

Saturday, 31 July 1999, 9:27 PM
The Cathedral of St. John the Divine
New York City, New York

Khalil Ravana paused for a moment on the path his master had set him. From the street corner opposite the looming, mountainous bulk of the church, he scanned it cautiously. A few upturned floodlights illuminated the carved stonework walls. They cast long and pitch-black shadows everywhere else. The Ravnos could feel his feet urged toward the darkest, most tangled and indecipherable place in sight, and his brief pause lengthened and became a true and nervous halt.

Pensively, he rubbed the stubble on his chin, stroked his beard and mustache, and glanced down at himself. He felt a bit better immediately. He'd changed the sharp suit for an outfit more to his taste. A flowing, wine-colored silk shirt with wide lapels and rolled sleeves was left wide open to show off his muscle-girt stomach and the curly black hair on his chest. Khakis, which he had always despised for their lack of color and military lack of imagination, had been turned around in America. He wore them in a style he had seen and coveted coming out from Chicago: unbelted and slipped nearly below his hips, revealing a bright and beautiful band of silk—fine, printed satin boxer shorts, slung low like the trousers. A short gold ball-chain graced his neck. The cloudy emerald ring swung on a longer, black leather thong. His shoes were cheap—suede as cheap as it came, with thin, nearly sponge-rubber black soles—silent, and without socks, nearly as good as bare feet

to him. And the entire ensemble (the clotheshorse smiled to himself) had been bought with the money he'd got pawning Hesh's child's jewelry. Khalil licked a finger, curled his forelock more tightly, and stepped across the street toward the churchyard.

"Talk to me," he muttered in the crosswalk. "What am I doing?"

The Eye changed hands here last night.

Khalil's eyes narrowed. "Hesh was unavoidably detained—here?"

Yes.

The young Ravnos gnawed his thumb in suspicion. He said nothing, but resolved to find a map of the city as soon as possible. This cathedral seemed a considerable distance from Long Island. Perhaps Hesh had covered a lot of ground last night. Perhaps the old bastard didn't know as much as it pretended to.... Khalil touched the pendant ring, and wondered.

More doubts rose like cankers. Why, if Elizabeth was supposed to be so useful, had the voice insisted she be left behind tonight? Khalil hated leaving his cache (which included the girl, now, in his own mind) unguarded. What if Hesh came back to gather her ashes? What if one of his men had been waiting in the wings last night.... The Setite had been surrounded by absolute gaggles of minions in Calcutta. Why not in New York? A shudder ran down the Ravnos's spine. Thompson—or worse, the Asp—could have been *in the apartment* while he himself slept. The thought stopped him in his tracks.

Move. Khalil's gut surged forward. He ignored it.

He had to find another source of information.

This reliance on the thing that called itself his master was intolerable.

Go, you filth-covered rat. The voice spurred him forth just like a horse. Khalil determined to stand still a while longer, if only to see whether he could. To the spurs was added a whip—pain in old wounds. The servant shook a little under the assault, but found it possible to resist. He smiled. The old thing's reach might go around the world from Calcutta, but its powers weakened with the distance. Khalil, deeply satisfied, let the force send him on.

As he reached the opposite corner, he blinked and scowled. There was a faint light in the distance that could not, quite, be accounted for by any mundane lamp or reflection that he could see. Curiosity took him toward it, in a circumspect and roundabout way—flanking it, in fact. A thin ribbon of pale blue, misty glow curved out of an alley two or three blocks down the other north-south street that bounded the cathedral compound. It traced an arc onto and down from a low building, and disappeared behind a fence.

“Are you putting that there, or is it really there?” Khalil asked his unseen master.

Your lack of clarity and articulation astounds me. I assume you refer to the residue given off by the Eye, not to the sky, the ground, or any other of the ten thousand things in your immediate vicinity?

“The blue glow,” said Khalil, from between clenched teeth.

It is there. I merely enable you to see it. It would take a very rare pair of eyes indeed to mark it without my assistance.

Khalil paced along the outskirts of the holy pre-

cincts. He passed under the arching stream of light, and subjected it to the minute scrutiny he gave everything offered him by his clansman. It was only a few inches tall and deep. It described a very crooked and erratic path through the night, though the arc, from a distance, looked perfectly smooth. A hand thrust into the trail felt slightly chill. An eye peering straight into the light saw nothing but street and city, but sighting along the thread gave a better idea of the color of the phenomenon. It was a kind of venous blue, the tint of drowned skin or of a dead man's lips, but far paler. The Ravnos accepted it as real (with reservations) and walked to the other side of the fenced-in area to see whether the Eye had come out again.

It had, into what seemed to Khalil's untutored eyes a cross between a garden and a junkyard. The death-blue light moved down, up, across, back, and through the hedges and flowers on a clearly impossible trail. In one place, the will-o'-the-wisp plunged beneath the smooth, unbroken turf. In another, the Ravnos saw two arcs—jumps, he would have guessed—that were joined, presumably where a person carrying the Eye had landed and taken off again, twelve feet off the ground.

"I never knew snakes could fly," he commented darkly, and set out to follow the puzzle to its end.

A girl, dead, alone, and wary, watched him from underneath a thick yew hedge. She had darted into its black shadow and hidden her pale hands and face in the mulch the moment the stranger came to her notice. There had been the hope, for a short time, that he was an ordinary denizen of the city—that she could, if she chose, slip away through the garden,

taking no more trouble than to avoid the few working lights local vandals had left.

The knowledge that he was *not* harmless, *not* human, *not* here by chance, grew on her with each step the stranger took. She could see, quite well, the ghost light in the air—and she could see that he saw it, and took a definite, sinister interest in it, as well. Now she dared not move. When he had first appeared, she had been doing a little tracking of her own near the ugly fountain-thing. The air around it was thickest with the glowing stuff, and so, at this moment, the stranger stood not a yard from her. When he backed up to look at the light-maze from a different perspective, his bare ankle came within six inches of her nose. He smelled of the grave, as she expected. She wished she knew whether sinking into the earth made a noise, and whether, once in the soil, her body could be dug out or staked or fired. She wished she knew how much longer the trace in the air—the fog that was no fog, not in this heat wave—would last. If it began to fade, she would *have* to come out. No matter who the stranger was, what he was working for, she couldn't let her only clue just melt away.

And if he's a clue? she asked herself.

The stranger stopped over a brighter spot, a patch on the ground. From there, the shine rose up—*To a man's height*, thought the girl under the bushes—and took a straight, uncomplicated line toward the street again—

And disappeared completely before it reached the sidewalk. The stranger stared at it for a good minute, then threw his arms up in flamboyant and furious anger. He said something, and the girl strained

to listen.

“What the h-h-hell is g-g-going on?!” Khalil stammered with pure rage—close to the edge of his reason.

It has been taken and very cleverly concealed.

“What—even from you?”

The presence loomed large and threateningly in Khalil’s mind. He cowered unconsciously. ***Of course not. It is mine. I can see where it is. I merely do not know where it is.*** Behind the stark tones, the young Ravnos felt something unexpected: admiration. ***There is nothing in its surroundings to tell me its location, either. Someone has been intelligent.***

“So why the fuck did you let me trace this goddamned neon all the way to the end? Why the hell couldn’t you drop a single bloody hint?”

You did not ask, said the voice maddeningly.

Khalil’s hands began to twitch. With a supreme effort of self-control, he asked, quietly, “Who has it? There was a fight here. You said it changed hands. Therefore—” he took a breath for breath’s sake—“Hesha hasn’t got it anymore. So. Who has the Eye,” and only the faintest emphasis on the next word betrayed his frustrations, “now?”

Leopold.

“Leopold.”

The Toreador from whom Hesha and his household took the Eye. The voice paused, and a new note came into it. ***Watch your back.***

It took a fraction of a second for Khalil’s mind to change tracks—then he whirled around, frighteningly aware that an enemy could have taken that instant’s delay to attack. Yet there was time enough to find his balance, and look at the lone figure standing near

him, and take her measure, and still no blow fell.

She waited for him. Her hands hung loose and free, though with talons extended. Her eyes were on him, but her ears were obviously everywhere. The taut tendons in her neck flickered, moving her head to catch the slightest sound. She stood calmly enough, but for all that, her stance was unusual, casual. The feet turned out at right angles to each other like a dancer's, a sailor's, or a trained fighter's. Unlike the martial artist (long dead) she'd reminded him of at first, she chose to stand on up her toes. In fact, her weight lay so far forward on the tips of her feet, Khalil wasn't sure how she could still have her ankles bent, and useful, at all. That was wrong...he had a feeling for combat (though he rarely stayed to join in it) and he concluded that, however good she might be naturally, she was completely untrained. He felt a little—a very little—better.

What light there was counted against him; he knew she saw him more clearly than he saw her. There would be a better exit behind him, too, if he could change their positions a little. He stepped counterclockwise, and was gratified to see her do the same. Again he circled slightly to the right, and the girl kept her distance from him. Another step, and she was just in the glow of a small flood-lamp illuminating a rust-colored statue.

The girl was dirty. She wore a tight, thin-strapped tank top, a pair of jeans that did nothing for her figure (except, perhaps, allow it to move). Dry leaves, burrs, and needles clung to her clothes and stuck in her knotted, curly, jet-black hair. Her face...dark, set in sullen lines...there was something about it.... Khalil chivvied her around the circle and into the

full glare of the bulb. It struck her from below and cast macabre shadows up her face. A scar—no, an open wound—showed on the curve of her cheek. And the light picked out, in beautiful detail, the pointed tips of her inhuman ears.

A *Gangrel*, thought Khalil. What heart he had sank. *I visit the largest city in the world, and practically the first leech I meet is a jungle lover.* Between his clan and theirs seethed the oldest, fiercest feud the Rom had ever spawned—a quarrel he had never, in his entire death, understood. By all accounts it had spread to the new world with the Gypsies it centered around. Still, she couldn't know that he was a *Ravnos* just by looking at him, could she? He began to regret his change of clothes. Why dress to impress your living cousins when you aren't sure you have any and wouldn't know how find them in this city even if they were there? *Damn.*

The *Ravnos* realized he was now standing in the spot that had been his goal. He'd had his look at her. A fast and uncomplicated route out lay directly behind him. Now, he could back away, revealing that he was afraid of her—turn confidently and walk away, expecting the amnesty to last or hoping to force her into an attack at a time of his own choosing—or turn and bolt. He looked again at her misshapen feet. She was probably the faster runner. Khalil opened his mouth. Speech was his best weapon, generally.

But the *Gangrel* got the jump on him, conversationally speaking. "You can see the trail," the wild girl said in a sharp, urgent, and very young voice. She went on, insisting, "You were following it."

"Was I really?" Khalil forced as much BBC into his voice as possible. Fake British, fake Brahmin, fake

Babu...anything but a guttersnipe's Rom accent...
"What trail?"

"I watched you the whole time. I heard you, too," she added accusingly. "Tell me. Who the hell's Hesha?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said Hesha had the...had *it*. Then you asked, who had it now? And you answered yourself a second later: Leopold." The Gangrel took a step in Khalil's direction, and he shuffled back as inconspicuously as he could. "So who's Hesha? Who's Leopold?"

Khalil licked his lips. "That depends on who's asking, doesn't it?" Hells knew that was true.

The girl frowned. "Ramona." A bit of the tension dropped from her, replaced by a somber pride. "Ramona Tanner-Childe." She hesitated, as if about to add something else, but shut her lips on it decisively.

"Hesha is a Setite, Miss Tanner-Childe." Her face didn't change. "Do you know," Khalil continued thoughtfully, "what a Setite is?"

"It ain't a Toreador." And though the sentence was undoubtedly a statement, her tone made the faintest query of it.

"No," he replied, stroking his mustache. *And why did you think it was?* he asked himself. "You're quite right there," he said aloud, ignoring the doubt in her voice, smiling as though she had told a faintly funny joke.

The Gangrel's body relaxed a little farther. "I'm looking for a Toreador. He had the...he had *it*, the last time I saw either of 'em."

Khalil looked her up and down, then decided to chance a little truth. "Your Toreador's name is Leopold."

Her ears pricked and eyes narrowed. "How the

fuck do you know?" she threw at him.

"I'm hunting him myself," said the Ravnos blithely, reverting to type. "I have come all the way from India to track this Toreador and destroy him—with my bare hands, if need be." A hollow little chuckle started in the back of his head; he ignored it. "I have," he lowered his eyes modestly, "a considerable reputation for demon-hunting and lupine-slaying in the cities of my homeland."

Her reaction caught him off guard. She laughed once, alarmingly, like a bark. "You? Alone?"

Lying idiot. She can see the trail; she has the mark of the Eye on her. She knows what it is capable of better than you do.

Khalil hid the bitter reaction behind his black eyes and smiled sagely at the girl. "Of course not." He took an ordinary, walking step toward her, and pretended that the possibility of a fight was over. It seemed to work. "I'm no fool," *whatever you may say, you old bastard*, "but I had to test you. Your wound—" His hand rose, still several feet from her face, and indicated the open gash. "May I look at it?"

"You can see it fine from over there," said Ramona.

"It's proof that you've been near the Eye." He paused. "And survived. And I might know a way to heal it...."

I know a way. What are you doing, boy?

Her face twitched in pain, but she came closer and let him peer at the mark. He brought his hands up, talons withdrawn, and touched the skin just above and below the open sore. "Sorry," he said as she flinched. Quite naturally, he put a hand to the side

of her neck to steady it.

“Are you American?” he asked conversationally.

“Yeah.”

“From New York?” Khalil kept his eyes on her cheek. He turned slightly for better light.

“No,” Ramona answered shortly, then relented. “California. That was...before all this shit. Lived here about a year, I guess.”

“You know the city well, then?”

“Sure.”

“You know the Ravnos here?”

A moment’s pause. “Sure,” she answered confidently. “Street gang from Queens.”

“Just so,” said Khalil. He took his hands off the girl’s throat and sat down a comfortable distance away from her. She followed suit, perching on the edge of a planter. “This Leopold—I really am trying to find him. I know things about the Eye and I have allies who may be able to help me, but I don’t know this city. I have to find someone who knows the territory. That could be you. Maybe we can help each other.”

For a minute, Ramona sat silent. She hiked her knees up and hunched her arms around them, staring at the stranger. A bitter frown crossed her face, and her shoulders fell in a little more; her eyes dropped to the ground. Khalil watched in fascination as the grimy hands stroked the stiff denim jeans, picking at the threads absently. She held herself together—she set her jaw, and the hands turned to fists—she looked up at him again, and he returned the gaze with his best earnest honesty. “S going to take more than you and me to stop that thing.”

“I know,” he said. “I know. But someone has to.”

Ramona stood up and came closer to her new

acquaintance. “What’s your name?” she demanded.

“Khalil.”

The Gangrel nodded as if in approval and stretched herself elaborately. *Just like a cat that’s agreed to adopt you, thought the Ravnos, or a mark who thinks he’s found a good deal, or a woman ready to take you home...still wary, but still mine....* He thought of his ride into town, of Elizabeth chained to the pipes—watched Ramona studying the track though the air—looked past them all to the city, and repeated to himself, *Mine*.

And the voice, too softly for Khalil to hear it, whispered also,

Mine.