanted him to go to another of those parties. Oh, yeah, he really needed to meet those people again. Like he needed a day at the beach.

"Paragraph. Next section number, title Payoffs."

Don clicked off his Olympus Pearlcorde, a slender model that could have fit into a cigarette pack with room left over, built for one-handed operation, and gathered his thoughts. He'd turned in a preliminary report before dinner, but needed to get his notes and a more detailed report together. There wasn't much else to do during the thirty-minute drive down I-40 from downtown to Mount Juliet besides think and talk. He signalled for a lane change, dodged a slow-moving Ford Festiva with far too many kids crammed into the back, and clicked the recorder back on.

"Again, Hugh Grantham seems to be at the center of it. I visited several sites, including three of his. At every one of his sites, I found evidence of bribes paid to codes inspectors, zoning officials, and Sign Commission inspectors. A look at his books would probably be amusing, but I'm willing to bet that he keeps two sets, and one of'em is never out of his reach. No libel here. I base this statement on the fact that his projects consistently come in under budget, and yet the unions are keeping quiet about the irregularities because he keeps throwing them large amounts of overtime. Where is the extra money coming from? More importantly, why? It's got to be costing Grantham a fortune to cut corners and then have to bribe his way out of the ensuing mess."

Don slowed, and put on his blinker for the Mount Juliet exit. Several cars behind him, another vehicle did likewise, but far back enough that Don failed to attach any significance to it. Besides, Mount Juliet had become a bedroom suburb of Nashville; lots of cars got off at this exit nowadays, not like when he'd first moved here twenty years ago. Mount Juliet was nothing more than a wide spot in the road then.

He turned left at the foot of the ramp onto Mount Juliet Road and headed into what passed for downtown. Mount Juliet was yet another small town that Nashville was in the process of consuming. The City Hall, there on the left as Don crossed Division Street, would one day be just another civic-architecture building lost in the sprawl of strip malls, trendy restaurants, and traffic congestion. Don had long ago decided that Nashville was a tumor, necrotic at the center and virulent at the edges. Well, by the time the city had brought its urban blight to Mount Juliet, he would have moved further away. He'd been looking at houses down near Almadale lately, halfway between the Metro Nashville-Davidson County line and Murfreesboro. The car jounced, crossing the railroad tracks. It would be a long time before Nashville and Murfreesboro met in the middle, long enough for Don to be safely dead and buried somewhere where there were still trees that hadn't been deliberately planted.

He slowed, and took a right at Curd Road, lost enough in his usual depressive spiral that he failed to notice the vehicle behind him also taking the turn, the same one that had taken the offramp behind him some time ago. Around the curve, Don pulled up to the stop sign at Private Road (obviously there had been a shortage of names and imagination when the road had become part of the public system), three blocks from his house, looking forward to a shower and a bourbon, not necessarily in that order.

-- And his car jolted forward with a crunch of metal on metal. Don was thrown against the seatbelt as the airbag exploded up at him from the steering wheel. Dazed, he flopped back into the seat, his ears ringing from the bang of the airbag, coughing on the fine powder that had erupted with it. He glanced up through bleary eyes to see something large and dark coming at him. Instinctively, he ducked.

The crowbar smashed through the driver's side window on the first swing. Glass fragments sprayed across Don as he reached for his gun, but the man with the crowbar reached in and stabbed him

viciously in the shoulder with the wedge on the end of the crowbar. Don's gun fell to the floor as his hand went limp.

Another explosion of glass on the other side, then the door was flung open. The man who'd done it reached in and rapped him hard across the knee with a baseball bat. The explosion of pain clouded Don's vision for a few critical instants, and then he'd been dragged from the car and was on the pavement, doing his best to shield himself from crowbars, bats and steel-toe work boots.

As suddenly as it had begun, it was over. Through swelling eyelids, Don squinted, making out five men and a blue Jimmy. He rolled out of the way, gasping with pain as the move ground the ends of broken bones together, and the truck sped past him and into the night.

It was a long way up into the car, longer than up the face in his rock-climbing days. Every move brought more agony and knowledge of yet another injury. Finally, though, he made it, sprawling across the driver's seat, heedless of the glass fragments or the cuts he'd received. With the side of his hand, he knocked the car phone out of its cradle and onto the seat by his face. Thankfully, they hadn't seen that movie, or just hadn't thought of it. His right ring finger was unbroken; with it, he punched in 9-1-1.

He was unconscious when the ambulance and the police arrived.

"Thanks for agreeing to see me at such a late hour." Vincent made himself comfortable on the couch. The other occupants were scattered about the hotel room, Juline, the oldest, and her husband Frank on the bed; Darren, the only son of Ellie Borden, seated at the desk with his wife Fran standing beside him; and Patricia, the younger sister, leaning against the wall by the bathroom, the only one in the room without backup.

Traci chimed in from Vincent's right. "We realize you've been on the road for several hours, and haven't had a chance to settle in, but we really felt it was important to speak with you as soon as possible."

Juline frowned, pushing a stray curl of auburn hair out of her face. "So you're representing the Indians?"

Vincent nodded diffidently. "More or less."

"What do you mean, more or less?" Darren interjected. "You either are or you aren't, right?"

"Well," said Vincent, "we're not lawyers, we're a private investigation firm."

"Oh, wonderful," Patricia said, rolling her eyes. She folded her arms across her chest. "We're stuck in Nashville with Jim Rockford. What kind of shady deal are you going to offer us?"

Vincent laughed. "I watch that show, too, even if it is an awful lot like work. No, seriously, we're not here to cut a deal with you, offer to sell you anything, or do anything even slightly illegal. Fisher Investigations has a reputation for honesty, and I'm not about to go messing around with that."

"What are you here for, then?" Juline pressed.

"To ask you to think carefully about what happens to a particular piece of land. You see, that's an old graveyard out there. A lot of the Indians have relatives buried there, could even tell you all their names if you asked. Now, there's no grave markers because that's just not the way Indians do things, but that doesn't make it any less hallowed ground."

"Aw, c'mon!" Darren said. "They ain't buried nobody there in over two hundred years. That ain't a graveyard, it's an archaeological site. We had a offer from Western Kentucky University to lease the place so's they could dig it up."

Juline's attention whipped around to him. "You shush about that, Darren."

Darren waved her off. "Get a life, Jule. He already knew about that."

Vincent nodded. "That's right. I also know that the Cherokee have filed an injunction in the State Supreme Court to prevent such a dig. The motion hasn't been ruled on yet, but the trend over the past few years has been to favor the Indians. See, that's been part of the problem, why the Indians haven't done anything till recently. The courts ignored them for a long time, and then just didn't just take them seriously --"

"Oh, get off it." Patricia gave him a disdainful frown. "The Indians haven't been treated all that badly -- "

"You know better than that," Fran said, speaking up for the first time since she'd introduced herself. "You're a teacher. What are the facts?"

"The facts are," said Darren, glaring up at his wife, denying her permission to speak, "we got the land." He turned his attention back to Vincent. "What kind of offer are they makin'? I mean, plain and simple, I don't give a flying fuck what happens to the land, I just care what we can get out of it and get shut of it."

"Like I said," Vincent replied, "we're not here to make an offer. We're just here to ask you to think about who you're going to sell the land to." Since he had Darren's eyes meeting his own, he took advantage of the contact to add a little enforcement. *Calm down*, he commanded, pushing the tension and suspicion out of Darren's mind. Fran raised an eyebrow and looked down in surprise as she felt her husband's shoulders relax beneath her hands.

"I dunno," Juline said. "I think I agree. There's some family business tied up with that land, which ain't none of yours" -- this directly to Vincent -- "so don't you bother askin', an' gettin' shut of it is what's important here. If your Indians can make a decent offer, we'll see how it matches up against the others --"

"And may the best man win," Darren finished for her. He stood. "Now, if you'll excuse us --"

Vincent's beeper went off, cutting Darren off in mid-sentence. Rolling his eyes, Vincent yanked the offending device off his belt, and squinted at the display. "S'okay," he told Darren. "I've got to go take this call. Thanks for your time."

"S'alright," Darren said, extending his hand. Vincent took it, and with it, Darren's mind. *You will give the Indians fair consideration*, he commanded, setting the order in hard enough that Darren went glassy-eyed and blank for a second. Vincent put out his other hand to steady the man as he wobbled.

"You okay there?" he asked, concerned.

Fran took Darren's arm. "Darren?" she echoed. "You okay, punkin?"

"Mm." Darren shook his head to clear the cobwebs. "Yeah. Just tired from the trip, is all."

Vincent and Traci excused themselves and headed off down the hall toward the lobby. Once out of the room and out of sight of the Bordens, Vincent picked up the pace to where Traci was nearly jogging to keep up with him.

"What's up?" she asked, conserving her breath.

"Wrangler called, used an emergency code." Vincent spotted a pay phone, headed over, dropped in a quarter and dialed. Instead of a ring, he got a couple of clicks as his call was routed, then the Wrangler's voice.

"Vince?"

"Yeah." Damn, the kid must have routed the hotel pay phones directly to himself. Got to talk with him about screwing with the phone company like that.

"Good thing I work late," said the Wrangler.

"Why?" Vincent asked. "What have you been doing besides phreaking around with the phones?"

"Answering'em. Don's in the hospital."

Vincent blinked in surprise. "What? Where?"

"And why. Seems he got pulled out of his car and beat up pretty bad. He's over at Vandy now, in

the ER -- no, wait a minute, they've relisted him to the OR and ordered in an orthopedic surgeon. Must've seriously broke something."

"Okay, run the police scanner tape through that voice recognition program you were telling me about. It's rough, but it'll be good enough for now. Pull Don's chart off Vanderbilt, and have both those files ready for download. I'll dial in from my laptop once we're on the road." He hung up on the Wrangler's acknowledgement and made for the door. Traci rushed after him.

"Vince?" she asked.

He tossed the keys at her; she snatched them out of the air. "You drive. Don's over at Vanderbilt. He's been assaulted."

"Don?" Traci nearly stopped short in surprise. "Somebody got the drop on Don?"

"Probably several people." They reached the car; Vincent paused while Traci unlocked the doors and they got in, then continued. "Broke a lot of bones, Wrangler said." He reached behind the seats, pulled out his briefcase and from that his laptop, fired it up, waited for it to boot. "Wrangler's running the police scanner tape through speech recognition. That'll give us some basic information to work with. That and Don's chart ought to be ready for me by now."

As the electric-blue Miata pulled out of the Ramada's parking lot onto Harding, heading for I-24 and the quickest route downtown, Vincent logged into the office system and thanked Apple for the cellular modem.

The Cherokee had done this before. With the speed and discipline of the military, they rolled onto the burial ground, set up floodlights, posted a perimeter guard, and had half their tents set up before anyone else knew what was happening. The media, called from a pay phone at a convenience store a half mile down the road, were the first to arrive, followed closely by deputies from the Rutherford County Sheriff's Department, who'd been called by a neighbor. His rooster had mistaken the glow of the floodlights for sunrise, and awakened him. The first deputy to respond called his supervisor, who called for backup and the boss. The sheriff himself called the governor.

While all this was going on, Kevin Sun-Goes-Down and John Skyhorse were keeping a careful eye on Walks By Night. Contrary to the specific instructions from the Council chiefs to wear white men's clothing, and leave the ritual trappings for the Sun Ceremony the next day, Walks By Night had shown up in full medicine rig, with half his face painted black. He stood by a Plains-style tepee, arguing with three other old men, all similarly attired.

"What do you suppose all that's about?" John asked.

"Dunno. Too far to lip-read. That's Sunfollower and Rises With The Moon with him. Dunno who the third is." Kevin squinted against the floodlights. "All of'em together could be a problem."

"A problem?" Henry had come up behind them -- pretty quiet for a city Indian who acted like he was half-white most of the time. Kevin gave him a nod by way of greetings.

"Could be," he said.

"How so?" Henry asked.

"Well, you know Walks By Night is about half crazy."

Henry waited.

"Those others with him are about the same." Kevin allowed Henry to draw his own conclusions.

The first thing Henry did was to look for the cameras. They were all down at the far end of the site, where Susan Canook was reading a prepared statement. She'd recommended, and he'd agreed, that she should represent the tribe to the cameras, leaving him free to deal with the government and the

business community. If Walks By Night was planning his own demonstration, though, Henry needed to warn Susan.

"I think we oughta talk with him," Henry stated. John and Kevin agreed by setting off across the field toward the group.

As they approached, the other three took off into the confusion, and Walks By Night spun to face them, fists on his hips. "Well?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

Kevin regarded him through narrowed eyes. "You wouldn't be plannin' on makin' us look like a buncha kooks out in front of the cameras, now, would you?" The word he used was not kooks, but a Cherokee term meaning roughly "congenital idiots who think they have great medicine."

Walks By Night spat, narrowly missing Kevin's foot. "I have no use for the white men and their glass eyes," he said, switching to Cherokee. "Who gives you leave to speak to an elder like this?"

Henry folded his arms. "The Council."

Walks By Night spat again, this time in Henry's general direction. "The Council!"

"It was decided," Henry said, unruffled, "that we would not make medicine tonight, but wait for the Sun Ceremony tomorrow. Grandfather, why do you defy the Council in this?"

The honorific didn't ease the sting of the rebuke like Henry had hoped it would. Walks By Night ground his teeth, picked up a handful of dirt, and cast it to the wind. "The Council," he stated. "They have no medicine! We will show them what they lack! We have souls that are still red!" He stepped forward and thumped Henry on the chest with his fist. "Your heart has turned white. Go talk with the white men. Let them steal from you again, like they always have."

"Old man," Kevin said, "Don't go messin' this up for us. You get near the cameras and I'll knock you down myself."

Walks By Night whirled on him, spat out "Cameras!", then strode off, laughing wildly.

John cocked an eyebrow at Kevin. "Now what the hell do you suppose he's up to?"

"Uh, can you let me know later?" Henry asked. "That's the county sheriff pulling up over there."

"Yeah," John said. "Go deal with him. We'll keep a lid on the old coot."

Henry departed in haste. John turned back to Kevin.

"This ain't about cameras, is it?"

"No." Kevin was watching where the old man had gone. "C'mon."

Armed with printout from a battery-powered printer, Vincent and Traci strode right past the information desk at Vanderbilt Hospital, at the back of the two-story echoing lobby, and ducked around behind the lobby to the bank of elevators. A weary-looking woman in a black dress with a white lace collar nodded to them as they joined her in waiting for the next car.

Arriving on the third floor, Vincent consulted the printout for directions. The Wrangler had provided a map as well as written instructions, and Vincent and Traci were able to dodge the busier areas on their way to the Recovery Room.

The double doors had a large sign: Scrub Attire Required. Across the hall, however, was a lounge of some sort, and the pair headed for it. Just short of its entrance, Vincent stopped abruptly and put out an arm to block Traci. Before she could ask why, two nurses and a resident burst out of the lounge, hit the swinging doors of the Recovery Room and plunged into the hive of activity beyond. Before the doors swung shut, Vincent got an impression of a massive room the size of a gym, a long counter down the middle and berths for gurneys lining the walls like spaces in a parking garage. Despite the rush and the congestion, nobody seemed to be tripping over anyone else. It reminded him of the

Nissan plant down in Smyrna, a car factory that operated on the Japanese principle of just-in-time. On the far side of the room, another set of double doors burst open, and a surgical team rolled in a gurney. The new arrivals headed for it, and the doors to the hallway closed.

Vincent looked back at Traci. "I heard them call a name over the speaker in there," he explained, indicating the lounge. "Not his."

They went in. The lounge was a cluttered, windowless room, filled with a jumble of furniture too ragged to be left in the public areas of the hospital any longer. To one side of the door was a table with two industrial-size coffeemakers adrift in a sea of cups, used stirrers, and open sugar and creamer packets. To the other side, another table held trays of donuts, sandwiches and a box of chip bags, all rummaged through, with a trash can to the side surrounded with empty bags and wrappers that had missed their target. An elderly black woman in a burgundy Housekeeping uniform made her slow way around the room on the far side, patiently collecting the half-empty coffee cups and chip bags, and half-eaten sandwiches, that had been left wherever their former owners had been sitting, trying to keep the place in some vague semblance of order. Two police officers sat nearby, one stretched out with his head back, his eyes closed and his hands folded across his stomach, the other making notes on a clipboard and stopping frequently for a pull at his coffee cup or a bite from the donut resting next to it on a brown paper hand towel. He looked up at the newcomers, and frowned.

"Public waiting room is on the mezzanine," he told them.

Vincent flipped out his ID. "Vincent Fisher, Fisher Investigations," he said.

The cop grinned, and stood, sticking out a hand. "Remington Steele! Pleased to meet ya!"

Vincent grinned back, and shook the officer's hand. "Contrary to popular opinion, I really do exist," he said. "This is my secretary, Traci Spano."

"Ma'am." The officer nodded politely to her, then returned his attention to Vincent. "Fred Jacokes, patrol sergeant. So what brings you here?"

"One of my people got assaulted."

"Wouldn't be Don Inboden, would it?"

"Yeah, don't tell me --"

Fred grinned again. "I'm the reporting officer, all right. C'mon, get a cuppa coffee, we'll swap notes."

"Thanks, I'll pass on the joe." Vincent put a hand on his stomach. "Ulcer."

"Hmh. Can't say as I'm real surprised." The two men found seats. Traci went off to scavenge the food table in search of something edible. The problem with working for Vincent was that he sometimes forgot about food. He didn't need it, why should anyone else?

"So what was he working on?" Fred asked, picking up his clipboard.

"Tracing ownership of some land," Vincent replied noncommittally.

"Must be pretty valuable."

"Not that valuable. At least, we didn't think so."

"So he makin' the rounds, or what?"

"Don?" Vincent laughed. "The man's a monk. Doesn't smoke, doesn't chase women, drinks maybe once a month. One of my best people."

"So why'd he get beat up?" Fred referred to the report. "Says here there were at least three sets of footprints, and tire tracks looked like a pick-up or a four-by-four."

The other officer cracked open an eye. "What're you gettin' so chummy with this guy for?"

Fred gave him a disdainful glance. "Wake up, McAfferty. This's Vincent Fisher. Only P.I. in the damn city doesn't think he's a cop."

"Oh?" McAfferty sat up, pushed his hat up out of the way.

"Yeah. That assault was one'a his people." Fred gave the sentence the same weight as if he'd been talking about another cop getting waylaid.

"So what was he doing?" McAfferty asked.

"Some sort of land ownership thing. Mr. Fisher, you want to tell us anything more about that?"

Vincent shook his head. "Not much more to tell. Can't give you the client's name, of course, and now I'm the principle on the case, so I can't tell you much at all without violating client confidentiality."

"You're taking it over yourself?" Fred asked, taking notes.

"Yeah. If it's this dangerous, then it's too dangerous for me to assign anyone else to it. I'll have to do it myself."

"You will stay out of our way, right?" McAfferty fixed him with a steely glare.

Vincent returned the gaze and dropped a little Power in behind it. "Don't worry about me," he told McAfferty, who blinked, tried to look away and couldn't, pinned like a rabbit in a car's headlights.

"Worry about the men that put Don in here."

"We'll get'em," Fred assured him. Vincent released McAfferty, who shook his head and decided to go for coffee, passing Traci on her way back, and dodging through a flood of people in scrubs, washing in like the tide from across the hall.

"So what's it look like, boss?" Traci asked, perching on the arm of Vincent's chair.

"At least three men, probably more?" He gave Fred a questioning look. The officer nodded agreement.

"Probably."

"Drove up in a pickup or a four-by-four, and then what?"

Jacokes consulted his notes. "Rear-ended Mr. Inboden at a stop sign. We're getting some paint samples off his car, so we should know more about what we're dealing with soon. They broke into his car from both sides and assaulted him with blunt instruments, one with some sort of edge to it, but blunt, not sharp. Mr. Inboden called 911 on his car phone, but passed out before we could get there."

"Inboden to ICU," said a voice over the speaker. Vincent and Traci jumped up to follow the rush out the door, Traci taking a last huge bite of her sandwich before tossing it in the general direction of the trashcan. It missed. The old woman from Housekeeping noticed, and wearily shook her head. More mess to clean up.

"He says anything, you let us know," Jacokes called after them.

"No problem," Vincent shot back as he departed.

Don was barely visible under a swath of bandages. Both of his arms were in casts, the left one going up to wrap around his shoulder. Both eyes were bruised and swollen, and his nose was taped over, an oxygen tube feeding in under the gauze. A nurse fiddled with a heart monitor attached to the gurney as an orderly pushed it toward the elevators. Vincent and Traci fell in beside it.

"Don?" Vincent asked.

"It's doubtful he can hear you, Mr. ...?" The nurse ended her remark with a raised eyebrow.

"Fisher. I'm his employer."

"You shouldn't be in this area."

"Well, we're leaving, aren't we?" He forestalled her exasperated sigh with a raised hand. "He's a private investigator, and this happened while he was on a case. I need to know exactly what happened to him."

The nurse's attitude softened, as the appeal of being in a Movie-of-the-Week situation sank in. "He's not likely to regain consciousness any time soon. We're taking him up to ICU. You'll have to stop off and scrub before you can come in and see him."

"Not a problem. Just show me where."

A short time later, garbed in blue scrubs and a mask (how pointless, Vincent thought), he was standing next to Don's bed in ICU, the curtains drawn to shield them from view of the nurse's station in the center of the room. Vincent closed his eyes and carefully *reached* into Don's mind, wary of the pitfalls and distortions induced by drugs and trauma. Somewhere in that haze were things he needed to know.

Back through the darkness of anesthesia, of unconsciousness, to the attack. There, a face behind a crowbar. Another, with a baseball bat. And -- careful, bring it up gently -- the back end of a blue Jimmy. Vincent coaxed Don's mind into sharper focus, like a police hypnotist looking for evidence, bringing the letters and numbers up to readable.

Got it. He retreated from the psychic contact, smoothing over the traces of his invasion. He opened his eyes.

"Hang in there, Don. It's too soon to lose you yet."

Vincent paused by the nurse's station on his way out, left instructions to be called when Don woke up, and collected Traci in the hall outside. Now for a session with the police identikit program the Wrangler had pirated, and then a stroll through the DMV computer.

Life had not been kind to Del Mangrum. He'd known since he was twelve what he wanted to be: a cop. He'd read the Law Enforcement Handbook at 14, joined the Police Explorer Scouts at 16, kept up his grades -- and then at 18, he'd applied for the Academy.

He'd been rejected. No, his eyesight was fine, he was in terrific shape, he was bright -- but he stood five feet five and a half inches tall, an inch and a half under the minimum height requirement for male applicants. We're very sorry, maybe you should try the military?

It wasn't the same. Yeah, he could make it as an MP, but he didn't want to spend his career guarding some lousy base against terrorists -- he wanted, he needed to be protecting the public against the slime he knew was out there. Maybe he'd join up, maybe he wouldn't. If he did, there were other police departments in the USA, some with no fuckin' minimum height requirement, and a four-year hitch as an MP was practically a guaranteed cop job when you got out, if your record was clean.

In the meantime, though, he had to do something, and working as a security guard for Wackenhut at least let him feel like he was protecting something. Not that anyone was really likely to break into a construction project out in the middle of nowhere, and what were they gonna steal if they did? A bulldozer?

He let his flashlight's beam linger on the big yellow earthmover for a moment, while he daydreamed about its theft, and himself running after it, climbing aboard, duking it out with the perp --

What was that? He flicked his light toward the perimeter fence. Something had rattled the chain-link, he was sure of it. Del headed off toward where he thought the source of the noise might be, passing stacks of lumber, concrete drainage pipes the size of bathtubs, skids of brick --

And from behind one of them, a dark form arose behind him. Strong arms pinned his to his sides, something hard pressed against his neck under the jaw -- he opened his mouth, tried to shout, to protest -

And the world slowly faded back in. Del took careful stock of the situation before he opened his eyes. The perps might still be nearby, might have a gun on him. He was lying on his back on something hard, cold and curved. Inside one of the big drainage pipe sections, must be. He listened for a long moment, heard nothing -- no breathing other than his own, no coughs, voices, or other human noises. Cautiously, he cracked an eye open.

Inside a drainpipe, all right, not ten feet from where he'd been jumped. Nobody visible; a quick

check showed his gun still in its holster, and someone had turned off his flashlight and left it beside him. If it wasn't for the pounding headache and the sore jaw, he might have thought he'd fallen asleep on duty.

Del avoided messing up any potential footprints by scrambling out the far end of the pipe. It was then that he realized that the lights were on in the mobile office, over on the other side of the heavy equipment parking area. He drew his pistol, and clipped his flashlight to his belt. No sense in showing a light and making a target of yourself.

The guard moved through the maze of bulldozers, backhoes and portable cranes with maneuvers long practiced in the woods behind his home. Check each point of cover, watch for movement beyond, lead with your gun. Stay low, don't put your head up. Quickly, he worked his way up to the edge of the parking area. There was a good forty feet of clear space between him and the office, but the door was on the far side, and with the lights on, the perps wouldn't be able to see out of the windows. He'd just have to chance it.

A short sprint later, Del stood with his back to the trailer, gun held upraised in both hands. He whipped around the corner, cleared the area, and moved up to the next corner. A fast peek, then sit back and think about what you saw. Okay, the door was open, light streaming out onto the metal steps and the ground beyond. No sign of people, no perps, no shadows. Okay, Time to go in.

He flung himself around the corner, up the stairs and through the doorway. "Freeze! Hands in the air!"

He was talking to an empty room. Dammit. Then he took in the state of the office, and realized he had a serious problem. He'd be lucky to keep his job after this. Aw, shit, why'd this have to happen on his shift?

The supervisor at Wackenhut took the call from Mangrum and followed procedure. First, he made sure the guard was calm, uninjured, and hadn't touched anything. Then he called the police, and after that, the client representative. Once he'd made all the calls specified in the manual, he pulled out an incident report and tried to remember how to fill it out. It had been a long time.

Judd Patten had originally been hired by the Grantham combine partially because of his cautious, methodical nature. As he had become more and more enmeshed in the inner workings of the corporation, this nature had served him well, and had been refined into almost a sixth sense that warned him of potential threats to the company. When he took the call from the security company, and realized that the police would have access to company records, alarms went off in his mind. He quickly went through his copies of the files kept at that site, and only when he was reassured that nothing there could be traced any higher than the project supervisor, plausible deniability could be maintained, did he relax. This was still a bad situation, and Mr. Grantham would have to be notified, but it could have been much worse if he hadn't insisted on compartmentalizing the information as strictly as he had. Judd waited until the preliminary police report came in before he awakened the CEO.

"Yes, sir, very sorry to disturb you at this hour, but we have a situation."

"What?" Hugh Grantham was suddenly much more awake. He swung his legs off the bed, flexing his toes in the inch-deep carpet. "What kind of a situation?"

"There's been a break-in at the Wasabi Towers site," Patten replied, his voice a little tinny and echoing on the cordless telephone.

"Shit!" Grantham fended off the advances of the blonde woman in the bed with him -- what was her name? -- and arose, shrugging into a silk kimono, a gift from a Japanese business partner. He ran a hand through his thinning grey hair, leaving it standing up in spikes like a demented crewcut. "How bad?"

"The mobile office was entered. Most of the filing cabinets were pried open, originally the police thought with a crowbar, but now it appears the tool had multiple prongs, like some sort of gardening implement."

"A gardening tool?" Grantham kicked his feet into a pair of slippers and paced the length of the bedroom and back. "What kind of bullshit is that?" he demanded irritably.

"I don't know, sir," Patten apologized. "It's what the police have told us."

"All right, go on, go on." Grantham ignored the woman, who obviously wanted him back in the bed.

"The office computer was accessed."

"Oh dear God." Grantham collapsed into a Louis XIV chair by a matching writing desk, the woman completely forgotten.

"It's not as bad as it might appear, sir. Only records specific to the site were kept there. Nothing can be traced any higher than the supervisor. As well, our legal staff assures me that they can convince any judge to exclude any evidence taken there as tainted."

"How so?" A ray of hope appeared on the horizon.

"Imply the police sponsored the break-in."

"Right. Of course." Grantham rubbed his eyes tiredly. One front covered. "What if it wasn't the police?"

"We may never know, sir. I've just been handed a report. Our computer people are on the site, and they tell me a virus was uploaded."

"Do what?" Grantham had no need to understand computers; he hired people to do that for him.

"Apparently the intruder was able to break the encryption scheme, access the hard drive, and then set up a telecommunications program. We found an external modem hooked up and still on, but no active connection. However, it appears that a remote user accessed the system, and then uploaded some sort of virus. Most of the hard drive is unrecoverable."

"So we have no way of knowing what files they looked at. Lovely. Absolutely lovely." Grantham got up and began pacing again. The blonde woman had tossed aside the covers, and was stretching luxuriously, but he wasn't to be distracted by the sight. Pouting a little, she slid out of the bed and slipped into a chenille robe hanging on a valet nearby.

"Well, keep on top of this," Grantham said finally. "Don't be afraid to throw the supervisor to the wolves if necessary."

"Yes, sir."

Grantham replaced the phone receiver in its charging cradle, and, totally ignoring the woman, spoke only to himself. "I need a drink." He set off down the stairs for the bar; the woman padded after him.

Chevas Regal was considered and dismissed, as was Tanqueray and Myers's Dark. A square bottle with a green label met his approval. Beam's Choice had seen him through some rough times before, and seemed appropriate now. A glass of Kentucky sippin' whiskey in his hand, Grantham seated himself at the bar, paying some vague attention to the woman when she came up behind him and started massaging his shoulders. He ran his hand up under the chenille robe, up her thigh. She purred, and slid her arms around him, her hands travelling down his chest.

The thud from the deck beyond the sliding glass doors brought him to his feet, woman and drink forgotten. It had been a heavy thump, something large and solid hitting the redwood planks. Another thud.

"Turn off the lights!" Grantham hissed at the woman. Without waiting for her to follow his command, he stepped around the bar and hit the panic button on the alarm panel. Security would be here

in less than a minute. The lights went out; he took cover behind the bar and waited.

Two armed men in off-the-rack suits burst into the room. One drew down on Grantham, then relaxed as he recognized his employer. The other covered the woman, briefly, then the sliding glass doors.

"Mr. Grantham?" the first man queried.

"Two thumps on the deck," Grantham replied.

The second guard held back, providing cover, as the first advanced cautiously to the doors. He took a quick look out, ducking back, and then a longer one. Then he opened the door and stepped out, gun pointing down at something on the deck.

"Jack!" he called back into the house. "Cut on the floods!"

His partner found the panel and switched on the outdoor lights. Shadows sprang into sharp relief as the deck was lit up bright as noon.

"Mr. Grantham?" the first guard called.

"What?"

"You'd best come see, sir." The guard sounded rattled.

Grantham struggled to his feet and made his way to the sliding door, the woman close behind him, keeping in his shadow for protection. They looked out onto the deck -- and the woman started screaming, backed away, holding out her hands in denial. Grantham spun, snarled at her, then glanced over to Jack. "Get her out of here," he snapped. "Trank her and hold her downstairs."

"Yes, sir." Jack took charge of the woman as reinforcements arrived, and led her away.

Grantham returned his attention to the two men sprawled on the deck.

Both were still breathing, which was something of a complication. Stiffs were much easier to dispose of than men who were injured but still alive. Their limbs were twisted in impossible directions. In several spots, raw bone poked through the skin. Their faces were battered almost beyond recognition, and it took Grantham a few moments to realize who they were.

"Oh, Jesus." That was Billings, and the other was Tate, two of the hardhats he'd paid to teach that nosy P.I. to mind his own damn business. This made things much more complicated.

"Jackson!" he snapped.

"Sir!" The first guard was instantly by his side.

"Two things. First, take these two over to General. Put it on Workman's Comp, tell'em it was a construction accident and you're very sorry, but you don't have the details."

"Yes, sir. And the second?"

Grantham rounded on him. "How the fuck did these two get dumped here?" he screamed. Jackson flinched. "How did whoever the fuck it was get over the wall, and past the patrols and the alarms? Huh?" His face flushed; the veins on his neck stood out with the force of his anger. "How did these two spitwads get here? Tell me that!"

Jackson couldn't meet his eyes. "I ... don't know, sir."

Grantham's voice went soft and dangerous. "Do you like working here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I suggest you find out. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. Get those two out of here." Grantham stomped off, waving a hand in the general direction of the injured men. "And get a crew up here to tear down the deck and replace it. Have them burn the wood. Bloodstains don't come out of redwood."

"Yes, sir."

Grantham collected his drink, topped it up and took it upstairs to the bedroom. Damn it, the

message was clear enough. Don't play rough unless you can take it as well as dish it out. Who was backing that damn P.I.? Couldn't be the Indians, they didn't work like that. Had to be a rival Family, but that somehow didn't wash. Fisher'd never take a client they knew was dirty, made a big fuss about it. So who the fuck beat those two up and dumped them here? Had to be professionals. Feds? Not unless it was the CIA. They were the only Feds that played that rough. What had he done to attract that kind of attention? Nothing, dammit.

And so his thought chased each other into the night, until the whiskey started working on his ulcer, and he dumped it for a new cocktail: Tagamet, Mylanta, Valium and Dilaudid. To say he slept after that would be a lie, but he was unconscious until well into the morning.

Shortly before dawn, Vincent stepped out of the shower, towelled off and put on a heavy white bathrobe. He padded into the main room of his apartment to find Traci sitting at the bar, studying a set of files. She glanced up and grinned at his entrance.

"Feel better, boss?"

He paused to consider the question. "Physically, yes," he replied. "I'm still a little pissed, though."

She held up two of the folders. "Hey, two for one's not bad."

"Unfortunately, sleazeballs like these" -- he took the folders from her, tossed them onto the bar by the computer -- "are a dime a dozen, and you only find a man like Don once in a lifetime."

"The hospital called."

"What?" Vincent blinked, taken off guard by the abrupt turn of the conversation. "When?"

"While you were in the shower. Isn't that always when the phone rings?"

He sighed, and gave in to her attempt to cheer him up. "Okay, okay, what'd they say?" He poured himself a cognac.

"They said Don's waking up. He's not coherent yet, but he's responding to them, and they said it looks like he's going to be okay. Mentally, anyway."

"Yeah." Vincent stared moodily into his drink, which he'd yet to taste, leaning on the bar. "I've never had to put someone on a disability pension before."

Traci covered his hand with her own, gave it a gentle squeeze. "You won't. You just wait and see. Don'll be back before you know it."

"I hope you're right." He left his drink on the bar and moved around her to the phone.

"Who are you calling at this hour?"

"Tony." He dialled.

"Right." She shook her head in mock amazement. "He lives at the office, too."

He gave her a look that said clearly, Don't be a smartass. "Tony?"

"Yeah?" The voice at the other end sounded husky.

"Vince. You okay?"

"I've been here all night, drinking this lousy cheap coffee the Department stocks and staring at the computer. It still won't talk to me. What's up?"

"Hugh Grantham."

"Grantham?" Tony abruptly sounded much more awake.

"Grantham," Vincent confirmed. "He's your boy."

"Mind telling me how you know this?"

"Very much so. I can tell you he'd been paying off a lot of people. Don was dictating a report when he got ambushed. The recorder's going to need some repairs, but the tape was intact. Apparently

Grantham's been bribing the construction unions with overtime. God only knows what he's been bribing the Codes people with, but he has."

"Okay. Got all that. We can start the ball rolling with that, get the Fraud Unit and the TBI boys on him with this. Call it a tip from a usually reliable source."

"Thanks for the non-credit."

"No problem. Got something for you on the Dobbs murder."

"So you're sure now it was a homicide?"

"Not completely. Damn thing just keeps gettin' weirder."

"How so?" Vincent motioned to Traci; she handed him his cognac.

"Well," Tony said, as if he didn't believe it himself, "the lab boys went all through the house with a damn vacuum cleaner, and you know what they found?"

"You're going to tell me, right?" Vincent tried the cognac, found it acceptable, took another sip.

"Nothing. Not one damn hair that didn't belong to Dobbs or one of three unidentified females. Every single strand they found was human. Now, you tell me what sort of animal doesn't shed?"

"One that's been shellacked?" Vincent grinned.

"What?!" Tony asked, incredulous.

"Uh, how about a really big chihuahua?"

"Vince, you're not taking this seriously," Tony said, exasperated.

"How can I?" Vincent asked, waving his arm for emphasis and coming perilously close to dousing Traci with cognac. At the first crack he'd made, she'd stifled a laugh, but at the second, she exploded into giggles, and didn't notice the danger.

"I mean," Vincent continued, motioning to Traci to either shush or move out of range of the phone, "you tell me that the murder was committed by an animal that doesn't shed, and you expect me not to make a few wisecracks? This is your big important clue? Tony, go home and get some sleep."

"I wish I could, Vince. This case is driving me nuts."

"Look, speaking from experience, a good day's rest will do wonders for you. You'll wake up this evening with your head lots clearer and ready to take this thing on again."

Sigh. "Maybe you're right. This is just getting too damn weird, you know?"

Traci was closing the lightproof shutters on the windows that overlooked Fourth Street. "Yeah," Vincent said. "I know. Look, I gotta go. See you later, okay?"

"Yeah. Take it easy."

Vincent hung up the phone and collected the folders from the bar. "Lock these up in secure storage, okay?" he asked Traci.

"Sure, no problem. See you this evening, boss."

He strode into the bedroom, the rising sun making itself felt in the increasing heaviness of his body, the difficulty of moving. Dumping the robe across a chair, he stretched out in the fireproof capsule that dominated the room, and triggered the lid. Once closed, it could only be opened from the outside with high explosives, large power tools, or both. The technicians at Mosler who'd built it had probably wondered about its purpose -- but not too much. Vincent had maintained a few of the contacts Stasja had gifted him with, one particularly who specialized in getting custom work done discreetly.

The capsule sealed with a soft thump, and then the clank of the locking bars sliding into place. Vincent laid back on the padded silk lining, closed his eyes, and dreamed.

"Good evening. I'm Dan Clark --"

"And I'm Demetria Kalodimos. Our top story tonight: The Cherokee may have already lost the battle to keep their ancestral burial ground from being turned into yet another Nashville-area office park."

The speaker was a slender, well-tanned woman with high cheekbones and a pixie-like face. The narrowness of her features was emphasized by her hairstyle, tight curls piled atop her head and shorn close on the sides. She wore a multicolored, imitation-patchwork blouse that must have given the stage manager and makeup technician fits, worrying about clashing color values. She glanced briefly down at her notes to refresh her memory, then delivered most of the story straight into the camera, glancing down only twice more as the tale unfurled.

The director rolled footage of the Cherokee encampment, the Sun Ceremony, and Susan Canook reading from a sheaf of papers as Demetria continued in voice-over.

"The Cherokee moved onto the disputed property late last night, land that has been documented as an ancestral burial site, in the hopes of delaying the sale and perhaps convincing the owners to accept the lower bid the tribe was able to muster in the interest of good public relations."

Cut to the exterior of the Ramada at 24 and Harding, a group of men in suits emerging behind a screen of plainclothes private guards, ducking the camera.

"But all in vain, or so it seems," Demetria continued, "as the property was apparently sold this afternoon to the Delaware Farms consortium." Back to Demetria briefly.

"The former owners declined comment, but consortium representative Hugh Grantham had this to say." She looked off-screen expectantly. Obliging her, the tape rolled and the screen cut to Grantham standing by the open door of his limo.

"We bought this property fair and square," he said irately. His hair was immaculately groomed, his suit spotless, but his eyes spoke of a rough night with little real sleep. "If the Indians couldn't match our bid, that's not my problem. The land had been in the family for two hundred years -- seems to me they waited an awful long time before statin' their claim to it. Delaware Farms owns it now, and those Indians are trespassin' on private property. This is still the United States of America, last time I checked, and ownership of land still means something here." With that, he ducked into the limo, and a guard shoved in between him and the reporters, saying "No, no more questions."

Back to Demetria. "The Cherokee have yet to issue a statement on their position after this abrupt turn of events, but by all appearances ..."

Cut to a shot of two Native children asleep in a tent, their mother watching from nearby as she brushed out her hair.

"... they intend to stay right where they are. Dan?"

Cut from Demetria to her co-anchor. "Thank you, Demetria," he said to her, then to the camera: "Mayor Bredesen today announced --"

Tony switched off the television, and nodded thoughtfully. "That's it, then," he said to nobody in particular. He picked up the phone and dialed. "This is Lieutenant Goodlark, Major Crimes. I need a tac squad put together, and an arrest warrant. Hugh Grantham. Yes, that Hugh Grantham. Oh, accessory to murder, conspiracy to assault with intent to cause grievous harm. That'll do to get him in here. Two tac squads? That's mighty generous of you. Thank you. Sure, go ahead, set'em up. How soon do I need'em? Well, how long do you think it's going to take for me to walk down there and pick up the paperwork?"

I will walk in the garden
and feel religion within
I will learn how to run with the big boys

I will learn how to sink and to swim

-- *Sinead O'Connor, Just Like U Said It Would B*

That evening, Vincent arose to find his tux laid out on the valet by his sleeping capsule, with a note. "Have fun, don't get busted -- T." He grinned, and slid into the formal attire with the ease of long practice. At least tonight he wouldn't have to push his food around on his plate and make it look like he was eating. He'd never fully understood it. Water, and beverages like wines or brandy, his system could handle in small quantities. Anything resembling solid food was right out, and the smell of cooked meat made him vaguely nauseous. He'd thought at one point that the level of processing might have something to do with it, as fruit juice had unpleasant effects, but wine was okay -- but a single abortive attempt with soyburger had blown that theory high and wide.

He adjusted his tie, and went into the main room, picking up his new palmtop from the coffee table. He spent the last few minutes before the limo arrived checking through its memory, and adding a few files from the desktop system.

Promptly at 9:00 p.m., a long black limousine pulled up in front of the building, a door opened and closed, and his doorbell chimed. Vincent closed the palmtop (it reminded him of the old Star Trek flip-top communicators), slipped it into the inside pocket of his tux jacket, made sure of the pistol on the other side, and took a last look around before locking up and heading downstairs to meet the driver -- and Stasja.

She was waiting in the back of the limo, her off-the-shoulder formal the height of Southern fashion, but clashing slightly with her Russian jewelry.

"Stasja, good evening," Vincent said as he climbed in.

"Darling Vincent," she replied coolly, extending a slim, elegant hand to be kissed. "Come, sit beside me."

He took the indicated seat, and spent the next half hour nodding occasionally, going "Yes?", "M-hm", and "Oh" in the right places, and taking occasional notes on the palmtop as Stasja held forth on the guests that were expected, their histories, current relationships, positions within the political structure, and behavior at previous social events that she implied Vincent should have attended.

Just as Vincent began to fear that he was going to go deaf, insane, or both, the limo arrived at a massive iron gate in a much larger and more substantial brick wall, topped with short iron spikes and the tell-tale glitter of broken glass, and flanked on the inside by two very large men with Dobermans. The driver spoke to the intercom, and the gate rolled majestically aside, allowing their passage.

Up the long, curved drive to the sprawling mansion, past topiary and rose-beds, past stables placed ostentatiously out front where they could easily be seen, the limo delivered them to the granite steps and colonnade that formed the entrance. Vincent exited when the chauffeur opened the door, into a steamy evening filled with the sound of crickets and the smell of roses and magnolia. He turned and extended a hand to Stasja. She took his arm as she joined him on the steps, and they proceeded up past the four-story fluted Ionic columns into the entrance hall.

The ceiling soared four levels about them, intricately worked and filigreed in the style of the Antebellum era, three massive crystal chandeliers hanging a full story below sending glittering shards of light through the chamber. Hardwood floors gleamed around the edges of Oriental rugs worth collectively more than the original cost of Vincent's building. For three quarters of their height, the walls were covered with pale yellow watered silk, and embellished at a few key points with massive oils of the estate in its pre-Civil War days -- the mansion itself; a gathering on the lawn; a fox hunt. Elegantly carved settees with velvet upholstery huddled discreetly at the baseboards.

Straight across the echoing chamber Vincent led Stasja, to where the doors of the grand ballroom stood open, flanked by butlers in Antebellum livery. The one on the right quietly inquired as to their names, then announced them into the ballroom.

Fully twice the size of and equal in height of the entrance hall, if it weren't for the chandeliers, the ballroom could easily have served as a hangar for the Goodyear Blimp. The artwork in here was all original Old Masters, some of which Vincent was certain Interpol was seeking. Fat chance of them finding it here. Among the tables, some displaying artworks, some with chairs and lace tablecloths for socializing, and some bearing the evening's refreshments (entranced mortals who would be replaced after one or two samplings so that no one committed the socially unpardonable sin of a kill at a white tie event), moved the nobility and the glitterati of the vampire kind. Elders and their coteries from around the world, in a colorful variety of evening dress, not all from the current century, made deals, introduced new fledglings, as groups and cliques formed and broke apart in a complicated dance. Over it all floated the strains of a chamber orchestra, performing a selection by Vivaldi.

Stasja started a step, to begin a sweep of the room -- blinked, and looked up startled at Vincent as he didn't move.

"What -- ??" she began, more surprised than angry.

Vincent stood his ground as a tall, portly man with a red silk cummerbund setting off his English-style formal (and unfortunately emphasizing his ample stomach) approached. He extended a hand.

"Lord Henry." The greeting was cool, noncommittal.

Henry returned the clasp with sufficient enthusiasm to make up the difference. "Vincent, old boy! So glad you could make it tonight! Been keeping well?"

"Just fine, thanks." He let go Henry's hand, indicated his companion. "You of course know the Countess Anastasja." It was not a question.

"Of course." Henry took the offered hand, bowed over it with some difficulty. "Countess. Glad to see you again."

She smiled graciously. "As well. It makes me happy to see that Vincent is keeping in contact with the right people."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Fisher and I stay in touch. After all, it's not that terribly far from Nashville to Memphis." Henry glanced off over her shoulder. "But the Mistress summons me, and I must go. Do take care, now." And with that, he was gone, leaving Stasja to raise an eyebrow at Vincent's faint grin.

"Very well," she relented, "so you have been keeping up with at least one of the connections I gave you. Come, we must present ourselves to the Parrs."

They joined a line, almost a processional, of vampiri waiting to introduce themselves to the hosts. Partially a social obligation, expected at any society event, for the vampiri the presentation was part of the elaborate set of rules that allowed a society of predators to co-exist with each other without constant conflict. Each attendee clasped hands with John Parr, murmured the customary pleasantries along with an ancient formula committing the person to obey the rules of the house while present, and then accepted a sip from a chalice held by Mrs. Parr. Like the offering of refreshment to the maker, this sealed a vow not to hunt in another's territory, at least for a time. At his first gathering, Vincent had wondered how so many vampiri could be in one place at one time without evidence accumulating to give them away to the breathing world. The strain on the local resources must be enormous. The answer was simple. There were customs governing such gatherings that went back for hundreds of years, that held down the possibility of an incident that could betray the vampiri. As well, no one was expected to host a second party within three years of the previous one, a time space that could be increased if there were a problem. If the hosts were well known for putting on a good party, there would normally be no incidents, as the vampiri would police themselves against souring the area for future gatherings.

Vincent and Stasja passed through the presentation, and moved off into the crowd, Stasja moving through the throng like and as at home in it as a fish in water. Vincent nodded, smiled, and exchanged pleasantries until he was certain he was going to be ill.

"Darling," Stasja said at last, "let's visit the buffet. They've just laid out that young one on the end, and he looks absolutely delectable."

Ick, Vincent thought. Delectation was probably a good word. Well, at least this event was white tie, so none of the "buffet" victims would end up dead. Most were hookers, hustlers, and the like, anyway, who would wake up the next morning with only the vaguest blurry memories and a massive wad of cash, sure that they'd been to a party with really incredible drugs. They'd attribute their fatigue and headache to exhaustion and a need to detox. Well, rest and getting off drugs and the street for a while wouldn't hurt any of them.

Stasja and Vincent arrived at the table, piled with cushions on which lay a young, slim man in his late teens, just behind a short man in a black suit.

"O, dear," Stasja exclaimed, "I'd really had such hopes." Obviously, she was counting on the man being a gentleman and letting her have first go at the youth.

He turned, and bowed. "Vincent, Stasja. So nice to see you."

Ohmigod, Vincent thought. "Wlad, good to see you." He put out a hand. Wlad clasped it firmly. Not so bad this time, Vincent thought; I only feel about twelve, and more solid.

Wlad bowed over Stasja's hand, brushed his lips across the back. "Please," he said, stepping aside and extending a hand to usher her to the table. "Do not allow me to come between a lady and her refreshment."

Stasja curtsied, and stepped up to the table. As she bent over the young man, Wlad turned to Vincent.

"I have been looking for you. Come, we must talk."

Aw, not now, Vincent thought, as they strode off across the hall. I really can't go traipsing off to Romania in the middle of an investigation. Especially not this one. How do I get out of this?

Wlad escorted him through a doorway and into a small drawing room, closing the door behind them. He took one of the brass-studded leather chairs by the fireplace, a brass screen blocking it off, its hearth cold in mid-August. Wlad gestured to the other chair.

"Please, sit. We must speak of important matters, you and I."

Vincent cautiously took the other chair. "Um, about this, uh, Romania thing, um..."

Wlad dismissed the subject with a derisive wave. "Pfagh! Perhaps in another generation, when the current crop of imbeciles has died off. They rose up, the people did, and they took the power unto themselves, threw out the Marxists, and then fell upon each other like a pack of mongrels." He paused, considered, and snorted in disgust. "They do not deserve my help at this time. No, what I wish to speak of concerns you much more directly." His gaze focused abruptly on Vincent with an impact like a hammer.

"Me?" Vincent managed not to squeak, and kept himself from looking wistfully at the exit only by a severe act of will.

"Yes." Wlad clasped his hands and steepled his fingers. "I have been watching you for some time now, and it has become obvious to me that there are certain things that you must be told."

Vincent kept his silence, and waited for the axe to fall. In response, Wlad cocked his head to one side, and regarded him with an amused expression.

"You are not going to ask what these things are?"

"Um," Vincent thought fast, "I figured you'd tell me your own way, you know?" Lord, don't let me tick him off.

Wlad smiled faintly. "We are not equals, you and I, nor shall we ever be. There is a gap of centuries between us that nothing can ever erase. However, I am not your feudal lord. I would like to think that we are two reasonable men, and could converse as such, setting aside the usual protocol for an Elder speaking with one younger. Is this possible?"

Vincent paused a moment for reflection. "Okay," he said finally, "so this isn't the big boss chewing out a junior employee?"

Wlad laughed. "My reputation interferes once again. No, no, nothing of the kind." He spread his hands to show there was no threat, then clasped them back as before. "There are simply things that your maker has not, nor will she ever, tell you, things that you must know. I have become somewhat of an impatient, interfering sort over the years, and like the very old of the mortal world, prone to speaking my thoughts directly and without regard to social convention. What do you know of bonding?"

The abrupt change of subject caught Vincent slightly off guard. Quickly ransacking his memory, he said, "Um, well, it's basically similar to Pavlovian conditioning, with similarities also to a mage creating a contagion link and to hypnotic conditioning. Uh, it's how Elders control their fledglings. That's about it, right?" He spread his hands, inviting Wlad to comment.

"That is more or less correct." Wlad nodded. "The Elder samples the young one's blood after his Turning, and creates a physical and mental link that allows him to dominate the younger one's will. What do you know of the way in which our society is structured?" He leaned back, crossing his legs European style.

"Elders assemble coterie of young, normally of their own turning. Um, sort of like wolves, we travel in packs, except the pack leaders don't get challenged and we're much more polite about crossing into other people's territory." Vincent nodded to himself. That ought to sum it up neatly. Was this some sort of test? Where was this going?

"Again, succinctly correct for the most part. One more item. The biologists of this age, when speaking of wolves, refer to the pack leader as the alpha male." Wlad held up a finger to make his point. "In our society, the leader is not always male, but is certainly an alpha."

Vincent gave that some consideration. "Are you saying that some of us are naturally leaders?"

"It would be foolish to pretend otherwise. There are leaders, there are followers, and there are rogues. These are not positions within society, but natures of the individuals taking those positions. We could refer to them for the sake of the discussion as alphas and betas." He counted off the types on his fingers. "Rogues are normally younger alphas, driven off from their turning pack by the Elder, who have not yet formed their own pack."

Uh-oh. Vincent had a sudden idea where this was going, and he wasn't sure he wanted to be taken there.

"One more item," Wlad said. "Alphas cannot be bonded. Domination of the will by one alpha of another is a chancy thing, and must be attempted anew each time. A permanent domination, such as a bonding, is simply not possible."

Vincent leaned back, put out a hand to ward off the conclusion he was drawing, and shook his head as though dazed. "Whoa. Hold the phone. Are you saying that Stasja couldn't bond me because I'm an alpha?"

Wlad smiled contentedly, as a teacher whose student has solved a difficult problem. "Exactly."

"Oh." Vincent massaged his forehead. If he'd still been mortal, he would have been developing a tension headache. "Excuse me. This is a bit heavy."

"You know it to be true," Wlad said, in a calm, matter-of-fact tone that brooked no denial.

"Okay." Vincent regarded him suspiciously, wondering how many more grenades the man had. "Now what? Am I supposed to start forming my own pack?"

"Only if you wish to." Wlad steepled his fingers again. "The rogue, the walker outside the pack, has just as much place in our society as does the pack leader. I have no coterie myself. You may have noticed this."

Vincent blinked. "Actually, no, I hadn't, but then I haven't seen you that much." He sighed. "That's good about the pack thing, though. I haven't met anyone since my turning I'd inflict this on."

"You will." Wlad seemed certain.

"If you say so." Vincent was still dubious.

"You will," Wlad repeated, with more conviction. "And when that time comes, you will give the decision substantially more thought than most. You have the potential within you to become one of the great figures of our society."

"Hold onto that thought a second." Vincent forestalled further remarks with a raised hand. "This is like, I dunno, uh, being told that you're next in line for the throne or somesuch."

Wlad laughed. "It is all a bit much, is it not? If someone had come to me four hundred years ago, and said to me, Wlad, in times to come, people across the world will tremble at your name, I would have thanked them for the flattery, but scoffed at the idea." He grew serious. "Yet here I am, become a legend while I yet walk the Earth. No, I offer no false modesty. What's the point to it?" He turned up a hand, questioning. "But you, Vincent" -- the hand folded and the index finger pointed -- "you have within you, as I said, the potential to do great things, to take a place that few vampiri can approach. I had no guidance on my journey to where I now stand. I made many errors, some of them fatal to others and nearly so to myself. I would see you spared of those experiences."

Vincent shook his head in amazement. "Wait a minute, are you offering to be my teacher or something?"

"In so few words, yes. A mentor, a guide. I offer my advice, if you will listen."

"Why me?" The question was direct, not pleading.

"I have said it once already. There have been, and are, few like you and I. An alpha with such potential comes along but once a century, if that often. We are moving into times that will require great leaders of our kind, if we are to survive -- and survive we must, make no mistake about that." His eyes flashed. "The human herd is overgrown, it strains the planet. The herd must be thinned, we must remove the weak and the stupid from the population, or our parent species will not survive. Humanity needs its predators."

"Okay," Vincent said. "I accept."

"That simply?" Wlad raised an eyebrow.

"What choice do I have?" Vincent shrugged.

"You can walk away. I will not stop you."

"Right, and I spend the rest of my existence knowing I tossed away a chance, my only chance, to develop whatever talents I have? That's not the way I am."

Wlad smiled, the expression of a hunter whose trap has been sprung. "Exactly. It is not in your nature." He chuckled. "I only wonder if Stasja knows what sort of force she has loosed upon us with your turning?"

Vincent joined in the laughter. "I doubt it. She never looked past my face or what I was doing right then."

Wlad nodded slowly. "But you have looked beyond the moment."

Uncomfortable, Vincent shifted in his chair. "So how does this training thing work?"

"I shall be out of the country for a short time, I think no more than four months. When I return, I will send word and you will come to New York. There I will begin your education. We will discuss the how of it then."

And with a few more words, they returned to the party. Stasja quickly reappeared at Vincent's elbow once Wlad was gone.

"What did he want?" she asked.

Vincent gave her a sorrowful look. "Now that's an impertinent question. You know I can't tell you that."

Stasja blinked in astonishment. "What? What do you mean, impertinent?" she demanded, shocked and irritated.

"An Elder speaks to me in private, in confidence, and you expect me to insult him by betraying that confidence? Now, really."

She shook her head, eyes still wide, looking for something less disconcerting to occupy her mind.

The ride back was quiet, Stasja still considering the import of Wlad's appearance and Vincent's subsequent change of attitude toward her. She knew she couldn't control him, it was why she'd evicted Vincent from her coterie. But now he seemed immune to manipulation and charm, as well as the demands of the maker on the fledgling. It was upsetting to her not to be able to extract the tale from him, and she seemed glad to be quit of his company. She declined his offer of a nightcap.

He bowed over her hand before leaving the limo. "Another time, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," she said, meaning no.

Vincent chuckled to himself all the way up the stairs. Sure, he'd taken a serious chance of insulting her, but it had been worth it for the look on her face. He'd treasure that moment forever.

"Yes, I see. No, I don't think the deal is in any danger. No. Look, ask Ron, not me, it's what we pay him for. No. No. Look, this is getting redundant. I'll see you tomorrow. Okay? Right. Tomorrow. Okay. Goodbye."

John Spaulding hung up the phone on the side table, leaned back into the sofa's deep padding, and gave a great sigh. His wife brushed his hair out of his eyes.

"What was that all about?"

He sighed again. "That was Terry."

Mimi nodded. "I'd gathered as much."

"It's this thing with Hugh," John said tiredly. "Terry's jumpin' at shadows over it, all in a dither, half expectin' the law to show up at his door next."

"They won't, will they?" Mimi asked worriedly.

John snorted in derision. "'Course not. Terry's as honest as the day is long, and he's got the paperwork to prove it."

A new thought alarmed her. "What about us?"

"What about us?" John echoed.

"We're not in any danger from this, are we?"

John sat up and looked directly into her eyes. "I'd be lying to you if I said I'd never done anything dishonest. But I've never cut corners where it put people's lives in danger, and I've never got involved with the kind of crowd Hugh Grantham runs with. I'm not takin' any chances on gettin' arrested or losin' all this." He waved a hand around at the house in general. "I've worked too hard for too long to toss it all away on some wild chance, just because it might make me more fast. Now, Hugh Grantham is a stupid man. He's got involved with some bad folks, and he takes wild chances. The only reason we brought him in at all was because he could front us the capital on short notice. The plan all along was to buy him out once we had the complete tract, and were gettin' pre-build contracts comin' in. And that is exactly what

we're goin' t'do."

"Even with him in jail?" Mimi asked. "Won't the police freeze everything?"

John nodded. "Yeah." He didn't seem worried about it. "They'll freeze all the corporate assets, and then Ron'll come in and earn his paycheck. He'll prove that whatever Hugh was up to, none of the rest of us were involved, and the corporation is clear of it. They'll have to unfreeze the deal then, and we'll all pitch in with our preconstruction downpayments, buy out Hugh's portion and be back on track. It may take a few weeks, but we'll be building by the end of September."

He rose, stretched, his lean body taut under the sweats he wore for a second that gave Mimi pause. There weren't many men in their sixties in that kind of condition. Even after all these years, the sight of him made her heart beat a little faster.

John strode up the steps into the kitchen. A few seconds later, as the wind began to moan around the eaves, she heard him rummaging around in the refrigerator.

"Mimi, did you tell the cook to get more Gatorade?" he called down to her.

"Yes," she replied. "Isn't it in there?"

"No, it ain't." More rummaging. "What was the weather report for tonight?"

"Hot, clear and damp. Maybe a little rain before morning." She picked up her embroidery, and hunted for the needle. It always slipped out and got itself lost in the sofa.

"Well, they're full of shit, as usual," John replied, coming back down the steps into the recreation room. "It's really pickin' up out there." He crossed the room, drew back the blinds. "Looks like we're in for a thunder-bumper."

As if on cue, lightning flashed, and the ensuing rumble rattled the windows.

Mimi dropped her embroidery hoop. "Glory!" she exclaimed, looking up startled. "That sounded like it was right on top of us!" She picked up the hoop, and leaned over, hunting through the shag carpet. "Now, don't you come over here in those bare feet till I find that silly needle."

"Dammit!" John exclaimed. He strode over to the door and kicked on a pair of battered laceless deck shoes. Outside, rain pattered against the window.

"Where are you going? John, it's fixin' to pour out there!" Another flash of lightning; thunder boomed. The house began to creak alarmingly in the rising wind.

"Damn wind's pulled up the tarp on the boat," John answered, as he opened the door. The wind threw a spray of rain into the room, and nearly yanked the door out of his hand. "Gotta get it tied down or the boat'll be full up with rainwater."

"You be careful, now, and be quick, okay?"

"I will be." He gave her a grin, then turned, scowled at the increasingly nasty weather, and, head down, stepped into it, putting his weight on the door to get it closed against the wind.

The television burst into static. "Oh, damn," Mimi said. Cable must have gone down again. The cable company swore they'd get much better reception than with an antenna, and they did -- as long as the weather was fine. Soon as it started raining, nine times out of ten the cable went out.

An alarming creak from outside -- the raingutter tore loose and went sailing over the top of the house. Mimi reached for the phone to call the cable people and raise Cain with them. She'd have to call the insurance people next, darn it. Just when she was looking forward to a quiet night with her husband, all this had to happen. And what were they paying all that money for, when the t-v went out in every little storm that came along?

Then John screamed. Mimi froze, unable to act, unable to even think. In their twenty-seven years together, she'd never heard him make a sound like that. Not when the chainsaw sliced off his thumb, not when that guard dog they'd tried out had bit him, not even when the boat slipped off the trailer and landed on his foot. He'd cussed a blue streak, but never --

And he screamed again. Pain, fear, mortal danger. The back yard floodlight flared and went out, like a bulb blowing.

"Ohmigod. John!" Mimi punched 911 on the phone.

"Nine one one --"

"My husband's bein' kilt! Ohmigod, send an ambulance!" She dropped the receiver, and lunged for the window, thankful they'd voted for the extended service that traced the call automatically. She drew the curtains back as a third scream, a shriek of pure agony, burst from the back yard.

She peered out into the darkness, trying to see through the hail and driving rain. There, by the long shadow that she knew was the boat, something big was moving. My God, what was it? Tall as the camper, a bear? What was it doing? Where was John?

As if in answer, something wet smacked into the window from outside, and slid down the glass, leaving red streaks in its wake. Mimi had seen enough medical shows to recognize a heart.

She fainted.

Tony was on his way to the interrogation room when a uniformed officer stopped him.

"Detective Goodlark?"

"Yo!" He swung around to see who'd called his name.

The officer (his nametag said Perkins) handed Tony a folder. "Thought you might want this. It's the report on those two construction workers."

Tony flipped briefly through the papers in the folder, reading a few key fields on the forms and skipping past the typed statements. "So it's not an assault?"

Perkins shook his head. "Not unless we can prove it was deliberate. The doc over to General says it was an accident with heavy equipment. Says it looks like those boys got run over by a bulldozer or somethin'. Every long bone in their bodies was broke in the middle."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "That sounds deliberate to me."

"Not unless they used a comealong. Doc said it takes more force to break a bone like that than a man can put out. You can't just grab somebody's arm and snap it like a stick."

"What if they jumped off something and landed on those guys? I know, that's really reaching, but ..."

Perkins didn't think so. "Not unless they jumped from thirty feet up." He tapped the folder. "It's all in there. Sorry, sir, but those two boys seem to have gotten on the wrong side of a backhoe."

"Well, shit." Tony wandered off in the general direction of Interrogation, reading the file more thoroughly, and avoiding desks, trashcans, and other people only by sheer luck. He paused for a minute outside the door to finish, then closed the folder.

"Well, Mr. Grantham," he said to himself, "have we let you stew long enough?" He went in, closing the door behind him.

"And I tell you again, Mr. Grantham is a respectable businessman, and a pillar of this community!" Grantham's lawyer, Clive Picciano, was a somewhat overweight, stocky man with a round, softly-featured face, and short black hair with a tendency to curl at the edges. His suit was tailored to flatter him as much as possible, and made of a dark grey worsted with black pinstripes. His red silk tie was knotted close to his throat and held with a monogrammed tacket. Although young, Picciano had already established a fearsome reputation as a criminal lawyer, tying judges up in webs of loopholes and technicalities, and painting opposition witnesses into corners with elaborately constructed logic traps. Today, he was facing off against Paul McCluskey, from the District Attorney's office, who had an 85% conviction record over

six years. The tension in the room was so thick, the air almost crackled with it.

"Mr. Picciano," McCluskey said calmly, "I don't care how much you client donates to charities each year." He made a discarding gesture with a neatly manicured hand. "It's not relevant to the facts of the case." Everything about McCluskey had an air of patient study -- his plain grey suit, the pinstriped shirt with the collar starched just enough to stand firm without itching, the somber tie carefully knotted tight enough to look good but not to be uncomfortable. He leaned back in his chair with the attitude of a hunter whose prey has already sprung the trap but hasn't realized it yet, with his legs crossed and his hands folded neatly on his knee.

Picciano raised an eyebrow, his expression that of utter disbelief, as if McCluskey had said "The sky is not blue." He pushed up his silver-rimmed glasses with a quick, deliberate movement, hand vertical, almost like a salute. "You accuse my client of fraudulent practices, and then insist that his character as established in the community is not relevant? I don't think so. The situation is obvious."

McCluskey spread his hands wide, inviting, expansive, generous. "So explain it to me."

Picciano fixed him with a cold stare. "My client's employee undertook specific actions completely on his own, against clearly promulgated company policy and without my client's knowledge. The site supervisor at Wasabi Towers has been released from employment, and his wages docked in compliance with company policy regarding fines from breaches of regulations. My client will be happy to cooperate with you in any criminal proceedings brought against this man." He leaned forward, predatory. "But Mr. Grantham had no knowledge of this man's actions, and is innocent of any criminal activity."

A uniformed officer came in, handed a paper to Tony. He read it, and holding a poker face with some difficulty, leaned over and whispered to McCluskey. Picciano was acutely interested in the process, but Grantham looked like he was bored and really had better things to do.

"If that's so, Mr. Picciano," McCluskey said finally, "then why is it that blood belonging to two men ostensibly injured in a construction accident was found on your client's deck? A deck that was in the process of being torn down and burned?"

A sharp intake of breath from Grantham. Picciano turned, ready to silence him, but Grantham turned his face away from the others and clasped his hands. McCluskey took note of his white knuckles, and knew that he'd scored bigtime.

"Care to explain that, Mr. Picciano?" McCluskey asked lazily.

Picciano tossed off a killing glare at his client, then turned back to the D.A. "I need a few minutes with my client. In an unmonitored room." He punctuated the request with a sharp look from narrowed eyes.

McCluskey smiled faintly. "Are you accusing us of listening in on privileged communications?"

Picciano shook his head, amazed that the D.A. had tried such an obvious and antiquated trap. "Not at all. That is one way glass behind you, correct?"

McCluskey nodded acquiescence, and arose. "C'mon, you can use the conference room down the hall." He led lawyer and client out of the interrogation room, and turned them over to a uniformed officer with instructions as to where to take them.

Tony grinned. "Couldn't'a got a better reaction with a hand grenade."

McCluskey nodded thoughtfully as he watched the departing pair. "We're not going to be able to hold the freeze."

"What do you mean?" Tony was baffled.

"We've got nothing on the other partners, and nothing to prove the Indian land was acquired by fraudulent means."

"What about murder?" Tony asked, incredulous. "We traced the tags from the explosives to a Grantham site!"

"Mm." McCluskey continued to stare off into the distance. "I'm saving that one. Might need another round in the gun in a few minutes. We get to court, I'll go for conspiracy, but I'm not letting Picciano know that until discovery starts." Now he turned his attention more to Tony. "You haven't arraigned him yet, have you?"

Tony grinned. "Nope."

"Good. Let's hold off for the forty-eight hour limit. I'll take the heat on that, tell the judge we were still bagging up the evidence and preparing the charges, and that we hauled him in early because of fear of flight in a capital crime. Let Grantham spend a day down in Holding."

"You got it."

McCluskey's eyes drifted back to where Grantham had gone. "He's going to be spending the rest of his life behind bars. He might as well start getting used to it."

The night was far from over at the burial ground. As soon as the news had arrived about the land sale, the Cherokee had dug in, their perimeter guards sitting down and handcuffing themselves into a human barricade. The sheriff decided to wait until the eviction papers were served. This was going to be a lot of trouble, and he might as well put it off as long as he could.

The council withdrew to discuss what actions to take and to prepare a statement for the media, and promptly got bogged down in a procedural dispute, which evolved into a shouting match between the moderates and the radicals.

Henry groaned. He'd seen this kind of thing drag on for hours. He leaned over to Billy Crow, a younger man there as a trainee, and told him, "I'm going off to the woods to meditate. See if the spirits have anything to say. When they get down to real business, come get me."

Billy nodded, and Henry slipped quietly out of the council tent. Off in the woods behind the encampment, the last few notes of a flute died away. He'd heard it faintly from within the tent, but hadn't been able to make out the tune over the racket. Now, as he caught the end of it, the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck rose. A cold chill went down his spine, and all his muscles tensed. He had no idea of the origin of that music, but he knew it was wrong. It spoke to things better left alone, walked a path nobody should even consider. Without realizing what he was doing, he stepped into cover behind a tent, and began making his way cautiously in the direction the music had come from, keeping to the shadows, trying to keep something between himself and the flute-player if at all possible.

He'd gotten to the edge of the woods when two dark figures made for the same shadow he was moving toward. Henry froze, started to ease back to a hiding place, when one called his name.

"Henry?" the voice hissed, barely a whisper. If he'd been two steps further away, he wouldn't have heard it.

"Yeah," he replied, pitching his voice similarly.

The figures relaxed slightly, and came toward him. As they passed into the light, Henry recognized John Skyhorse and Kevin Sun-Goes-Down, both dressed in forest camo, their hair tucked underneath dark watchcaps.

Henry held out a hand, stopped them a few feet away. "Tell me you weren't playing that flute."

John raised an eyebrow. "You heard it?"

"I felt it", Henry said, repressing a shudder.

John and Kevin traded glances. Kevin looked Henry over assessingly.

"You believe in spirits?" Kevin asked.

"Yes." Henry didn't hesitate.

"Had a vision?"

Henry sighed. "Where d'you think my name came from?"

Kevin and John traded looks again. Kevin nodded once, slowly.

"C'mon," John said. "We gotta talk, but not here."

The three stopped by the canteen tent and collected a paper cup each of herbal tea, then went off to Kevin's tent, a battered Army surplus officer's cabin model with a symbol on each side in black paint. Kevin paused at the entrance, touched a small bag hanging from the pole, and murmured a few words that Henry didn't catch.

The interior was sparse, almost monastic. A blanket spread out on one side with another folded at one end, a Coleman cooler and a footlocker, both looking as well-used as the tent, and a garment bag hanging from a loop at the back. The men found seats on the canvas floor.

Kevin opened the footlocker and took out a shallow clay bowl and a bag. From the bag came a bottle of oil, which he used to fill the bowl about halfway, and a cork disk with a wick stuck through it. He put the bag away, then lit the lamp with a metal Zippo lighter.

Silence for a few moments. "Henry," Kevin said finally, "you had any visions lately?"

Henry frowned. "I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "I've had some dreams lately that seemed pretty vivid."

"There's one you've had several times. Tell me about it."

Henry didn't ask how Kevin knew that. The answer seemed obvious. "I'm standing in the woods. A snake makes a ring around my feet. It sheds its skin, and the skin goes to a clearing while the snake stays around me. A white owl flies into the clearing, and it fights with the skin. Then I wake up. I don't know how the fight ends." He sipped his tea. The night was turning cool, and talking about the dream wasn't helping.

Kevin reached into the footlocker again, and took out a small brazier that he set up over the lamp. He hunted around and brought out a few small cloth bags. From each of these, he took a pinch of an herb and tossed it into the brazier. Henry recognized the smells of sage and sweetgrass, but there was something pungent and woody, and another lemony, astringent odor, that he had no names for. Kevin and John began to chant, low, Kevin breaking away to mutter a few words in the old ceremonial tongue.

The tent grew closer, more quiet, more still. The night sounds outside faded away. Henry shifted uncomfortably as a tingle raced out of the brazier, through him and out to the walls of the tent.

Kevin turned back to him. "What we speak of stays here, except as the spirits guide you."

Henry nodded.

"You will be leaving your place as a scout," Kevin continued, switching to Cherokee, "to come into the village and sit by the medicine fire. A new path opens before you, the path of medicine." He reached out, marked Henry's forehead and throat with oil mixed with the brazier's ashes.

"You've had a vision, son," John said, in English. "One we've been having for a week or more, now."

Henry raised an eyebrow at him.

"I asked you if you believed in spirits," Kevin said. "Look me in the eye and tell me the truth. Do you believe that the spirits are real?"

Henry took a deep breath and met the older man's eyes. It was harder than he'd thought. Something, like heatwaves rising off the pavement, seemed to be between them, and he had to finally relax and stare past them to see clearly, as pushing didn't seem to get him anywhere.

"I've had my doubts," Henry told Kevin, "but I had a true vision, when I did my naming vigil, and while I haven't had a spirit talk to me since, I still believe they're there."

Kevin stared at him for a long, uncomfortable moment before he spoke. "What's this dream

mean?"

Henry shrugged. "Uh, something being reborn?"

"No," John said. "Think it through."

"Okay. Um, Snake stayed beside me, and that's life and healing, and something dead went to fight the owl?"

"And what was the owl?" Kevin asked.

Damn, it was hard to see through that shimmer. Henry managed to relax again with great difficulty as he focused on the question. Suddenly, the answer came to him.

"It came from out of the northwest, an evil spirit, hungry for the souls of the people." The words seemed to come *through* him from somewhere else. "A thing that was dead rose up again to defend the village, while the living held back to heal afterwards."

"And the snake was waiting for its skin to come back," John said.

Henry glanced over at him. John was easier to see than Kevin. What did that mean?

"What you saw," said Kevin, and Henry had to look back at him again, "was a legend of another people, one that should not be here."

"Like the flute. They're part of the same thing." Henry didn't know why he was so sure of that. He just was.

"Right. What do you know about the Wendigo?"

"Uh, Western tribe legend, out in the Rockies, supposed to explain cannibalism in the winter when the food ran out."

John snorted derisively. "You got a bunch of white lies to unlearn. Yeah, some people blamed the Wendigo when they got hungry and their neighbors started lookin' tasty, but that ain't all of it, not by a long shot."

"The Wendigo is real," Kevin stated calmly. "Every bit as real as you or me. It's a spirit of winter storms, rage and hunger. Very dangerous."

Henry followed the chain of thought to its end. "So what's it doing here? It's August, in Tennessee."

John sighed, a grim frown creasing his features. "Walks By Night."

"The guy you told me was crazy?" Henry asked, incredulous.

"Isn't calling up a spirit like that crazy?" Kevin asked in response. "He's not content with the Council's actions, so he decided to do something about it himself, and raised the spirit."

"So what do we do about it?" Henry didn't even think about it. He automatically included himself in the action.

"Don't know yet," John said.

"We can't just sit around," Henry insisted. "Can't we haul him up in front of the Council?"

Kevin shook his head. "Man may be crazy, but he's right about them. Council's medicine runs thin these days. They couldn't hold him. White men couldn't, not in their jails. We couldn't either, not him and his buddies together."

This was getting a bit much. "Buddies?" Henry asked.

John snorted again. "Didn't think the ol'fart was raisin' it up hisself, did you?"

With nothing to say, Henry kept silent.

"There is something you can do," Kevin told him.

"What?"

"Tell that P.I. friend of yours."

"Don?" Henry was confused. "He's in the hospital."

"No." Kevin tossed more herbs onto the brazier. "His boss. Spirits say you ought to talk to Fisher

about this."

"Okay." By now, Henry was taking all this at face value. If the spirits wanted him to meet with Vincent Fisher, then he'd do it, just that, no questions.

"And, Henry --"

"Yes?"

"You got to do it before dawn today. Come sundown, Walks By Night and his buddies're gonna raise the thing again, and this time they're plannin' on lettin' it loose on the city. We don't have the manpower to stop'em or to restrain the thing once they call it up."

Kevin poured a splash of water into the brazier, filling the tent with pungent steam. Through it, his voice came to Henry with an echo on more than the physical level.

"Hurry, son. We ain't got much time."

On the way to his car, Henry met up with Billy Crow.

"Man, where you been?" Billy asked. "I been all over lookin' for you!"

"No time, Billy," Henry told him. "I've got to go see Fisher."

"Now?" Billy asked, amazed.

"Yes, now. If anyone in the Council asks, send'em to Sun Goes Down." With that, Henry swung into his car, revved it up and left the site in a spray of gravel. Oddly enough, neither the cops nor the media seemed to notice his abrupt departure.

He made the trip downtown in thirty minutes, about fifteen quicker than the speed limit would have allowed, and pulled up in front of the Fisher Investigations building to see that the top floor lights were still on. Henry parallel-parked in front of the building, ignored the parking meter as it was out of its hours, and stabbed the button on the intercom with his thumb.

After a few anxious seconds, a voice came back to him. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Mr. Fisher?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Henry Touch-the-sky. I've got to talk with you."

To his surprise, the security door immediately clicked and swung out an inch, and Vincent replied, "Come on up. I've been wanting to meet you."

Henry made his way up the stairs, past three landings with security doors every bit as massive as the one at the street entrance, ending at yet another one at the top. A camera stared down at him from behind a shield of some clear material Henry was willing to bet was bulletproof. This guy wasn't paranoid, was he? Henry guessed that dealing with break-ins and security violations every day would make you just a bit more worried about your own security.

After just enough time for him to catch his breath from the climb, the door opened and Henry stepped through into the main room of Vincent's apartment. Vincent himself was waiting just inside. He extended a hand.

"Henry. Good to meet you."

Henry shook the offered hand, found it cool, dry and amazingly firm. "Mr. Fisher."

"Please. Vince. Mr. Fisher is my father." A casual grin.

"Vince, then, but I'm afraid this isn't a social call."

Vincent quirked up one side of his mouth. "It never is. C'mon, have a seat." He indicated the sofa grouping. "Get you something?"

"Thanks, no," Henry replied. "Need to keep my head clear for this."

"That serious?" Vincent preceded him to the sofa, perched on one end, leaving Henry the other or the easy chair. He chose the latter.

"Yes." Henry folded his hands, frowned grimly. "This may seem like an odd question." He looked up directly at Vincent. "Do you believe in spirits?"

Vincent restrained a laugh. It wouldn't be appropriate. "More than you know," he said. "Why? Does this have something to do with the case? I don't know if you got my message, but since Don's in the hospital, I've taken over as principal investigator. Assuming, of course, that you want us to continue."

Henry took a deep breath. "That may not be relevant."

"How so?" Vincent leaned forward, giving Henry his full attention.

In reply, Henry went back to the earlier subject. "When I asked you about spirits, you didn't seem surprised."

A sardonic grin. "Let's just say that I've seen too much to not believe, myself, and that I believe that all religions hold a grain of truth. That ought to cover subjective and objective pretty well."

Henry plunged ahead. "Vince, I've been sent here by a vision, that was shared by two other men. What I have to tell you may sound outrageous, but I have to believe that the spirits knew what they were doing when they sent that vision and sent me here. Somehow, telling you this is going to be useful."

"Okay." Vincent nodded. "Let's assume that I'll seriously consider what you have to say, and take it from there."

"Right." Henry took a deep breath, and tried to relax the way he had in Kevin's tent. Vincent blinked in surprise. A faint wash of magic was rolling off Henry. Not much, and not well focused, but enough to sense it.

"One of our people," Henry said, addressing the coffee table, "has raised an evil spirit. He's set it against the people he sees as our enemies."

"Wait a minute." Vincent held up a hand. "This thing wouldn't be about the size of a bear, with a taste for people, would it? Arrives in the middle of a storm?"

Henry jerked up, startled. "You've seen it?" he asked.

"No." And I'm glad of it, let me tell you, Vincent added to himself. "I've seen what it did. Your tribesman, he's pissed off about the land deal, right? And so he calls this thing up, and sics it on the developers, right?"

"Exactly." Henry nodded. "It's called a Wendigo."

And at the name, the dreams swept in, the forebodings that Vincent hadn't been able to remember, the grim prophecies that had left him uneasy for the past week. The vision was clear, the storm ravaging across the city, ice sheathing the buildings, people frozen, torn and bloody, in the streets, as a hulking shape stalked through the streets. And himself, standing in its way, a crowd huddled behind him, hiding in his shadow, the only thing between them and the monstrous shape reaching out hungrily.

"Oy." Vincent leaned over, one hand across his stomach, the other pinching the bridge of his nose, his eyes squeezed tight with the impact.

"You okay?" Henry asked, worried.

"Oh. Oh, man. I will be. Give me a minute." Vincent shook his head to clear the black fog from it, stood and crossed over to the bar. He poured himself a brandy, took a sip. "So," he said, turning back to Henry, "your tribesman has gotten pissed off enough he's called this thing up."

"Yes. But he's not a tribesman of mine. No one who would raise such a thing is of my blood." Henry's fist had balled up tight on his thigh.

"But this guy's calling the sucker up to defend the burial ground."

"If we have to resort to such things, then where is our honor? If we cannot keep the land by any other means, then perhaps we are not meant to keep it. Better to lose the burial ground of our ancestors

and hold our honor, than to gain the land by such means." Henry had switched to Cherokee without realizing it.

"Pardon?" Vincent hadn't understood a word.

Henry realized what he'd done. "Sorry. We can't do that. If we can't hold onto the land without the Wendigo, then we're not meant to keep the land. Our honor's more important than the burial ground."

"So stop the guy."

"We can't. No jail could hold him, and we don't have enough shamans to take him and his buddies on, and stand a chance of winning."

"Oy." Vincent tossed off the rest of his brandy. "So you came to me, after you had this vision thing."

"Me and two others, yes."

"Well, let's just say that you're not the only one having dreams lately." Vincent glanced at the windows. The sky was growing lighter. "Tell you what. I'll meet you at the burial grounds tonight, and we'll look into this, okay?"

Henry nodded. "It'll have to be close to sundown. Walks By Night is planning to raise the Wendigo again tonight, and this time he's letting it loose on the city."

"Oy."

"You keep saying that."

"Nothing else to say. Your spirits don't exactly believe in taking the comfortable approach, do they?"

"No." Henry stood. "You have a part in this, then?"

"Don't look like I have much choice. See you tonight."

They shook hands, and Henry departed. Vincent poured himself another brandy. What was he going to tell Traci? "Went off to take on an evil spirit. If I don't come back, have a nice life?" This was just too much in one week. He knew he was worried. He always dealt with things that upset him by being flippant. Defense mechanism. But, damn, this was worse than meeting Wlad again. At least Wlad wasn't out to take him apart. This thing -- how pissed was it going to be when it found out he wasn't exactly alive? Could he survive it?

Shit.

If you turn from me
You darken my sun
You snap that thin thread
I call my horizon
And I'd like to remind you
Of something small
That the rock in this pocket
Could cause your fall

-- *Rock In This Pocket, _99.9 F_ by Suzanne Vega*

In the complete, velvet darkness of the capsule, Vincent awoke, and touched the controls. The lid rose to reveal his clothes laid out on the valet -- and Traci standing beside it, leaning against the wall,

arms folded and eyes narrowed.

"You were just gonna take off," she snapped, "and leave me with this?" She waved a crumpled sheet of printout. Vincent didn't need to read it; he'd written her a note, dropped it into her queue, figuring with a low priority attached it ought to be well after dark, well after his departure, before she got to it. Obviously, he'd been wrong.

"Obviously, you don't know all personal messages from you get red-flagged in my queue," she said, wadding up the note. "Vince, how could you?"

He climbed out of the pod, and reached for his clothes. "Would you believe I was trying to avoid a scene?" he asked.

She threw the note at him. "So you leave me this? Going off to fight some big toothy monster, have a nice life, keys are under the mat?"

Vincent winced. "Well, I thought I'd been a bit more graceful than that about it."

"That's about the gist of it. Dammit, Vince, do you really think that little of me?"

He paused in the course of buttoning his shirt. "Of course not. How could you think that?"

She sighed, exasperated. "We've been together for five years now. In some ways, we're closer than husband and wife ever get. I know you keep telling me how much you need me, but did you ever stop to think that I might need you?" Her voice shook; a tear rolled down her cheek. She brushed it angrily away.

Vincent closed his eyes, nodded once. "Okay." He raised his head, met her gaze. "I've been a jerk, and a blind one at that. I guess -- I just took our relationship for granted."

"You can't do that, Vince," she said, shaking her head, less angry now that the apology had been extended. "I know, we started out as boss and employee, but we crossed that line a long time ago. You can't just -- toss all that away, walk off and leave me nothing -- but a note -- " and she dissolved in tears.

Vincent gathered her up, held her until the spasms had subsided. "Ssh, ssh." He tipped her head back gently until their eyes met.

"Traci," he said quietly, "you mean a lot more to me than just someone to face the day for me. If you've ever had any doubts about that -- don't."

"What's going to happen to us, Vince?" She sniffled. "Damn."

"Tonight?" Vincent handed her the tissues off the dresser.

"No, I mean down the road." She blew her nose. "Ten, twenty years from now. Vince, you're not going to get old. I am."

A chill swept over him. "You can't mean you want me to -- "

"Yes. I do." She set her mouth in a determined line. "I don't know how long we'll stay together, but I want us to have as many years as we can stand. Yes, I want you to Turn me."

Vincent shook his head in disbelief. "Traci, I've never done that to anyone before. It's not a Gift. It's a fucking curse. If you believe that I love you, how can you ask me to inflict that on you?"

Her eyes misted over with tears. "If you love me, you'd want to be with me, right? No matter what it takes, right?" She yanked aside her collar. "Right?"

He embraced her, held her tightly. "I can't. Try to understand, even if I wanted to, I can't right now."

"Why not?" she asked, her voice muffled against his chest.

"It takes a lot out of both participants. I've got to conserve my strength for tonight. If -- "

"When," she said.

"When I get back," he conceded, "we'll talk about this a bit more, okay? If I do Turn you, that's a major step, and there's no undoing it. And again, I can't do it tonight. Even if I could, I wouldn't."

"Why not?" She looked up, confused.

"Because if anything happened to me, you'd be unbound and Masterless."

"I don't understand -- "

"There's leaders and followers, okay? Except with vampires it's more like personality types, you're one or the other. Wlad met me at the party last night -- "

"Oh my god." Her eyes went wide.

"S'okay, he wanted to tell me about this alpha thing. That's why Stasja's attempt to bond me failed. You can't bond an alpha. But you're not an alpha."

Her expression shifted, shock sliding toward insulted. Vincent headed it off.

"No, really, you're just not the born leader type. You like to do things for other people, like to have someone to look up to. Right?"

"Well, I guess so." She didn't seem to be too happy with the idea.

"Okay, so you'd need a Master, an alpha type, to attach to. Vampires travel in packs, like wolves. The only rogues who last for long are alphas who don't have a pack of their own. So, either you're an alpha or you're part of someone else's pack. Follow me so far?"

She nodded. "So if something happened to you, I'd get swept up by some other alpha type into their pack?"

"Pretty much, yeah. You see why I wanted you to think about it?"

"Yeah. Vince?"

"Mm?"

"In the old days, when a man went off to war, his lady gave him a token, something of hers to take with him, to give him strength and remind him of what he was fighting for." She tilted her head to one side, stretching out her neck below his chin.

Vincent was nothing if not chivalrous.

The night is black, without a moon.

The air is thick and still.

The vigilantes gather on

The lonely torchlit hill.

Features distorted in the flickering light,

Faces are twisted and grotesque.

Silent and stern in the sweltering night,

The mob moves like demons possessed.

Quiet in conscience, calm in their right,

Confident their ways are best.

-- *Rush, Witch Hunt*

A spray of gravel was thrown up as the electric-blue Miata swung into the lot at the burial ground. Vincent bailed out as soon as it quit moving, slamming the door and hoping it locked. All the way from Nashville, he'd felt an increasing sense of urgency, a voice in the back of his head: hurry hurry hurry. It was up to a shout now, a cadence marked by drums and rattles.

Some of the percussion was coming from a tarp awning put up near the back of the camp, next to a beat-up Army surplus officer's tent. Half a dozen men sat in a circle around a fire, under the awning, a

faint shimmer around them that was uncomfortable to look at. Henry emerged from the shimmer, jogged over to meet him.

"Where have you been? Nobody can find Walks by Night, but we know where the others are -- c'mon." Henry practically dragged Vincent up to the tarp -- and no further.

It was like walking into a rubber wall. It gave, to a point, and then stopped firm. Henry went on through, and jerked around, brought up short by his grip on Vincent's jacket. His jaw dropped, astonishment widening his eyes.

Vincent glanced down. A ring of cornmeal, with feathers and rocks stuck in it at odd intervals, surrounded the awning. The shimmer rose up from it. Magic, dammit. The more he ran into the stuff -- literally, this time -- the more he disliked it.

Oh, great, and now the old man at the head of the circle (how can a circle have a head? Dunno, but this one did) had gotten up and was giving him a damn sharp look.

"Henry? This is Vincent Fisher?" the old man asked.

"Uh, uh, yeah, yes, that's him." Henry was still staring at Vincent, unsure about what his inability to cross the circle meant.

The old man stepped over to them. The low chanting, drums and rattles from the rest of the group continued.

"I'm Kevin Sun-Goes-Down. Don't worry, it's just the spirits havin' a laugh at our expense." He extended a hand across the circle. Vincent cautiously reached out to take it, and the old man clasped forearms with him and drew him into the circle. There was an unpleasant tingling sensation, like a dentist striking a nerve, and the feeling of the wall being shoved aside over its protests, and then he was standing beside Kevin.

Sun-Goes-Down grinned at him, and led him around the circle to his place, motioning for Henry to sit at his left and Vincent at his right.

"So, Henry has told you what we face?"

Vincent nodded, shifting uncomfortably. He did not like being here. Outside the circle looked much more inviting, but he wasn't sure he could get out without help.

"Did he tell you how to stop it?"

"No," Vincent replied. Now it was Henry's turn to be uncomfortable, dammit.

But Henry just shrugged, and looked to Kevin for the answer.

"A great hero," Kevin said, "steps forward from the tribe. He rolls in the snow until he freezes solid, becoming kind of an ice giant, and goes off to wrestle the spirit. Meanwhile, the village cooks up a medicine to return him to normal when he gets back."

"Aw, c'mon!" Vincent said. "It's August, in Nashville! Where the hell are we gonna get snow?"

Kevin fixed him with another of those sharp looks. "The key there is that the hero steps over the line between life and death. He gains power from having partially left life behind in a great ritual. You've already been through that."

"Say what?" Ohmigod. Maybe if he bluffed --

"Don't even think about it," Kevin told him. "You couldn't cross the circle. When I touched you, I knew."

"Knew what, grandfather?" Henry hoped the honorific would excuse the interruption.

Kevin turned to him and said, "Your friend here is what the white people call a vampire. He walks between the living and the dead, and has great medicine. This is why the spirits sent you to him."

Henry'd gone pale with the news, and shook his head in denial. "No, that's not possible. There's no such thing."

Kevin raised an eyebrow. "You can believe in one kind of spirit and not in another? Watch and

learn."

Now he addressed the full circle. "The hero must come of the tribe. As leader of the Medicine Council, and an elder of the tribe, I call upon my right to adopt, and bring this man into our tribe."

He turned, stuck out his left arm, the hand clenched into a fist, and pulled a small knife with his right. "The bond is by blood."

The drums in Vincent's head and in the circle flared up; he seemed to be moving almost in choreographed motions, every move already planned and guided by someone else. Of course he would do this; it was inevitable, it was necessary, he wouldn't survive without it. He raised his left wrist to his mouth, extended his fangs, and bit. Henry gasped. Sun Goes Down drew his knife across his own wrist, and the two men pressed the wounds together.

Sun Goes Down tied a leather thong about their wrists, pulling it tight with his teeth. He swayed dizzily as the impact of Vincent's blood hit him, then recovered -- the effects were not unlike peyote -- and turned back to the circle.

"This is my son, Swifter than Wind. Let no man challenge him without facing me." He slashed the thong, freeing their arms. Vincent licked the wound he'd made, sealing it closed. Sun Goes Down held his arm out.

"If you would?" he asked. Vincent obliged; the old man had got a bit too enthusiastic with the knife. He blinked; the taste of the shaman's blood was richer and more complex than he was used to, and it made him a bit dizzy. That, and for a few seconds, he could see an extra shimmer around the others in the circle. It went away quickly, though.

"We're makin' it hard," said Kevin, "for Walks by Night to call his spirit. Each man here is fighting one of Walks By Night's lodge, tyin' up their resources. We've located all of them except their leader."

An image slid into Vincent's mind as the shimmer left his vision -- a clearing, moonlight rippling across long grass, a figure walking into it -- an old man, in macabre medicine dress -- he held a flute --

And as the first notes of the flute echoed out of the treeline, Vincent leaped to his feet. NOW NOW NOW, screamed the voices in his head. The pull nearly yanked him off his feet. "I know," he said, and with that he was off, through the barrier and into the trees, one thought in his mind: find the old man and kill him before he gets started. The dim light of the moon and stars filtering through the trees was bright as day to him. Every sound was amplified a hundred times, his senses expanding with the Hunt. The feel of warm blood ahead --

Vincent burst into the clearing, through another barrier, and fetched up hard against a third as he lunged for the old shaman. Behind his flute, Walks by Night grinned. Now the hero was trapped, unable to stop the calling of the spirit, and unable to flee or get help from outside the circle. He took a deep breath, and blew the opening notes of the Call.

I gambled in two graveyards
I won against the odds
With the smiling saints
And the silent saviours
With the maggots and the gods
I cursed the things they showed me
I could never see again
And the howling of the wind at night
I wrote upon the rain

-- *The Pogues, USA*

A light breeze stirred the top leaves of the trees. It moved lower, setting them all in motion. The sussuration was unpleasantly reminiscent of the hiss of a rattlesnake about to strike.

It's coming.

The flute rose, long slow tones giving way to quicker measures, calling, entreating. Icy drafts swirled down into the grass, eddying and billowing, turning the meadow into an ocean infested with sharks. The insects fell silent.

It's coming.

Small branches stirred. The clouds overhead scudded by on the bow-wave of a stormfront, grey wisps like tattered shrouds fleeing the oncoming black monoliths. Ozone spread its sharp tang; thunder rumbled in the distance.

It's coming.

Calling, demanding, imploring, the flute wove a path, a door, a gate, soaring, wailing. Its shrill voice pierced the darkness and gathering gloom. In the camp, dogs began to howl at the high notes.

It's coming.

Larger branches stirred. Twigs snapped off. Leaves swirled about the clearing, a hurricane forming with the flute-player at its eye. Lightning flashed; thunder rolled.

It's coming.

Gale-force winds lashed the trees into agony. Heavy limbs cracked under the onslaught. Rain and hail spattered like bullets, down, sideways, up, whichever way the stormwinds raged. The sky was black with clouds, incandescent with lightning. The mad piping of the flute reached a crescendo, an ear-piercing exclamation, -- explosions of scintillant light burst forth in the eye of the storm --

It's here.

Vincent dropped into a T stance, balanced to attack or dodge. At the edge of the clearing, Kevin and Henry slammed into the outer barrier, and fell back, stunned not only by the impact but by the sight of what stood within the circle.

Fifteen feet high, the beast was shrouded in fur the color of moonlight on snow. Its massive chest supported shoulders broad enough to walk across, arms the size of trees ending in massive clawed hands with a three-octave spread. The head sloped up from the torso, apparently with no neck, or maybe it was just the overdeveloped musculature making it seem that way. Facially it resembled a gorilla, with a flattened nose, deep-set eyes under a pronounced bony ridge and a prognathic jaw, but the tusks projected a handspan top and bottom and were sharp enough to be called fangs. No gorilla ever had that look in its eyes, either, a burning rage and hunger far the other side of madness.

With a roar that set leaves to trembling, it launched itself on Vincent. He slid aside, lagging a foot -- and the Wendigo tumbled across the clearing, to fetch up against the barrier.

Good, Vincent thought, it's not terribly smart or subtle.

His analysis was interrupted as the beast lunged up and toward him, like a tsunami rising out of the ocean. Claws ripped through Vincent's shoulder as he tried to evade, knocking him down into the grass. He rolled frantically to avoid the follow-up strike, and the beast tore a gaping wound in the soil, flinging clods of earth and grass to the edge of the clearing.

Damn, that sucker's fast! Vincent launched a kick from the ground, springing up onto his hands and driving both feet into the side of the Wendigo's knee. It did not collapse as Vincent had hoped; it was like kicking an oak. The beast staggered, off balance, and recovered, whirling to try and find its prey.

Outside the barrier, Kevin blinked and refocused his vision to the physical. "We've got one hell of a problem here."

"No shit?" Henry was too boggled by the combat to remember that he was speaking to a tribal elder.

Not that Kevin really noticed. "If we don't do something, Vincent may lose that fight. But if we crack the barrier, the Wendigo gets loose."

Vincent parried another vicious swiping attack, stepping inside its arc to leap up, grab a handful of chest fur and haul himself up to smash a heel strike into the beast's nose. He let go and threw himself back as the Wendigo screamed, taking a handful of talons across his back. The beast howled, pawing at its face, its nose not apparently damaged.

Shit, that should have at least started some bleeding. Speaking of which --

Vincent's clothes dropped to the ground as a hawk spread its wings and went for altitude. The shift closed his wounds, although he was still in pain and had lost enough blood to notice it. Up, up, then roll, dive, tuck the wings in, claws out and forward --

The Wendigo looked up and swung. Vincent flicked a wingtip and rolled around the beast's talons, and sank his own into its left eye. A satisfyingly wet sound and a spurt of fluid, then he was gliding away, low, the beast screaming in pain hit after him. Just before the barrier, Vincent extended his wings, climbing --

And was sent reeling by a backhand. The damned thing had caught up to him.

He shifted to wolf just before impact, tucked, rolled, ran, dodging another blow. A quick look back.

Jesus Christ, the thing regenerated. The left eye should have been a streaming ruin, but it was glaring balefully at him as the beast pursued.

"I've got an idea, Henry," Kevin said, "but it's gonna take your help and it may not be real comfortable."

Henry shrugged. "Whatever. We have to do something."

"Okay. Clear your mind. Focus the way you did back in my tent, and like in the lodge."

Kevin began a low chant. After a minute, Henry took it up with him, as the power began to build.

Vincent deliberately tumbled, rolled, and the Wendigo overran him. Something that big just couldn't turn on a dime like its smaller opponent. He came up behind it with a vicious slash of his teeth, hamstringing left and right. Howling, the beast fell, rolling to face its attacker. Vincent gathered himself, to spring for the neck --

And liquid fire seared down his throat, up into his brain. The beast's essence raved within him, clouding his vision and his mind. He reeled back, shaking his head, trying to clear it.

"The Earth is your mother

The Earth is your father

You are a child of the Earth"

Claws ripped into his side. The pain shocked Vincent out of the haze. He snapped at the wrist. The beast drew back from his teeth, and he scrambled to his feet. Beast and wolf faced off against each other, circling, feinting, seeking advantage. But the wolf was tiring, had lost blood, was injured, moving slower ...

Henry shimmered, and melted into the ground, travelling along the roots and trickles of groundwater, merged, one with the soil. Under the barrier, through it, it didn't matter if the barrier extended below the surface, he *was* the earth, moving through it like an electrical charge through wire. Then up ---

The pain was tremendous. Birth is traumatic, and Henry was born from the dark womb of the planet into the cold, shocking air and light of the surface. He lay, naked and gasping, next to the inner barrier around Walks By Night.

The Wendigo sensed better prey. Live, warm, easier to take than the spirit wolf that harassed it. Breaking away from the confrontation, the beast lunged for Henry.

"No!" Vincent, in human form now, leaped onto its back, grabbing handholds in its fur, climbing for the head.

Henry stretched to touch the inner barrier --

The beast whirled, raking the air with its claws, trying to dislodge its attacker --

Kevin focused --

Vincent reached around for the beast's eyes --

And with a noiseless pop like a soap bubble bursting, the inner barrier vanished. Henry collapsed, unconscious, the strain of his rebirth and the channeling of Kevin's magic too great. Walks by Night's eyes went wide, and he raised his hands to conjure a new barrier.

Vincent launched himself from the beast's shoulders, ignoring the pain as the Wendigo dug its claws into the back of his leg, and smashed into the old shaman. He pounded the man's head on the ground to be sure he was going to stay down, then snatched the flute.

From behind, the Wendigo caught him up in a bearhug, and began to squeeze. Vincent shrieked in agony as his ribs buckled.

He sank his fangs into the beast's arm, whipping his head side to side to shred its flesh, and the Wendigo's grip broke. As the fire roared into his brain once more, Vincent whirled.

"This works on us," he screamed, "let's see what it does to you!"

And he sank the flute into the beast's chest, driving it in with both hands.

A blaze of lightning --

A clap of thunder --

Scream of the wind --

And it was gone.

The need screaming in his veins, Vincent spun, and with the last shred of conscious thought, chose between the two men lying on the ground before him. He seized the old shaman, raised him up and sank in his fangs.

Hot, sweet blood poured into his mouth, strength, life, healing. His ribs knitted, his wounds closed. The beat of the old man's heart drove him on, faster, more, faster, more --

Then the psychic explosion as life departed. The shock threw Vincent back. He dropped the body, staring blindly as the rage left him, and dizziness swept over, the world lighting up with new colors, new shapes, echoes around everything alive.

Vincent collapsed.

The vampiric constitution is nothing if not resilient. Vincent opened his eyes a few minutes later to find Kevin kneeling beside him. The old man's worried expression vanished, to be replaced with a shaky grin.

"Couldn't find a pulse," Kevin said. "Had me worried for a minute there, n'then I remembered. Felt kinda stupid, y'know?"

Vincent sat up slowly, holding his head to keep it from flying into small pieces. An entire tribe of howler monkeys had taken up residence in his forebrain and were trying to dig their way out with pickaxes. "Henry?"

"He's fine." Kevin glanced off to the side, then back. "Out like a light, 'n'he'll have a sore head come the mornin', but he held up like a warrior. Boy's found his path."

Vincent blinked. He couldn't get his vision to focus. The world kept spreading, ripples of color surrounding Kevin, Henry, the trees -- but not Walks By Night. The shaman's body lay crumpled nearby, and was coldly inert, devoid of color.

"Oh damn."

Kevin followed Vincent's stare. "Yeah, that might be a problem. Think we oughta get the Council in on this about now."

He stood, wincing a bit and favoring his knee, and headed off back toward the camp. Vincent gathered up his clothes, crawled over to the body, and sat staring at it for a long time.

Security troops moved in, roped off the clearing, and the Council members arrived, gathering around Vincent and his victim. Kevin had already explained the situation briefly when he'd broken in on the meeting, and on the way to the clearing. While not glossing over any important details, he didn't dwell on the more unpleasant aspects. He finished up the tale, introducing Vincent as Henry was put on a stretcher and carried off back to the camp.

"Wonderful." Susan Canook sighed. "The old man was crazier than we thought. Just the kind of press we need right now."

"So who says we let'em know?" Sings Like Thunder drew on her cigarette and held the smoke a long moment, then exhaled a long, thin streamer that defied the breeze for a moment before dispersing. "White media wouldn't believe it anyway. We tell'em the old man got ate up by a rabid dog. Anybody says anything about what really happened, they'd figure we'd been chewin' peyote."

"It ain't their business." Kevin nodded agreement. "This is Indian trouble, not white. No offense, there," with a quick glance to Vincent.

"None taken." Vincent grinned. "Besides, I'm not a White anymore, remember?" He was starting to get the hang of the difference in his vision, and beginning to understand why it was different -- not that he was sure he liked the idea.

Susan sighed again, rolling her eyes, and spat a wad of tobacco in the general direction of the body. "What we do then. We tell the sheriff we had a dog attack. Dog ran off, got away. This was a spirit battle, anyway. We got no business messin' in it. No sense tellin' anybody things they wouldn't understand. Vincent?"

"Yes, grandmother?" Now why did I call her that, he wondered.

"From this day, you're welcome at our council fires. Seems not all white spirits are evil." She grinned at him, exposing a few teeth and many gaps, Reservation dentistry at its best.

"I'm glad you think so. I appreciate your not spreading the story. The fewer people that know about me, the more comfortable I am."

And that was that. A series of clasps and farewells, and Vincent headed out to the parking area, dodging the authorities and the press with well-honed skills.

On bended knee before you with tears in my eyes,
I pledge that till my dying day my sword is on your side--
Forever on your side.

And I love you more than life--
I swear that you mean everything to me,
Everything I'd sacrifice--
If my lady you would favour me.

-- *Skyclad, Moongleam and Meadowsweet*

"You're packing."

"Yes, Traci. I am." Vincent decided against the turtlenecks, and gathered up a few more dress shirts, carrying them over to the suitcase spread open on his sleeping capsule.

"Why?" Traci stood in the doorway, arms folded tightly, trying to decide whether to cry or scream.

"I killed a man tonight." He put down the shirts, and faced her. "I lost control, and drained him dry."

"Oh, no." Her anger melted away, and she crossed the gulf between them, wrapping her arms about him and laying her head on his chest. "Oh, Vince. What happened?"

"The old shaman conjured up the Wendigo by himself. I took it on."

"By yourself?" She looked up at him sharply. "Vince..."

"No choice. Nobody else there could have. Henry and his teacher, Kevin, got involved and gave me some help. I got the flute away from the old man, the one he'd used to summon the thing, and staked the critter with it. Did the trick." He smoothed her hair absently, staring off into space as he told the story. "After, though, I'd taken a pretty bad beating, and I grabbed the closest thing with warm blood. I'm not sure if it was luck or not, but it was the crazy old man instead of Henry. Could've easily been the other way around." He shuddered.

"Vincent, he deserved it."

"Maybe. But it could've been Henry. I lost control. And I couldn't stop myself, once I bit him. Not until he died. Knocked me out, and things haven't looked right since."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not completely sure." He stepped gently away from her, and led her over to the couch. She leaned up against him and rested her head on his shoulder. He continued.

"I think I'm seeing auras. I'm sure I got more than blood from the old man."

"I don't understand."

"When you drain somebody dry, you take a little piece of their soul into yourself. At least, that's the way it was explained to me. If you Turn the person, that little piece turns into the fledgling-sire link, but if you kill the person, you absorb some of their memory, some of their abilities, a piece of their self."

"You mean you've got part of that crazy old man in your head?" She sat up, looking at him warily.

"More or less. And that's why I'm leaving. I've got to learn how to deal with it, and I don't want to be around people I care for" -- he reached out and caressed her cheek, running his fingers down her jaw -- "until I'm sure I've got it under control."

She looked down, away from him. "So how long is this going to take?"

"I don't know." He shook his head helplessly. "In a couple of months, I'm supposed to meet Wlad in New York. If I haven't got a handle on it by then, I feel pretty certain he'll know what to do. So, less than a year, more than a week. I'm sorry, but that's the best answer I can give you."

She blinked away a tear. "What about the agency?"

He waved a hand in the general direction of the desk behind him. "There's an envelope in the top drawer with your name on it. Inside is a power of attorney and some other things. Pay the bills, and the agency will run on its own without me just fine. I'll check in from time to time, and deal with anything you really feel I need to."

Another tear. This one, ignored, made its slow way from eye to jawline. "What about us, Vince?"

She couldn't look at him.

He sighed wearily. "I'll be back. That's the most I can tell you. I can't even think about Turning you until I've got complete control of myself and whatever I've picked up. But I will be back."

She looked up, then, searching his eyes for the truth of it. "You will?"

He took her hands in his, and met her gaze. "I promise you. I'll come back."

They held each other for a long, tearful moment, and then Traci helped him finish packing. In silence, they carried the bags down to the battered old Karmann Ghia Vincent had owned when he started the agency, and never had been able to part with. The car loaded, they held hands on the sidewalk for a time.

"So this is goodbye, then?" Traci asked finally.

"No. Never goodbye." He kissed her, then got into the car. She turned, and went up the stairs without looking back, as he drove away.

We have the world tonight

So keep me company

And when the sun comes

We will be history

-- *Happy Rhodes, Moonbeam Friends*