

**Monday, 19 July 1999, 10:16 PM**  
**Governor's Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

“Really, Alexander, I can’t see why you refuse me this!” Victoria was well beyond pouting and footstomping, and was working herself into a full-fledged rage. A single lock of her perfect, dark-brown hair fell out of place across her forehead. She brushed it aside irritably.

Prince Garlotte stood and watched her tantrum brewing. His childe, Isaac, likewise stood—Victoria had not offered them a seat, though, in the larger sense, she was the guest. The young sheriff looked on and tried not to squirm as the Toreador insulted his sire. For what else could it be but an insult to give the prince an ultimatum, and then spurn his hospitality when he refused to comply? Two of Gainesmil’s underlings scurried about packing Victoria’s belongings—belongings that, almost to the last gown, were gifts from the prince. Added insult.

“You know,” said Garlotte, “how it pains me to refuse you anything, my love.”

“Then don’t refuse me,” she snapped.

“Ah, Victoria.” The prince reached out to lay a hand on her arm, but she withdrew, gracefully yet pointedly, from his reach. He watched her brush the lock of hair away from her face again. *How perfectly you’ve choreographed it all, Victoria*, he thought, *down to the last curl. My God, she’s lovely with that fire in her eyes!* As she turned her back to him, Garlotte noticed Isaac cringing at the slight, but the prince

was too captivated by the curve of Victoria's spine, the perfect flare of her hips, to be insulted.

She faced the prince again and began to speak, but paused and looked at Isaac, as she had earlier.

"I assure you," said Garlotte, "you may speak freely before Isaac. He is the model of discretion." The prince noted with pride as his childe very nearly succeeded in disguising a flinch. *He's learning. Give him a few more decades....*

"My most earnest desire is to protect you, my prince," she said at last, a forced calm blunting her rage.

"Of course it is, my dear."

Victoria planted her fists on her hips. "So I tell you again: You must send Jan away."

"And I ask you again," said the prince. "Why?"

Victoria's brief show of patience came to a abrupt end. She flashed a glare at Garlotte and Isaac that would have brought a mortal to his knees. As it was, Isaac took a step back.

"He plots to take your city."

Garlotte let her accusation linger between them...before he dismissed it. "But Isaac and I have just come from inspecting some of the city's defenses—manned by Kindred newly arrived from Chicago, as a favor to Jan."

"*Not* as a favor to Jan," Victoria corrected the prince. "As a favor to his bloodthirsty sire."

"Who among us is *not* bloodthirsty?" Garlotte asked in feigned innocence.

Victoria, exasperated, turned toward the open French doors and the balcony. "Don't be dense, Alexander. Certainly he protects the physical secu-

rity of the city. Another Sabbat pit is of no value to him. He will maneuver you from power.”

“He has told you this?” Garlotte asked her.

Victoria ignored the prince’s preposterous suggestion and turned her wrath instead upon the two skulking Toreador who carted load after load of her finery out of the inn. “Leave us! I came to this city penniless. I can do without whatever is left. Wait for me at the truck.”

As the two lesser Toreador scampered away, Garlotte could not deny two implications of their presence, one for each underling. First, Gainesmil had chosen sides in this matter, or at the very least he’d ingratiated himself to Victoria. *But can I begrudge him the desire to be close to her?* Garlotte wondered. He pondered the question for a few seconds before reaching a conclusion: *Absolutely.* Gainesmil would be brought to heel. Garlotte would make sure that the architect came to see the error of his ways.

Second, considering that the movers had arrived almost simultaneously with Garlotte and Isaac, Victoria must have held out little or no hope that she would sway the prince. *But why create an open break?* Garlotte wondered as he stroked his dark beard. *Is she playing to my sense of chivalry? Does she expect I’ll try to win her back?* He had no conclusive evidence, but of one thing the prince was certain: Even Victoria’s most capricious whim was driven by devious, inscrutable purpose. And tonight that purpose pulled her away from him.

“I cannot remain your guest and watch you destroyed,” Victoria said.

Garlotte said nothing. He merely gazed at her—at the strong and gracious lines of her face, the weave of the white sweater as it lay upon her breasts, the golden locket that he had given her.

*I can let her go*, the prince told himself, and though it was true, the fact that he could did not mean that he *wanted* to do so.

“The conference won’t stand for his heavy-handed ways,” Victoria continued. “With time for a little reflection before the next meeting, they’ll see him for the usurper he is.”

*With a little reflection and a bit of persuasion...* Garlotte interpreted her comment, but he had not overlooked the potential threat of the displaced masses. “There is no more conference.”

Victoria glared at him, the challenge obvious in her eyes.

*Did she really think I’d allow the rabble to influence policy once some semblance of stability was restored?* Garlotte wondered. Had he overestimated Victoria, or was her apparent outrage merely another feint?

“The majority of refugees have been assigned duties upholding the city’s defenses,” he explained. “There is no longer any need to consult them in matters of planning. *They*, Victoria, realize that a strong city, shelter against the Sabbat, is the most they should hope for. They did not enjoy free rein in their old cities. Nor should they expect it here.”

“I see.” Victoria’s hand rose slowly to the locket. Her gaze shifted and came to rest on Isaac. For a long moment she studied him, but then her interest in him seemed to dissipate instantly.

“But there’s no need for you to leave,” Garlotte suggested.

Victoria turned back to Garlotte. She tugged at the locket with just enough force that the thin chain tore apart behind her neck. As if to punctuate her rejection of Garlotte, she set locket and chain on the table before him, then left without another word.

Prince Garlotte closed his eyes and savored the last traces of her lingering scent. He wanted to imprint the memory of her on his mind’s eye, so that she would ever be there beside him. For a fleeting moment, the world receded, and there was only she and he, until...

“Should I follow her?” Isaac’s voice shattered the illusion.

Garlotte fought down the deep growl that began in his belly. “Follow her? To Gainesmil’s haven? I believe I know where to find it.” The prince’s tone precluded further questions.

He took his late wife’s locket, that piece of jewelry that had until moments ago rested against Victoria’s chest, from the table. The chain could be repaired easily enough. Garlotte’s eyebrow rose with interest, however, when he opened the locket and found the shriveled tongue resting within.

*I determine my own destiny*, Victoria reassured herself. The limousine that Gainesmil had sent carried her gently over the city streets and followed behind the truck full of her possessions. Her hand strayed to her throat, to the space where the chain no longer rested. She’d given it back to Garlotte, and along with it the memento of her time with the fiend Elford in Atlanta.

*They don't think I mean business.* Alexander, Jan, Theo Bell, Vitel, the new Tremere witch—none of them took Victoria seriously. Elford had made that same mistake. His gnarled tongue was a warning. *Let Garlotte understand, if he has eyes to see, she thought, then, He won't understand. Not until it's too late.*

The prince was not wrong to be suspicious of Victoria, but if he trusted Jan, he was a fool. And he would suffer the consequences. Either Jan would depose Garlotte, or Victoria might be driven to it herself. But that would be many weeks or months down the road. Tonight, she had set a more immediate gambit in motion. Garlotte might think that he could do without her company, but let him try. Then add to that another factor: Without Victoria actively opposing Jan, Garlotte would have much less reason to support his clanmate. She had planted the seed in the prince's mind that Jan was a threat. Garlotte would also likely blame Jan's presence for the estrangement between herself and the prince.

*We'll see how long before cracks form in the Ventrue good-old-boys network,* she thought.

But it wasn't Garlotte, or even Jan, that Victoria feared. She still could not shake the feeling that she was merely playing an assigned role in this drama. That was her greatest and constant fear, and she'd taken steps, again, to see that it was not borne out.

*He brought his childe.* The prince had responded to Victoria's summons—her *invitation*, rather—but he had brought Isaac with him. So Victoria had left. She had aligned herself, to a certain degree at least, against the prince. Had he come alone, she would

have allowed herself to be talked into staying. She would have sent Gainesmil's underlings away without her in the end. She would have abandoned this latest plan. She was determined, above all else, that no elder being would out-guess her. Not every time.

Yet the feeling that she sleepwalked through someone else's dream clung to her like a fever, as it had increasingly since Atlanta. As it had since her time in the clutches of the vile Tzimisce. Now Victoria's fingers brushed the tiny imperfection on her jaw—the image of a serpent swallowing its own tail—that her makeup seemed capable of hiding for only so long.

*I determine my own destiny*, she told herself, over and over again, as the limousine passed farther into the night.

Prince Garlotte already had sent Isaac away to inspect more of the city's defenses. Now the prince reclined on the couch and pretended that Victoria was still there. It was much easier without his child babbling on about nothing. Garlotte imagined that the impression of her body was still warm—the way her body had been warm that night on the ship—on the cushions beneath him, or on the bed in the other room. He tried to convince himself that he could still catch a hint of her fragrance. He considered keeping the belongings she'd left behind—aside from the decomposing tongue on the coffee table, of course—and going on as if she resided permanently in his inn. He could seal the suite, so no one would ever disturb the space she had inhabited.

*My God*, he sighed. He had not anticipated the

ache that had gripped him after not even a full hour of her absence. It wasn't that he had to be with her every moment. Over the past few weeks, in fact, he'd spent relatively little time in her actual presence. To know that he *could* be with her, that she was at his beck and call, was enough; to know that he could *not* see her, that she would turn him away...that might well drive him to distraction.

*Ah, well, he tried to resign himself, I might need a bit of distraction.*

"What do you think?" Garlotte said to the empty room.

"I was waiting for her to flash some titty," came the reply. "I figure she's enough woman for you and junior—and me, I'm okay with watching."

Garlotte sat up and faced the Nosferatu. Colchester rubbed his hands together and stared into the distance, as if replaying in his mind what hadn't happened. "I would think," the prince admonished him, "that you'd have tired of playing peeping tom by now."

Colchester wheezed and...grinned? It was hard to tell with the fangs jutting through his lip. "Mostly, yeah. But she's enough to put starch back in your collar."

Garlotte frowned. He did not care to hear Victoria spoken of in so coarse a manner. Colchester apparently realized his mistake; his manner sobered rather abruptly.

Garlotte pressed on. "And she and Pieterzoon have not...encountered one another again since what you reported two nights ago?"

"That's right."

Colchester's perverse glee having faded, Garlotte could read nothing at all in the solid black eyes, the cratered face. *I would have done better not to have put him on his guard*, the prince thought, but the Nosferatu's lechery grated so, to an irrational extent. *Some matters*, Garlotte decided, reaffirming his own actions, *aren't meant to be rational.*