

**Friday, 16 July 1999, 10:48 PM (local time)**  
**Iglesia de San Nicolás de los Servitas**  
**Madrid, Spain**

The heart of the church was a huge, mostly empty room with a stone floor. In it, a fat man sat on a simple wooden stool, contemplating a chess board. A smattering of white pieces, including a handful of pawns and a single bishop, had been removed from play. So had a few black pawns, but that was all. White had castled and was concentrating on establishing a strong defense, while black was on the offensive but seemed oddly disorganized, and one of its knights was in imminent danger.

“It seems like a resignable position.”

Cardinal Ambrosio Luis de Monçada looked up from the board, a beatific smile on his face. “Ahh, Sir Talley. It is good to see you in the flesh, my son. You are well? The trip was not too arduous? You have fed?”

Talley, as the templar called himself, nodded assent to all of his host’s questions. “Your hospitality, Your Eminence, is as always impeccable.” He eased his long frame down onto the stool opposite Monçada. Talley was bony and angular, with a face like a hound that has just seen the fox vanish once and for all. His hair was white, though his features made him seem no older than thirty. His hands were his most remarkable feature: They were long and slender, and the fourth finger on each was longer than the middle one. In his living days, Talley had once been accused of being a werewolf because of those remarkable hands; having dealt with any number of

lupines in his time, he now found the recollection amusing. He wore a charcoal-gray suit, clearly hand-tailored by someone who knew how to accentuate the clean lines of the human predator.

By contrast, Monçada wore a simple priest's robe, and sandals that flapped against the floor as he tapped his foot, contemplating his next move. "Unfortunately, Don Ibrahim, my opponent in this game, is of the stubborn sort who will fight to the last angry little pawn." He looked up with an expression of mock concern. "And you seat yourself in his place! Truly, my son, I thought you were on my side in this matter."

Talley rose and bowed. "Forgive me. I shall, of course, repair to your side immediately, and beg humble apologies for my treachery."

Monçada chuckled, a thick, wet sound. "No, no. Sit. I just find that too many of the young ones these days have a dreadful tendency to get wrapped up in chess metaphors. It's lazy thinking."

Talley did not sit, but leaned over and picked up the black queen. "Mmm. Considering the chessboard, I'm not surprised the privileged few who see it are whipped into a tizzy by it. Lucita?" he said, indicating the piece he held.

Monçada reached a pudgy hand out for it. "Of course. The set itself was a gift from Vykos. He does marvelous work, do you not agree?"

"He?"

The cardinal shrugged massively. "He, she, it—it changes with its whim. I met Vykos first when he had his original form, and that is how I know him. He does me the courtesy of resuming it when he comes to visit."

“Ah. If it’s all the same, I’ll avoid the issue and keep this form for the foreseeable future.”

Monçada gave a delighted laugh. “Your courtesy is greatly appreciated, and I trust you to keep the face that suits the one they call ‘The Hound’ best.” He looked at the chess piece, then replaced it on the board. “Pity she was so reluctant to pose for this. Ahem.” He looked up. “You would like to know why you are here, yes? The pleasure of your company is, while something I do not get nearly enough of, not sufficient to cause me to summon you.”

Talley kept a poker face. “I trust not for confession, then? I’m afraid I’ve racked up quite a list of sins in the centuries since Jeffrey first brought me here; I must admit to having been a bit lax in my churching.”

“We should make time for that soon, then, my little Hound. I have faith in you to perform the task I’ve set you without harm, but more faith in other things. God is merciful, but only if we avail ourselves of that mercy. And it is incumbent upon those of us who are irretrievably damned to pay careful attention to how we tend our souls. We are damned for a reason within God’s scheme of things, but that does not excuse us from obeying those of God’s laws that He has left to us.”

Talley shifted uncomfortably. Unlike most of the Sabbat’s archbishops and cardinals, Monçada actually had been an archbishop in life, and a pillar of the Church during years when faith was a palpable thing. Oddly enough, his belief had not deserted him upon the Embrace, instead twining around an inflexible belief in his own damnation. It was a curious combination, but a potent one, and Monçada’s abil-

ity to draw upon the strength of his faith was one of the reasons he was so widely feared by even those who served him. Still, the cardinal's devotion to the sect did little to set those Cainites of little or no faith at ease around him. It was fortunate, then, that Monçada spent all of his time within the heart of his massive, mazelike cathedral haven. The cardinal did not journey forth into the world; the world, when he needed it, approached him humbly, and on bended knee.

In the distance, bells were tolling.

"Tut, tut," the cardinal said suddenly. "I trust you to keep your body safe enough to house your soul until you return, and then we'll shrive you. In the meantime, there's work to do."

Talley nodded. He was almost as old as Monçada, certainly faster and possibly stronger. But the cardinal had a presence, an aura of paternal wisdom and sheer power that made Talley feel like a child—a mortal boy—once again. He felt the need to garner Monçada's approval, to seek shelter and safety under the cardinal's beneficent gaze. It was most likely a trick, a side effect of some power or other that the cardinal didn't even realize he was employing, but the impact was devastatingly real.

Then again, according to Talley's great-grandsire Boukephos, Monçada had possessed that gift even when he was alive. It had been, said the ancient Greek, the deciding factor in Embracing Monçada, even over the protests of the Muslim members of the clan who were affiliated with the other side of the *Reconquista*. Now those self-same Cainites sought his counsel on matters temporal, if not spiritual.

"So what is this work you have for me?" Talley

had to force himself away from his contemplation of the cardinal, and it was clear Monçada was aware of his distraction. “I work better when I know what I’m actually supposed to be doing.”

“You will enjoy this, I think. It’s a bit of a change of pace. You don’t have to hunt down and kill anyone, nor will you be walking to and fro in the earth, and up and down in it.”

“I don’t have to kill anyone?” Talley’s tone became one of mock indignation. “Then why call for me?”

“Because I’ve decided it’s time to broaden your repertoire, among other reasons. How do you feel about protecting some of my servants against assassination?”

“Bored, actually. Why do you want me to do it?”

“I have my reasons.” It was said with an air of finality.

Talley frowned. “I don’t like this. Whom am I supposed to be bodyguarding?”

“An archbishop in our little escapade over in America. Shall I tell you the whole story?”

Talley’s eyebrows shot up. “Please.”

Monçada shook his head, slowly. “There is not much to tell, alas. The American plan is proceeding well, though the leadership of the operation is divided. Schismatic, one might say. There are three archbishops in place, now that Vykos has been elevated, and I’m sure Boukephos has educated you as to what happens to power-sharing arrangements of that sort. One or more of the three tends to fall by the wayside with a dagger in his ribs.”

“Or back,” Talley added mirthlessly.

“Or back.” Monçada nodded. “And in this case,

it would seem that the wheels are already in motion. Someone has decided to remove one of my archbishops. Someone has decided to be very certain that this archbishop is removed. Someone has gone to very great expense to hire an assassin to do away with one of those who are doing my will. Naturally, I do not approve of this sort of thing.”

“What happened to Vallejo? The last time I met with *Les Amies Noir* I was told he’d gone abroad to watch Vykos. Why not just expand his assignment?”

“My dear Talley,” Monçada said wearily, “your lack of faith in my judgment is disappointing, extremely disappointing. I know the difficulties inherent in this matter intimately; they are why I sent for my Hound, whose heart and skill are sufficient to overcome them.

“Now hush, and listen. An archbishop is the target of an assassin, yes. Do I know which one? No; it is enough that I know that the hunt has begun. Do I care which one? No; though I would be most distressed to lose any of my three able and talented servants. Preventing the assassination would be the preferable outcome, of course, but even that is not the most important thing.”

Talley drummed his fingers on the table, careful not to disturb the chessboard. “Ah. I see. So I am to insert myself into this little game, protect whichever of the archbishops seems most likely to be removed, and hand you the assassin’s head on a silver platter? Christ’s wounds, Cardinal, it’s a joke! Defend three potential targets, all arrogant as Hades and no doubt bound and determined to prove they don’t need me? And it’s not as if I’m any sort of—of bodyguard. Get someone whose business it is to tend others.”

The cardinal closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a deep breath. Rustling noises echoed from the shadows in the corners of the vast chamber, and the very stones of the floor were suddenly cold as fear. For a second, Talley feared he'd gone too far, but if he had, it was too late to call back the words he'd spoken. It would also be too late to escape with his life; the cathedral was a deathtrap to any who did not enjoy the cardinal's favor.

"What I want from you is simple. I want you to tell me who is plotting this foolishness; Vallejo has been there too long and may be compromised. Tell me who feels he is above my commands and the necessity to prosecute the war with the Camarilla, above the demands of the sect and of God. I find such arrogance intolerable, and I will know the author of it, if it costs the lives of a hundred archbishops. I will sire armies, if it comes to that, to uncover this traitor. And you," he said, leaning in close, "you will be my instrument, my Hound on the scent of those who betray me. Go to America, Talley. Watch the archbishops, and watch them watch one another. See who makes the first misstep. See who falls." Monçada's eyes were open now, black as the shadows he commanded, and Talley found himself unable to look away. "Use the ruses you must—I do not care if you tell them you're there to watch over the lowliest pack priest or the operation as a whole. I have already sent word to Archbishop Polonia of your incipient arrival. They will wonder why I have told Polonia and not Vykos, who is perceived as my catspaw in all this. We shall see what they make of that; no doubt some enterprising souls will see it as me withdrawing my favor from Vykos; instead, it is a wedge driven be-

tween the two, to see if they react to trifles.

“And I don’t expect you to ‘get’ the killer, Talley. One or both of you would end up rather badly smashed if you tried, and I’d rather you didn’t run the risk until after I’ve seen to the state of your soul, and that of my childe. If worst comes to worst, just make a statement to my dear Lucita that she can’t simply decide to knock over the pieces on my little chessboard after all.”

Talley blinked. Twice. “Lucita?”

Monçada nodded. “Lucita. Now you see why I don’t want you to ‘get’ her. I am,” he sighed ruefully, “entirely too fond of you both.” The cardinal turned his attention to the chessboard, a frown on his face. “All that you need is waiting for you with Hidalgo, in the blue chamber. You remember the way?”

Talley nodded somberly.

“Good. You are dismissed.” The templar stood silently, turned silently, strode silently toward the door.

“Talley?” The cardinal’s voice was calm and measured. “Talley, if you see Don Ibrahim on your way out, you may wish to repeat your advice on his game position. I don’t think he’ll take it, though. I don’t think so at all.”