

part two:
the fire dance



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:07 AM
Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia

“This isn’t right!” Caldwell sputtered through clenched teeth.

Antonio Vallejo barely suppressed his rage. “The attack must go forward, Señor Commander.”

On the other side of Peachtree Street, the main thoroughfare of downtown Atlanta, stood the High Museum of Art, a distinctive rounded structure built around the circular well of the interior lobby. Aside from the handful of cars that had arrived earlier, including two limousines and a Rolls Royce, there was no evidence of the gathering that Vallejo knew to be occurring there on the fourth floor—a gathering of the Camarilla vampires of the city, come together to fawn and gawk over mortal sculpture, come together to deceive themselves, to pretend that they were somehow still human. Come together, unknowingly, to die in a hellish conflagration of violence.

If Commander Caldwell, that was, would pull his head out of his ass and give the preliminary orders so the attack could go forward.

“It is a simple order, Señor Commander.”

Commander Caldwell obviously felt otherwise. In his agitation, he paced among the preternatural shadows that concealed the two from view; he ran his fingertips along his scalp, up and down, a thumb above each ear, pinkies together along the crest of his bald head. As he rubbed his stark, white scalp, his fingers left furrows in their wake—slight furrows of skin, barely noticeable at first, but as Vallejo

watched and as Caldwell's agitation increased, the furrows deepened until they became gullies that must have, of necessity from their depth, delved into the substance of the commander's cranium itself. Yet he continued his pacing and his stroking, seemingly unconcerned by, in fact unaware of, the deformity he wrought upon himself.

Tzimisce, thought Vallejo. He was reminded again—as if he could ever forget!—why the mere mention of the clan evoked such unease in his heart. They at least, unlike the Camarilla pretenders, retained few pretensions to humanity. But perhaps the fiends had taken their transformation, their transcendence, many of them would claim, a bit too far.

Not that Vallejo had any doubts about where his own eternal soul was eventually headed. But these *Tzimisce*, these fiends...

May the Virgin help us if they ever gain control of the Sabbat, Vallejo thought, then cringed at the inadvertent piety. Ostensibly, he had left behind the religious trappings that had so bound his mortal life, but like a penitent having allowed his confession to have lapsed for quite some time—two and a half centuries, to be precise—he didn't like to press his luck by drawing the attention of the Holy Mother. Such a misstep was as sure an indication of Vallejo's own agitation as was the self-disfigurement of the *Tzimisce*'s.

Vallejo chastised himself for such laxity. A time of battle was the most important instance for discipline. Thus Caldwell's recalcitrance was that much more galling.

"The attack cannot go forward until you draw in your patrols, Señor Commander," Vallejo said.

Caldwell abruptly ceased his pacing, shoved a stubby finger toward Vallejo, and bared his obvious fangs as he spoke: "Somebody has screwed up the orders. This can't be right."

Vallejo was dumbfounded, so foreign to his frame of reference was this assertion—an order not acceptable to a subordinate? Nothing of Vallejo's centuries of training at the hand of Cardinal Monçada in Madrid had prepared him for this. As a squadron leader of the cardinal's hand-chosen legionnaires, the most elite, highly trained military force the Sabbat possessed, Vallejo *knew* that a soldier's job was to execute his orders, not to question them.

But this New Worlder, this American, was unwilling or unable to see that basic truth. It was more than the predictable and natural resentment of a Tzimisce against the more astute and politically dominant Clan Lasombra, Vallejo realized, since the "objectionable" orders had come from another Tzimisce, Councilor Vykos. No, this insubordination rose from Old-World efficiency trampling on New-World sensibilities. The offensive about to be launched had been conceived of by Cardinal Monçada and was to be implemented by Councilor Vykos. Certainly Caldwell and others, in seeing designs they had bungled for decades carried out by perceived interlopers from across the sea, suffered from wounded pride. But to endanger the entire operation, to place at risk the ascendancy of the Sabbat on this continent, was unthinkable, unconscionable!

And yet it was happening.

Caldwell recommenced his pacing. His aide, a slightly built, not overly defaced Tzimisce, who appeared quite unhappy to find himself near the

epicenter of a burgeoning dispute, skulked farther into the shadows. The attack was to have gone ahead at midnight. It was already unnecessarily delayed and seemed likely to be delayed additionally, judging from Caldwell's manner.

"This ain't *right*," Caldwell said again. "I'm not letting all the credit for this attack go to damned..." he stopped suddenly, seeming to remember Vallejo's presence.

"...To damned foreigners?" Vallejo offered, allowing a certain level of menace to creep into his voice.

The American glared at his fellow commander and groped for perhaps a less inflammatory choice of terms than he'd started to utter: "To...to *others*," he spit out at last.

"Sir," said Vallejo, forcing the use of a formal, clipped tone so as not to vent his growing ire, "your patrols ensure that our victory will be complete. None of those people will escape us, and no one from the outside will be able to interfere."

"I want a piece of the action!" bellowed Caldwell.

Vallejo flinched. Now, incredibly, beyond becoming an obstacle to the mission by his refusal to carry out simple orders, Caldwell was, by way of his fulminations, risking discovery of two of the three point-of-contact commanders for the assault.

"*Lower your voice!*" Vallejo barked forcefully, but without imprudent volume. In dealing with the American, Vallejo felt compelled to revise his estimation of his fellow commander. There might be a touch of Old World-New World rivalry at work, but the root of the conflict was a lack of professionalism on the westerner's part. Vallejo had dealt with bores

on both sides of the Atlantic, any of whom might have balked as Caldwell did now. Caldwell happened to have the added impediment of being an idiot. All of this led Vallejo to one unavoidable conclusion.

If he shouts again, I will kill him.

It would be well deserved. Failing another outburst, however, Vallejo believed that the political situation, with which he tried to keep respectfully uninvolved, was too fragile for him to take direct action against this pompous fool.

“My patrols should be part of the attack,” Caldwell insisted, slamming his fist against his other palm.

“Give the order, or step aside for someone who will...someone who *can*,” said Vallejo.

Caldwell bristled at the suggestion that he was not up to the task at hand. Again, he pointed at Vallejo. The Tzimisce’s finger, trembling with rage, almost touched the Spaniard’s nose. Vallejo, for his part, resisted the temptation to grab that finger, to bend it back until it snapped, and to keep bending until it came completely free of the hand. Caldwell’s aide did his best to slink even farther into the shadows.

“I won’t take that from you,” Caldwell threatened, his voice rising very close to the level that Vallejo had decided would require drastic action.

Vallejo, however, stood at perfect attention. Only his steeled nerves kept him from striking out. He was in the awkward position of trying to convince a Tzimisce commander to carry out an order from a Tzimisce superior, and while Vallejo was by far the most seasoned combat veteran on the scene, the Council had made clear that all three commanders—

Vallejo, Caldwell, and Bolon—were considered equal in rank. All this was running through Vallejo's mind as he stared at the quivering finger of this incompetent windbag.

"I won't take that from you," Caldwell repeated more quietly.

"Take?" asked an icy-calm voice from behind Caldwell.

He turned to see, less than a foot away, Councilor Sascha Vykos. Caldwell involuntarily took a step back.

Vykos was tall and slender. As was the custom of the Tzimisce, Vykos had altered her appearance, the very formation of her bones and skin, although not so much as the battalion of battle ghouls, those walking masses of destructive musculature, that she directed through Commander Bolon. Her high forehead was folded upward and back, a symmetrical feathering of flesh. At least it was tonight, at this moment.

Over the years, Vallejo had seen Vykos on numerous occasions back in Madrid. Though physical appearance was fairly malleable for the Tzimisce fiends, she more so than most of her clan reinvented herself as often as a mortal woman might change hairstyles. Yet this ever-variable appearance, as Vallejo well knew, though definitely disconcerting, was less disturbing than the casual air of cruelty that clung to her no matter what twisted guise she chose, and whether she was knee-deep in dismembered corpses or sipping vitae from fluted crystal.

This was the woman, the creature, that Caldwell faced. This was the will he had flouted in his refusal to set into motion the first phase of the night's attack.

“There’s nothing for you to take, Commander,” said Vykos. “Your job is to give—to give the orders that were entrusted to you.”

“Councilor Vykos,” he said with a short, jerky bow. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Indeed,” she purred like a large predatory cat as she edged even closer to the disgruntled and increasingly uncomfortable commander. “I had not planned to venture so close to what I presumed, in my ignorance, would be a field of battle.”

Caldwell flinched at the rebuke. The lion’s share of his indignation seemed to have deserted him, or at least to have been tempered, now that he stood face to face with the superior to whose orders he took such exception. Her gentle tones and tight, insincere smile took the starch from him.

“Something’s wrong. There’s been some...misunderstanding,” Caldwell told her. “What I got can’t be the orders you gave. Somebody screwed ‘em up, didn’t tell us right.”

Vykos stared fixedly at the commander. She responded neither in word nor expression to what he said.

“My patrols are ordered to stand by,” he continued, “to sit back and just watch the assault.” His dander rose again somewhat as he reminded himself of the indignities that had been heaped upon him. “My boys can kill as good as anybody. A lot of them are *Tzimisce*,” he emphasized to his clanmate. “They deserve a piece of the action. And some of the others...some of them are here to fight against their own clans.”

Vallejo casually spat at this mention of the *antitribu*, those Cainites who had indeed broken with

their clans, disavowed their blood and defied their elders. Vallejo could summon no respect for them. *Cannon fodder. Nothing more.*

His spittle striking the pavement sounded like a thunderclap in the tense silence of the shadows. The insult was not lost upon Commander Caldwell, but he had more urgent problems at the moment.

"I know you couldn't have ordered us just to sit and watch," Caldwell said. "You wouldn't do that. My boys deserve a piece of the action. So do I. This is all a trick.... Somebody changed the orders."

"Hmm." Vykos leaned forward and sniffed near Caldwell's left ear, then his right. The commander seemed totally unsure of what to make of this, but he held his ground and persisted in making his case with only minimal stuttering. "My patrols...our Tzimisce, and the others...are...I mean, you know, they deserve a piece...."

Vallejo, completely ignored for the moment, watched this peculiar exchange that was so far beyond his perception of the relationship between officers of differing rank. The two fiends, only centimeters apart yet not making contact, now impressed him as serpents engaged in some elaborate mating ritual.

But then Vykos did touch her clanmate. "Shh," she cooed to him, a mother to her babe, as she placed her palms gently on his cheeks. "You are very much mistaken, Commander." Her voice was soothing now, but only in the way that ice brings numbness.

Even amidst the dense shadows that Vallejo maintained, he thought he saw her eyes glowing, not the bestial red which many Cainites might achieve, but a piercing, cold blue. Caldwell tried to protest,

but she shushed him again, and with a tender finger upon his lips silenced him. She returned her hand to his cheek.

“No active part in the assault?” she asked. “How could you believe such a thing, my dear Commander?”

Vykos shook her head sadly. “When the patrols are ordered forward, they will form a seal around that museum. You see the museum?” She turned his face slightly so that he faced the High. Then she nodded his head, once, twice, in the affirmative.

“No one will escape—because of the patrols,” she explained patiently. “And do you know who is inside, Commander?” This time she gave him no time to reply, but herself continued. “The prince of this city is there, which means that it is likely that others will try to help him—mortal police, perhaps. But do you know what they will find?”

A light was dawning in Caldwell’s eyes as well, a light of realization—not realization of strategy, which Vallejo thought should have been obvious from the start. Caldwell, as Vykos soothed and stroked him, was realizing his own fear.

“They will find their way blocked,” she answered her own question. “There will be no help for the prince. Nor for any of the others.”

The absence of sound rivaled the absence of light on that dark street. Caldwell and Vykos stood practically eye to eye, his white face in her white hands. Vallejo, feeling very much the spectator, looked on in detached amazement, while Caldwell’s unobtrusive aide seemed to ooze into the cracks of the sidewalk—surely a trick that not even the Tzimisce had perfected.

“So you see how important the patrols are?” asked Vykos. She allowed Caldwell to nod his own head this time.

“Good. I wanted to be sure.” Then she began to press her hands together, steadily, forcefully. An expression of consternation crossed Caldwell’s face but quickly gave way to fear. He grabbed her wrists, tried to pull her hands away, but to no effect.

Vykos’s eyes shone more brightly. Caldwell’s face began to give way beneath the steady pressure of her palms. Slowly, her hands compressed the bone structure of his cheeks and jaw. His face suddenly took on an elongated manner, exaggerating further the furrows along his scalp. A garbled moan arose in his throat.

Vallejo watched in horrified fascination. He could not force himself to turn away.

Like warm butter, he thought. Shortly her hands would meet in the center. *Squeezing him like...*

But just as Vallejo managed to form those thoughts, Vykos plunged her thumbs into Caldwell’s eyes, *through* his eyes—for she didn’t stop at that jellied matter, which dribbled down his face. Caldwell jerked spasmodically as her thumbs, like hot knives, dug into his brain.

Vallejo did not remember seeing the body fall or slump to the ground, but there it was, Vykos standing over it. She flicked her fingers, and a splatter of bodily juices struck the ground like the first raindrops of an approaching storm.

Vykos turned to Caldwell’s aide, the slight Tzimisce, whose every ounce of determination was barely preventing him from fleeing into the night.

“Give the order,” she said. “The attack will go forward.”

She turned and walked away, secure in the knowledge that her directive would be carried out promptly.

Vallejo, watching the councilor, thought he could hear her humming faintly as she left.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:26 AM
Near the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

“Shut your mouth before I rip it off your face,” Marcus said to either or both of the dark, lithe figures, Delona and Delora, beside him atop the parking garage. They, along with “Fingers” Jorge, who was obediently quiet and wrapped up in his cloak, had been in position for nearly two hours. Marcus had expected orders before now, and the waiting was playing on his nerves.

Playing on his nerves almost as much as the twittery laughter between Delona and Delora. The two had a jittery sort of language they spoke to each other that Marcus couldn’t understand, and he always felt that they were talking about, and *laughing* at, him. He realized, after making his threat, that it would be difficult to rip someone’s mouth actually off her face—the mouth being just a hole—but he decided to let it slide.

“Shut up, you little turds.”

They were dark and small—of course, everyone was small next to him—so turds they were, as far as he was concerned. But they looked more like spiders, with long spindly limbs that they folded up near their body. And their skin, not only dark, looked as if it had been singed all over. Marcus, unable quite to reconcile his own analogies, wasn’t sure why a spider would be burnt, or why a turd would be either, for that matter.

Worse than the fact that they were ignoring his order for silence—and Caldwell had put *him* in

charge—Marcus was afraid their constant blabbering would give away the patrol's position. They were within sight of the museum, after all, just around the corner. Couldn't they see that this was an assignment of such importance that the little turds should shut up? The burdens of command weighed heavily on Marcus.

"If I've gotta tell you one more—"

But they all fell silent at once. Delona's and Delora's tufted black ears tensed and quivered. Marcus heard it too—a door opening below them; a door *being* opened, and that meant *somebody* was opening it. Marcus, his blood fairly boiling from the endless waiting and the trials of leadership, rushed to the edge of the parking deck to peer down. The turds flanked him on either side.

A lone figure had, indeed, exited the garage and was moving toward the street corner. Marcus had been told to allow no one to pass the parking deck in either direction, toward or away from the museum. The figure below was moving away from the museum, and he was being sneaky about it. Only the slight creak of the door opening had given him away.

As Marcus debated what commands to give, Jorge tore past him over the railing and dropped onto the figure in the street.

Marcus was astounded. Jorge had preempted his first *real* order of command. Worse still was the lack of success that Jorge met with. Maybe it was the fluttering of his cape that gave him away, or maybe the victim just possessed incredible reflexes. Either way, as Jorge made contact, the stranger fell backward and rolled, coming to his feet even as Jorge crashed to the ground.

Marcus roared in disbelief. Delona and Delora, as if amused that their leader had just unwittingly and completely relinquished whatever remained of the element of surprise, giggled hysterically.

The astonishingly agile stranger, with his light brown skin, expensive haircut, and formal attire, looked up at Marcus and the others. Jorge moved closer. He threw back his cloak and unfurled his fingers, each several feet long, which bobbed and weaved like restless serpents. Simultaneously, like a constrictor consuming big game, he unhinged his jaw and laughed as his mouth stretched wide enough to ingest a small child.

Again surprisingly, the stranger did not flee. Instead he took a combative stance and his voice echoed off the cement walls of the parking deck: “Come on then, you bastards! I’ll take one of you with me. Which one wishes to accompany me to the hellish pits of Set?”

Set! Marcus couldn’t believe his luck. Of course, only another creature of the night would’ve been able to elude Jorge’s lunge. More importantly, Caldwell would be very pleased when Marcus brought him the trampled husk of a Setite!

Delona and Delora, without waiting for orders, were already crawling down the face of the building, and the Setite was backing away. Marcus had no intention of being left out of the fun. He hoisted a leg over the railing and then launched himself into the air. His legs, powerful enough to crush a bowling ball or mangle a parking meter with only slight exertion, sent him well beyond the retreating Setite, who was obviously dismayed—as well as cut off from a route of escape. Two new potholes marked the point of Marcus’s landing.

“So good of you to come to us,” hissed Delora in her rarely used and strangely accented English.

Marcus leapt again, this time straight at the Setite. Despite the distracting approach of the other three Sabbat, however, his victim saw him coming and dove off the sidewalk, again rolling and jumping to his feet, leaving Marcus with only an armful of air as he grasped for a crushing blow at the space the Setite had vacated.

Now the Setite did run, but Delona and Delora were incredibly agile and quick. They bounded ahead of him, cutting him off again, and when he paused, Jorge struck. His fingers flashed through the air like long-starved vipers. They lashed the Setite and wrapped around his body, pinning one arm to his side.

From his vantage point, Marcus saw what Jorge probably could not. With his free hand, the Setite produced a small knife from somewhere. He'd bent low; maybe an ankle sheath hidden beneath his dress trousers.

Such a cute little knife, Marcus thought, as he approached from the Setite's blind side, wanting to finish off their prey before the dancing turds had a chance to beat him to it. That would show them who was in charge. Marcus kept an eye on the knife, though there was little chance that such a tiny blade would even penetrate his inhumanly thick skin, much less do him any serious harm.

I like this Setite, thought Marcus, seeing their victim still struggling, even down to one arm and surrounded. *He's got guts*. At least he would until Marcus squeezed them out of him.

Just then, the Setite whipped his hand and his blade through the air, not throwing the knife, but—

Something struck Marcus across the face. Burning, searing pain in his eyes. Darkness. Pain spreading deeper.

He clawed at his face, at his eyes, not caring that his fingers, too, began to burn. Denied sight, Marcus lurched from one side to another, stabbing with his massive feet whichever way he felt he was falling at that moment. The pavement crumbled beneath him, making footing that much trickier. And still his eyes burned.

Acid, or something like it.

Marcus dug his fingernails into his own face and ripped away some of the surface flesh around his eyes. That helped only a little. He tried to force open his eyes, squinting and blinking in the harsh light of the nearby street lamp.

He was still closer to the fight than he'd realized in his blindness. The Setite had struck again. Only a few steps away, Jorge was down, the little knife impaling his hand. His movements were jerky, twitchy, as if control of his limbs had left him, and he wailed piteously, like a dying cat. The Setite, his back turned to Marcus and Jorge, was squared off against Delona and Delora.

Marcus lashed out with a sledgehammer fist and caught the unsuspecting Setite solidly between the shoulder blades, propelling him into the air. He landed hard on the pavement several yards away. No cushioning roll this time.

Delona and Delora were on him at once, raining blows upon his head and shoulders, knocking his legs and arms from beneath him as he tried to regain his feet. Marcus brushed them aside and lifted the Setite

by the collar, then spun him around so the two were face to face.

And Marcus smiled.

Despite his burning and watering eyes, despite the blurred vision, Marcus smiled as he wrapped his arms around the Setite and squeezed. Ribs snapped. Such a beautiful sound—almost as pleasing as the anguished scream that now came from the Setite.

Die, little man. Die! Marcus's smile broadened at the sound of his helpless victim choking on the blood that welled up in his throat as broken ribs punctured and sliced through his innards. The hulking Tzimisce even took pleasure from the blood the Setite coughed into his face. It was the blood of victory.

Marcus roared with triumph as the last resistance of the Setite's body gave way before the incontestable vise of his bulging arms. Joints popped. The Setite's carcass was crushed almost beyond existence, no doubt liquefied by the nearly geologic force Marcus exerted. Marcus hugged the remains to his chest. He could smell the rich blood soiling the once-exquisite evening wear. Then Marcus held at arm's length the remains—

Except there were no remains. At least no body. There was blood, yes, but not enough. No ruptured entrails, no liquefied flesh dripping to the pavement. The last strains of Marcus's triumphant roar curdled in his throat and were reborn as a cry of frustration.

Delona and Delora seemed to realize what had happened—the Setite had somehow slipped out of Marcus's grasp, leaving behind only clothing like shed skin. But the blackened twins had no more idea where the Setite had gotten to than did Marcus. They hurried about in different directions—up the street, down

the street, around the corner, into the parking garage—but clearly the Setite had escaped.

“Gone,” said Delona, as if explanation were necessary.

“Gone,” echoed Delora.

Marcus let the empty clothing drop. After hours of waiting and having his orders ignored, the one intruder his patrol had spotted had eluded them. Jorge lay convulsing on the ground, and Marcus himself was half blinded by what must have been some type of poison on that puny little knife. It was all more than he could bear. Marcus’s already blurred vision clouded red with rage. Without warning, he opened his powerful jaws and struck at the surprised Delora. He caught her on the neck, which snapped. In fact, her head remained attached to her torso by only a few cords of tendon or muscle or something. Denied his proper feast on the Setite, Marcus sucked what vitae there was in her tiny frame, then discarded the desiccated husk onto the street like so much garbage.

“Get rid of *that*,” he said to Delona, indicating her former mate, “then carry Jorge back upstairs. Now!”

Delona, he noticed, rushed to obey him this time. While she carried out his orders, and Marcus blinked repeatedly and rubbed at his eyes, the tiny radio in his pocket began to beep at him. The device looked like a child’s toy in his colossal hand. He labored briefly to press the correct button.

“Patrol five,” he said.

“Tighten perimeter,” said the voice that sounded much farther away than it really was. “Close to fifty yards.”

The voice was not Caldwell’s, Marcus noticed.

It was one of his aides', the skittery one. But that of itself was not unusual.

"Gotcha," said Marcus, then remembered that there was something more formal he was supposed to say, but with all the waiting and the ruckus and the frustration, the specific wording escaped him. "Moving in," he said, and stuffed the radio back into his pocket.

"Come on, you turd," Marcus called to Delona. Jorge wouldn't be ready to move yet, if ever—who knew what Setite poison might do to a little fellow like him?—so Marcus's patrol now consisted of himself and Delona. At least she wasn't giggling any more.