

THE VAMPIRE CONSPIRACY

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For Lovers of the Genre

THE VAMPIRE CONSPIRACY

KIRSTEN LEVINSON

**FROM THE SCREENPLAY BY
MARC MORGENSTERN**

**BASED ON A STORY BY
MARC MORGENSTERN**

**FIVE
STRANGERS
FILMS
LIMITED**

1

Peter

Peter was listening, really listening, for the first time in his life.

It wasn't easy. He was running, which was something he didn't normally do; as he was fond of saying, he made other people run. He was perspiring, which he detested and usually avoided. His heart was unaccustomed to this level of activity and was pounding in his ears, making it nearly impossible to hear anything else but the clop clop clop of his shoes. Normally he liked the authoritative click of his leather soles, but now it made him frantic, knowing that it was carrying cleanly down the length of the hallway to those looking for him.

He stopped, just for a moment, and focused his hearing past his own ragged breathing, outwards and down the hall where he knew they had to be. A breath or two later he heard the whisper of bare feet on tile, soft, heavy footfalls, many of them. He could see nothing stirring under the cold bluish fluorescent lights, but he knew the sound. Despite the blossoming pain in his chest, he began to run again.

Then he heard their voices, their damned rising,

hollow voices. No intelligible words. It sounded like they were coming through the walls on either side of him, in front of him and from behind.

But nothing appeared, and after a moment he decided that it was a trick.

“No,” he said, and stopped. That was it - an illusion. Wouldn't put it past the bastard. He leaned against the wall, panting, his hands on his thighs.

“This is a trick!” he said breathlessly to the hallway. That was how the others had been fooled, and it was not going to happen to him. “This is a fucking trick,” he said calmly, “and I know it's a trick, so go fuck yourself. Yourselves.” He hoped he sounded like a hard-ass, like the Peter that nobody fucked with.

The voices eased away, as if he'd broken a spell.

He waited, breathing hard, then held his breath and listened again. Nothing.

“Now, that is how you get shit done!” he said out loud, satisfied. Be authoritative, be unequivocal in what you want. Does it every time. He almost wished someone else was around to witness it. He looked down at himself, and then was glad he was alone. The scrubs he was wearing had bright smears of blood everywhere that they had tried to grab him. Whose blood, he didn't know. He thought he was okay, all things considered. To his distaste he noted dark sweat stains on the light-coloured scrubs, spreading under his arms and down his chest. He could feel rivulets of sweat making their way down his temples and neck. His feet were killing him. At least he still had his shoes, his favourite Ferragamos. Auburn textured calfskin, classic three-eye lace-ups. Perfect for everything except running from monsters. He pulled one off to examine his foot, and swore at the blood running

down his heel. Unbelievable. Four hundred seventy bucks at David's, and they were giving him blisters.

He jerked his head up. He had not been listening, and now he could hear their feet, closer. Much closer this time, and their voices, reedy and soulless, moving nearer. He forgot his blisters and ran for his life.

A door, a door. There had to be - there was. He skidded into the doorway and grabbed the knob, expecting it to be locked. It swung open and he stumbled in, slamming it behind him. He threw his weight back against the door and leaned into it, breathing heavily.

The room was dimly lit and nearly empty, but light enough that he could make out a familiar form in the shadows. The man barely moved, only tensed in his stance as he gazed at Peter. Next to him there was a series of photographs taped to the wall. Peter could see them well enough to recognize them. Three death scenes: the aftermath of a mafia hit, the outline of a body on the ground, and corpses muddied with blood, their features indistinct. In the fourth photo, a school portrait, a blonde girl smiled into the camera with the airy optimism of a young teenager. The artificial style of the picture did not hide her toothy adolescent beauty, the particular loveliness possessed only by girls of her age. Peter had studied the photo before, and had felt some sympathy for that guy in *Lolita*; for a long moment he had understood what that character could have seen in a fourteen-year-old. Then he had put the picture down, away from himself.

Now Peter could also make out the word 'FORTITUDE', scrawled in God-knew-what across the wall. The man in the shadows stepped forward, and Peter saw that it was indeed Jason, dressed in scrubs and

bloodied like him. Jason was scowling, his jaw set, his face blanched with anger. His hands were balled into fists, making the ropey muscles in his forearms stand out. His tone was withering.

“You monster.”

“Fuck you,” Peter said. Jason took another step forward.

“You. You caused this.”

Jesus, thought Peter. We're about to get ripped apart and he wants to fucking argue. Fine.

“You know nothing, sporto,” he said caustically.

“Don't fucking try to comprehend something your addled brain couldn't possibly understand.” He certainly wasn't going to take the time to explain things to this goon.

“You,” Jason said. There was that accusing you again. “You fuckin' could have prevented this.”

Peter snorted. “Even if I could have, you still fucked her.” That stung, he could tell. Jason blinked. “I didn't know she was fourteen. You fuckin' can't tell anymore,” he said defensively.

Peter rolled his eyes. “Sure. Right.”

They both started as something hit the other side of the door hard. Whatever it was waited barely a breath before it struck again. WHAM! A few photos fell off the wall. Peter grabbed Jason and shoved him against the door. “You're strong. Keep 'em out,” he ordered him, and threw his own back against the door. He wished desperately for something - a gun, a crowbar, even a chair - to put between himself and what was coming.

He looked at Jason, who was sweating, his eyes wide, his arms flat and fingers splayed against the door as if it were holding back the ocean. “Where are the others?” Jason suddenly asked.

“Dead.”

“Shit.” Jason wiped at his streaming face with his forearm.

WHAM!

Peter's teeth rattled from the impact of the strike against the door. Its hinges were beginning to loosen. Peter imagined a huge battering ram on the other side, with an army to carry it. His head hurt from the sound and vibration. He could see another door on the far side of the room, through which Jason must have entered. He pointed to it.

“What about your way? Where does that lead?”

“Dead end,” Jason said, staring at the loosening hinges. There was a puff or two of plaster dust from behind them, and then they gave out. Peter did not have time to shift his weight off the door before he was driven forward onto the floor, the door riding his back. Instinctively he rolled sideways to get out from under the door, and then wished he'd stayed where he was.

Writhing in the doorway were figures who looked too slight to have broken through so easily. Next to Peter, Jason was sitting where he had fallen, staring openmouthed at them.

“Don't look at them!” Peter snapped, getting to his feet. “Avoid their eyes.”

“Avoid their eyes,” one of the figures agreed in a soft, flat voice. The others took it up as a toneless chant.

“Avoid their eyes avoid their eyes avoid their eyes...”

They began to step lightly forward, pouring slowly into the room like a quicksilver flow. Peter saw what seemed to be men and women, but they didn't move, sound or smell like anyone he had ever encountered. They were all lean, nearly emaciated in appearance, and

their flesh was a sickly grey, their lips and fingers tinged blue. Like Jason and Peter, they wore scrubs, but the creatures' were torn and filthy, liberally smeared with what appeared to be dry blood. They all had the wild-haired appearance of homeless people, but their eyes were terribly pale and empty, as though their souls had been leached out long before. They did not smile; the only real expression any of them seemed capable of was a grimace that revealed pale gums and strangely pointed teeth, sharply reminding Peter of rabid dogs. And that smell...beyond the odour of neglect, there was something faintly sweet and sickening that spoke of decay and death and turned Peter's stomach with fear as much as nausea.

He yanked Jason to his feet. Jason tore himself away from staring at the creatures and looked at Peter.

“What?”

“Their eyes!” Peter nearly slapped him. “Don't look into their eyes!” The creatures were advancing, some growling low and some echoing him, as if they approved of his advice. “Their eyes...” He heard the words drift tonelessly around the group.

“Fuck,” Jason said, backing up. He began fumbling in his pockets as though suddenly recalling that Excalibur was stashed in one of them somewhere. A creased piece of paper fell to the floor. “Fuck!” Jason exclaimed, staring at the paper, his hands full. “Grab that! It's the map!”

“It's what?” Peter asked sharply, feeling behind himself for the wall as he backed away from the creatures.

“The map! The map to get out! We're so close to the end-“ Jason tried to reach for the paper, and found himself offering his hand to one of the creatures. They

were pushing forward, slowly and inexorably forcing the two men back, the whole writhing mass moving at such a leisurely pace that Peter suspected they were enjoying themselves. Jason's pocket yielded up something else.

“Pencil!” he exclaimed, holding it aloft.

“So?”

“It's wood!”

“So the fuck are you,” Peter snarled. He was done. Done with this room, done with these not-quite humans who stank of death. Done with Jason, who would certainly get him killed, one way or another. He stepped just a little further back than Jason, behind one of the big man's shoulders. “We just might get out of here alive,” Jason was saying, his eyes fixed on the creatures, his trembling arm brandishing the pencil that was definitely not a crucifix.

In the next moment two things happened nearly simultaneously. The creatures sprang forward as one, and Peter gave Jason a mighty shove into them. He glimpsed Jason's horrified face as he toppled forward, caught completely by surprise. Jason did not even hit the ground. As Peter sprinted through the door and down the hall, he heard a high, agonized scream that abruptly stopped.

Peter's reason had deserted him. Fueled by a sick rush of terror, he ran, and the creatures who were done with Jason were right behind him. He risked a glance backwards, then looked front again just in time to see a wall rushing at him.

The next thing that he was aware of was the coppery taste of blood in his mouth, and then the cold floor against his spine. His forehead, nose and chin hurt like hell. He could smell the creature smell somewhere near,

but heard nothing: no footfalls, no movement. He opened his eyes.

Two female-ish creatures were leaning over him, grinning vacantly. Their mouths and chins were slopped red, some of it already drying rust. Peter screamed, but it was a lost scream that came out hoarse and weak, just like in his dreams. “Don't!” He croaked. “Stop!”

“Don't...” one of the creatures said distantly.

“...stop,” added the other.

“Don't...stop,” said the first.

They grinned. Peter tried to scream again, but choked as he was assailed by the stench of their bodies so close. He wanted to shift his arms, his legs, but there seemed to be more of them around him and they slid their fingers up his limbs and rolled carelessly across him. So many, and they all writhed and pushed against him as though he were not even a person, just something they wanted to pull apart and share. They moaned and hissed in his face so close that he could feel the breath condensing on his cheek. He couldn't move anything, couldn't see anything, and the whole world stank of death. He squeezed his eyes tight shut.

“ENOUGH!”

The voice was enormous, and the creatures paused. The whole group froze for a moment, and Peter had a sudden flash of hope that they would be chased off. But they simply unfroze, and resumed clutching at him.

There was a sharp jab in his arm which quickly turned to an agonizing deep burn. He opened his eyes and lifted his head to see that one of the creatures had settled at his arm to pull blood steadily from the wounds she'd created with her teeth. Her pale eyes met his, but did not register anything other than a dull animal satisfaction at having

her share. Another jab, this time near his collarbone. He could not believe that they were fastening on to him like lampreys. He couldn't see the one at his neck, but the burning spread down his shoulder and arm and he could feel himself starting to slip into the cool, insensible waters of shock.

"I said that's ENOUGH!"

The creatures who were not feeding turned toward the interruption, peeling their lips back from their teeth like angry hyenas. Peter forced his eyes open again, and through a gap in the horde could see a man standing over them, glowering. The creatures preying on him lifted their heads and stared. Without warning, they all leapt at the man in one swift leonine movement. The man was unperturbed and lifted his hand, making a delicate gesture with his fingers. The creatures dropped to the floor and cringed. Cool. Peter decided that he'd just met his very best friend. He sat up.

The man was not tall, but seemed in complete possession of every aspect of himself, from his long hair and level gaze to his dusty eighteenth-century clothes and buckled shoes. Peter wondered briefly about the outfit; maybe the guy was a Prince fan. Whatever the clothes, the guy was putting out a serious-strength vibe. The air around him seemed electrified, and Peter didn't like the intensity with which the man stared at him.

The creatures were keeping their distance and watching the man carefully, as if waiting for a signal from him. It reminded Peter of circus lions with their tamer.

And now he noticed the pallor of the man's skin, and his unholy pale eyes that resembled those of the creatures.

Shit. They were on the same team after all.

“Who are you?” Peter croaked. The man smiled, giving Peter the benefit of his long, pointed canine teeth. Peter flinched.

“I am Rhylos,” the man said, his grave bass voice heavily accented. French, it sounded like. “You’re one of them,” Peter said. Rhylos seemed amused at the idea. He smiled again, and again Peter flinched at the sight of those teeth.

“Not exactly,” said Rhylos. “These creatures are little more than animals, I’m afraid. I have a good deal more...initiative.”

“So you’re the devil,” Peter said. Rhylos laughed.

“Perhaps to you, Mr. Church.” He leaned forward. “I’d like to make you a very special offer.”

Half of Peter’s brain, the gambling half, which normally got to be in charge, immediately messaged him saying take it, take it, whatever it is, go for it. But the lesser-used half, which tried on occasion to exercise a degree of common sense, remembered the films Peter had seen about deals with the devil, and it screamed *YOU MUST BE OUT OF YOUR MIND!*

“I don’t make deals with the devil,” Peter said, to the relief of his common sense lobe. Rhylos grinned. “That’s not what I’ve heard.” He studied Peter’s bruised face.

“Are you enjoying the game? I can get you out of it, you know.”

“In exchange for what? My soul?”

“You have a soul?” Rhylos chortled. “I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“Fuck off,” Peter said rudely.

Rhylos raised an eyebrow. “Really, Mr. Church. You could be more polite. After all, I’m the only one who can

free you. You won't consider letting me help you?"

"I'm sure I couldn't afford your price." As he said this, Peter was wishing that he had been left with something besides his shoes, like his gold chain or his Cartier watch. Then he would have something besides himself to bargain with.

"And what other choices do you have?" Rhylos asked. "Prayer?"

Good idea! "Yes. God will save me," Peter said, hoping that God was indeed listening and writing this down.

"You must be very special," Rhylos replied, as if to a five-year-old. "He hasn't saved anyone else yet." And Rhylos smiled, showing his very, very pointed teeth.

"Go to hell, you evil fuck," Peter said, and shut his eyes. Surely he knew a prayer other than grace. Oh, right. "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

Rhylos sighed and shook his head. "Interesting. At the point of death and not before, people endeavour to find God."

Peter was faltering, uncertain of the exact words. "...as it is in Heaven...as it is in Heaven..." Then he dried up.

"Give us this day -" Rhylos prompted. Peter seized it.

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive our trespasses..." he continued, and finished it without a blip. He opened his eyes.

"Amen!" Rhylos said heartily. "Good for you, remembering all of it. A shame that they're just words." He smiled a pitying smile. "Unfortunately it's quite hopeless, Mr. Church. You refused my help. You cannot win this game without me."

The demons stirred, and softly echoed Rhylos: “you cannot win...”

Rhylos snapped his fingers, the signal they'd been waiting for. The creatures fell upon Peter, abruptly cutting off his light and air, and he found himself smothering in the press of grey flesh and the smell of decay. Teeth found his limbs, his shoulders and torso. They began to draw on him, pulling him this direction and that, and the pain blazed across his body. Rhylos was long gone when Peter's consciousness at last mercifully left him.

2

Trapped

Unconsciousness is not like sleeping.

Not for Janet, anyway. For her it was like a prolonged stay at the bottom of a murky pool. Sometimes she struggled upward, and could see shafts of light and hear voices from above. Other times she lay mired in the silt below, her arms and legs too heavy to move. She wanted to believe that she was dreaming, asleep in her apartment, with the neighbors arguing next door and the pipes clattering. But the images were too vivid, too horrible, and she thrashed harder and harder, hoping to get away from them. Impossible for her to judge how long she fought for the surface, but finally the light grew harsh and bright and with a final kick, she broke through.

Consciousness was a shock. Light and cold air assailed her, and her reflexes threw her up into a sitting position, her eyes flying open and her heart racing. She was disoriented, and tried to calm herself so that the sensation would pass.

She looked around, her vision clearing, the sense of

strangeness increasing. She did not recognize her surroundings. She was in a stark white room, on the floor. There was no furniture, no equipment or signs that might identify it as a particular facility such as a hospital. Try as she might, she could not remember coming here, or ever having been here before.

The yelling that had penetrated her unconscious state persisted, the words becoming more distinct. The racket was coming from other people in the room, two men and a woman she did not know. They were pounding on the walls and shouting like castaways trying to attract the attention of a passing plane. Janet could see two other men in the room - one sitting, one lying down - who seemed oblivious to the frantic activity of the others.

Okay. Okay. Janet fought down panic and did a quick inventory of her current situation. Her police uniform was gone, replaced by a jumpsuit sort of like scrubs. Her gun was gone too, of course, along with all of her jewelry. She still had on her own bra and panties, thank God, and oddly, the boots that she wore on duty.

She was still woozy. She wiggled her toes and fingers, flexed her knees and elbows and turned her head side to side. Pretty good, no apparent injuries or loss of mobility to her joints, although she felt stiff and sore. She gingerly felt her scalp and face. There were tender spots on her face and head, probably bruises. Whoever had brought her here hadn't been especially careful.

Which brought her back to the fact that she was here, and no wiser to where or why. She wondered if she'd been kidnapped. Someone who hated cops, maybe someone she'd arrested at some point. Or was it an elaborate practical joke? Who would pull something this sick? She thought about her old partner Chuck. He might

have done something like this, with some kind of 'gotcha!' at the end that would have made it all okay, even funny. Chuck had had a pretty screwy sense of humour. But Chuck was dead, and her current partner couldn't find his ass with both hands and a flashlight, much less plan something as elaborate as this.

Kidnapping made more sense. Reflexively she slid her hand down to where her holster should have been. She missed her gun badly. Despite seldom ever having had to use it, she missed its solid, reassuring heft. This whole nightmare was scaring her badly, and with her alarm bells ringing so stridently she would have felt much better with a weapon.

She looked down at herself again. Her boots looked comic sticking out of the legs of the rumpled jumpsuit. Examining the others, she saw that everyone had been clothed in similar generic outfits, but seemed to have kept his or her own footwear. Weird.

Janet let her head sink back against the wall. "What's going on here?" she said out loud. The others took no notice of her. The group's lack of interest in her irritated Janet, which made her fear and frustration at the whole bizarre situation nearly unbearable.

"What in hell is going on here?" she demanded of the room.

They barely glanced at her. The woman, older than her and frailer, began to hack, a rich rheumy cough that sounded like the product of two hundred years' worth of cigarettes. The man next to the older woman made a face and moved away. Janet wondered if she'd landed in a TB ward for the hard of hearing. "Hello?" she shouted. This time they all looked at her. She saw immediately from their empty, desperate expressions that they were as

lost and panicked as she was. Great.

Well, maybe somebody knew something. “Where are we?” she asked, and they looked at each other and back to her, disappointed, as though hoping for answers instead of questions. She persisted. “What's going on?”

“We all woke up here,” said one of the men. He seemed about fortyish, kind and distressed. The others nodded. The kind-faced man sighed and sat down, putting his head on his arms. Janet did not find this encouraging.

“Anyone have a cigarette?” asked the older woman. “Kid?” she addressed the sullen young man slouched against the wall. He ignored her. Janet thought that the woman's lungs would probably prefer oxygen to a cigarette anyway.

She found herself increasingly infuriated; no information, no response, and no hope on anyone's face. She tried again. “What the fuck is going on here?”

Another man spoke. “You know, we didn't know the first time you asked.” His voice was heavy with sarcasm. “Did you want to wait thirty seconds this time, then ask again?”

“We're stuck,” offered the kind-faced man.

“How'd we get here?” Janet asked.

“I don't know,” he said. “What's the last thing you remember?”

She could not find anything at first. Then she saw her apartment, heard the creaky stairs as she made her way up them. “I was at home. I remember coming home...after work.” It had been night. “What day is this? How long have we been here?”

Everyone looked blank. The older lady came over and crouched down next to her. She peered at Janet's head.

“What's your name, dear?” she asked, not unkindly.

“Janet.”

The lady frowned at Janet's forehead. “Do you remember hurting yourself recently? Hitting your head?”

“No.” Janet was unsettled by the peering.

“I'm Vera, Janet.”

“What are you doing?” Janet asked irritably.

“Checking your head,” Vera said. “You've taken a knock.”

The sarcastic man spoke up. “Mitch.” Janet thought he was addressing someone, then realized that he was offering his name. She nodded to him. “Brian,” said the kind-faced man. They all looked at the young man who sat with his back against the wall. Everything about him was closed off to them; he didn't even seem to hear them. Mitch shrugged. “We don't know his name. He's not talking.”

Janet spoke to him loudly. “Guy, do you know why we're here?” The guy didn't answer, but rolled his eyes contemptuously. Mitch smirked.

Janet was shifting quickly into action mode. One thing she'd learned early on as a cop was to get past the disorientation stage of strange situations and assess them as quickly and coolly as possible. She was coming up empty on where they were or why; there was no visible common denominator among them, although she felt that there had to be something. Nonetheless, she had to move forward and focus on getting them all out of here. She wondered if they would allow her to take charge.

Vera seemed a motherly sort, but she gazed at Janet with a penetrating expression that made it hard for Janet to concentrate. Janet had taken an instant dislike to Mitch, and every successive thing he said or face he

made seemed to confirm her initial impression of him as a self-important prick. He had a big mouth and probably nothing useful to offer; however, she might be proved wrong about that. Brian, on the other hand, looked like the type to think things through. She worried about the stricken expression he wore, and hoped that he wasn't inclined to freeze under pressure.

The big guy on the floor could be a real problem. She knew that look that he'd given her, and wondered if he somehow knew that she was a cop. Maybe he just responded badly to anyone who asserted themselves. Well, she didn't give a shit whether or not he had authority issues. She was not going to waste time in a power struggle with anyone in this group, especially if their survival was at stake. If the need arose, she'd sit on this guy, hard.

And then there was the guy no one had mentioned, the basket case on the floor. He looked mid-thirties and out cold, but beyond that it was difficult to tell anything about him. Obviously no one in the group knew anything about him or had even seen him conscious. She might have to try waking him up later, but for now she decided to let him be.

Vera piped up, interrupting her train of thought. "Those bruises on your head are fading, Janet. If you hit your head after you got here, then judging from the stage they're at, you've been here at least a few days."

Janet was aghast. "A few days?" Jesus, no wonder she felt so lousy! How was she not dead from dehydration?

She looked again at the motionless man on the floor. He had a rank, unwashed odour about him, and she got the impression that he was sick, too. "What about him?"

"If you're talking about the stink, he's smelled like that

since I got here,” Mitch said with disgust. Janet gave him a look. It might be a very short time before they all smelled like this guy, although she sure as hell hoped not.

She looked around the featureless white walls. They hadn't been beamed here, for Christ's sake. “There must a door,” she said aloud.

Mitch jumped on that. “Wait a minute, guys - why didn't we think of that?” he said caustically. “There's got to be a door!”

Sarcasm. The lowest form of humour. Janet gave him a look that she hoped would wither a few of his key internal organs. Brian was shaking his head. “There's no door,” he said, his voice flat and hopeless.

Janet felt terribly fatigued, and she was becoming aware of an ache in her left arm. She examined her wrist and found several puncture wounds. She looked up. “They've had me on some kind of intravenous!”

“Nothing we don't know, sweetheart,” Mitch said. Janet gritted her teeth.

“Me too,” Brian said, and held up his wrist to display the same wounds.

Janet rolled up her sleeve. More punctures, a whole constellation of them right to her elbow, accompanied in places by crescent-shaped bruising. She had seen similar marks on people in the course of her police work. She shook her head. “These are bites.”

Brian and the others looked at their arms in horror, and Janet now saw that everyone had been subjected to the same thing. Small wonder, then, that they were all so pale and haggard; in addition to hunger and dehydration, they might be coping with blood loss and God knew what kinds of infections. This was just getting better and

better.

Brian seemed to be coming a little bit undone. “What the hell do we do? I have to get home! I have a family!”

“Like I'm enjoying hanging around in a sealed room with a bunch of fucking idiots,” Mitch said sourly.

Vera had been examining the walls again. “There has to be more to this room than meets the eye. We got in somehow, didn't we?” Mitch immediately turned on her.

“Auntie, if you don't have anything productive to add, then shut it,” he said viciously. Cowed, Vera looked at the floor.

That did it for Janet. She'd disliked Mitch on sight - he'd reminded her of every criminal lawyer she'd ever known - but here she'd been willing to cut him some slack. In her experience, many assholes turned out to be okay people who were scared shitless. Now she decided that Mitch might be scared, but he was still basically an asshole. These guys usually ranged from annoying to dangerous; this one was probably sociopathic. Whatever. She was done with him.

“What the fuck is your problem?” she demanded. She saw his hackles go up.

“Listen, little one. In case you hadn't noticed, we are in a whole mess of fucking shit,” Mitch replied, and as he spoke he walked towards her until he was close enough to spit in her face. Janet, however, was used to people trying to intimidate her, and wasn't fazed.

“Yeah, we are,” she said evenly, looking straight into his eyes. “And the last thing we need is someone afraid to offer a potentially life-saving solution because they're afraid of what your reaction will be.”

“Well, she should stop saying stupid, obvious things like some dumb fucking woman.” Mitch didn't even

seem to be deliberately baiting her as he said this; he was just that much of a misogynist. Janet pushed her face into his.

“You want stupid? Stupid is being an asshole in a situation like this. Keep making enemies, asshole.”

Brian, Vera and the guy against the wall were all watching, their faces tense. Mitch crossed his arms. “I buy and sell people like you every day.”

“Oh yeah? Where's your chequebook now?”

Mitch smirked. “Feisty. Maybe when we get out of here...”

Janet's stomach roiled at the thought. “Fuck you,” she spat, with all the venom she could muster. Then she turned away. No more energy to waste on this weasel.

“Ooh,” Mitch said to her back. Janet didn't reply. She felt sick and drained, and ordered herself to avoid confrontation for now. She pictured herself breaking Mitch's neck later, and the image made her feel slightly better.

Brian was back to staring at the walls, like Vera. “There's got to be a secret door,” he said, and Mitch rolled his eyes. Janet promised herself that if he opened his mouth she could kick him, but he didn't.

“What did we overlook?” Vera touched a wall and ran her fingertips over it as though reading Braille. Brian and Mitch began doing the same. Somewhere a clock began to chime, causing Janet nearly to jump out of her skin. The others had obviously heard it before, because no one acknowledged the sound until it finished chiming and Vera murmured,

“Eight o'clock.”

“We can tell the fucking time,” Mitch snapped.

Janet decided to try tuning him out. “Anything? Any

irregularities?” she asked Brian.

“Not so far.”

“Shyster, anything?” she asked Mitch.

He smiled, creeping her out. “Now, how did you know I was a lawyer?”

“Your Santa Claus disposition,” she said sweetly. Then she pointed to his feet. “Your shoes. Lawyer shoes.” He had on Italian leather lace-ups that she figured to be three fifty at least.

He looked at them, intrigued. “Really?”

“Yup. Those are lawyer or C-level executive shoes, and you're no CEO.”

“Huh,” he said, impressed with this bit of detective work.

The unconscious guy on the floor suddenly came to life, choking and writhing. Everyone jumped back, and stared as his eyes rolled back in his head and he started to convulse, his limbs and spine stiffening with awful force.

“Help him!” Vera shouted. “He's having a seizure!” She and Brian got into position behind the guy's head, cradling it to keep him from smashing his skull on the floor.

“This is just great,” Mitch said in disgust, and turned away. Janet knelt down next to Brian and waited for the convulsion to stop. After a minute or so the jerking ceased and the man seemed to be unconscious and still again.

Brian turned the man's head to the side to clear the froth that had accumulated at his mouth. “Holy shit,” he said in an awed voice. “Look at this.”

Vera and Janet peered at the man's neck, and even Mitch leaned over them to have a look. The flesh was

riddled with puncture wounds like those on her wrists, but deeper and more numerous, in neat pairs of holes that looked like cobra strike marks. Around them was purple bruising, but surprisingly little in the way of dried blood. If the man had lost any blood when the wounds were inflicted, it had been completely cleaned off...or drained away.

Janet could see that the others were thinking the same thing. "Who takes blood like that, right from the neck?" Vera asked, sounding very frightened.

Janet shook her head, staring at the marks and feeling queasy. "A snake, maybe? A predator of some sort?" She looked up. "Vera, are you all right?"

Vera was backing away from the spectacle of the man's neck, a look of horrified recognition on her face.

"Vera," Brian said quietly, "what did this?"

Vera shook her head. "They don't exist. They don't exist." She seemed ready to faint. Janet might have had patience for this behaviour under other circumstances, but here and now she wanted to give Vera a good shake.

"Do you know what did this?" She asked vehemently.

The owner of the bitten neck suddenly screamed, his eyes flying open. Brian let go of his head in surprise. The man scrambled to his feet, shaking and shrieking. He was barely intelligible, stringing all his words together: "Nonononostayawaystayawaystayaway! Stay-away-from-me! Stay-away-from-me!"

Surprisingly fast for someone freshly conscious, he fell over himself to get to the corner of the room. Once there he wedged himself in and continued to scream, a piercing, agonized wail that set Janet's teeth on edge.

"Calm down," she ordered him. He screamed louder. "I've been good! I've been good! Why? Why? Why?"

Why?” He was so terrified that his eyes were rolling back in his head, like a deer about to be taken down by wolves.

Janet decided to try another tactic, and approached him slowly, murmuring, “It’s okay, fella, it’s okay...” With every step she took, he wedged himself further into the corner.

“Back up,” Brian suggested. “Let him breathe.” No one needed further encouragement to remove themselves to the far side of the room. The man watched them, his chest heaving, his eyes darting from person to person.

Under her breath to Vera, Janet murmured, “What’s going on with this guy?”

The man began to sob. “Don’t bite me, don’t bite me, don’t bite me...” He was pleading with them, shaking. It was chilling to hear while looking at the many bites on his neck. Whatever he was afraid of was not merely a figment of his imagination.

“No one is going to bite you,” Brian said gently. The man didn’t seem to understand him and became more agitated. He began to shriek again. “*DON’T BITE! DON’T BITE! DON’T BITE!*”

Mitch rolled his eyes. “Well, I’d say that Elvis has left the building.”

“Looking for a client?” Janet snapped. “Seems like your kind of guy.”

Brian carefully motioned to the man to sit, and sat down in front of him. After a moment the man cautiously sat down too. He was clearly still terrified, his eyes wide and fixed on Brian. “What’s your name?” Brian asked softly.

The man stared at him, but showed no sign of having heard.

“Fuck this,” Mitch said.

“Shut up,” Brian said, not taking his eyes off the man.

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you,” Janet said, ready to belt Mitch. “This guy could be our only clue to what the hell is happening here.”

“I'm Brian,” Brian said to the man. “What's your name?”

“What'syournamewhat'syournamewhat'syourname,” the man responded.

“I'm Brian,” Brian repeated patiently.

“If you need me, I'll be in the west wing,” Mitch announced, and strolled over to where the silent, surly-faced young man still sat against the wall. Mitch sat down next to him.

“Get the fuck away from me,” the young man said calmly.

“Alrighty!” Mitch said, who got right back up and rejoined the rest of the group. Janet noted this exchange with interest; apparently it was possible to intimidate Mitch after all.

Brian was persevering with the name thing, and the man seemed a bit calmer. “Brian,” Brian said for the fiftieth time, pointing to himself.

“Brian,” the man repeated.

“Brian.” Brian nodded. He pointed to Janet, and the man stared at her. “Janet,” Brian said. “Janet,” the man repeated, looking a little less vacant.

“Shyster,” Brian said, pointing to Mitchell.

“Shyster,” the man repeated dutifully. “Fuck off,” Mitch said, scowling.

“Who are you?” Brian asked, pointing to the man. The man began to repeat,

“Who...are...” Brian shook his head, and repeated his gesture.

“Who are you?”

The man sighed.

“Peter,” he said heavily. Brian smiled. “Peter,” he said, nodding.

“Good, you can speak retard,” Mitch said loudly. “Ask him who bit him.”

At that, Peter unleashed another wail. Brian threw up his hands. “Peter, it's all right,” he said gently, but Peter was shaking and screaming again.

“Nice work,” Janet said between her teeth to Mitch. Peter began to bang his head against the wall.

“Grab him!” Vera yelled, and Janet and Brian tried to help her pull him back. Already his forehead was bleeding, leaving a bright smudge on the wall each time it struck. The forehead is very vascular, Janet reminded herself. Doesn't take much for it to bleed. He may not be hitting it that hard -

“*NO! NO! NO!*” Peter shrieked, timing his no's with each blow against the wall. After a particularly sickening thwack, he passed out.

Jesus. Janet stared down at him, feeling queasy again. She had been exposed to a lot on the street, but never had she seen someone nearly beat themselves to death with fear. She couldn't breathe. The air in the room felt thick and dangerous, like an ozone-heavy atmosphere before a storm.

“What the hell is wrong with him?” she murmured, knowing the question was purely rhetorical. The others knew only as much as she did.

And then a voice, a rich, ancient voice that carried a hint of amusement, spoke from behind her. “He's

insane.”

Janet turned. Her first thought when she saw him was that there absolutely had to be a door after all, because he had somehow entered noiselessly and was standing there smiling at them. Not an especially nice smile. Nothing nice about him, except the eighteenth-century opulence of his clothes. He was not tall, but stood easily in the manner of one who owned the kingdom. Janet could not guess his age. His face was unlined, but his eyes burned deep in their sockets and his broad mouth remained curved in that unsettling, knowing smile as he studied them.

This one knew what was going on, all right. This one could even be in charge.

Mitch had apparently drawn the same conclusion. “What the fuck is going on here?” he exploded at the man, who only smiled back.

Janet noticed that the young man sitting against the wall had finally stood up. She stepped forward. “Look, we've had no food, no water—“

Vera jumped in. “What do you want with us?” Janet elbowed her. She didn't care what this clown wanted; they were all in urgent need of some fuel.

“All will be explained,” the man said soothingly, as though they were a kindergarten class.

Mitch was incensed. “Well, how about you fucking do some explaining right now?” he demanded. “Where's my watch?”

At that moment Peter awoke, saw the man and screamed. Immediately he convulsed again, and they reached out to hold on to him. When Janet looked up again, the man was gone.

But there was a door.

Mitch was astounded. “Where the fuck did that come from?”

Vera shook her head. “Nowhere. It was here all along. We must have been hypnotized.”

Janet considered this. Possible. “How?”

“I don't know.” Vera looked very troubled.

Brian grabbed the front of Peter's shirt. “Someone help me move him.” He tried to lift Peter, who appeared to be catatonic. His body sagged in Brian's arms.

“Well, someone help him!” Mitch said, and walked right past them. Janet grabbed onto Peter, aiming what she hoped was a brain-melting glare at Mitch. Asshole. No, King of Assholes.

They approached the door cautiously. Mitch strode through first, followed by Vera and the young man. Last were Brian and Janet, half-carrying, half-dragging Peter. Perhaps mercifully, Peter was once again unconscious.

3

The Rules

The man was there, as Janet had thought he would be, presiding over a table at the end of the room. On the table were careless piles of bread and cheese and some plastic cutlery. Other than the table, and the door behind it, the room was as featureless as the one they'd come from.

They were all starving, but no one seemed to be in a great hurry to join Rhylos at the table. Janet and Brian set Peter down on the floor, where he lay in a still, disjointed pile of limbs until Janet straightened his legs and arms. She was sad for him, hollowed out as he was by his terror, and now barely able to inhabit his shell. She could tell that Brian felt the same way. And there was that other thing that lay behind her compassion, as it always had whenever she dealt with victims of accidents or attacks: the feeling that it was what she would want, if she were in their place. In her years as a police officer, even though she knew that she could just as easily become a victim, Janet had never before had such a

strong sense that what had happened to someone else could happen to her, too. She looked at Peter's neck, and then at the matching wounds on her arm. There but for the grace of God go I...so far.

Vera had entered behind Janet and Brian, and stayed near the door, uncertain. Mitch had strode in ahead of them, and he stood facing Rhylos, bristling with aggression. Vera spoke first, her voice timorous. "What do you want with us?"

Rhylos smiled benignly and swept his arm across the table as though indicating a banquet. "Before we begin, eat."

They all looked at each other, and Vera, Brian and Janet slowly moved to the table. Mitch hung back, wearing a look of deep suspicion. Brian picked up a piece of bread, turned it over and smelled it, then shrugged and began to eat. Vera, Brian and Janet each grabbed a bun, and Janet took another for Peter; God knew when he had last eaten. She saw the young man grab a plastic knife and stuff it into his waistband. Mitch stepped forward, but the bread was gone, and his face soured as he realized that he shouldn't have hesitated.

The others ate their small ration in a matter of seconds, and Janet even convinced Peter to eat his share. She could see that Mitch was simmering, working his hands into fists over and over, and a flush had risen in his face. He stared at Rhylos, who stared back with maddening calm. Finally Mitch burst out at him, "What's your fucking deal?"

"Mr. Jobidan," Rhylos said delicately, "I would prefer that you refrain from vulgarities."

"Fuck you," Mitch said rudely. "Where's my watch?"

Brian gave Janet a look that clearly said we're trapped

with a crazy and this guy wants his Rolex.

Rhylos assumed a sympathetic tone. “Perhaps I should clarify your situation a little. The one you are carrying is Peter Church.” He smiled sadly. “He is the one who offended me the least.”

Janet did not think that this clarified her situation. Mitch looked shocked. “Peter Church?”

“You know him?” She asked Mitch.

“High-profile criminal attorney.” He glared at Rhylos. “He's been missing for about five years.”

Rhylos did not dispute this. Mitch was working something out. “There have been others, others missing. Lawyers, mostly. But no bodies. You like lawyers, or something?”

Janet expected Rhylos to say why yes, they're just delicious. Instead he continued to smile patiently at Mitch, like a teacher waiting for the answer to a math problem. Janet knew the pattern that Mitch was talking about. There had been several lawyers disappear over the last ten years. But there was nothing found to connect the lawyers except their profession, and each case had quickly gone cold. She thought that it would be a bit too neat if Rhylos had somehow been responsible for all of them going missing, but the accusation certainly didn't seem to worry him.

“Where are they?” Mitch demanded. He slammed his hands on the table. “Where are they, you fucker?” Rhylos did not answer. He seemed to be enjoying Mitch's anger.

“They're dead, aren't they?” Mitch said.

Rhylos looked satisfied. “They are.”

They all felt it, the coldness that his words spread through the group. No one moved.

Mitch asked, “You want us dead?”

“Tell us.” Brian stepped forward. “Are you going to kill us?”

“Not if you kill each other first,” said Rhylos cheerfully.

Mitch was bordering on hysteria. “What the FUCK does that mean?” he shrieked. “Kill each other first! I don't even know what that means!”

“It means if you don't shut the fuck up, I'll kill you myself,” Janet snapped.

“Bravo, Ms. Montgomery,” Rhylos said approvingly. She blinked, shocked.

Brian was looking at her, seeing her surprise at hearing her name. “Who are you?” he asked Rhylos.

Rhylos had been waiting for this.

It seemed to Janet that the room changed subtly, that Rhylos grew a little brighter, that the wall behind him receded so that he appeared to be standing in a pool of light, the fabric of his clothes looking more lustrous and his deep-set eyes burning brilliantly in his broad face.

“My name is Captain Theolonius Rhylos. I was born in Nice, France, in the year 1754, to a man of the cloth...”

“You think you're two hundred and fifty years old?” Mitch snorted. “You're insane.”

“Quiet,” Vera hissed.

“You be quiet, you dried-up, geriatric old -“

“I'd listen to her, if I were you,” said Rhylos, who was frowning darkly at such an early interruption in his narrative. “You may learn something useful.” Something in his face suggested strongly to Mitch that he shut up, now.

Rhylos resumed. “In 1789, during the storming of the

Bastille, we encountered unexpected resistance and we almost lost the battle. The events were turned and the day won when I was embraced by General Henri Laurent.”

“I knew this had a gay angle,” Mitch announced.

“Shut up,” Brian and Janet said together.

“I mean, look at the way he's dressed!” Mitch continued, oblivious. Janet considered pressing her fingers into his jugular, to put him out just long enough to make her point.

Rhylos glowered at Mitch.

“Mr. Jobidan, I grow tired of hearing your voice.” He addressed the rest of the group. “He is the perfect example of why the likes of you are here.”

“Way to center me out,” Mitch said sourly.

Rhylos went on. “I had known the General as a very powerful man. Very powerful. Some had said that there was an unnatural quality to him, his fearlessness in battle, his strength, his ruthlessness. He won because he was afraid of nothing. Pain, injury and even death seemed to be of little consequence to him. He had memories of a thousand battles, and he had learned something in each of them. He had no weaknesses, not one, and detested them in others. It seemed that he needed nothing, not even sleep or food, only the counsel of his memories so that he might devise a suitable strategy for his next campaign. And I, who slept and ate and feared like an ordinary mortal, envied him desperately.”

He paused, and looked around at their faces. They said nothing.

“At Bastille he found me, and he gave me something precious. Mon cher General had chosen me as the recipient of his gift of power, and after he took me to

himself I returned to battle, and the resistance ended. Was ended.” Now he showed a frightening smile.

“I ended it. I used my bare hands, and I did not hesitate. Nor do I hesitate to this day. If I believe that change is required, I enact it. I fear nothing, and I have no weaknesses.”

Apart from the fact that you're a psychopath, Janet thought.

“I am indeed two hundred and fifty years old,” Rhylos said. “I have seen places and events that you cannot fathom. Indeed, without powers like mine, you would have long since gone insane. But I have not. Everything I have witnessed has strengthened my resolve to cleanse my world of weakness and sin. General Laurent gave me the means to cause governments to crumble from within and leaders bring themselves to ruin. In these times, however, I find it serves me better to use more subtle methods.”

“What are you?” Vera said shakily.

Rhylos smiled almost paternally at her. “Dr. Vera Nichols, I am a vampire. But you already know that.”

Janet found herself running her hands through her cropped hair over and over. Her brain sang a little song: this makes no sense, this makes no sense, this makes no sense, this makes no sense...

As a cop, she heard peculiar monologues and screwy explanations for off-the-charts behaviour all the time. She knew how rational a very ill person could sound, until their logic suddenly turned left and disappeared. She had seldom, if ever, been fooled, though. Even good liars betrayed themselves eventually, and sick people couldn't help revealing that they weren't living quite on the same plane as the rest of us. It was a different

experience, however, to find herself inside someone's world while they explained things. Rhylos spoke with the conviction of one who knows no other truth, and the fact was that they were here together, trapped by him. He spoke of manipulating events, and he'd obviously done something to get them here; he also seemed to know something of each of them. On the other hand, there was no way for Janet to verify that he was either two hundred and fifty years old, or a vampire. (She was uncertain about how she would go about this anyway.) And practically, the fact was that he had them trapped, injured and frightened, and intended to do something with them. So it didn't matter if he believed himself to be a vampire or Santa Claus; they were in his game, playing by his rules. *But still: a vampire?*

"Impossible," she whispered.

Whatever had been loosely restraining Mitch snapped. "Are you serious, Dracoool?" he yelled, getting closer to Rhylos's face than any of them had dared. "This bullshit may work with the little boys you try to attract, but unless you tell me what the *FUCK* I'm doing here, I'm gonna fucking *LOSE IT!*"

Rhylos raised his hand as if to calm Mitch. Janet saw Mitch yanked backward into the air, his feet going out from underneath him. The unseen hand that had pulled him up threw him to the floor several feet away from Rhylos.

The others gasped. Vera was white; Brian's hand had gone to his mouth, and Janet felt that the bottom of her stomach had dropped away. She stood very still, replaying Rhylos's gesture and Mitch's movement in her head, and could not make it make sense.

Rhylos stood over Mitch, studying him. "Look at him."

He sounded as though he were thinking aloud. “The weak mouth. The fear masked with anger and aggression. No character. No strength. No faith in anything but himself, and money. Reptiles are better animals than this one.” Mitch groaned, and struggled to sit up. “An excellent example of what I detest.”

“I’m gonna fucking sue,” Mitch said weakly.

Rhylos smirked. “Of course you are.” He began to walk as he talked with the air of a professor. “I have grown disgusted with the way society has progressed. It has gone nowhere. There is no honour anymore, no real strength. The weak and stupid may use other means to dominate, and sickness and perversion are not merely tolerated, but rewarded. This is not right. This is not the way of things. These cowards and idiots must be culled. Society must learn these lessons of life.”

“Taught by you?” Vera asked sarcastically.

“Yes, by me. I have seen a time where only strength, intelligence and courage prevailed. The waters of this world are not merely diluted now. They have been made a cesspool of sin and stupidity. I witnessed the change. However, I can change it back.”

Mitch had made it to his feet. “What do you want?” he asked breathlessly, appearing not to have heard anything that Rhylos had just said. “Money? Do you want money?” Rhylos rolled his eyes. Mitch patted his pockets, the legs of his scrubs. “Did you take my checkbook?”

Rhylos turned and walked a small circle around Mitch, steepling his fingers under his chin. “Mitchell Jobidan, criminal lawyer,” he said musingly. “Certainly no oxymoron, is it? When was the last time you won a case fairly?”

“What are you implying?”

“I'm not implying anything. I'm asking you an honest question.” Rhylos smiled wryly. “I doubt you have an honest answer.”

“What do you want from us?” Vera asked desperately. To Janet's surprise, the young man had risen from his crouch against the wall, and walked confidently - very nearly swaggered - up to Rhylos. He was taller than Rhylos, more solid, and stared directly into Rhylos' eyes as he spoke to their captor.

“Listen, freaky, I ain't playin' with you anymore. Get me the fuck out of here, or I'm going fucking Vietnam on your ass.” No waver in his voice, no fear at all. And it sounded like a promise.

Rhylos seemed amused. “In due time, Shiv. Isn't that what your peers call you? Shiv? If you promise to pay attention, I will tell you the rules.” He sounded for all the world like a high school teacher. Janet watched Shiv's eyebrows go up in disbelief as Rhylos turned his back dismissively and addressed the entire group.

“You five have each been chosen for a particular reason...”

“Which is?” Brian asked.

“You will know when the time is right.”

“We're to figure that out?” Vera still sounded shaky.

“Cause and effect,” Rhylos said in a sing-song voice. “Sin and saviour, black and white...”

“Sin and saviour'?” Mitchell screeched. “What the hell do you mean by that? I don't know what you mean by that!”

“You,” said Rhylos, with a grand gesture, “are my guests in a game.”

“You have no right to do this to us!” Brian seethed.

“I take the right,” Rhylos said. “You will use each other's skill and wits to try to successfully negotiate the maze of my lair. Should anyone make it out alive, they will receive my entire fortune.”

“The maze of your lair?” Mitchell was foaming at the mouth. “Who the fuck -“

“Shut up!” Janet snapped again, fearing that Mitch was on his way to a skull fracture this time. “This is fucked,” Shiv announced. Janet wondered if he had actually seen what Rhylos did to Mitch. He wasn't acting like it.

“You should listen,” Rhylos said calmly. “It may save your life.” He enunciated very clearly, as though they were dense. “Succeed, and you will receive my entire fortune, for that will mean I am finally dead.”

At the word 'fortune', something seemed to dawn on Mitch. “Wait, wait,” he said. “What kind of cash are we talking about here?”

Shiv, on the other hand, was clearly unimpressed, less so at having been all but ignored by Rhylos. He leaned into Rhylos' face. “I say we teach this velvet-helmet ass-boy what the meaning of pain is, then take his fucking lunch money and send him home crying to his motherfucker.”

Rhylos did not flinch, but evinced distaste at Shiv's phrasing. Shiv drew back to wait for his threat to sink in. It did not appear to have any effect. Rhylos only gazed back at him.

“Mr. Mackenzie,” he said paternally, “you have street smarts. You've surveyed the situation. You know that what you've described is not the wisest course of action.” Rhylos appeared to be holding Shiv with his eyes. “No, that's not the way you work,” he said softly. “You are

like the alligator, yes? You lie in wait, watching from a still position, waiting...waiting for the right moment to react. Then you snap your steel jaws closed on your prey, and hold on...hold on and spin. Spin until they don't struggle anymore. When you're ready, you drag your victim right to the bottom of the swamp with you, don't you?"

Shiv was staring at Rhylos, glassy-eyed. Rhylos smiled, and Shiv blinked. Suddenly he raised his arm, the plastic knife in his hand, and plunged it toward Rhylos' neck.

Rhylos was gone.

No, not gone. Behind them, smiling.

Enraged, Shiv bellowed and charged. Rhylos caught him around the neck easily, and held him aloft with one hand. Rhylos' eyes gleamed yellow, a lizard's eyes. Or a demon's. Shiv gagged and let the knife drop from his hand, his feet dangling several inches above the floor.

Janet couldn't stand it. "You're hurting him!" she shouted, watching Shiv's face turning bright red, then purple. Rhylos gave her a long, appraising look, and then coolly set Shiv down. Shiv staggered, clutching at his throat. Rhylos turned to the group again.

"I am giving you an opportunity to play my game, use your intelligence, and win more fortune than you could possibly imagine."

Vera choked. "Giving us the opportunity? Forcing it upon us!"

Rhylos ignored her. "You have until dawn. Should you make it to the end, the money is yours. Should you survive but not finish, you become a slave to our hunger until the next game commences." Several of them cringed, glancing at Peter.

“This is preposterous,” Mitchell said in a high voice.

Janet was thinking hard, running through everything she knew about hostage situations. This guy was talking. Maybe he could be talked to, reasoned with, or some Achilles' heel found. “If you want a victim,” she said to Rhylos, “take me. Let these people go.” Rhylos smiled at her, a strange smile that she could not read. “He wants more than a victim,” Vera said angrily. “He wants entertainment. A challenge.”

“A challenge?” Janet said, wondering what would constitute a challenge for this monster.

“He chose me because he thinks I'm a threat,” Vera explained. “It's the courses I teach. Vampires, werewolves. I'm supposed to be an expert.”

Behind Vera, Janet saw Rhylos smile and give a barely perceptible shake of his head.

“Those are kids' stories,” Mitchell snorted.

“And this is the goddamned fairy tale,” Janet said grimly.

“You're kidding!” Brian said in disbelief. Janet shook her head. There were some things about this that they were just going to have to buy into for the time being, until they figured out more about their situation. Rhylos might be completely batshit, but she had a feeling that this game was real enough, and they had better be ready to deal with it.

Rhylos had been watching their back-and-forth with that strange smile playing about his mouth. “When the clock chimes midnight, the hunt begins,” he announced. Janet saw the excitement illuminate his face, his eyes burning deep and bright.

“Hunt?” She began to feel sick again. “You said a maze. We're being hunted, too?”

“By vous?” said Mitchell sarcastically.

Rhylos laughed. “Indeed, Mr. Jobidan. By us.”

“Us?” Mitchell looked perplexed. “There's an us?”

“His succubi,” Vera said wearily.

“His what?” said Mitch, but Vera waved him away. She was very pale.

“Have there ever been any winners?” Brian asked.

“Any survivors?”

“Just him,” Rhylos said, inclining his head towards the corner. They all looked at Peter where he lay, twitching and staring sightlessly at the wall.

When they looked up again, Rhylos was gone.

“Fuck,” Janet said. So much for reasoning with him.

“Where'd he go?”

“I doubt he was ever in the room,” Vera said.

Nope, Janet thought. He was here. Don't know how he got in or left like that, but he was here. She watched Shiv take his plastic knife and go to work on the door latch.

Mitchell faced Vera. “All right, Grandma,” he said, hostile. “Sooner or later I'm gonna get an answer. What the fuck is going on here?”

“Is it true? Do they really exist?” Brian asked anxiously. Vera hesitated, then nodded.

“This is bullshit!” Mitchell said angrily, for what Janet was sure was the thousandth time.

“Fine,” she said to Vera. “If you know about them, then you know how to beat them.”

“You believe this shit?” Mitch said incredulously.

“He's a fucking magician with smoke and mirrors!” He seemed to have forgotten his trip across the room by the unseen hand.

“Maybe,” said Vera, “but I think we have to assume for now that what he said is true. We have to protect

ourselves.”

“How?” Brian asked hopefully.

“Well, is anyone a priest or a rabbi?” Vera asked. “It may give us a psychological edge.”

Over at the door, Shiv laughed. “Yeah. I’m a fucking rabbi.”

Brian looked doubtful. “Uh, nothing legit...”

“What do you mean?” Vera said sharply. “Were you ordained?”

“Yeah,” Brian said uneasily. “But not in Christianity.”

Mitchell threw up his hands. “Then what the fuck good are you?”

“Hold on,” said Vera. “In what?”

“Roschdale Ministries. They ordained, like, 500 of us in the seventies.”

“Never heard of them,” Vera said, “but it could be enough to help us.”

“You guys are as gone as this fuck!” said Mitchell, pointing to Peter. Vera ignored him. She seemed more awake now, less passive, acting with a sense of purpose.

“You have to bless objects,” she told Brian.

“Bless objects?”

“For objects to have an effect on vampires, they have to be blessed by a representative of God.”

Brian looked uncomfortable. “I don’t think I’m a representative of God, exactly. See, the thing at Roschdale was that we-“

“This shit is whack.” Shiv had turned away from the door and was looking at them, clearly disgusted. “I’m not goin’ to hang around listening to a bunch of dumb white folks talk about some fag who says he’s a vampire...”

“Listen up,” Vera said coldly. “If this is for real, then we are being chased by an honest-to-God bloodsucking

vampire who wants us dead. And even if you don't believe it, do you want to end up like Peter? Or do you want to work together to survive this?"

Good for you, Janet thought.

Mitchell sighed theatrically. "There's always some dyke who wants us to work together..."

Janet decided that it was time to back Vera up. "Listen, Shyster," she said in her this-is-non-negotiable tone, "either you're part of the solution or part of the problem. So far you've been part of the problem, so shut your cake hole for half a second and tell us what you have to bring to the table, or I'll kill you myself."

She knew this wouldn't scare Mitch, but he at least had the good grace to look defensive. "Whoa, don't get your panties into a bind," he said, putting his hands up. Then he couldn't resist adding, "We need to get you some action, sister."

"Masturbate."

Janet did not recognize the calm, lucid voice. She turned her head and saw Peter sitting up, gazing at all of them.

Mitchell grinned. "What kind of freaky porno did I just walk into?"

"What did you say?" Brian asked Peter.

"Masturbate. The fear gland is close to the sex gland. If your sex gland is at ease, it will cause your fear gland to be less active."

Looking at Peter closely, Janet could see that the clear voice belied a thousand-yard stare. Peter probably wouldn't have much more to offer now than he had in his earlier state, but at least he wasn't screaming.

"Peter," Brian said gently, "what's happening here?"

"It's a game. You're in a game."

“We know that,” Janet said, trying not to sound impatient.

“It's fear,” Peter said. “He loves your fear. Thrives on it.”

Vera nodded. “Makes sense.”

“You're listening to him?” Mitchell snorted. “Want stock advice, too?”

Peter looked at Mitchell sharply. “You're a lawyer.”

Mitchell looked irritated. “How does everyone know that?”

“He likes lawyers,” said Peter.

“Great.” Mitchell did not look flattered.

“You'd better masturbate,” Peter advised Mitch, and then closed his eyes and began to rock back and forth, humming to himself.

“Does shitting my pants count?” Mitch muttered.

Janet knelt next to Peter. “Don't worry, Peter. We'll get you out of here.” She patted his shoulder in what she hoped was a reassuring way. She stood up. Mitch looked incredulous. “Don't worry? 'We'll get you out of here?' How do you propose to do that?”

“I don't know,” said Janet firmly, “but I'll get us out of here, somehow.”

“Who made you leader?” Shiv demanded. “I did,” said Janet, facing him squarely.

“Not in my motherfucking world.”

“I don't see you offering any solutions.”

“That's cause I don't see you sucking my big black dick,” Shiv said. Getting in her face, trying to throw her off balance. Well, she'd been there before. “Maybe we should take crazy boy's suggestion and kill two birds with one stone.” Janet could smell his fearful sweat.

“Stop it!” Vera yelled. Mitchell crossed his arms and

faced Janet. “And just what qualifies you to be in charge?”

“I'm a cop.”

The room went still. As she had expected, Shiv did not take the information well. He towered over her, his nostrils flaring with rage, breathing heavily. He clearly wanted to tear her to bits. “The last thing I fucking need,” he began in a low, furious voice, “is to be stuck in some stinkfuck room with a goddamned fucking pig.”

Janet stood her ground. “It's this fucking pig who's trying to get you out of here.”

“You can't do fucking shit for me, bitch!” The very idea seemed to enrage him.

“Why don't you calm down?” she suggested.

“Why don't you make me, pig?”

He loomed over her, pressing on her with his mass, and for a moment she saw what he must see: her small frame, soft mouth and large brown eyes. No matter. She was used to being underestimated.

“You better get out of my face,” she told him calmly.

“Make me.”

“Stand - the - fuck - down,” Janet ordered him, and was not surprised when, a moment later, he took a swing at her. It took her three seconds to redirect his punch and put him on the ground.

Shiv was clearly startled to find himself there. “Fuck this shit,” he said, unnerved, and clambered to his feet. Janet waited. Again he swung, and again she redirected, this time getting a good strike in at a pressure point on his ribs before laying him out. The second time around, he didn't get right back up.

“I could do this all day, tough guy,” she told him. He sat up, nursing the spot on his ribs where she'd nailed

him. "But we don't have time for this bullshit! We're being hunted, for Christ's sake! We need to -" she stopped, thinking for a moment. She looked at Brian.

"What?" he asked warily.

"What do you do?"

"I'm an engineer."

"What about you, Shiv?"

"Fuck you," Shiv said sullenly.

"It's important. What do you do?"

"Sam, we need your help," Vera said gently.

"You guys do whatever the fuck you want." Shiv stood up. "I'm getting out of here."

"Shiv, we could use your help, your street smarts," Janet said, trying not to sound patronizing.

Shiv turned to her. "Is that what you see? Some sort of punk-assed criminal?"

"Nope," she said firmly. "I see a guy with resources we can use."

Shiv went to the door where his plastic knife still jutted out from the latch. He placed one hand on the door and the other on the knife, giving it a gentle twist. The door swung open. He looked back at Janet. "Fuck you, bitch."

They all jumped as the unseen clock chimed loudly, once. "Goddammit!" Janet exclaimed involuntarily.

"Quiet, quiet," Brian said. Everyone waited tensely for the next chime. It didn't come, and after a moment Janet said tentatively, "One o'clock?"

Vera shook her head. "Quarter hour."

"Quiet!" Brian said urgently, and Janet could now hear it: the sound of footfalls outside, many feet rushing softly nearby. No voices. An army of barefoot ghosts.

"What's that?" murmured Mitch. His eyes were huge.

“I don't want to hang around to find out,” said Vera. Brian nodded. “We should go.”

“He said twelve!” Mitch complained.

“Well, maybe our abductor lied to us,” Janet said.

Vera was still listening. “It was a signal to start.”

Mitch was looking in the direction of the sound, back where their entrance lay. “Where the hell can they be coming from? We just came from there.”

Brian caught Janet's eye and indicated Peter. “What do we do with him?”

“Wacko?” Mitchell said. “Leave him.”

“Like we'll leave you, Jackass.” Janet was wishing for her gun again.

“He'll slow us down.”

“We take him,” Brian said decisively, and reached down to help Peter up. “Grab an arm.” Mitchell grudgingly took Peter's other arm, and the three of them staggered through the door behind the table. Janet looked at Vera. The older woman seemed held by the sounds of the approachers, like a rabbit barely breathing as a hawk circled overhead. Janet doubted she'd last long in the rear.

“Vera, go,” she ordered, pushing Vera towards the door. “I'm right behind you.” Vera glanced back once, then scuttled through the doorway.

Janet held herself still for a moment, listening. Yes, things nearby. Whispers she could not properly hear, footsteps that did not seem to come from any particular direction. She thought about Vera's hypnosis theory. This certainly all felt like a big mind fuck. This surreal-sounding approach could be all in their heads. Just something to get the mice running through the maze. But her senses were going crazy; she swore she smelled

something, felt the air thickening as it had done before Rhylos appeared. She stared at the door they'd come through, and thought she saw a flicker of light, a shadow passing. Then another. *And another.*

Keeping her eyes on the doorway, she moved backwards towards the table, then slipped behind it. She picked it up and moved lightly back to the door.

I'll just reach through and close it. Then I'll put the table in position against it.

She set the table down, and took a breath.

Looked carefully through the doorway. Reached out to the knob.

A girl was smiling at her from the other side of the door.

No, not a girl.

And not smiling. Peeling her lips back from her teeth, a Doberman's grimace. Maybe a girl once, but now a slight, filthy, reptile-eyed predator who had Janet in her sights. And the smell - a sickening, faintly sweet smell that Janet recognized at once. Nothing else smelled like that.

She reeked of corpses, this thing. But as Janet faced her, momentarily frozen, she looked dangerously alive, hissing through her wolves' teeth.

Mercifully, Janet's brain unfroze and yelled MOVE! The signal reached her hand just in time for her to yank the door closed as the thing sprang forward, its teeth snapping shut where Janet's arm had been. There was a WHAM! as the thing threw itself at the door, calling out to the others. She could hear them massing on the other side of the door as she shoved the table under the handle. Then they began to batter the door, the table shuddering with every strike. Janet did not wait to see if it would

hold; she turned and ran through the other door, slamming it shut behind her. The smell of death clung to her as she went.

In the hallway, Brian and Mitchell struggled to follow Shiv, whose long, muscular legs kept him ahead easily. The two men were half-walking, half-dragging Peter, who was semi-conscious again. “Can you hold him up a little more?” Brian said around Peter's elbow.

“How'd I get this shit detail?” Mitch muttered, and hoisted Peter again. Vera lagged behind them, coughing. Mitch cast a glance over his shoulder at her, and rolled his eyes. Janet was nowhere in sight.

Ahead of them, Shiv arrived at a door. He stopped, uncertain. Maybe some of the doors were dead ends. He tried it anyway. Locked. “Shit,” he grumbled.

“Pick it,” said Mitch, from down the hall.

Shiv didn't like Mitch's imperative tone. “What?” he said testily.

“Don't give me fucking attitude, gang bang.” Mitch was short of breath. “Just pick it. We're being chased.”

Shiv could see the logic in that. He started working at the lock, but couldn't get into the right position for the overhead light to illuminate his work. His hands were sweaty, making things harder. “I can't fucking see!” he complained.

“Do we even know that this is real?” Brian asked Mitch, as they caught up to Shiv.

“You want to stay and find out?” Mitch asked rhetorically. Down the hall in the direction from which they'd come, they heard a slam, and then a rhythmic banging commenced.

Brian leaned over Shiv. “Um, we're in a little bit of a

hurry.”

Shiv gritted his teeth. “Get off my-“

“Can you fucking pick a lock, or not?” demanded Mitch.

“Get off me, or pick it your own damn self,” Shiv spat. Brian gave Mitch a look. Better back off.

Mitch started to say something, thought better of it, and closed his mouth. Both men waited, watching the end of the hallway anxiously. There were more sounds, vocalizations - growls, moans, peculiar keening sounds that accompanied the percussive bangs.

“Janet...” Brian said.

Mitch shook his head. He leaned over Shiv again. “Look, guy, we need to get into that room ASAP. If you do it, I'll give you a thousand dollars.” Shiv ignored him completely.

Between Brian and Mitch, Peter raised his head. “Where are we?” he asked, looking around blearily.

“We're running,” Brian told him.

“Oh,” Peter said. “It's no use.”

Vera finally arrived at the door, hacking. “What's going on?” she asked breathlessly.

“Locked door,” Brian said.

Vera tapped Shiv on the shoulder. “Pick the lock!” she instructed him.

Shiv gave her a look of disgust. “I need my tools, man!” he muttered. There was the sound of boots, and Janet appeared at a hard run up the hall. She skidded to a halt at the door and bent over to catch her breath.

“What took you?” Mitch demanded.

“I had to bar the door,” Janet said, wiping sweat out of her eyes.

Brian was relieved to see her. “Are you all right?”

"I don't know what they are," Janet told him shakily, "but this shit's unnatural."

"They're vampires," Peter said in his lucid-but-not-sane voice. "We need some wood."

Janet was about to say no, we needed her revolver and an back-up when she remembered the table. "There's the table, but that's keeping them out."

"We'll need it," Vera said. So you go get it, Janet thought sourly. She shook her head. "We'll let them in. Trust me."

"You heard him," Vera said shrilly. "It's a maze. They've probably already found another way." Janet looked at Vera carefully for a moment, trying to decide if there was more here than what she could see. Nope, she decided, and no time to second-guess. She turned and sprinted back down the hall. She heard Brian call after her, but she didn't stop.

Shiv looked over his shoulder at Vera. She met his eyes briefly, then looked away.

Janet ran softly, slowing as she returned to the door she'd just come through. She paused, trying to listen over her own breathing. No sound now. Silently she re-entered the room, and eased up to the door where the table was miraculously still in place.

Brian appeared at her elbow, causing her nearly to leap out of her scrubs. "Janet, don't--"

"Shhhh." She motioned for him to listen, not talk. But there was nothing now - no breath, no feet, no motion to be heard. "Do you hear that?" she asked him.

"No."

"Exactly." So Vera was right - they'd gone to find another way in. Janet gingerly lifted the table out of its

position, and they watched the handle to see if it turned.

“Okay,” she said softly. “Let's get out of here.”

They had taken four steps when the closed door exploded. At least, it sounded like an explosion. In fact, it was the sound of the force with which the girl-thing and a dozen like her burst through the door into the room. Janet instinctively turned and shielded herself and Brian with the table, shoving the legs into the creatures. They reacted quickly, the second wave dodging the table and throwing themselves at Brian from the side. He threw a solid kick at the first one, enough to send it to the floor. The next one was slowed down with a punch to the jaw, but his balance was off and he couldn't strike with the force that he needed. He grounded himself, and nailed the thing when it got back up.

Janet's table was proving to be a pretty good weapon, but it was heavy and she was having difficulty holding on to it. The creatures were grabbing at the legs and snarling, furious that they could not get at her easily. She whacked one in the centre of the chest with a table leg, and it let out a howl that sounded more of outrage than hurt.

The howls and crashes were carrying clearly down the hallway. Shiv was desperately working the lock. He could not care less about these fucks, but goddamned if he was going to be left out in the hallway to be eaten. The others were on him - Vera shouting “Hurry!” and Mitch swearing at him over and over - but he kept his focus on the lock. Like having a gun to your head, he told himself. That's the time you got to make your fingers do exactly what you say.

“I'm trying,” he told Vera. I'll open this door, he

thought, and then I decide who goes through.

To Janet's distress, it seemed to be nearly impossible to knock the demons unconscious. She had landed several good bell-ringing blows that should have put the recipients out cold, but didn't. She could see that Brian was having the same problem; despite well-aimed kicks and punches, all he could do was slow them down. The table, an old desk of some kind, had not been intended for the punishment it was taking, and was beginning to disintegrate. As she fended the things off she frantically tried to think ahead: how could they buy enough time to break away and get down the hall? The creatures' balance didn't seem to be so great; maybe they could knock enough of them down to create a short term barrier -

One of the creatures, showing more initiative than the others, seized the table and tore it away from her. It hit the ground a couple of feet away and splintered into several pieces. So much for her shield. In an instant Brian snatched up two pieces, and held them up as a cross.

The effect was interesting. The creatures stopped, staring at the cross in confusion. They seemed both held and repelled by it, like a light that hurt their eyes but compelled them to look anyway. "It's working!" Brian shouted. Janet grabbed a shard of wood, and decided to test her own knowledge of vampires: she plunged the wood with all her strength into the torso of the nearest demon. It went in surprisingly easily; she had aimed well and thrust the makeshift stake up under the ribs, so that there would be little resistance. The creature unleashed an ear-splitting wail and folded to the floor, gurgling. The others recoiled from it, staring. Then, one by one,

they looked back at Janet and Brian. One of them took an experimental step towards Janet, then another. Brian had backed up to the doorway.

“What now?” he asked breathlessly.

“Keep backing up,” she ordered, not taking her eyes from the things. They were advancing again, more tentatively. She grabbed another piece of wood from the floor and staked another monster, who flailed and screamed before dropping. Again the creatures froze, staring at their fallen comrade.

“Run!” Janet yelled to Brian, and he obeyed, dropping the wood and sprinting out the door. She grabbed the pieces he'd been holding and started flailing at the creatures who approached her, desperately hoping she was buying enough time for Brian to warn the others.

4

Prudence

Shiv, his face to the lock, heard the blessed click and gave the door a push. It swung open easily, and the others shouted in relief. Vera, Mitch and Peter ducked through quickly, followed by Shiv, who stayed near the door. He had to time this right. Mitch stuck his head out the door and saw Brian coming full-tilt down the hall.

“Come, on, come on!” Mitch hollered. Brian cornered like an athlete and slid through the doorway panting.

“Where's Janet?” Vera asked.

“She's coming,” Brian answered. He immediately felt terrible that he had not checked to make sure she was behind him, and went to the door to look. Shiv slammed the door in his face and locked it.

Brian was aghast. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Don't fuck with me, man,” Shiv said in a low, even voice. Brian tried to unlock the door and Shiv struck him full across the face, hard enough to send him straight to the ground. Even Mitchell was shocked. He didn't like

Janet, but she wasn't totally useless, either, and if she could be locked out, so could he. He moved to help Brian up, but Shiv blocked him.

“Just because you're my lawyer doesn't mean I won't kill you,” Shiv said, and Mitch could see that he meant it.

Janet had broken away and was running for her life. She knew that she could probably move faster than them right now, but that wouldn't matter if Shiv hadn't got the door unlocked. She approached the door, and saw that it was closed, with no sign of the others; she hoped that this meant that they were inside. She skidded to a halt in front of the door and banged on it. She could hear their voices inside, arguing. She tried the door, but it was locked. She banged again, and the voices rose, harsh and desperate. And suddenly Janet knew what was going on. She knew that she was locked out, and she knew who had done it, and she remembered where she had seen him before.

That is, if you don't kill each other first. Rhylos' words came back unbidden.

She looked over her shoulder to see the creatures rounding the corner. What they lacked in speed they made up for in dogged, relentless pursuit of their prey, and she prayed that she had friends as well as enemies on the other side of the door.

Mitch was staring at Shiv and weighing his options carefully. Behind Shiv, Brian slowly got back on his feet and stood up silently, making brief eye contact with Mitch. Someone banged on the door.

“LET ME IN!” The urgency in Janet's voice was

painful to ignore.

“Open the door,” said Mitch. “No,” Shiv said flatly, and crossed his arms.

With a yell, Brian tackled Shiv from behind. The surprise was great enough for Shiv to lose his balance, and Mitchell leapt on top of both of them before Shiv could react properly. Vera squeezed past them and swiftly unlocked the door.

The scene that she opened the door to very nearly made her faint. Janet was defending herself against what appeared to be a horde of demons with two pieces of splintered wood that she brandished like a martial arts master. As Vera watched, a creature got close enough to be impaled by one of Janet's stakes. It screamed and collapsed, and Janet kicked it against the others to push them back a little. Vera forced herself to reach out far enough to grab Janet's arm and drag her through the doorway. She slammed the door behind Janet and locked it.

Janet stood just inside the room, breathing heavily, still gripping her pieces of wood. She bore several scratches and scrapes and had been liberally daubed and spattered with blood. Vera suddenly had a terrible thought.

“Have you been bitten?” she asked Janet urgently.

“Who *the fuck* was it?” Janet asked, staring at Shiv.

“Did they bite you?” Vera demanded.

“No,” Janet said. “It was you, wasn't it?” she said between her teeth to Shiv, holding on to her rage only by the tip of its tail.

“You fucked with my family,” Shiv replied calmly.

“You gonna do something about it?”

They both moved at once. Shiv was bigger and

stronger, but Janet was trained, and still held the pieces of wood. When he went for her she got him hard across the stomach, and when he doubled over, across the back to send him to the ground. She was so enraged that it was all she could do not to keep hitting him, keep hitting him until the rage bled out or he did. Instead she took the stick she was holding and snapped it in half, then threw it to the floor. Brian picked up the broken pieces and set about fashioning a cross with them. Janet stood over Shiv, trying to quiet the screaming in her head.

“If you ever do that again, I'll kill you,” she told him, and meant it with all her heart.

Brian shook his head. “Why'd you lock the door, man?”

Shiv reached for the other stake, but Mitchell snatched it away.

“He wants me dead,” Janet said wearily.

“Why?”

“I killed his brother.”

She watched them - Vera, Brian, Mitch - absorb this. Brian nodded to himself. Here was a connection between two of them, and she wondered about others. Was it all horrible? Were they all joined somehow by the worst of each person's past? Given what Rhylos had told them about sin and vice, it seemed likely. So this would be a game of shared secrets, along with everything else.

“Oh my God,” Vera said softly. She was staring at the walls of the room. With all their attention on the door, they had failed to notice that they stood among a gallery's worth of photos.

The pictures were different sizes, mostly three by five and eight by ten, and reasonably good quality, so it was not hard to see what they depicted. They all seemed to be

set in the same location, a dark underground parking lot, the subjects at times illuminated by headlights. Janet recognized herself caught in a shooting stance, her gun pointed at an unseen target. There were photos of other police from her division, their guns also drawn. There were several pictures of bodies: two or three young toughs sprawled on the ground, a dead young girl, and, painfully, the body of Janet's partner, Chuck. And there was an extraordinary shot of her with her gun pointed at the young man she recognized as Shiv's brother Marcel, whose body was being flung back by the force of her bullet. Once-in-a-lifetime shots, both of them.

On one of the walls someone had scrawled *PRUDENCE* in large ragged letters. Janet shook her head, trying to clear it. She could not summon the mental strength to figure out the significance of the word. Right now it was just another image on the wall to her. The others perused the pictures slowly, their faces pained as if they were in a particularly shocking art exhibit. Janet's eyes kept drifting back to the 'shot of the shot', and she remembered that moment, the sound of the gun echoing madly around the space, the vibration of the recoil ringing through her hand and arm. The metallic, dark-brown smell in the air. She closed her eyes against the memory, but could not shut it out.

In her mind's eye she was there. Crouched down behind a car, plainclothed, Chuck nearby. They were watching what was unmistakably a drug deal taking place between three young punks and a dealer they could not see clearly. Janet could see the one she now knew to be Shiv's brother; watched him shift from foot to foot and nervously wipe his thumb across his nose over and over.

She remembered thinking at the time how young he seemed, and how unsettled. She knew that this was not a group of high school kids buying pot; this was a distribution deal, and warranted some serious police attention. And caution.

The nervous kid threw her off. He didn't belong there. Either he knew they were watching, or he'd never done this before, which didn't seem right. Janet had learned that crimes were, to a degree, fairly predictable, especially those by experienced criminals. There were certain details that had to be taken care of if the crime was to go smoothly, as with any project. As it was the very rare offender who came up with a truly novel approach to these details, Janet and her colleagues had developed a good sense of what usually took place during the course of these events. Another thing she had learned was to pay attention to her instincts, and right now her instincts told her that something here fell outside the usual pattern. She wished to God her instincts would say what it was, exactly, and save her some time.

She motioned to Chuck. He acknowledged and moved around the other side of the car. Quiet and focused, Chuck was a good guy to have on your side. Deceptively young-looking, with kind brown eyes and dimples, he was surprisingly hard on the inside. Janet had seen him angry, and she had seen him unflinchingly doing what needed to be done, and she was alternately proud and a little afraid of him. She was tough, but not in the same way. He had been a good partner for her. They got each other, and most of the time she trusted him completely. Now he was going forward to do what needed to be done again, and her motion and his nod before he slid around

the side of the car was the last interaction they would ever have.

Prudence. An old word, no longer fashionable. A Rhylos word.

Asking Chuck to move forward hadn't been prudent, had it? She should have gone. She had a lower startle response, a calmer demeanor. More experience. She might not have reacted the way he had.

Didn't matter now.

Janet opened her eyes. Vera was pondering the brother-taking-bullet image. She looked at Janet.

"When?" she asked sympathetically.

"Eight months ago." The inquiry had barely wrapped up.

"You're dead, pig." That was Shiv next to her, his anger refueled by the photos.

"Your brother was a criminal," Janet said flatly.

"How'd they get these pictures?" Brian suddenly asked. He had been looking at each one carefully, as though seeking something. Janet thought it was a damned good question.

There was a growl at the door, then a drawn-out scraping sound. The lock rattled.

"Oh, our friends," Mitch said. "I was starting to miss them. Heads up, guys."

Shiv did not hear him. He was facing Janet, his eyes boring into hers. "We're all the fucking same to you, ain't we, you prejudiced piece of shit?"

Janet was not going to deign to answer that question. "Your brother was involved in a drug deal," she told him.

She could see a scarlet flush of rage making its way up Shiv's neck. "My brother was innocent!" he spat in

her face.

“So was my partner!” she threw back. She was tired enough that although she should have expected it, she didn't see his punch coming. He labeled her across the jaw, rattling her teeth and making her ear ring. The others responded immediately, pulling him back.

“Get off me,” he snarled, and they let go, but stayed close. “You're not safe,” he told her.

That struck her as absurd, and she laughed. Of course she wasn't safe. None of them was. “Fuck you,” she said. Enough.

Shiv, predictably, flew at her. Janet stepped aside and helped him into the wall. He struck it with his full weight, turning his head at the last second so that his shoulder took the worst of the impact. He slid to the ground and groaned, clutching his shoulder. Janet stood above him, ready. Asshole. She should not have to keep doing this.

Shiv struggled to his feet and looked at Janet with as much hatred in his face as anyone had ever aimed at her. “Fuck you, bitch.”

Janet was just tall enough to get her forearm under his chin and her knee into his belly, pinning him against the wall. “Listen, you fucking waste,” she said between her teeth, “I have been a cop for years. I have dealt with shit you can't imagine. I am nails. If your brother took a bullet from my piece, he fucking deserved it.” She could see by his face that the knee in the belly really hurt. She didn't care.

“Janet, go easy,” Vera pleaded.

“Get off me!” Janet mocked Shiv. She was so tired of him, he who thought that this was only about race, who thought that he was the only one to ever have suffered

any pain. An innocent victim. Sure. She was sick with anger.

There was a WHAM! against the door, then another. Janet knew that sound. She released Shiv and he lurched forward, holding his throat. She turned her back on him and handed Mitch a stake. If Shiv tried any more shit, she decided, she would kill him. She couldn't afford to let him continue with his little vendetta. None of them could. She noticed that Mitch was looking at her with something like respect, and a bit of fear. Smart guy.

Vera piped up. "Mitch is Shiv's lawyer."

"What?" Janet exclaimed. She glared at Mitch. "When were you going to reveal this tidy piece of information?"

Mitch looked very nervous. "What does it have to do with anything?"

Janet suddenly wondered why Vera had spoken up. Did she really think that it was a problem? Was she trying to curry favour with Janet? Take heat off herself, for whatever reason? She looked at Vera, who met her eyes and pointed to Brian. He was leaning against the wall, wiping at his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, holding the photo of the girl.

"Are you all right?" Vera asked him softly.

"Fuck," Janet muttered. More shit. "Brian?" He did not look up.

"BRIAN!" she said, her tone compelling him to look at her. His face was white and stricken, streaked with tears.

"She called me up and asked me to help her with her homework. I told her to come over. I could help her better if she was with me."

So that was his connection to this event. "I didn't know, Brian," Janet said. "I'm sorry."

“She had a terrible time with calculus,” he continued, as if he hadn’t heard her. “She wanted to become an engineer like me, but calculus was so tough for her.” Brian’s grief was so acute that it was hurting all of them. Even Mitch looked saddened.

“My little girl is dead,” Brian choked, “and it’s because of the people in this room!”

That struck Janet at her core. Shiv spoke up. “I didn’t kill your fucking daughter, so back off,” he said petulantly. No, you didn’t, Janet thought. That much is true.

“Is this why we’re here?” Vera asked.

“Is what why we’re here? Because of a drug bust gone wrong?” Mitch said angrily. “I wasn’t part of your drug bust.”

“No, but you’re involved with him,” Janet said, indicating Shiv, who was staring at the photo of his brother.

“He wasn’t involved either! He was in jail!” Mitch protested.

Shiv spoke, and for the first time there was neither anger or arrogance in his voice. “It should have been me,” he said softly to the picture.

“Listen, guy,” said Mitch, “we all know you’d like to bring your brother back, but - “

“I fucking sent him,” Shiv said hollowly. “I couldn’t pass up on this cherry deal, so I sent him. He didn’t want to go.”

“So yeah,” said Brian, unsympathetically. “You are responsible.”

There had been a brief respite from the sounds on the other side of the door, but everyone suddenly became aware of their return, and the increase in their volume.

The door began to creak. "We have to get out of here," Vera said urgently.

Shiv was hurting, and Brian's accusation angered him again. "I'm not responsible for shit!" he told Brian. "The fucking pig took down your daughter!"

"No!" Janet said furiously. It had not been her. A cop, yes, but not her. She realized that it mattered very much to her that Brian understand this, see what she had seen. The girl appearing from nowhere, just going to her car. Janet had seen the girl, and had seen Chuck pop up at the same moment. Chuck was so fast. Janet could see the horror on the girl's face. Instantaneous, our expressions. Fast enough for the world to see that Brian's daughter saw Chuck, saw the gun, saw the next moment clearly. None of it fast enough to save her.

Brian did not seem to hear Janet. "You are all so pathetic," he said. "My daughter is dead, and all you can do is bicker about who's responsible. As far as I'm concerned, you're both fucking responsible." There was loud WHAM! against the door, the sound of several bodies hitting it at once.

"Brian, I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened to your daughter," Janet said carefully, "but right now we need to focus on what's happening to us."

"What's the point?" Brian asked. "I really don't care whether any of you lives or dies."

"Brian, I don't know why this happened to your daughter," Vera said gently, "but nothing is going to bring her back. If you want to get to the bottom of what happened and give yourself some peace, you have to get through this first."

Brian was looking at the ground, but he appeared to be considering this. Finally he nodded.

WHAM! WHAM! The door complained under the pressure it was bearing.

“Suggestions?” Janet asked the group. Vera stepped back, scrutinizing the pictures, trying to see a pattern. “I don't know about the word,” she said, “but the photos must mean something.” She stepped forward and lifted one. The others began to do the same, ripping the photos off the wall and checking their backs. Mitchell lifted one and encountered a button set flush against the wall, smooth and featureless. “I think I found a button,” he announced, and the others clustered around to see. “Press it,” Vera suggested. Janet noticed that Vera was fond of suggesting things for other people to do. “Wait,” she said. “We don't know what it does.”

Mitch put his finger on it. “It's the only thing we got.”

“What if it's a trap?”

“Look,” he said. “It couldn't get much worse.” He pressed it. There was a satisfying click, then another click somewhere behind the wall. They all jumped back when a sound like stone grinding on stone started, as if entire walls were shifting.

“What the fuck is that?” Mitch exclaimed. Brian hushed him. They all listened carefully.

“It's the maze,” said Brian. “It's shifting.”

The grinding paused, and then their wall began to slide over, a doorway opening up on one side. They peered in. A passageway, the walls as smooth and unremarkable as the others they'd seen.

“Let's go,” said Mitchell briskly. Shiv walked through immediately without a backward glance. Brian and Mitch hoisted Peter up to his feet. Janet was staring through the doorway. How are we ever going to know which is the right path, and which is the trap? We won't. All we can

do is hope for a chance to backtrack and try again.

Mitchell and Brian were hauling Peter into the passageway. Vera looked at Janet. "Are you all right, Janet?" she asked, in that same gentle voice she'd used with Peter.

"I'm fine," Janet replied brusquely. She had no intention of voicing any uncertainty, especially to Vera. She didn't know why. Vera nodded to her, and started down the hall.

"Vera?" Janet asked, and Vera turned.

"How are you involved?"

"I told you," Vera said neutrally, "I teach a course." She turned and resumed walking.

Janet entered the passageway behind her and followed, staring at the back of Vera's head. That's not it, Vera. I know that's not it. So do you.

Rhylos had learned all he needed to know in one swift glance around the room, and he was pleased. The events that had transpired here were obvious: the players had brought the table through and barred the door. His creatures had broken through. The players had defended themselves with the table. Some creatures had perished. This was not a problem; in fact, it was a good sign that they had a challenge on their hands. There was blood. So beautiful. This was a good game.

The creatures fawned on him. Once each a player, now all his. They were pulled to him, matter to his dark star. He truly was the centre of their universe. They sometimes were torn between their hunger and his commands, but he forgave them for that. He knew the thirst, and knew too that at this point they were little more than animals, with minimal control over their

impulses. But they were good hunters, and they trusted that he would always ensure that in the end, they fed. He stroked one's head, looked into her vacant eyes.

"They're smarter than most," he told them. "We'll have a game yet."

He gestured and they fell away from him to sprint down the hall. Back on the chase. They were grinning death's head-grins, and it made Rhylos smile. Something akin to happiness, this.

The players trooped along the featureless hallway, each lost in his or her thoughts. They shared fatigue, thirst, hunger and weakness, and the revelations in the last room left them all feeling battered. No one spoke for nearly an hour; finally Vera broke the silence by pleading for everyone to stop for a rest. Nobody objected. They sat slumped against the walls, not caring for the moment where their pursuers might be. Janet was next to Vera, who looked better already for have sat a few minutes.

"Lord," Vera groaned. "I would love a cigarette."

"Tell me about these things that are chasing us," Janet said.

Vera sighed. "There could be a biological explanation for their behaviour, you know."

"So let's hear it."

"Well, whatever they are, they're not vampires."

"They're not?" Janet thought about the teeth on the first one she'd seen. The girl had had teeth like a predator, not human teeth. Well, whatever.

"No. But they could be very sick people who have a disease."

"What kind of sickness would do that?"

"An old one," Vera said. "Have you ever heard of

porphyria?”

“Nope.”

“Not surprising. It's not common now. You know how in your blood you have hemoglobin? Well, porphyria is a lack of heme in your blood cells.”

“Heme?”

“A component of your blood. Trust me, it's important. When you lack it, you have an adverse reaction to sunlight, and strong smells like garlic. Your gums recede, so it looks like you have fangs. And of course, because you lack heme, you crave blood.”

Mitchell had been listening. “So they're just people?”

“Essentially. But they're sick, so when they feed on someone healthy, the disease is spread via the bloodstream.”

“How do they survive without food?” Janet asked. “I mean, I'm assuming they're not eating properly.”

“Actually, they can survive by drinking blood,” Vera replied. “It has all the nutrients they need to get by. Solid food is broken down by our stomachs in order to go into the bloodstream anyway, so this just eliminates that step in the process.”

Nasty. “So they're nothing but diseased blood drinkers,” Mitch mused.

“Not quite that simple,” Vera said. “They're very aggressive. They eventually go insane, craving blood so badly that they'll do anything for it, even kill someone.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Janet said. “So,” she said in her friendliest tone. “Tell me about this course you teach.”

“It was called *The Science Behind The Myth*. Basically, that's what it was. We talked about legends, especially Dracula and the undead, and the facts that may have led to the stories.”

“And supposedly you're here because of this course. But why would Rhylos care whether or not someone disproves vampire myths?”

Vera looked uneasy. “I don't know.”

Janet skewered Vera with her stare. “Pretend they're real.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me. Since you're the closest thing to an expert on vampires that we have, let's pretend for the sake of argument that vampires are real. Tell me about these things again.”

“Um, all right.” Vera considered this. “Like I said, the ones running around aren't actual vampires.”

“Well, they're sure as hell not normal,” said Mitchell, “so what are they?”

Vera hesitated. “See, this will sound ludicrous.”

“Try us,” Janet said.

“They would be...undead.”

“Undead?” Brian asked skeptically.

“But they're not vampires?” Janet asked. She hadn't heard of this before.

“No. To become a vampire, you have to drink the head vampire's blood,” Vera explained. “Think about it. If it just spread like a disease, the planet would be overrun with vampires by now. If they were real, that is.”

“But they do bite,” said Mitchell. “So how do you know that they haven't drunk his blood?”

“They're too weak. Vampires are much more powerful.”

Janet was thinking hard, trying to figure out whether any of this made more sense of what she'd seen, or didn't explain anything. “Is this even possible, this vampire thing?” she asked Vera seriously.

Vera smiled. “No. Of course not.”

“So how do you kill them?” Mitch asked.

Vera shrugged. “The same way you kill anyone.”

Shiv spoke up, looking directly at Janet. “You shoot them in the head.”

From somewhere in the bowels of the maze, something shifted and groaned.

“We should move on,” said Brian nervously.

5

Faith

At length they arrived at the next room, the door of which was unlocked. Shiv entered first, and saw *FAITH* scrawled on the wall. “Shit!” he exclaimed. The word made no more sense than the others had, and in this room there were no other clues. There were two other doors, and Shiv tried each one as the other men entered.

Locked. Brian and Mitchell set Peter down.

“Hurry up and unlock those doors, will ya?” Mitch said to Shiv. “This guy stinks.”

“I’m trying,” Shiv said over his shoulder.

“Try harder,” Mitch said. “Pretend it’s a bag of crack.”

Shiv turned around at that. “Listen, you whitebread fuck-’em-for-a-dime, leave-’em-for-the-slime motherfucker, if you ever talk to me like that again, I’ll fuck you up so bad...”

Shiv stopped, too tired to think of a suitable threat.

“What? What?” Mitch sneered. “Can’t think of anymore colourful youth slang to end with? Just get at the lock.”

Anger fueled a burst of adrenaline in Shiv's system, and he stepped up to Mitch. "You got a big mouth, motherfucker. I'm gonna close it for you."

Janet and Vera had come through the door. "Aw, what's going on now?" Janet asked wearily, seeing Shiv and Mitch chin to chin. Shiv glanced at Janet, looked back at Mitch, and decided that he was not going to waste what little juice he had left. He returned to the doors. Mitch smirked.

Vera stared at FAITH. "Another one. What do you think these words mean?"

"Don't know," said Janet. "What was the other one again?"

"Prudence," Brian said.

"Right," said Janet. "Prudence. Faith. Cher's kids?" Vera smiled weakly.

"God," said Brian. Janet thought he was commenting on her bad joke. "Faith in God." Mitch snorted, a favourite conversational element of his. "Why would a vampire have faith in God?"

"Because he's seen the devil," Brian said quietly. Janet noticed that he was still holding the cross that he'd made in the last room. They glanced over at Shiv, who was working on the locks. Peter suddenly convulsed, and as they went to him, he vomited blood.

Mitchell looked disgusted. "What now?"

"Maybe they're close," Brian said, his hand on Peter's arm. "Maybe he can sense them, or something."

"Bullshit," Mitch said. "Why now, and not before?"

"I don't know. I just think that he knows they're coming."

Vera shook her head. "He's really sick. We have to get out of here and get him to a doctor."

Janet decided that it would be safe to assume that the things were coming. It had to happen sooner or later, and they might as well be prepared. “Shyster, your stake,” she ordered Mitch, and he threw it to her. After some tugging she managed to tear a strip off the bottom of the front of her scrubs, and quickly wrapped the handle of the stake.

“My God, Janet, your hands!” Vera exclaimed, and Janet saw that her palms and fingers were inflamed and bleeding in some places from the table and the slivers in the stakes. She had been completely insensible to the pain.

“I’ll be fine,” she said brusquely, and handed Mitchell the improved stake. “Shiv,” she said, gesturing for his stake. He hesitated, then threw it to her, and she made him a handle too. He took it back and gripped it experimentally, trying a couple of test stabs in the air.

Suddenly Peter launched into a seizure, his back arching, his eyes rolling back. It was very frightening to watch, and what frightened Janet more was the gathering of currents in the air, as if before a lightning strike. She was sure that she could hear something like the rushing of whispers or soft footsteps, but when she tried to focus and listen, it eluded her. They must be coming.

She gestured to the others, and they grouped together at the far end of the room, facing the passageway, their backs to the still-locked doors. Shiv was labouring at the lock of the first door, shaking his head in frustration. Brian faced the passage squarely and held up his cross. The gesture seemed to affect Peter, forcing him into another convulsion, his lips peeled back from his teeth. Under his groans Janet was certain now of the other sound growing louder, and the others were beginning to

notice it too.

“Are they coming?” Mitchell asked, his voice noticeably less cocky than usual.

“I can't tell,” Janet whispered. A chime sounded somewhere, and Peter screamed as if in response. It was followed by a second chime. Peter stopped, and for ten seconds there was near-silence.

“Two o'clock?” Vera murmured.

A smell hit Janet's nostrils. “Oh God-“

They exploded into the room screaming. Although she had tried to prepare herself, Janet nearly dropped her stake. Brian had the presence of mind to keep holding his cross up, and the creatures skidded to a stop, snarling at it. Vera moved in front of Peter. Janet quickly staked the thing nearest her, but it did not slow the others down this time. They stumbled past their dead comrade and flooded the room, surrounding Janet and knocking the cross out of Brian's hand. He scrambled for it as Mitch and Shiv began laying about with their stakes, developing a rhythm as they plunged the weapons into creatures' chests again and again. Janet was desperately trying to stay focused as the demons went for her limbs, shoulders, anything they could get their teeth into. She deterred the nearest one by jamming her stake sideways into its mouth and breaking its jaw. When she yanked the stake out, the creature could not close its mouth. But there were others to take its place, determined to get hold of any part of her in order to taste her blood. It horrified her to see them bare their terrifying teeth and prepare to sink them into her flesh, and she began to slowly lose ground as she became more and more outnumbered.

She heard Brian's voice. “BACK!”

The things let out a collective shriek and dropped

away from Janet like burned leeches. Brian was brandishing his cross at them, his jaw set. Janet moved quickly to get behind him. He took a step forward, and the creatures gibbered and backed up into the passageway. Shiv took the opportunity to move to the second door and try the lock again.

Mitchell was mystified. "What the fuck - ?"

The demons had fled down the hallway.

"What about your theories now, Vera?" Janet asked quietly. Vera was staring at Brian, openmouthed. "I don't...how...?"

Brian had lowered the cross, but still held it facing in the direction of the hall. "I'm ordained, remember?"

"Yes, but that's hardly real!" Vera exclaimed.

"Real enough," Janet said.

Shiv rolled his eyes. "Just like white folks to question good fortune."

Mitchell looked at Brian gripping his cross. "You can't hold them off forever, you know."

"Just until dawn," Brian said grimly.

The lock released under Shiv's fingers. He opened the door, glanced back at them, and went through it.

Janet suddenly remembered Peter. "I'll carry Peter," she said to Brian. "You keep holding that thing."

"Fine by me,"

He wasn't there. Janet stared at his spot on the floor in shock. "Vera? Peter's gone."

"Huh? He was just there!" Vera, too, stared at the corner where he had lain a moment ago.

"It's the first good thing to happen to us," Mitchell said harshly. "Let it go."

Janet debated for a moment. They had got Peter this far...but it did not make sense to go looking for him. He

had probably been taken by the creatures, and as Vera had said, it was unlikely that he would ever recover even if he was saved. So perhaps it was for the best.

Reluctantly, she and Vera followed Mitch through the door.

Peter was awake now, more awake than he had been in a long, long time.

He did not want to be aware of anything around him, but he was painfully cognizant of Rhylos standing over him. Rhylos was displeased.

“Clever,” he said between his teeth. “Clever that you would find a minister, one ordained in an obscure religion many years ago. You thought I would not check, and indeed I did not think I had to.”

“Please-“ Peter whispered, terrified.

“You've become a thorn in my side, Mr. Church. Are there any more surprises of which I should be aware?”

“No,” Peter gasped. “No more.” Rhylos shook his head sorrowfully. “I can't trust you anymore, Peter. You've disappointed me.” He leaned over Peter, who began to weep.

“No, Rhylos, please, please...”

“Shhhh,” Rhylos said soothingly. “Shhhhh. It will be all right.”

“No - “

“Shhhhhh,” Rhylos whispered into Peter's neck before letting his incisors sink into the man's flesh. Peter writhed as Rhylos tightened his grip on his shoulder, feeding voraciously. He was far too weak to escape. Slowly Peter's body surrendered up his blood, and a mist

began to descend in front of his eyes. And, as Rhylos had said, it was all right. He was sinking down lower than he had ever gone before, and his pain and fear were drifting away. He would sleep now, he decided. Sleep would release him from everything.

Janet felt trapped by a moment in time that she replayed in her head over and over as she walked. She saw herself gesturing to Chuck, and saw him popping up from beside the car. So fast. Yet somewhere in that fraction of time, she had seen the girl, seen Brian's daughter.

She had seen her. She had not stopped Chuck in time. Could she have? Chuck on the other side of the car, leaping up to yell, "Freeze! Police!" The punk grabbing the girl, then releasing her to fall forward as he was shot. Chuck and the girl, their mutual looks of horror even as Chuck fired, and then the girl was blown onto her back, her books scattered across the concrete.

It seemed to Janet that she should have been able to stop him. Warn the girl. Do something other than react. But she had not.

The report following the inquiry stated that Janet "bore no responsibility for the deaths of either her partner, or the other victims". But that was not accurate. Janet had borne their deaths for eight months, carried them with her day and night. It did not matter what the board of inquiry thought. She considered herself responsible. After all, her actions had led to their deaths. Even now she walked heavily because of it. And seeing Brian bravely bringing up the rear of their group with his

cross made her burden all the greater.

Vera looked at Janet and started, surprised. Janet felt the harsh mask of her face, and did her best to relax her expression. “Yes?” She asked Vera.

“Can we rest?” Vera pleaded. “I’m so tired.”

“Rest if you want,” Mitchell said, and continued walking.

“We’ve been walking over an hour!” Vera protested.

“Yeah, and I’m in dress shoes, so shut the fuck up.”

They kept going. A few minutes later, Brian spoke up from the back. “We’re traveling downhill.”

Janet was puzzled. “How do you know?”

“You don’t feel the incline?”

“No.”

“Well, I feel it.”

“Into the depths,” Janet said grimly.

“Are you on the take?” Mitchell asked her abruptly, and she was surprised into answering.

“No!”

Mitch continued conversationally, as if they were talking about her vacation.

“That incident. Did you get your partner killed because you were on the take?”

“You,” Janet said with great feeling, “are the biggest fucking asshole on the entire planet.”

“Maybe, but I wasn’t on the take.”

Janet snorted, a Mitch sound. “And getting a known felon free on a technicality wasn’t because you were on the take.”

“I was doing my job,” Mitch said righteously.

“Fuck you. When’s the last time you looked for a fact instead of a loophole? That’s what determines which side of the law you’re on.”

“You don't know what you're talking about.”

Janet looked him in the eye. “It was you who worked this punk's case and got him out of jail.”

“So?”

“You knew he was still dealing. When he couldn't go, he sent his brother.”

Mitchell shrugged. “We all make choices. That was his.”

Janet was becoming furious, despite herself.

“So if I make a bad choice, why should someone else be punished for it?”

Brian had been listening. “It wasn't my daughter's choice to be gunned down in your little war.”

“Decent people should stay off the streets,” Shiv said.

“Why?” Brian asked angrily. “It was decent people who made them.”

“You don't know nothing,” Shiv told him condescendingly.

Janet turned to look at Shiv. “It was all caused by you.”

That angered him, but Janet didn't care. “Fuck you,” he snarled. “You think I was born this way? You think shit just happens?”

“Of course not,” she retorted. “Why? Was your brother hopped up on drugs at the time?”

“You know shit,” Shiv said tightly.

“Can you all just be quiet?” Vera broke in anxiously. “They could be close!”

Shiv ignored Vera. “My brother wanted to be a designer!” he said hotly to Janet.

She smirked. “Designer drugs?”

“Fuck you. A building designer. A - what's it called - architect.”

“Oh, and he was designing an underground parking garage?” she said sarcastically. She hated the way she sounded, hated how cruel she was being, but she could not stop feeling so angry. Shiv's refusal to take any responsibility for his actions infuriated her, as people like him always had. She was too tired and weak and scared to care about anyone's feelings right now; in fact, she wanted to hurt Shiv for having set all of this nightmare in motion.

Shiv carried on. “He was supposed to get into City College, but he couldn't. See, when you're poor, your marks alone won't do it for you.”

“City College?” Vera sounded surprised. “I'm on the admissions committee. What was his name?”

“It doesn't matter now,” Shiv said bitterly. Vera persisted. “No, tell me, what was his name?”

“Marcel,” Shiv said quietly.

“Marcel?”

“Marcel Mackenzie.” He kept walking.

Janet stole a glance at Vera. The older woman wore an expression of shocked recognition. Another connection, Janet thought. I only care if it helps us get out of here.

They had come upon another door. “Finally,” Janet muttered. She tried the knob, and it turned easily in her hand.

6

Temperance

The room they entered was largely bare, like the others, but had two features of note: a word, and Peter. He was lying in a heap in the corner, silent and still.

“Fuck,” Shiv said, which Janet took as disappointment that Peter wasn't dead and gone.

Vera went the pile of Peter to see how he was. The others contemplated the word on the wall, which was TEMPERANCE. So they had been meant to enter this room too, Janet thought, but why? Just to read a word on a wall? To find Peter?

She glanced over at Vera. “Is he all right?” Vera shook her head. “He's been bitten again, really badly.”

”Shit,” said Mitchell, which sounded like irritation at the inconvenience that was Peter to Mitch. It could be you, buddy, Janet thought darkly. Could be you instead. She went back to the word on the wall. Not really a word she used herself.

“Temperance?”

“Like temper,” said Mitch. “Control your temper.”

“I know that, you asshole.” Janet was not about to accept anything from Mitch, even a word definition.

Brian piped up. “It's one of the seven heavenly virtues.”

“The what?” Janet asked. Sounded familiar.

“The seven heavenly virtues. You know the seven deadly sins, right?”

“Yeah, 'don't steal' and shit.”

“Ten commandments!” mocked Mitchell. She shot him a look.

“These are the flip side of the sins - the virtues,” Brian explained. “Faith, hope, charity, justice, temperance...uh...”

“Prudence and fortitude,” Shiv finished. Seeing their surprised looks, he scowled. “Surprised that a criminal has heard of the Bible?”

“We have to figure out what each one means for us,” Vera said.

Brian studied the word again. “Temperance,” he murmured.

“Maybe this is the room where we're supposed to all play nice,” Mitchell suggested, baring his teeth in a distinctly shark-like smile.

Vera shook her head. “We can't assume that.”

Janet thought back. “Well, we exhibited faith in the last room.”

“No, we had someone with faith,” Mitch corrected her. True. “What's prudence besides that John Lennon song?” she asked.

“Curbing your sexual desires, I think,” Brian said. “But that doesn't make sense.”

“Well, we can all see that Janet wants me,” Mitch said

airily.

“Blow me,” said Janet.

“Why not? You’ve got the biggest cock than any of us here.” Shiv, who was running his hands over the walls, laughed to himself at this.

Brian seemed not to have heard any of them. “It could fall under being humble, like humble before God, or something.”

“Let’s break it down,” said Mitch. “Too bad we don’t have a crayon, so we can print it out in a way that Janet can understand.”

“One more,” Janet said coldly, “and you taste your nads.”

Mitch seemed suddenly to remember what she had done to Shiv. “Sorry,” he said. “In Prudence, we saw the pictures...”

Peter suddenly sat up. “He’s up!” Vera exclaimed.

Brian looked over. “Hey guy, are you all right?” Peter did not respond.

“He’ll be fine,” Janet said uncertainly. Peter looked odd, but at least he was alive.

Mitchell shook his head in frustration. “Nope. I can’t think of the connection. I don’t know what the word shit means.”

“Well, whatever it is, we have at least four more rooms to get through,” Vera sighed.

“Yeah, but in Charity we get the Lincolns,” Shiv said, grinning.

“Maybe,” Brian said, “but we have to get through Fortitude and Justice first.”

Vera had been watching Shiv feeling his way along the wall. “Okay, there’s got to be a secret door here. Let’s find it.”

They all began to move, searching for crevices. “How do we fight those things?” Brian asked. “I can't ward them off all at once.”

“Those things are weak,” Janet said with more confidence than she felt. “I was taking them out like, thirty at a time.”

Shiv looked over at her. “Well, look at you. The vampire killer.”

“I guess I am.”

“Big girl. Don't get her mad.”

“Trust me,” Janet said to Shiv, “I thought of joining them just so I wouldn't have to spend any more time with you or Shyster.”

“I have a name,” Mitch said, offended.

“Yeah, and I have a cunt,” Janet said abrasively, “but I don't intend to use that here, either.” She sat down and began sharpening her stake on the ground. The others were silent, eyeing her warily. Janet felt hard and angry, with nothing more to offer anyone. She was afraid now that even if she got out of this place alive, there would be little left of her that she recognized.

Time had elapsed, but no one could tell how much. They only knew that they were profoundly tired, and they rested while they could. Mitch slept on the ground, and the others sat slumped against the wall. Vera kept her eyes closed, trying to meditate. Janet was finished sharpening her stick and sat staring into space, doing her best to think of nothing at all and failing miserably. The thought that kept popping into her head was how keenly she missed the sky. In the many hours or days that she had spent here, there had been no windows, no breath of

air to prove that the outside world still existed. Her eyes were weary of the ugly fluorescent light that cast a pallid glow on the skin and bleached all colours the same yellow-grey. She stared up at the ceiling and told herself that the light above her was sun, giving her strength. Maybe she could hypnotize herself into believing she was free.

Brian and Shiv sat side by side. Shiv was subdued now, and Brian needed to talk to someone. “What's your real name, Shiv?” he asked quietly.

“It's Sam, man.”

“Hey, Sam.”

“Yo.”

Brian didn't want to sound pushy, so he let a couple of minutes lapse before he asked, “Any ideas?”

“Naw,” Shiv said wearily.

“Yeah. Me either.”

“It's a bitch,” Shiv sighed, and Janet suddenly spoke up irritably. “Are you guys talking about me?”

“You'd fucking know if we were talking about you, 'cause we'd be saying 'skank' and 'cuntbitch',” Shiv replied. His voice lacked the anger that had filled it before.

“Oh,” Janet said a little sheepishly, then added, “just thought I heard 'cuntbitch'.”

Brian suddenly laughed at this, and Shiv laughed too. Mitchell groaned and opened one eye, then screwed it closed again.

“Sam,” Brian said thoughtfully. “Not Sam Mackenzie?”

“Yeah, man. Sam Mackenzie.”

Brian looked at Shiv wonderingly. “Weren't you at City College for track?”

“Yeah.”

“You ran the 100-metre in, like, ten point one nine seconds!”

Shiv shrugged as if this were very unimportant. “Yeah, that was me.”

“Shit, man!” Brian said admiringly. “What happened to you?”

Shiv indicated his leg. “My knee.”

Brian nodded sympathetically. “Wow, man, I'm sorry. You had a gift.”

“Yeah.” Shiv contemplated the floor, then said, “It was all fucking them, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“The assholes at the college. They blew out my knee.”

“How?”

“They had me on this drug. It didn't help me run, it just helped me with my workouts. I didn't know shit about it.”

Janet spoke up. “Stanazithol.”

“Yeah, that's the shit,” Shiv said bitterly. “It gave me power. Too much power. My muscles didn't know when to stop. Well, my fucking knee sure did.”

“How long ago was this?” Janet asked. Shiv thought back. “Shit, five years ago.”

“Is that your district?” she asked, knowing he was going to get angry again. She couldn't help it. “What the fuck are you talking about?” Shiv said irritably.

“Drug dealing,” Janet answered casually. “You have the university?”

“Get the fuck off me.”

“That's why you still hang around.”

“Fuck you, pig fucker.” He turned his back to her. Both of Mitchell's eyes were open, apparently against his

will. He sat up and yawned. "I still don't see why I'm here."

"You managed to keep a drug dealer on the streets," Brian informed him.

"Oh, right," said Mitchell, as though Brian had given him a trivia answer that he'd forgotten.

Brian looked at Janet. "He said you were on the take."

"I wasn't goddamn well on the take!" she replied hotly.

Shiv snorted. "Shit, lady, you were paid to look the other way."

Janet was feeling the anger rising in her chest again.

"You don't know what you're talking about. I never once took a bribe."

Shiv shrugged. "Then your boy was the fucking plant. My boys was telling me that he wanted some extra Lincolns, and we were all 'you gotta be fucking kidding me'."

"Shut your fucking mouth," Janet said forcefully.

"I'm just sayin'," Shiv said innocently. "If it wasn't you, it was your boy."

"So why is Brian here?" Mitchell asked.

"I told you," Brian said edgily. "My daughter."

"Yeah, but that doesn't answer why you'd be here,"

Mitchell said. "What about your daughter?"

"I don't know." Brian was getting upset again. "How can you know the mind of a madman?"

"He paid me off."

Everyone looked at Vera. Her eyes were open, and she was gazing at Brian.

"What?" Brian looked shocked.

"I was on the admissions board. He paid me off," Vera said matter-of-factly.

“You bribed your way into the school?” Janet asked Brian. She had somehow not expected that he would do something so dishonest, and found herself feeling very disappointed. But of course, they were all here for something.

“Big deal,” Brian said defensively. “She didn’t have the grades, so I greased a palm.”

“How un-Roschdale of you!” Mitch said, smiling.

“But what does that have to do with anything?” Brian asked the room, as though pleading his case.

“I don’t know,” Mitch said. He looked at Vera.
“Grandma?”

Vera was looking at Shiv, troubled. “Grandma?” Mitch said again.

“Well,” Vera said hesitantly, “to admit someone, we had to turn someone away.”

“So?” Brian said.

“You have to remember that it’s not a big college. It’s complicated - it has to do with funding, admission limits...”

“Yeah, yeah!” Mitch said impatiently.

“...so we had to turn away someone who deserved to go. Who had managed to get in of their own accord.” Janet glared at Brian again. “You took away someone’s chance at schooling. What if that was all they had?”

“I think it was,” Vera said.

“I didn’t make the rules,” Brian said indignantly. “I just paid off a committee to admit my daughter. I didn’t know that they had to kick another kid out.”

“That’s monumentally naïve.” Janet was disgusted.

“Do you remember the other kid, Vera?” Vera nodded.

“Who was it?”

Vera looked at Shiv sadly and said, “Marcel.” Brian

screamed. Shiv had heard the name and without hesitation had driven his stake into Brian's shoulder. He grabbed Brian by the chin.

“You fucked up bad, man.”

“Stop it!” Janet shouted, jumping up. Shiv pulled out the stake and Brian screamed again. Shiv raised the stake high over Brian, and Janet got hold of his arm, pulling him away. “He didn't know!” She told Shiv, whose eyes were streaming.

Shiv jabbed a finger at Brian. “He was gonna get out,” he said in a trembling voice. “He was gonna make it. You fucked up our lives.”

“I didn't know!” Brian gasped, clutching the wound in his shoulder.

“That makes it okay?” Shiv asked incredulously.

“I knew,” Vera said quietly. They looked at her, and she sighed. “We had to choose someone, so we picked the one we thought probably wouldn't last the entire school term.”

Janet looked at Shiv, who wiped his forearm across his eyes. “Fuck you all,” he said furiously.

“It was wrong,” Vera said to him. “I know that.”

“Well, now we know why you're here!” Mitchell said brightly. Everyone ignored him. Janet was staring at Vera, something stirring in her memory.

“So how do you know him?” She asked the older woman.

“Who?”

“This one.” Janet indicated Shiv. “The kid.”

“I don't,” Vera said calmly.

“You called him Sam earlier.”

“No, I didn't.”

“Yeah, I heard you too,” Mitchell chimed in.

“What do you have with this kid?” Janet asked, not letting Vera's eyes go.

“Nothing,” Vera replied unconvincingly. She looked around at the group, seeing their faces. “I said nothing!” she insisted again. She looked away, avoiding their eyes, and her gaze fell upon the corner where Peter had lain.

“He's gone again!” she exclaimed.

There where Peter had been was a door. A panel of wall had somehow been moved, and another hallway was visible through the new exit. Janet forgot Vera immediately. “He's been here before,” she said excitedly.

“He can lead us through the maze!”

Mitch shook his head. “Yeah, but how far?”

Nevertheless, he and the others began to follow Janet, who had already started down the hallway.

They were only a short distance from TEMPERANCE when they came upon Peter, his eyes glazed, his gait set on 'wander'. As they took his arms there was a sound of grinding stone, and they were cut off from the room they'd just left by the shifting of walls again. Brian gazed at the place where the door had been, deeply worried.

“That was our sanctuary,” he said.

“What?” Mitch said, sounding annoyed.

“Temperance. Abstaining. That was our safe room. They were abstaining from attacking us.”

“Shit,” Shiv said. Just a theory, Janet told herself, but it unsettled her. “Looks like a long hallway,” Mitch commented, and they all began to trudge together, trying not to think about what might come next.

Next was another room, unremarkable except for the four doors in plain view. Now they would have to choose a direction for the first time. Shiv was first in, and sat down immediately. Peter moved slowly to one of the doors and stood facing it, his back to the others. Brian hovered near Shiv, looking sorrowful. “Sam, are you all right?”

“Fuck, I don't get it, man,” Shiv said despondently.

“Why does this shit always happen to me?”

“Sam, I'm sorry,” Janet said, and meant it. It was easier to say when he wasn't being an asshole.

“I still don't know why I'm here,” Mitchell announced. Vera shook her head. “You never will, Shyster.” Mitchell glanced at Peter, whose back had suddenly stiffened.

“Whaddaya smell, boy?” he asked, smirking. He put his hand on Peter's shoulder. In a lightning-quick, fluid movement, Peter whirled around and grasped Mitchell's head and shoulder, exposing the man's neck. Janet saw Peter transformed, his eyes burning white and his expression set in an open-mouthed mask, his fanged grimace seeming to stretch across his entire face. Mitchell saw it too and shrieked, terrified. “*GET HIM OFF ME!*”

Janet leaped forward and caught Peter by the elbow, yanking him away. He flailed and pulled away from her, then lunged at Shiv with the single-mindedness of a shark. Shiv froze in horror just long enough for Peter to fall on top of him and bare his teeth in readiness. Janet staked Peter from behind and he howled and leapt up as if trying to outrun the piece of wood buried between his shoulder blades. They watched as he ran through one of the doorways and down the hall, all the while trying

frantically to yank the stake out of his back.

“Fuck me,” Shiv said, incredulous.

“Yeah,” Janet said. They stared after him. Janet breathed deeply and did her best to calm down.

“He’s been here, like, five years?” she asked the others.

“Somebody said that’s when he went missing,” Vera said.

Janet turned to her. “So how long after you’re bitten does it take for you to turn?”

Vera considered. “Most stories say a day, a couple of days. Sooner if the vampire who made you is more powerful.”

“Mmmm. He’s only been bitten recently.”

“I don’t get it,” Mitchell said loudly. “What does that mean?”

“The creatures couldn’t have turned him,” Vera said thoughtfully.

“No, he wasn’t part of the last game,” Janet agreed.

“So?” Brian asked anxiously.

“So.” Janet exhaled. “There’s more going on here than we thought.”

“That’s great,” Mitchell said sarcastically. “Like what?”

“I don’t know.” Janet turned to Vera. “What about saving Peter? Is it possible?”

“Theoretically, yes. If we kill the head vampire within twenty-four hours of Peter being bitten, supposedly he’ll be okay.”

“He’s coming back,” Brian warned. They could hear Peter’s now-familiar wail growing louder again as he came back up the hallway. He came streaking into the room and ran right into Shiv, who was ready with a right

uppercut. Peter flew backwards and landed in a pile on the floor, the stake falling out of his back.

“Pin him,” Janet ordered, and Shiv and Brian each grabbed an arm and sat on it. Peter flailed and grimaced like a rabid bat. Even though he no longer looked quite human, Janet could see the pain in his face as he stared up at her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him.

“Careful,” Vera warned, keeping her distance. Janet did not move away. Peter began to wail again, and Janet smacked him across the face. That surprised him, and he stopped.

“Hey, I know this asshole!” Shiv suddenly said.

“What are you doing here?” Janet asked Peter again, and he began to weep.

“No, he'll punish me, he'll hurt me...”

“We'll hurt you more,” Janet threatened. Peter didn't seem to yet realize that he was a full-fledged vampire, and she intended to take advantage of it while she could.

“This is the guy from the deal!” Shiv announced. She looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“He's the guy! I set the deal up with him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Shiv was shaking his head in amazement. “I didn't recognize him at first 'cause he looks like shit, but he's definitely the guy.”

“He's going to kill me,” Peter whimpered. Janet leaned forward. “How do we beat him?”

“Beat him? Yes, yes, beat him!” Peter said eagerly.

“Why are you here?” she asked him again.

“I didn't want to do it anymore.”

“What?” Mitchell asked. “Do what?”

There was a pause. Peter's unholy eyes rolled in their

sockets. He seemed to be going through an internal struggle to reach his human memory.

“Find people,” he said at last.

With that, everything snapped into neatly into place. Janet felt as if she had suddenly been given an aerial view of the whole game, and it made her dizzy.

“We were all set up,” she said, feeling distinctly sick. Peter's eyes flicked over to her.

“He made me find you.”

“How far back does this go with us?” Brian demanded.

“Far,” Peter said. “You couldn't imagine.”

Shiv leaned on Peter's arm. “How-far-back?”

“Five years ago.”

“He manipulated us,” Brian gasped. “Turned us into criminals!”

Shiv's face was twisted with fury. “Mother fucker,” he said between his teeth, and struck Peter so hard that Janet heard the crack of bone. Shiv stood up, leaving Peter lying there staring at nothing, his head at a sickening angle. Shiv looked past Janet and said, “Aw, shit.”

They turned to find themselves surrounded by grinning undead. This time, however, they were quicker to react, and moved so that they were back to back. Janet had her stake and Brian his cross, and each now wielded their weapon of choice with practice, if not expertise. Shiv was staying with the group, more or less, but was fighting fiercely with his hands and fists; to Janet it sounded as though he were almost enjoying himself, goading the creatures and then sending them flying.

“You want some of this?” Smash! Into a nose. “Is that all you got?” was followed by a violent kick to someone's sternum. “Thought so!” And Shiv went after

the next one.

Mitch and Vera were faring most poorly. Vera simply could not cope, and beyond an utterly ineffective kick or two, was doing little to defend herself. Janet grabbed her arm and pulled her behind them so that she would at least be protected. Mitch was managing to keep the things from getting their teeth into him, but he looked absolutely terrified, as though he were barely staying on his feet. Janet was about to grab him too, but was temporarily distracted by a creature wrapping itself around her ankle. She leaned down and nailed it with her stake, and when she looked up Mitch had broken away from the group and was running through one of the doorways. Shiv saw him too.

“Shyster! No!” he hollered, and went after Mitch. Janet and Brian made eye contact, and each grabbed one of Vera's arms. Together they broke away from the creatures and ran down the hallway after Mitch and Shiv. Even dragging Vera, they were still faster than the things when they wanted to be. After nearly two minutes of hard running, they had put some distance between themselves and their pursuers.

“We lost the rest,” Vera panted, and they slowed as they came to a place where the hallway split and branched off in two directions.

“Right,” Janet announced, for no reason except that her gut said so.

“No, left,” Brian said with equal conviction. They looked at each other.

“Split up,” suggested Janet, and without further discussion Brian took off down the left-hand hallway, Janet and Vera down the right. As they ran it suddenly occurred to Janet that this was the first time they had

parted ways.

Mitchell was still running. He wasn't much for fights, but at least he could outrun those things. The hallway curved gently around until suddenly he found himself confronted with a dead end. He almost ran into it, skidding to a stop at the last possible second.

“What the fuck...?” He backed up a couple of paces, then recalled a place not far back where the tunnel had forked. “Wrong way,” he muttered, and turned around. As he approached the fork he could hear motion in the hallway he'd first come from, and he put on a burst of speed. He reached the fork and entered the second tunnel just in time for the creatures to see him down the hall. A cry went up and they renewed their pursuit of him, their shouts echoing around the halls.

7

Justice

Janet and Vera had run right into a room and come to a dead stop. They both stood facing the word JUSTICE that ran across the wall. Vera turned around and discovered that their door was gone.

“Where the fuck...?” she said angrily, but Janet was looking at her, not seeming to care about the disappearing door.

“How did you know his name was Sam?” Janet asked again. For a reason she could not identify yet, this was important. This was part of it. She needed to know now.

Vera stared at her, exasperated. “What are you talking about?”

“Shiv,” Janet said doggedly. “You called him Sam earlier. How did you know his first name?”

Vera threw up her hands. “Rhylos. He called him - “
“No. He called him Shiv and Mr. Mackenzie. I remember.”

“Well, he went to the college.”

“He was there for maybe a term, five years ago. You

knew every student personally? Stayed friends with Sam?"

Vera crossed her arms. "What are you saying?"

Snap, snap. More pieces were locking themselves into place in Janet's head as she stared at Vera, seeing for the first time the selfishness of the older woman, the shrewd eyes, the calculating behaviour masked by kindness.

"You run the drugs out of the college."

Vera's mouth twisted slowly as she gazed back at Janet, obviously gauging how much Janet knew.

"You have no proof of that."

"My partner was on the take. He told me about you. I didn't put it together until now."

"Chuck's a liar!" Vera said defiantly. "I never did anything of the sort." She saw Janet's expression, and caught herself. Janet waited.

"Let me guess." Vera said after a moment. "How did I know his name was Chuck?"

Janet nodded. "You killed my partner."

Vera shook her head vehemently. "You can't say that. It wasn't my fault."

"So whose was it then?"

"You could have prevented it," Vera said accusingly. Janet felt something cold in the bottom of her stomach when Vera said this. "Remember," the woman continued, "you were taking coin too."

Something Janet had been pushing down over and over was now trying to force its way back up into the forefront of her consciousness. She could not deny what Vera said. She could not deny it. She found her voice, which sounded high and tight: "I was supposed to stay out of things. No one was supposed to get killed." Which was true.

“Well,” Vera said coolly, “then you weren't doing your job, were you?”

No, I was not. Janet could not speak. I was not. Cops are not supposed to do what I did. Chuck is dead because of it. Because of me.

She turned away, unable to face Vera now. She was startled to see a man sitting in the corner, his face in his hands.

“Brian?” Janet moved towards him, relieved to see him alive. He did not look up. “Brian?” she said again.

“Are you all right?”

From behind her, Vera said nervously, “Janet, I don't think that's Brian.”

Shiv turned in a circle for the third time. The door was gone. He had followed the hall to the end, only to find this room whose floor said JUSTICE, and to be swallowed by it.

“It has to be a trick,” he said aloud, his voice bouncing around the empty room. He moved to the wall to run his fingers down it, the way he had been led to doors before. He could not concentrate. Something in the stillness around him made him believe that this time there was no door, hidden or otherwise. “Shit!” he said, just to break the silence.

“Yo, bro.”

Shiv recognized the voice at once, a rich, surprisingly deep voice for such a young man, a voice which always carried a trace of a smile. He turned slowly, a chill crawling up his arms and across his chest. Marcel stood within touching distance, his eyes distant, his face grave.

But there was the ghost of a smile there, too, and Shiv could not help breaking into a broad grin at the sight of his brother. For the moment it did not matter that Marcel looked through him with sightless, otherworldly eyes, that he moved strangely and smelled of something long dead and gone. For the moment, it was a beautiful thing to Shiv to stand beside his brother again.

Brian could see the inside of the room from the hallway, and he approached cautiously. Someone was sitting on the floor with her back to him, and she looked eerily familiar. He moved into the room softly to get a better look, and found himself holding his breath. Brian was looking upon his daughter. Suddenly she spoke into the darkness.

“Daddy? Is that you?” Her voice was soft and distinct, and he realized that his eyes were brimming with gratitude at hearing it again.

“Yes, sweetheart,” he whispered.

She looked up at him, her eyes opaque and distant, but her smile genuine. “Hi, Daddy,” she said, and sounded relieved.

The man had risen and stood facing Janet. Vera was keeping her distance several feet away, but to Janet she no longer existed. Janet could not take her eyes from Chuck, from the bullet entrance wound in his forehead. He could not quite look at her through his clouded eyes, and his mouth was grim. There were rusted rivulets of blood down the side of his face. She saw that he still had

his gun in his hand.

“I remember when they made you my partner.” His voice was gravelly, but still Chuck's voice.

“Good God, Chuck,” Janet said hoarsely.

From behind her, Vera said insistently, “Janet, that's not Chuck.” Janet did not hear her.

“My wife was so jealous. She didn't want you as my partner,” Chuck not-Chuck continued.

“I'm so sorry.” What else could she say?

“I told her that you were like a sister to me. She could see it, too. She believed that you would never hurt me because I convinced her. I convinced her that you never would.”

Janet wanted to touch him, hold the side of his head and wipe off the blood. “Chuck...”

“Janet, why did you do it?”

No, no, no. She could not bear the accusation coming from him. Tears spilled down her cheeks and she did not lift her hands to wipe them away. “Oh my God, Chuck—”

“You killed me, Janet.”

“You've got it all wrong!” she protested weakly. He took a step towards her, then another. Janet could smell something familiar in the air around him. Death. He smelled like death. Which to her, at that moment, made perfect sense; after all, he was dead.

She was vaguely aware of Vera somewhere behind her, repeating,

“Janet! That's not Chuck!” Vera's voice irritated her.

“Stay back,” she murmured to the older woman, but did not take her eyes off Chuck.

“You signaled for me to shoot. You knew about the girl.”

Did I signal? I must have.

Unwillingly, she was there again, crouched down beside the car...

...signaling to Chuck...

...who popped up...

“FREEZE! POLICE!”

Who had shouted? Chuck's voice, echoing around the cars. But there was a girl there, right in his sights, a young girl who could have been safe if she had been standing three feet to the right or left of where she was. I didn't know she was there. No planning on my part could have put her more precisely in harm's way than she was. Only fate could have engineered such awful timing, Chuck - who saw the girl, and hesitated just long enough for two of the punks to grab her to use as a shield. Janet saw them pull their weapons and fire. She had not seen Marcel duck down behind a car. She aimed carefully and shot one of the punks in the head. He was the one holding Nicole, and when he suddenly released his hold on her, she stumbled forward

- just as Chuck pulled the trigger -

- and realized what he'd done, and froze -

- just long enough for the other punk to squeeze off a shot -

and hit him in the head.

Janet saw Nicole thrown back with the force of Chuck's bullet, and less than a second later she saw Chuck's head snap to the side, his eyes wide. She tracked the shooter and took him out just as he brought his gun to bear on her. Center mass, fast and clean.

Very quiet now. No more gunfire and no more voices. Her ears rang and her nose and mouth were filled with the tang of burnt gunpowder. She stood up and walked slowly over to where the punks had stood, kicking their

guns away. She stayed in a Weaver stance, her gun trained on the bodies as she moved. She released her left hand from its supporting grip to reach down and check for pulses.

A voice behind her. "I'm not - "

She whirled around to see the kid, the nervous one, right behind her and reaching into his pocket. She shot him without hesitating. His knees gave way and he crumpled to the ground, the hand in his pocket coming free and flopping on the concrete. His fingers unfurled and released an inhaler, which rolled gently to a stop at Janet's feet. She stared at it, willing it to change into a gun, a knife, a grenade...anything that would justify what she had just done.

She knelt by the boy, who looked up at her in confusion, his eyes glazing.

"I..." he started.

"Don't talk," she said, quickly loosening the collar of his coat. He stared at her, his mouth working.

"I don't..."

His breath was a syrupy rasp.

"Hold on," she pleaded. "I'll call an ambulance. Hold on."

He gazed up at her, and as she spoke she saw his eyes lose their light. The furrowed brow relaxed, and the quizzical look faded as his face became smooth and slack. She sat back, her face wet with tears. She had taken it away, and fate would not allow her to give it back, even at the last minute.

She crawled over to Chuck on her hands and knees. He lay sprawled on his back, his head turned. There was a clean entrance wound on the left side of his head, near his eye. Somehow his face had retained a trace of

expression, his eyes and mouth half-open in something like surprise. As though in death, he had understood, but not believed that she had betrayed him.

You weren't supposed to die, Chuck. Nobody was. You were supposed to be dirty, and I was supposed to catch you. I was not supposed to be the only one left.

“You were on the take,” Janet said, startling herself back into the room with JUSTICE and Vera and Chuck not-Chuck.

“You were my partner,” he answered. “Partners stick by each other. How are we supposed to do the job if we aren't honest?”

“You were crooked!” she protested, nearly blinded by tears.

“You should have stood by me,” he said, unmoved. He lifted the gun and pointed it at her. She couldn't move, couldn't take her eyes off him. “For Christ's sake,” she pleaded, “you were going to have me killed! I heard the phone tapes, I heard it all!”

Chuck was shaking his head. “You knew I was legit.”

“You were conspiring to take me out because I wouldn't crack!” Again, she found herself praying that her choice had been justified. But Chuck was not letting her go.

“It was you who was paid off by Smith,” he said gravely.

“We never found Smith! I was lead to believe that you were the leak. We had a list of rogue cops and you were on it!” Even to her ears, it sounded weak.

“How much?” he asked coldly.

“Christ, Chuck, you don't get it! They told me you

were crooked! They used us against each other!”

“You never believed it yourself,” he said sadly. “The money made you turn.”

“You were rogue!” she insisted. It was all she had, all the reason she had for killing her best friend. She badly needed him to understand.

Chuck shook his head again. “You were my little sister. Smith got to you.” He cocked the hammer on the gun. Janet looked at it, suddenly wondering if Chuck not-Chuck could really shoot her, or if the bullets were just part of the fabric of this bizarre reconstruction. She decided that she did not want to take a chance. “Don't make me kill you,” she warned him, and then realized that it was hardly a threat to someone already dead. Chuck was certainly not worried.

“You should pay,” he said calmly.

“Chuck -“ Janet began, and saw the slight twitch of his finger on the trigger. She ducked and staked him in the shoulder as he fired. He twisted on the spot and fell, the gun flying out of his hand. Janet jumped back as the man on the ground lifted his head.

Rhylos.

He rose quickly, scowling, and yanked the stake from his shoulder. “Not yet,” he growled, and threw it to the floor. Janet dove for the gun and brought it up lightning-fast - pointed at nothing. Rhylos was gone.

She picked up the stake and turned to tell Vera that she had been right. But Vera now lay on the floor, a wound in her chest, her breath the liquid rattle sound that had haunted Janet for months.

Shiv took a big step back, nearly falling because of his

rubbery knees. Marcel did not seem to notice. He stood calmly in front of Shiv, gazing through him. "Where you been, man?" he asked.

"Marcel?" Shiv said hoarsely.

"You haven't been around," his brother said. "I've been practicing my jumpshot."

Shiv was dizzy, disoriented. His eyes were streaming.

"Marcel?" he asked again. If Marcel answered him, then he was not where he had thought he was, or perhaps even when he thought he was. He was drifting back to the place and time when he had last spoken to Marcel. Only there and then would this make any sense.

Marcel was grinning. "I bet I could beat you now. Maybe I'll get into school on a b-ball scholarship."

Shiv rolled his eyes. "Don't be whack." He didn't really want to talk about Marcel getting into college right now, but it was all that Marcel thought about.

"How long, man?" he asked Shiv eagerly. "How long before we have enough dough to get me in?"

"I just got one more job to do," Shiv said uneasily. "I'll have enough then. It's a big score. Some lawyer dude."

"That's great, man! That's great!" Marcel's enthusiasm made Shiv feel lousy for what he was about to tell him to do. There was no other way. Shiv didn't trust anyone else, and he wouldn't get out of jail soon enough to do it himself. And it was time for Marcel to accept some of the responsibility that Shiv carried. Find out how the world really worked.

"Marcel, man, I need you to make the drop." Marcel's grin faded. "Is that why you want me to go to school? So I can make drops for you?"

Shit, what a crazy idea. "Naw, man, I just can't make

it. Can't get out of here yet. I need you to do it for me.”

Marcel was anxious. “Sam, I've never done this before. I could fuck it up.”

“It's easy, man. I trust you. You'll be cool. There's no other way, man.” Shiv knew that Marcel knew that this was his only shot. No other way to get the cash. Marcel was silent for a minute, staring at nothing. Then he looked at Shiv.

“Tell me again what it's like.”

“A drop?”

Marcel broke into his sparkling smile. “No, man! The chicks at the university!”

Shiv was relieved. “The chicks are fucking strokin'. And they love the black cock, man.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, with feeling.

“That's what I'm talkin' about!” Marcel said, satisfied. Shiv smiled to himself. Hey, whatever Marcel needed for motivation. He looked up, and Marcel had disappeared.

“I don't remember.” The voice came from behind him, causing Shiv nearly to leap out of his scrubs. “Did I ever give you the cash?”

Shiv turned to face him. “No.”

“Did I lose it?” Marcel was very worried. “I'm sorry, Sam. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lose it.” He sounded younger than his years, and it pained Shiv to hear the need for his approval in his brother's voice. He sighed.

“It's not like losing my baseball glove, Marcel. People were after my ass. I had to take care of business.”

“I'm sorry,” Marcel said sorrowfully.

“I know, man.”

His brother shivered. “I'm cold, Sam. I'm cold.”

“You're dead, Marcel.” And even as he pointed this

out, Shiv could feel the room around him begin to solidify again.

“I know,” Marcel said forlornly. “Shiv, you said nothing would happen to me.”

It hurt so much to hear. “How could I know?” Shiv said, knowing that he had known, and hating himself for it. He could see the tears on Marcel's face gleaming in the low light.

“I just wanted to make buildings,” his brother said. Shiv looked at him and realized that Marcel had been hardly more than a boy, one who had put his childlike trust in Shiv. He could not say anything now; nothing could change what had happened or make it right.

He put his hand on Marcel's shoulder. Marcel turned his head to look at Shiv's hand, and bared his teeth. He reached out and grabbed Shiv's arms in a ferocious vise-like grip, then threw him to the ground. Shiv had been caught completely off-guard, and had no time to regroup before Marcel threw himself down on Shiv and sank his teeth into Shiv's arm. The pain forced Shiv to react, flinging the bitten arm out and sending Marcel to the floor. Shiv gave him a kick for good measure. Marcel clutched his ribs and began to sob, curling into a ball. Shiv immediately felt terrible. Forgetting everything, including the bite on his arm, he reached down to touch his brother and reassure him.

Marcel immediately seized Shiv's outstretched limb and tried to pull him over, baring his fangs in preparation. Shiv saw the eyes that were no longer his brother's eyes, and was enraged. He yanked the Marcel-creature to his feet and struck him hard across the side of the head, feeling bone crack under his fist. The creature fell to the floor and did not move. It lay splayed on its

front, still and silent. Shiv stared at it, wondering how he could possibly have been fooled. The creature looked like Marcel, but that was all. It was unquestionably not him.

Mitch had been running from the smelly undead for what seemed like hours, made longer by the scalding pain of the blisters on his feet. What was the logic, he wondered as he ran, of taking his clothes and replacing them with something more comfortable, but not his shoes? He put it down to the perversity of his host, imagining Rhylos somewhere viewing Mitch's bleeding feet on a monitor and chuckling to himself. Asshole.

The hallways did not seem to end. Mitch felt like he had become trapped in a Gordian knot rather than a maze, a tangle of hallways from which there was simply no way out. He had not seen a door in ages, and the monotony of his surroundings was beginning to wear on him almost as much as the running.

He found himself in a stretch of hallway that curved gently to the right, making the door invisible until he was nearly upon it. He whooped when he saw it, hardly slowing as he turned the handle and burst into the room. His momentum caught up with him, and he tripped and pitched forward head-first, knocking the wind out of himself as he hit the floor. He lay on his belly, gasping like a goldfish for a long moment before his diaphragm reset itself and let his lungs take a breath. Lifting his head, he saw that he was sprawled next to the word JUSTICE, lettered large and careless across the floor. Mitch also noticed that he seemed to have come in the only door. He groaned and rolled over.

The fetid smell hit him even before he realized what he was seeing. A large assembly of creatures had followed him into the room, and now surrounded him. They were either grinning or baring their teeth - he couldn't tell the difference. He figured that either way, they were probably pretty pleased about how the chase was turning out for them. Some achievement, he thought sourly. Catching the out-of-shape lawyer who was already wearing what felt like bear traps on his feet. He guessed that there were about twelve of them, too, which struck him as monumentally unfair. Justice, my ass.

Well, if you can't lick 'em (bite 'em?)...
He smiled what he hoped was a winning smile.

“Any chance we could talk about this?”

Brian watched his daughter, savouring the sweetness of seeing her and hearing her voice again. He remembered standing in her doorway the day that she left for the college, wondering what it would be like not to see her every day. It wasn't far, but even so he was not sure he could bear it. She was such a light, his daughter. She deserved the risks he had taken, the sacrifices he had made. What greater good was there than to put aside one's own desires for one's child? Perhaps he would no longer feel quite so comfortable with his conscience, but it was a small price to pay. Nicole deserved this opportunity, an opportunity only he could have secured for her. He had done the right thing.

“Daddy?” Nicole said, interrupting his reverie. “The police were here.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Brian said briskly. “Have you

finished packing? We're running late."

"What did they want?"

"Don't forget your alarm," he said, pointing to it.

"You're not going to have your mother to wake you up every morning at college."

Nicole was gazing at him, her gentle brown eyes not letting him go. He could see that she was deeply troubled.

"Daddy," she repeated firmly, "what did they want?"

He hesitated. "They had to ask me a few questions."

"What about?"

"Nothing. Bring an extra pillow," he instructed, handing it to her. She did not move, her eyes still fixed on him.

"They said that you were seen with Vito Sabatino."

He looked at her sharply. "Who is 'they'? Who told you that?"

"It's not important. He's a gangster, Daddy," she said reproachfully.

"Who told you that?" Brian asked again, more forcefully.

"The police," Nicole admitted reluctantly. Brian looked her square in the eye. "He's a friend from college, honey. Do you hear me?" he said, sounding harsher than he wanted to. She nodded unhappily, looking down at her open bag. Then she lifted her head again.

"Daddy?"

He softened his tone. "Yes, sweetheart?"

"You didn't tell me how I got into this school with my grades."

Brian sighed. He had been dreading this question. He still wasn't sure what to tell her.

"Well, honey, we managed to pull a few strings."

“We?” She was alarmed. “You mean Vito Sabatino?”

“I told you, he's a friend!” Brian said irritably. Nicole regarded him gravely. “You love me, Daddy, don't you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Promise me you'll stop.”

“Stop what? I'm not doing anything wrong, Nicole!”

“So how did I get in?” she asked insistently.

For God's sake, why did she care so much? “Fine. Vito's an alumnus, and he helped persuade the admission committee that you deserved a spot.”

“You just said he was a college friend! You didn't go to my college!”

“Nicole,” Brian said, trying to keep his tone even,

“Vito and I knew each other when I was in college, okay? Where is this coming from? We didn't do anything wrong, honey. I swear.” Indeed, he thought, he had not. No one had got hurt, and his baby had a chance at college. Nicole examined his face, but did not see any guilt or remorse there.

“Okay,” she said finally. “Can I call you if I have trouble with my homework?”

He smiled at her, a proud, happy smile. “Of course you can, sweetie.”

She tilted her head to the side and smiled back. “I love you, Daddy.”

“Nicole?”

“Yeah, Daddy?”

“I love you too. With all my heart.”

She opened her arms to hug him. Without hesitation he put down the cross that had cramped his hands for so long. She stepped towards him and he saw that the pallor of her skin was ghastly and her hair hung in limp, dirt-caked strands. Her shirt was spattered with blood long

dried brown. He reached for her and embraced her, inhaling her sickly sweet odour and vowing to himself that he would hold her for the rest of his life.

Janet had knelt beside Vera and taken her hand. She had no doubt that she could do nothing for her now, but she didn't want Vera to be afraid. She lifted the older woman's head and rested it on her knees, hoping that Vera's breathing might ease a bit. Vera's eyes were glassy and every breath was clearly an effort. She looked up at Janet, strangely calm.

"So you know," she said hoarsely.

Janet exhaled. "Fuck, Vera. You were Smith."

"No. Someone higher." Janet didn't believe her, but it didn't matter now anyway.

"Vera, I have to know. Was Chuck -"

"No."

"So...the proof...the tapes were forged?" Janet asked weakly.

"Yeah," Vera sighed. Her eyes were half-closed.

"I set up an innocent man."

"You took the money. You didn't believe in him."

Janet felt a terrible sadness descending on her. "I guess I didn't."

Vera's face twisted with pain for a moment, and then it seemed to pass.

"This is why I'm here," Janet said. "Not that I didn't know the truth. I didn't believe what I knew was true."

"I never thought you were a bad cop," Vera whispered.

"Janet...you know...all that crap earlier...about...a disease?"

"Yeah."

Vera summoned air with tremendous effort.

“Was...wrong.” Janet leaned down closer. Vera breathed through blue-grey lips,
“Vampires are real.”

Shiv stood over the body of what he had thought was Marcel. This imposter had been the cruellest of tricks, the most hurtful of mirages. It enraged him to think that anyone would fool him like this.

“I don't know what we did to God to upset him like this,” he muttered. He put his boot on the base of the thing's neck, and placed his hands on either side of its jaw. Then he turned his head. He knew it was not Marcel, but was still unnerved by the image.

“I love you, bro,” he whispered, hoping that the real Marcel could still hear him somehow. He grasped the jaw firmly and gave the creature's head an abrupt twist. The crack of its neck reverberated in his hands. Shiv let the head go and stepped back, feeling sick and sad. Now the body on the floor was not Marcel at all, but just one of the pathetic monsters that had pursued them.

Shiv looked away from it, and his eyes came to rest on the door. The door? Maddeningly, it was back. Shiv forgot about the thing on the ground and ran for it before he lost his chance.

Brian gathered his daughter to him and closed his eyes. She wrapped her arms tightly around him and pressed her face against his shoulder.

“I want you to be proud of me, Daddy,” she said, her

voice muffled.

“I am. I’m very proud of you, sweetie,” Brian said, and meant it with all his heart.

“Good,” she breathed in his ear, and fastened her mouth on his neck. He did not move, except to flinch when her teeth slid into his flesh. She began to drink deep and he surrendered to her, allowing her to take his blood freely. Brian remained still even as her feeding became more and more voracious and she tightened her grip, until finally her frenzy broke his neck. The creature that had been Nicole to Brian had to follow his body to the floor in order to drain it completely of blood.

For perhaps the first time in his life, Mitchell had nothing more to say. He had exhausted all of his best comedic material, then offered the things money, and then moved on to threats. He was particularly good at threats. Still they pressed in on him, grinning. Finally he had resorted to name-calling, because it made him feel better. Now his throat was dried up, along with his tactics. He couldn't talk his way out of this, and God knew he couldn't fight his way out. Worst of all, he had a terrible feeling that there might not be anyone left to rescue him. He had quite literally backed himself into a corner.

“Fuck,” he said hoarsely, as they took one step after another, advancing slowly and deliberately towards him. The smell was incredible.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...”

One of them reached out with its filthy hand and touched his face, and Mitch finally lost it completely. He screamed with absolutely everything he had. It felt good.

Another one moved in and touched him, and he closed his eyes and screamed again. If they were going to eat him, he was at least going to give the motherfuckers the worst migraines of their miserable lives while they did it.

Janet still sat with Vera's head on her lap. At some point Vera had stopped breathing, but Janet had been so lost in her own misery that she had not noticed right away. Now Janet's search for a pulse yielded nothing. The older woman's eyes remained half-open, her mouth slack as though she might have had one more thing to tell her. Finally Janet reached over with her free hand and gently closed the unseeing eyes, but continued to hold her. She had not known Vera, had not trusted her, and had been dismayed at the extent of her dishonesty. And yet she was glad that the woman had not died alone. She had found holding and talking to Vera in her last minutes a strangely comforting experience. It was what she would want. Perhaps that was the crux of it; the seven virtues had little resonance for Janet, but she was aware that there were moments when she had done for someone just because it was what she would want. And there were a lot more moments where she hadn't thought about that at all.

Somewhere, she realized, she had lost sight of everything that had made her a cop in the first place. She no longer thought it ridiculous that she would be grouped in here with drug dealers and crooked lawyers. Hadn't she acted selfishly, without principle? Hadn't she taken money for betraying someone, lying to herself all the while about what she was doing? Everyone here had knowingly done something wrong, something that had hurt others. And

everyone had also suffered because of someone else's misdeeds. She was no exception.

And perhaps that was justice. Being forced to face the gap between what she had believed herself to be, and what her actions told her she really was. Suffering as she had caused others to suffer. Being brought low, and discovering that she belonged there.

What could she do now? Nothing, it seemed, except feel sorry. And she was, profoundly, humbly, unreservedly sorry for all of it. It was not enough merely to feel bad that her actions had led to the death of others. Sitting here in this prison, alone now that Vera was gone, Janet talked to each person in turn and apologized. To Nicole, for creating a web that snared her too. To Brian, for Nicole. To Marcel, for looking at him but not seeing what she should have seen in time. To Shiv, for Marcel. And most of all, to Chuck and everyone who loved him, for not believing what she knew was true of him: he had been an honest man, and he had trusted her more than she deserved.

After a long while, she opened her eyes and lifted Vera's body gently onto the floor. She stood up, stretched and flexed to see where she might have been hurt. All things considered, she was okay. More importantly, she was ready. A strange peace had settled over her, and for the first time since her imprisonment, she felt like she might be able to handle whatever came at her.

Janet's new-found peace was interrupted by a scream from someone not far away. It was immediately followed by a second scream from the same person. This was a good sign because it sounded like Mitchell and it meant that the first scream hadn't ended with something biting off his head, however tempted the something might have

been to do it.

Janet picked up the gun and went to the doorway, then paused to glance back at Vera's body.

Sorry, Vera. At least your problems are over now.

She began to run in the direction of the scream.

Mitch had crammed himself as far into the corner as he could go, trying to curl into a ball to give the things a smaller target. After screaming twice, he was startled to see that the demons seemed to have halted their advance. He was immensely relieved, because his throat hurt like hell and he didn't think he could manage a third one.

"Mr. Jobidan."

Rhylos. Out of the frying pan... "Fuck," Mitch muttered.

Rhylos made his way through the creatures and stepped up to Mitch. Mitch was taller, but it didn't matter. Rhylos was looking at him like Mitch was some sort of curious insect that he might like to squash, or study. He just hadn't decided which yet.

"You've been a very bad man, Mr. Jobidan. Rigging the court system," Rhylos began pleasantly.

Ah, Mitch thought. I get it. Time for charges, verdict, sentencing, and execution. Super. "I never made the law," he said. Which was true.

Rhylos's eyebrows went up. "You've freed confessed criminals."

"I never did anything illegal," Mitch said, hoping this was true too.

Rhylos began ticking off on his fingers. "Jury tampering, withholding evidence, witness bribing..."

"Oh, *that* illegal."

Rhylos smiled grimly. “You are an unusual one, Mr. Jobidan. At this point most people find God.”

“Given my current situation, I don't think he's listening.”

Rhylos didn't seem pleased with Mitch's attempts at levity. “I'm going to offer you a chance at life, Mr. Jobidan.”

“Where are the others?” Mitch asked suddenly. Rhylos didn't seem to hear him. “Would you like to leave this place, never to return?” he asked.

Mitch was getting a bad feeling about where this was going. “Are they still alive?” Again, Rhylos ignored the question.

“I offered this deal to Mr. Church, and I'm offering it to you now.”

“Because we're lawyers?”

“You can leave the maze right now,” Rhylos said, “but you become my personal assistant. You investigate people, and you find a connection.” He smiled his pointy smile. “Lawyers are good at this, oui?”

Something began to dawn on Mitchell. “What exactly are you asking me to do?” He asked suspiciously.

“When you find a connection, you engineer an...event.”

“Goddamn,” Mitch said, amazed. “He was right. Everything was a set-up.” He was thinking hard. “You know, Shiv recognized your guy, Peter. Said he knew him from somewhere.” Mitch stood up. “The drug deal, the admission, the bribe to the committee...”

“...paying off the cop...” Rhylos added helpfully.

“They were decent people, you know. You manipulated them.”

Rhylos shrugged. “It's all about autonomy, Mr.

Jobidan. They all had a choice. No one had to take a bribe. No one had to sell a drug.”

“You make decent people criminals.”

Rhylos shook his head. “I only give them the opportunity. It's up to them to take it.”

“So that's how you determine who you choose.”

“That is correct.”

Mitch was impressed. This was big-picture thinking. Maybe not something even he would do, but still. The scale of it was something.

“And now you want me to find them,” he said. “I've never set up innocent people, you know. I've just freed some bad ones.”

“No one is innocent.”

Mitch looked at Rhylos carefully, trying to decide whether or not he agreed with that last point. He wasn't sure about this offer. What worried him most was that he usually had some sort of back door for contracts that he grew tired of, some way of sneaking out without anyone noticing until it was too late. He suspected that there would be no back door on this one, ever.

“What if I say no?”

Rhylos tilted his head and looked at Mitch. “Mr. Church eventually said no, and so we hunted him. He was a smart man, my assistant for nearly five years, arranging and executing four different games, including yours. All that time, he was gathering information on how he could destroy me. When enough people had died, and he felt that he had enough information, he turned on me.”

“What happened?” Mitch asked, but was pretty sure he knew the answer. Rhylos leaned in so that his face was inches from Mitchell's.

“With his knowledge, Mr. Church lasted forty-six minutes longer than the average contestant.”

He stepped back. “I need someone I can trust. I think I can trust you, Mr. Jobidan.”

“Why me?”

“You have the same contempt for society that I do.”

“That's true,” Mitch admitted.

“Take my hand,” Rhylos said, extending his many-ringed hand to Mitch. Mitch looked at it, and paused.

“Will I be fed upon?”

Rhylos looked shocked. “Mr. Jobidan, please! You're a lawyer! Even we vampires have standards.” Then he smiled at his own joke.

“Yeah, you're a real card,” Mitch said sourly.

“Take my hand,” Rhylos ordered again. Mitch sighed.

“All right. I'll do it.” He took Rhylos's hand, unsure of whether to shake it, or just stand there. “I'm free of this game, now, correct?”

“Yes. You are free of the game. No one will harm you.”

Mitchell let go of Rhylos's hand. “What about the others?”

“I'm afraid they don't have what I need,” Rhylos said regretfully.

“So they're stuck in here.

“If they are still alive, yes.”

Mitch felt a brief prick of his conscience. He didn't like it, and shrugged it off. He assumed a businesslike stance and put on his *Important And Successful Lawyer* face.

“All right, I'm ready. Let's go.”

Rhylos waved his hand and the creatures silently fell in behind him and Mitch. At the exit, Mitch was startled

to see Janet step into the doorway. She was filthy, with a gun in one hand and a stake in the other. She stared at Mitch, seething.

“Janet?” He tried to sound pleased to see her.

“Um...how much did you hear?”

In response, she lifted the gun and shot him cleanly in the centre of the forehead. He hadn't even hit the floor before she brought the gun around to bear on Rhylos. His creatures had come to life around him, slaving and snarling at Janet. Rhylos smiled at Janet and looked not at all worried.

“Let's see if immortality can stop a bullet,” she said through her teeth.

“You can't win this way,” Rhylos replied placidly.

Janet shot him point-blank in the chest. The impact sent him back a step or two, but that was all. Infuriated, she shot him again. His body seemed to absorb the bullet, with no blood or damage. He looked down at his chest, then up at her.

“You see?” he said, with a paternal smile.

Janet turned and ran. Rhylos patiently counted un, deux, trois...to quinze in his head, then snapped his fingers. Snarling, the creatures set off down the hall after her.

8

Fortitude

Janet ran down the hall, frantically searching for a door, an exit, any damn thing that might lead somewhere. She did not know exactly why she had shot Mitch, but she wasn't sorry she'd done it. Allowing game after game to go on with different people, all of whom had been set up to commit crimes? Not on her watch. It was funny, after the agonies she'd been through over the people that she'd hurt. But Mitch...well, there were assholes, and there were assholes. Many people acted like assholes because they were frightened, or embarrassed, or something terrible had happened to them and they no longer knew how to relate. Mitch, as far as she could tell, had been just an asshole, and a dangerously self-serving one. If Janet couldn't stop Rhylos, she'd be damned if she would let someone else help him. Especially someone like Mitch. And anyway, she was already going to Hell. She rounded a curve in the passage and came upon a door which she easily pushed open. She stopped short at the word FORTITUDE. How many had she seen now?

No time to count. There were two other doors to the room. One of them was locked. She tried the other, and came face to face with Shiv entering from the other side.

“Shit!” he exclaimed, startled.

“Fuck,” Janet muttered. If he'd come from there, it wasn't a way out. Shiv stared at the gun in her hand.

“Where did you get that?”

“It was all a setup,” she said, trying to explain as quickly as she could. “Right from the beginning. Your brother, the deal, me, everything. We weren't meant to make it back.”

“Goddamn,” he said, and she knew that he believed her.

“Shiv, we have to get out of here.” Janet extended her hand to him and he gripped it. Truce.

She turned and shot the lock out of the other door, then gave it a kick.

“Let's go,” she said, and Shiv followed.

After less than a minute of running, Shiv and Janet found themselves at a dead end.

“Shit. Back to the room!” she yelled, and she and Shiv turned around and ran right back from where they'd come. As they re-entered FORTITUDE, Shiv halted and turned to her, his face tormented.

“Shit. We're missing a room. We can't be at the end - we're missing a room!”

Janet had realized it almost as he spoke. “Hope,” she said. “There is no hope.”

They looked at each other for a long moment. Those words spoken aloud forced them to confront a possibility they had each refused to consider.

“No one lives,” Janet said. Shiv nodded slowly. Nothing else made sense.

So...

Janet had never been indecisive in her life, and she had no intention of changing now. Resolutely, she extended the butt of the revolver to Shiv. “Here. You take it. There's one bullet left. If it comes down to one of us not escaping...”

Shiv was not a man to say no to the offer of a gun.

“I know,” he said, and took it. She turned away from him, and he from her so that they stood back to back. Janet had already decided that Shiv was going to do what he was going to do, and she was not going to stop him. She heard the scrape of his shoe as he turned, and felt a breath of air as his arm came up. She could feel the tip of the barrel of the gun touching her hair at the back of her skull, and she closed her eyes.

Shiv was hesitating, something he did not often do. He had dreamed of this moment long before he met Janet, and meeting her had not changed his desire to hurt someone for Marcel. But he knew some things now that he hadn't before. As much as he wanted to blame Janet completely, he couldn't. And Shiv wasn't sure that shooting her was smart. She was a fast thinker, and good in a fight. If one of them could escape, why not two? Keeping her alive might even double their odds of survival.

The decision was made for him when he saw the first demon burst in, and the room was suddenly alive with the creatures. They did not hang back, and swarmed around them like smelly piranhas. Shiv and Janet didn't

hesitate either. Janet began staking everyone within arm's length, and Shiv was cracking skulls with the butt of the gun. The demons' enthusiastic participation was costing them, and the floor was already very bloody. One of them caught her arm and pulled itself up to sink its teeth into her shoulder before she managed to drive her stake into its sternum. The bite spread fire down her arm and across her chest, and she became aware of the terrible weight of her exhaustion. She looked over at Shiv, who had been fighting with frightening efficiency. He dispatched the last demon in the room with gun and stake, and stopped for breath. Already they could hear the snarls and footfalls in the hall that heralded the arrival of a second wave.

“That has to be the way out!” Shiv gestured to the door that led to the dead end. “Let's go!” He grabbed Janet's arm, but she didn't move.

“No. I'll stay and hold them off. You go.”
Shiv blinked. “No, I'll - “

“Just go!” she ordered him. Her mouth was set in a thin line. He could tell that there was nothing to say to her; he knew what she was doing, and why. He nodded once to her, and took off down the hallway.

Janet took a deep breath, and rolled her head to loosen her neck. She renewed her grip on her stake as the first creature appeared in the doorway. It growled and ran right for her, where she met it with a solid kick to its ribs. The next one was right behind it. And the next one.

Shiv came upon the dead end again, and at once approached and put his fingers to the wall. It was very difficult to focus just on the ends of his fingers when he

was sweating and breathing heavily, but he forced himself. He began sliding his hands across the wall, praying and praying.

The creatures were coming so fast now...Janet could not keep up. She found herself backed up against the wall in order to minimize the number of directions that the attacks could come from, but she knew, too, that she was trapped here. The things were clumsy and not quick, but there were so many more of them now, and they were relentless. She felt a terrible pain in her leg and saw that one of them had fastened itself to her calf and was drinking greedily. Horrified, she leaned down to stake it and another one jumped on her back. It was the opening the others needed. They pushed in and got hold of her arms, some of them already attaching themselves to her skin like lampreys. In a moment they had pinned her completely, and her stake was gone. Lightheaded, exhausted and in agony, Janet realized that she was finally truly helpless, with no one to rescue the rescuer. A creature found its place at her shoulder and bit hard into the muscle by her neck, causing her to scream involuntarily. Then she could not stop screaming, until she was too weak to scream any more and the black water closed over her head.

9

Charity

Janet's screams shattered Shiv's concentration and he could not continue running his hands along the wall. It had proved fruitless anyway; he believed that there were no seams or secret levers to be found. He began pounding his fists against the wall in frustration, railing against all of it: the confinement, the fear, the futility, and the guilt. And most of all, this fucking dead end. His fists struck the wall over and over with very satisfying thuds, and he could see shallow depressions beginning to form in the plaster where he hit particularly hard. He threw in a kick for good measure, and it landed with a different sound, a much more hollow one.

Shiv paused, then kicked again and produced the same hollow tone. He leaned down and gave the spot a good whack with his fist. Same tone, a flatter, emptier sound than his other punches. Nearby he could hear snarls and groans as the demons finished with Janet and began to sniff around for the one that got away. Time to think quickly. Shiv picked up his stake and drove it into the

hollow point on the wall as hard as he could. The wall buckled around the point of the stake, and another sharp blow formed a hole. Shiv peered through it, but could see nothing clearly. However, there was definitely light coming from the other side, and something there besides more wall. He began to create a larger hole, repeatedly pounding the edges of the one he'd created to widen it further and further.

Down at the end of the hall, the demons spotted him and began to lope towards him. After a quick glance over his shoulder at them, Shiv pounded at the wall furiously until there was a hole that he thought he could fit through. Poking his head through to the other side, he saw that he'd found a room much like the others, but hidden. He put one arm through, then the other, and wiggled like crazy to fit his shoulders in. He could hear the creatures almost upon him, and briefly debated pulling back and standing up to face them rather than leaving his legs and hind end undefended. No, he decided. He would get through this goddamned wall if it meant leaving them a foot to chew on.

Suddenly he realized that he'd let the gun drop out of his hand on the other side. Using his arms, he braced himself against the floor and twisted his torso, hips and legs through the whole. When he leaned back to get the gun, several scrawny, filthy arms shot through the hole and tried to grab him. The things were furious, pounding on the wall and snarling through the hole, but they did not try to get in. Shiv decided to give up on the gun for the time being.

He sat up and leaned back against the other wall, wiping at his forehead with the back of his hand. Looking up, he saw another word written across the

opposite wall with the same sprawling hand as the others: CHARITY.

CHARITY. He counted the rooms on his fingers: six. Assuming that there truly was no HOPE, there should be six. So this was the last one.

“I did it,” he said wonderingly to himself.

There was one door, and it had to lead outside. The door to freedom. He got up and went over to it to rattle the handle. Locked, of course. Shiv thought about the gun on the other side of the hole, and how Janet had shot the lock out. He went back over to the hole and crouched down to peer through it. The gun was still there in plain view, surrounded by the things. They appeared to be resting, hunkered down and quiet as though waiting for something. Shiv did not care to think about what that might be.

As he stood up from his crouched position, he heard a familiar voice.

“The game isn't over yet, you know.” Rhylos was standing in between Shiv and his intended exit. Rhylos's lips were curled in a smile, but he did not look amused. Shiv gripped his stake.

“I finished your damn game. Let me go.”

“I'm impressed, Mr. Mackenzie,” Rhylos said, as if Shiv hadn't spoken.

“Let me go.”

Rhylos shook his head. “Not just yet.”

“Why not?”

“I was convinced that there were no decent human beings left on this planet,” Rhylos began. Here we go, Shiv thought wearily. Free me, kill me, whatever, motherfucker. Just spare me the lecture. “That society had become so corrupted that even those who believed

they were decent could be corrupted as easily as the most blatant criminal.”

Shiv shrugged. “So you don't like people. Can't say I'm too fond of vampires.”

“When I was made a vampire three hundred years ago, I thought I could take the power and try to do something good with it.”

“You chose this?”

“I did. We were at war. The decent people of France were losing out to a corrupt government. With this power, I knew I could certainly turn the war and win.” Shiv snorted. “Too bad the decent people became corrupt.”

“You know your history,” Rhylos said approvingly.

“I know people.”

“I originally created this game to prove to myself that decent, incorruptible people still existed. I believed that in the face of extreme adversity, they would follow the seven heavenly virtues and become victorious.”

“All those people you killed?”

Rhylos waved dismissively.

“Mortal lives are fleeting. I did them a favour.”

“So...did you find any 'decent people'?” Shiv's voice was heavy with sarcasm, but Rhylos did not seem to hear it. He sighed heavily.

“No. Everyone we set out to corrupt allowed themselves to be turned. In the game, no one has understood the virtues. They have only known how to fight a little, then flee like rats. Once it amused me, but now...” he shrugged.

“Now nothing does. The person I once looked for does not exist, and I am tired.”

Shiv hoped that would work in his favour. He renewed

his grip on the stake.

“So what now? You could just let me go.”

“I told you that we are not done here. You have one more creature to kill.” He smiled, showing his pointed teeth.

“Well, you got one more human. And I'd say you have the advantage,” Shiv said tightly.

Again Rhylos shrugged. “This is your difficulty, not mine.”

“What if I refuse?”

Rhylos tsk'd. “Why choose death, when there is still life left?”

Shiv turned to face the vampire square on and grounded himself. He held his stake out at the ready, and something suddenly occurred to him.

“There's no money, is there?”

“No.”

Shiv was bitterly disappointed, but he did his best to hide it.

“Didn't think so,” he said, and lunged at Rhylos. The vampire evaded his blow easily and Shiv's stake plunged through air, connecting with nothing.

From his new position, Rhylos said sorrowfully,

“Have you learned nothing here?”

“You're fucking with me,” Shiv said angrily. He began to circle Rhylos slowly, hoping to throw him off somehow. Rhylos stood nearly motionless, watching Shiv calmly.

“Why are you here and the others are not?” he asked.

“What?” Shiv said irritably.

“You heard me. Why are you here, and the others are not?”

“Dunno.” Shiv kept moving.

“Could it have been my test of character?”

“Oh, right. Your heavenly virtues.”

“Yes, the virtues. Could it be that you are the only one in your group who embodied them?”

Shiv was behind Rhylos, and debated shoving the stick into his back, around where his heart was. He didn't know if that would work.

“Bullshit,” he said, and Rhylos nodded assent.

“Yes. Bullshit, as you say. You and I know that you no more embody the virtues than I am an archangel. But you are swift and vicious, and you know much about getting what you need. You were willing to do anything to survive, regardless of what happened to the others. And unlike the lawyer, you are not easily frightened. You exist only on your own cruel terms.”

“So what?”

“So, mon ami, I have realized that the world now belongs to those like you. I should have known from the beginning that it would be a person like Shiv who would win my game. Not a fair, decent, kind one. Only the most ruthless could survive in here, as is true of this world now.” Rhylos cocked his head to one side. “Still, I think you can realize at least one virtue.”

“Oh yeah?” Shiv said suspiciously. He could not quite figure out where any of this was going.

“Yes. You see, I made myself a promise. I decided that when this human arrived who was monster enough to finish my maze, it would be time for me to leave this plane.”

It sounded good to Shiv. “So leave.”

Rhylos laughed harshly. “Let me ask you, Mr. Mackenzie. What is the last virtue?”

“Charity.”

“Yes,” Rhylos said softly. “Charity.” Abruptly he reached for Shiv's stake. Startled, Shiv held on to it and thrust it into Rhylos's chest. The vampire staggered, clutching the stake, and fell to his knees. “Charity,” he gasped. “Give me my death!”

Shocked, Shiv stepped back. Rhylos slid to the ground writhing, his eyes rolling back in his head. His voice came out in a gurgle. “You missed my heart. You must turn the stake. Turn it towards my heart, and thrust!” Shiv reached out to do what he had longed to do since he came to this place. But he paused, thinking. The situation could perhaps be turned to his advantage.

He leaned down and spoke into Rhylos's contorted face.

“Where's my money?”

“There is no money! Charity!” Rhylos rasped.

“Fuck that shit. After all you put me through here, and I get nothing? Fuck you,” Shiv spat. “That stake must hurt, motherfucker.”

Rhylos did not reply. Shiv gripped the end of the stake. “Where's the money, asshole? Tell me, or I swear I'll take this out!”

“No,” Rhylos groaned.

“My money,” Shiv said between his teeth, and gave the stake a little twist. Rhylos shrieked.

“There is none! None for you! Rien!”

Shiv let go of the stake and gave Rhylos a vicious kick in the ribs.

“You fucker! Stop fucking with me, or I'll fucking let you live like this!” he screamed, enraged. He sent the toe of his boot into the vampire's stomach and back over and over. He didn't know whether or not it was doing any damage, but it sure as hell made him feel better. After several kicks Shiv paused for breath. The vampire lay on

his side, seemingly barely conscious. His eyelids fluttered, and he took a ragged breath. "Finish me," he gasped.

Shiv stared at Rhylos. No money. No nothing. He had nothing.

"Make me a vampire," he said suddenly.

Rhylos's eyes flew open. "No!"

Shiv grabbed the end of the stake and twisted it again, making Rhylos cry out.

"Listen to me, motherfucker. I swear to fucking God, unless you turn me, I will keep you in agony the rest of my miserable fucking life. You know I will."

Rhylos stared at him through glassy eyes for a long moment. Finally he gave a barely perceptible nod.

"D'accord. You are already a monster," he whispered. Shiv knelt next to Rhylos and lowered his head. Rhylos opened his mouth and peeled back his lips to expose his teeth, but paused.

"Do it!" Shiv commanded, and thrust his shoulder against the bared fangs. Rhylos could not stop himself, and sank his teeth into the muscle above the top of Shiv's collarbone on that side. He began to drink deep and Shiv steadied himself as the room started to whirl and swim around him.

Rhylos pulled back. Shiv was dizzy, and shook his head to clear it.

"Now I drink from you?" he asked, and took Rhylos's wrist.

"No, I beg of you, don't - " Rhylos said weakly. Shiv paid no attention, picking up a splinter of wood. He sliced the vampire's wrist deeply and the blood began to flow freely at once, its colour almost black. Shiv steeled himself and put his mouth to it. It was slippery and

metallic on his tongue, and at first he had to force himself to swallow it. As he drank, the room began to spin again and he found himself pulling on Rhylos's wrist in a steady, strong rhythm, a pulse throbbing loudly in his head. The blood intoxicated and warmed him and he felt bereft when the flow began to lessen. Shiv released his grip on Rhylos's wrist and wiped his mouth with the back of his forearm. He felt strange and animal, but that did not bother him. The blood began to boil in his stomach, shooting flames throughout his torso, and he doubled over. He looked at Rhylos, who lay quietly watching him.

“How long?” Shiv groaned.

“An hour, perhaps more or less,” Rhylos said weakly. Shiv felt his guts twist, and he clutched at his belly again.

“I can feel it,” he whispered. It would be worth it. Worth it to have what Rhylos had. He could bear the pain, agonizing as it was.

Rhylos stretched an arm. “Mr. Mackenzie - “

The spasm passed and Shiv straightened. He gazed down at the vampire, and his mouth twisted in contempt.

“Now you can die, for all I care,” he said, taking hold of the stake.

“Keep your minions weak...” Rhylos murmured, and stiffened as Shiv turned the stake and drove it into his heart. His eyes rolled back in his head and he sank back down onto the floor, his arm still outstretched, his face as still and grey as stone.

Pain began to flower in Shiv's chest, branching out into his stomach and limbs. It made it impossible for him to stand any longer and he folded to the floor, arms wrapped around his torso. He could feel a massive shift

commencing inside him, his human system withering in the brighter light of this new and more powerful self that was being born. It hurt, though. No doubt that the death of his old self hurt.

Eventually the pain subsided enough that he could drag himself to the corner and sit up against the wall. He knew that the change was not over yet, and that more pain would come. But then it would end. Shiv closed his eyes and waited.

10

Hope

In Janet's nightmare there were spiders that roamed her flesh and dug their fangs into her, and when she moved to brush them away they swarmed up her arms into her hair and ears. She shrieked, flailing and shaking her head to loosen them, but lost her balance and fell several stories in the cold air. As she struck the ground she felt her spine snap, and she arched her back and screamed and screamed.

She found herself sitting up, unable to breathe. Quickly the memory-sensations flooded back: the many hands pulling on her, the fetid smell, her cheek on the cold concrete floor. Her punctured, burning skin. Janet looked around frantically, but there was no one else to be seen. She put her hand on her chest and tried to force herself to pull air in deep, regular breaths. Her arms and legs were covered in bites and bruises from teeth, and any movement she made was accompanied by a heavy, sickening pain. Her scrubs were liberally daubed

with blood - hers or someone else's, she couldn't tell. What the hell happened to me while I was out?

Her vision seemed a bit blurry. She squinted experimentally at the wall, and saw that it bore the word HOPE in foot-high letters. Reading it made her head hurt.

So there was hope. Ironic.

She had found Hope.

It dawned on Janet that she was still alive. Messed up, to be sure, but somehow still alive. Maybe there was a way to win this. The idea seemed to let a little light into the dark place that her psyche had become, like someone surreptitiously cracking a window.

She got up and limped painfully to the hallway. It seemed very quiet. She made her way slowly along the passage, and found herself at the dead end again. There was Chuck's - or whoever's - gun. She picked it up. Assuming that it hadn't been fired again, there was still one bullet left. A stroke of luck.

She peered through the hole she was sure Shiv had made in the wall, but in the half-light she could see nothing in the room. Gripping the gun, she put one leg through, then her torso and other leg. On the other side of the wall, she straightened up and froze.

Rhylos was there, on the floor. He'd been staked. Black blood pooled on the floor by his torso, and there was another congealed patch around his slashed wrist. His face, petrified by death long overdue, had lost its arrogance. Now all that remained was the shell of an ancient and bitter man.

She saw CHARITY, writ large. So this was the last room, she thought wearily. And where were the riches? The big prize? She felt nothing about the room, about

Rhylos. She was drained, literally and metaphorically. It felt rather pleasant, as though her soul were numbed with morphine.

Janet's eyes were drawn to movement from the corner, and there was Shiv sitting up, his eyes closed. His muscles twitched and jumped like live things under his skin.

Janet moved carefully past Rhylos to Shiv, and bent down to examine him. He appeared to be breathing, but there was something distinctly odd about his posture and the strange lustre of his skin. His limbs jerked as though he were dreaming.

Janet took a step back. Something more than strange here.

She saw that he had been bitten hard on his neck. There were deep puncture wounds there, with bruising and blood. Blood stained his lips like wine. Janet looked back at Rhylos, and the wound on his wrist. It was a deep cut, made by something other than fangs, by someone who did not have fangs. Someone who did not have fangs yet.

Slowly she brought the gun up, and sighted down the barrel to Shiv's forehead. She was not sure, but she did not know whether or not she would survive finding out. How long had it been? It could be too late already. She should not take the chance. Nevertheless, her finger rested gently against the trigger and did not squeeze it.

Too many dead.

She could see them all: Vera, dead in her arms. Chuck at her feet. The girl, Nicole, and Brian, certainly dead now too. Marcel. Peter. Mitch, a hole in his forehead. All dead because of her weakness, and the creature on the floor staring sightlessly at the ceiling, a stake in his

chest.

And Shiv in front of her. Dead or alive now? Or something else?

As if hearing her thoughts, Shiv slowly opened his eyes. He stared right through her, past the barrel of the gun pointed at his head, and his eyes were the silver, soulless eyes of Rhylos.

No more weakness, Janet.

No more game, Rhylos.

It ends here.

“Your prize,” Janet said, and pulled the trigger. She saw the hole bloom in the centre of Shiv's forehead even as he reached for her.

Please accept my charitable act, my gift of death. To stay in this world is to suffer. Even you, a monster among monsters, would suffer. Someday your sins would become a burden, and, like Rhylos, you would no longer be able to move under the weight. You never found hope, and it is hope alone that tells us we can survive this world.

In a moment Janet would know whether or not she was too late. In the meantime, there was hope. It alone was not enough to save her, but it was enough to make her believe that she might be worth saving.

The End