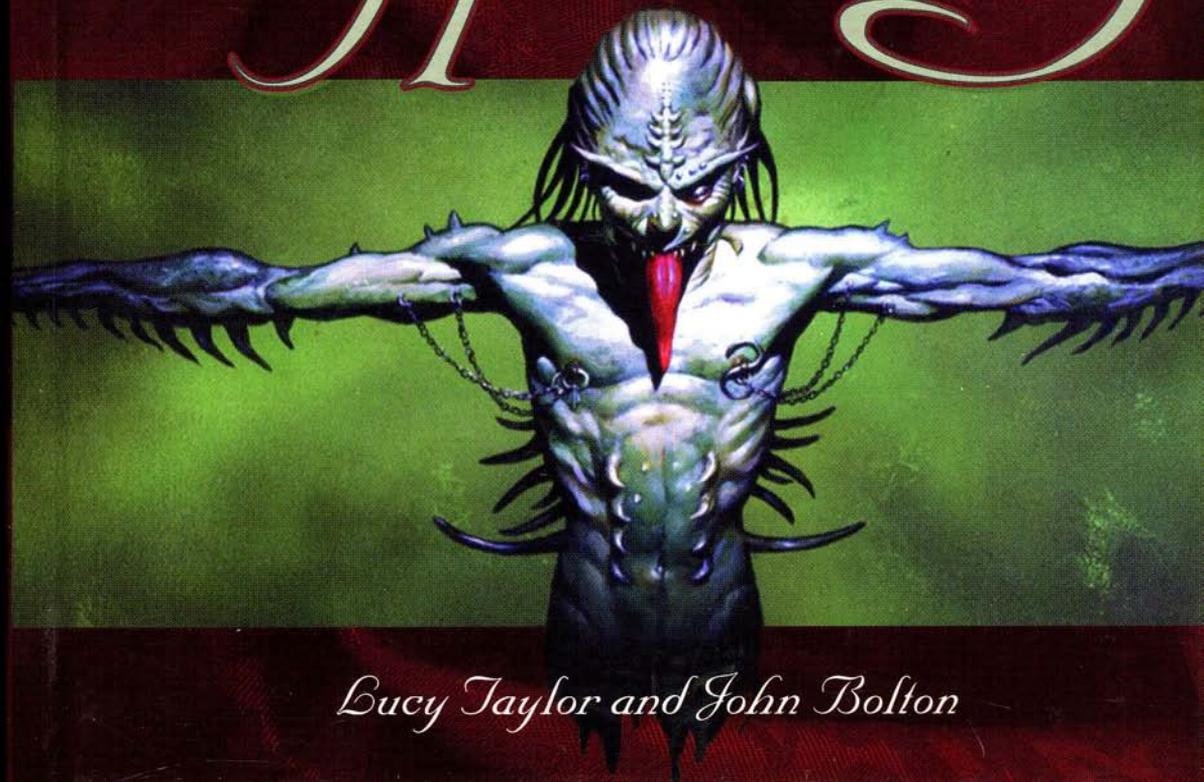
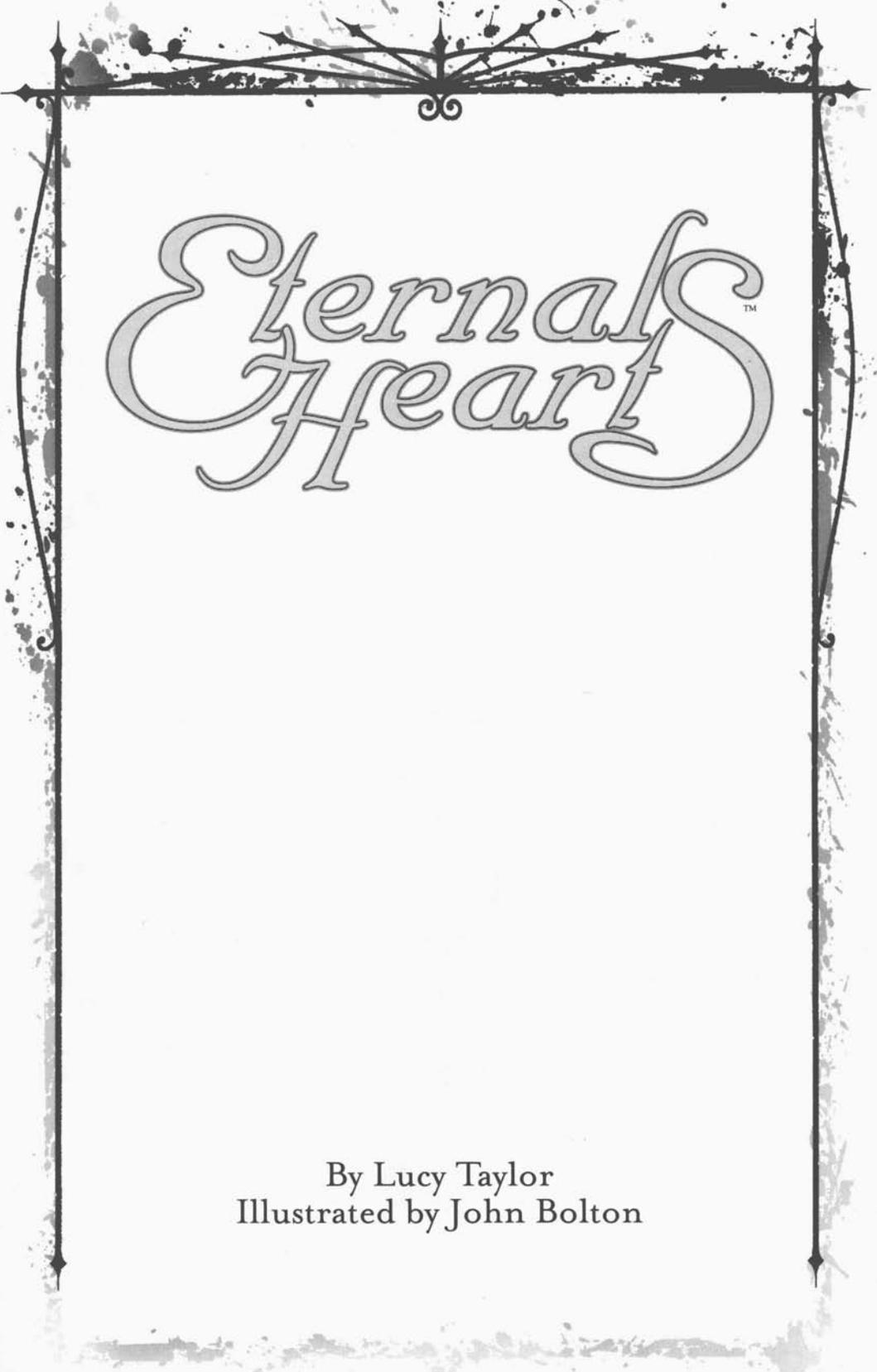


EternalsTM Heart



Lucy Taylor and John Bolton



*EternalTM
Heart*

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A WORD FROM THE DEVELOPER

Do vampires... um... *fuck*?

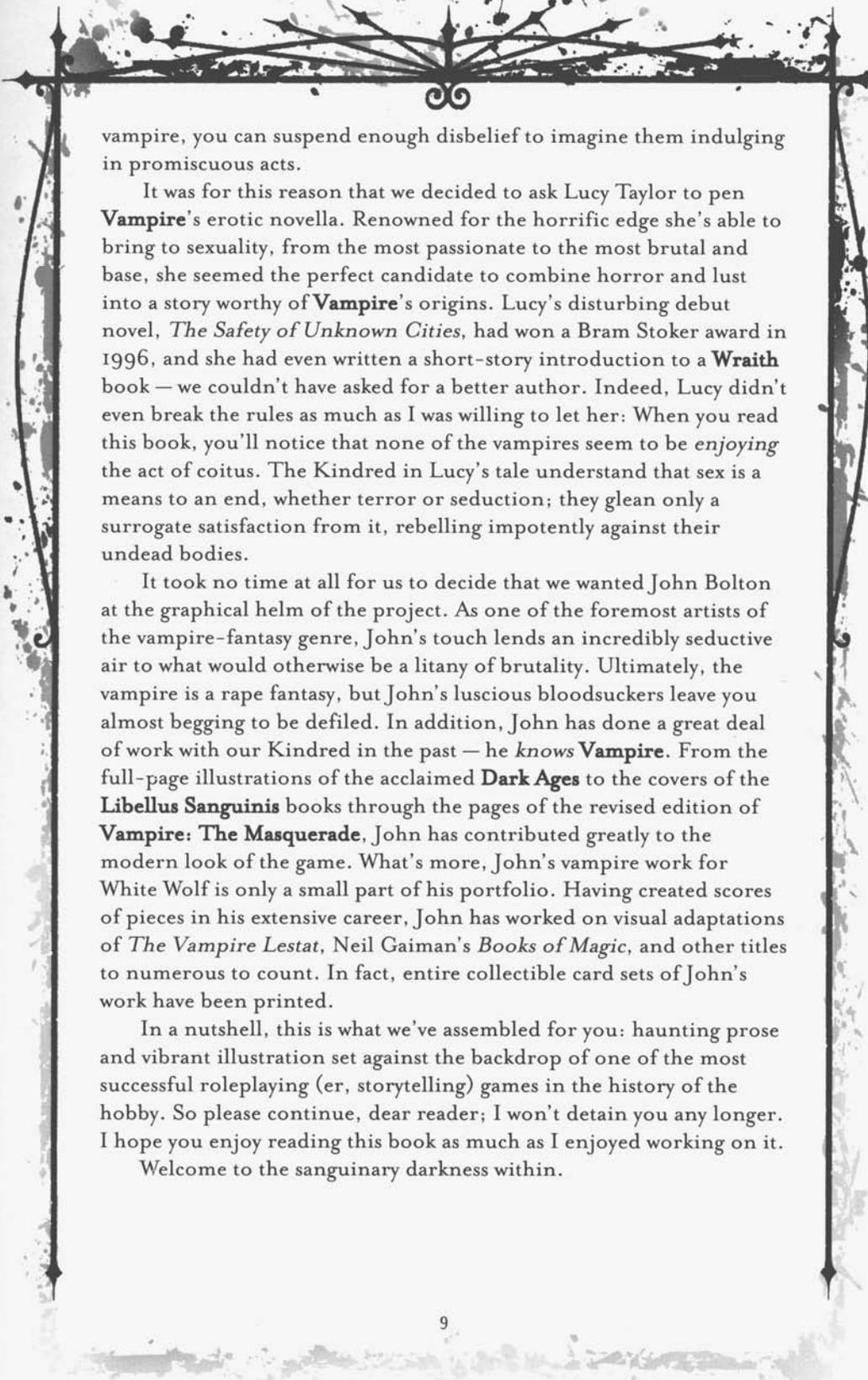
Well, not precisely. They're capable of performing the physical act by redirecting blood to the appropriate pieces of anatomy, but no vampire is going to be fathering or carrying a child. In fact, despite the ability to carry out the rudiments of the act, vampires don't gain any particular pleasure from the act.

If that's the case, why publish vampire erotica?

In our minds, that question answered itself. Vampires have been associated with sensuality and sexuality since their reinvention at the hands of Dr. John Polidori. The good doctor conjured forth Lord Ruthven in a fit of inspiration fueled by the future fashion-plate for vampire wannabes everywhere, Lord Byron. Prior to that point, vampires had been mindless, bloodsucking revenants of folklore. Polidori's romanticizing of the concept opened the floodgates — vampires became sensual staples of gothic and Romantic fiction. Witness the wicked desirability of Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla*, the carnal brutality of Frederick Cowles's *Kaldenstein* counts and the (sometimes) dapper charm of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Even the vampires of our jaded modern times possess an attractive emotional edge. Gary Oldman's *Dracula* from the Coppola movie had "traveled oceans of time" for his lover. Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt pushed the boundaries of mainstream homoeroticism in *Interview With the Vampire*. Hell, even porn queen Traci Lords looked suitably lurid before having her head blown off in *Blade*.

Vampire: The Masquerade followed the precedent set by other avenues of vampire entertainment. Published in 1991, the game brought a new dose of sensuality to a medium whose previous attention to sex involved circling a gender on a hobbit's character sheet. Live-Action Role Playing, particularly of the **Vampire** variety, even went one step further — sometimes the sex happens for real, instead of just "in-game." Sex — at least metaphorically, under the guise of a vampire's lust for blood — usurped the traditional T&A chainmail-bikini thrill that had long dominated hobby gaming. Out with the old, in with the pale, shapely goth androgynes....

To that end, I suppose I have to say we've cheated in this book. Without getting into long-winded discourses on vampiric physiology, **Vampire's** *Kindred* can engage in intercourse of various types, though they generally don't gain anything from it. But so what? If you can suspend enough disbelief to wrap your mind around the fantasy of the



vampire, you can suspend enough disbelief to imagine them indulging in promiscuous acts.

It was for this reason that we decided to ask Lucy Taylor to pen **Vampire**'s erotic novella. Renowned for the horrific edge she's able to bring to sexuality, from the most passionate to the most brutal and base, she seemed the perfect candidate to combine horror and lust into a story worthy of **Vampire**'s origins. Lucy's disturbing debut novel, *The Safety of Unknown Cities*, had won a Bram Stoker award in 1996, and she had even written a short-story introduction to a **Wraith** book — we couldn't have asked for a better author. Indeed, Lucy didn't even break the rules as much as I was willing to let her: When you read this book, you'll notice that none of the vampires seem to be *enjoying* the act of coitus. The Kindred in Lucy's tale understand that sex is a means to an end, whether terror or seduction; they glean only a surrogate satisfaction from it, rebelling impotently against their undead bodies.

It took no time at all for us to decide that we wanted John Bolton at the graphical helm of the project. As one of the foremost artists of the vampire-fantasy genre, John's touch lends an incredibly seductive air to what would otherwise be a litany of brutality. Ultimately, the vampire is a rape fantasy, but John's luscious bloodsuckers leave you almost begging to be defiled. In addition, John has done a great deal of work with our Kindred in the past — he *knows Vampire*. From the full-page illustrations of the acclaimed **Dark Ages** to the covers of the **Libellus Sanguinis** books through the pages of the revised edition of **Vampire: The Masquerade**, John has contributed greatly to the modern look of the game. What's more, John's vampire work for White Wolf is only a small part of his portfolio. Having created scores of pieces in his extensive career, John has worked on visual adaptations of *The Vampire Lestat*, Neil Gaiman's *Books of Magic*, and other titles to numerous to count. In fact, entire collectible card sets of John's work have been printed.

In a nutshell, this is what we've assembled for you: haunting prose and vibrant illustration set against the backdrop of one of the most successful roleplaying (er, storytelling) games in the history of the hobby. So please continue, dear reader; I won't detain you any longer. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed working on it.

Welcome to the sanguinary darkness within.

CHAPTER ONE

Spires.

Spindle-thin, ornately carved church spires, rising high over her head as she lay on her back being bludgeoned.

That was the first memory that returned.

After that, blood. Her blood. So much blood that she couldn't see the spires anymore, couldn't even see the preternaturally beautiful face of the man standing over her. Watching the others who were slaughtering her now. Relentlessly, artfully, torturously.

Five of them altogether. Two women, three men. They took turns at times, at other times collaborated to concoct new and inventive horrors to perpetrate upon her. Not as beautiful as the man who watched, but similar of feature — the diabolical mirth around the eyes, the seductive curl to the lips. A certain restrained, reptilian torpor to the movements. As though theirs was a common lineage, a similar damnation.

Raw, gleeful laughter as she writhed on the ground. Her ankles grabbed, her legs parted and stretched wide, like a wishbone ready to be snapped. Then her jaws wrenched open, mouth violated while others made use of the rest of her. Fucking her everywhere possible and then, when they were bored with that, opening up new, unnatural channels they could desecrate. And the Beautiful One standing over her still, not deigning to touch her now when so much damage had already been wrought, but fondling himself, a malign angel glorying in her torment.

Then, like a horde of leeches, their cold lips on her skin.

Teeth working, tongues lapping. And a strange, death-eroticizing pleasure — more intense than any drug she'd ever tried — that thrilled through her and seemed to make her breathe faster, bleed faster, blood and orgasms pumping out of her in one sublime rush.

She remembered freeing her mouth long enough to cry out his name.

Then the unspeakable clang of the shovel when it stoved in her skull.

Summoning all her will, Jean Locklear tried to open her eyes. Found them stuck shut.

She tried to scream, but her mouth and throat were plugged tight with a dry, gummy substance.

Tried — for the first time in her life — to pray, then realized that whatever hell she currently inhabited was far from the purview of God.

Oh, fuck, oh, fuck, where am I? How'd I get here? What the fuck did they do to me?

In the rank-smelling darkness, she became aware that she wasn't alone. Something inched and slid across her skin where nothing should have been.

It tickled along the curve of her nipple and nudged into the crease of a breast.

A breast? She still had both breasts, didn't she? Unable to raise her arms, it was impossible to find out; but where the left breast normally balanced the right one, there was now a vertigo-inducing sense of void.

Something else was exploring her farther down. Probing her softly and wetly, like a limp, deboned finger, then wriggling loose to snuggle moistly, horribly at the ravaged entryway to her ass.

She tried squirming away. She couldn't. Her body was held fast.

All right, she thought, maybe the church spires, the blood, the demented faces of my tormentors were all a dream.

Maybe, she thought, I got picked up for hassling Senator McNamarra again, and this time, instead of a warning or overnight in jail, they put me away. I'm in a straitjacket in the ward over at Jackson Psychiatric and some perverted orderly, some orderly pervert who counts his victims' pubic hairs and only comes on the even thrusts has his thumb in my cunt and his finger up my ass. Or the tip of his tongue. Correction, his whole hand. And he's wiggling it, sniggling it, higher and higher, spreading slime and saliva all the way to the back of my pussy. Fuck, fuck, fuck! Get me out of here. Oh, Christ get me out of here!

But no straitjacket could bind so completely and no tongue penetrate so deeply into her core. She managed to part her lips and tasted dry, crumbly dirt.

Where the fuck am I?

The blackness in which she'd come to her senses was solid and heavy and weighted her down. In places, unyielding as brick; in others, spongy and malodorous. Gritty under her eyelids and nails. Filling her mouth and her nostrils, all her openings, both her body's natural orifices and its new and terrible ones, the slits and gouges, the tiny, ragged amputations and deep, gaping punctures. And each of these an invitation to the things that curled and crawled and nested, a hive of bizarre infestation probing her helpless body for possibilities.

Her body, seething with activity and yet so passive, such deadweight flesh. Flesh that, in some bizarre way, she sensed had not just been mutilated but malformed as well, resculpted in grotesque and ghastly ways.

Even worse, inside her, beyond the wild roar of her thoughts, lay a deep, reverberating silence. Given time, she knew her mind would sink into that silence and be annihilated.

All right, she thought, I know what this is. Not a straitjacket at all. Some kind of bondage device with sensory deprivation to jack up the torture, and drugs to make me think I'm insane. I can take this. It will end. Even fantasy scenes that get out of hand, that go bad, they all end sooner or later.

Rapunzel, Rapunzel...

Fuck Rapunzel. She didn't want to be Rapunzel the sex slave anymore. She wanted to be Jean Locklear again. Plain old Jean Locklear who lived in a walk-up apartment on the fringe of Georgetown. Jean Locklear, who would have been pretty if she'd only let herself eat enough and if she didn't use a razor blade to mutilate her arms and legs when she felt stressed.

On the Net, her name was Rapunzel. On the Net, she could be whomever she wished. A transsexual latex freak; a double amputee with a fetish for having her stumps licked; a fuck-me, suck-me, beat-me-till-I-bleed submissive bitch with a ring in her clit and a brand on her ass; a porn prince with a kink for whipping pretty boys. Online she was a shapeshifting, genderbending, fuckstruck macho slut who took it up the ass and down the throat and in the cunt, who strapped on a Secretariat-sized dildo when she did rough trade and fistfucked like the hottest leather hustler while in real life she was —

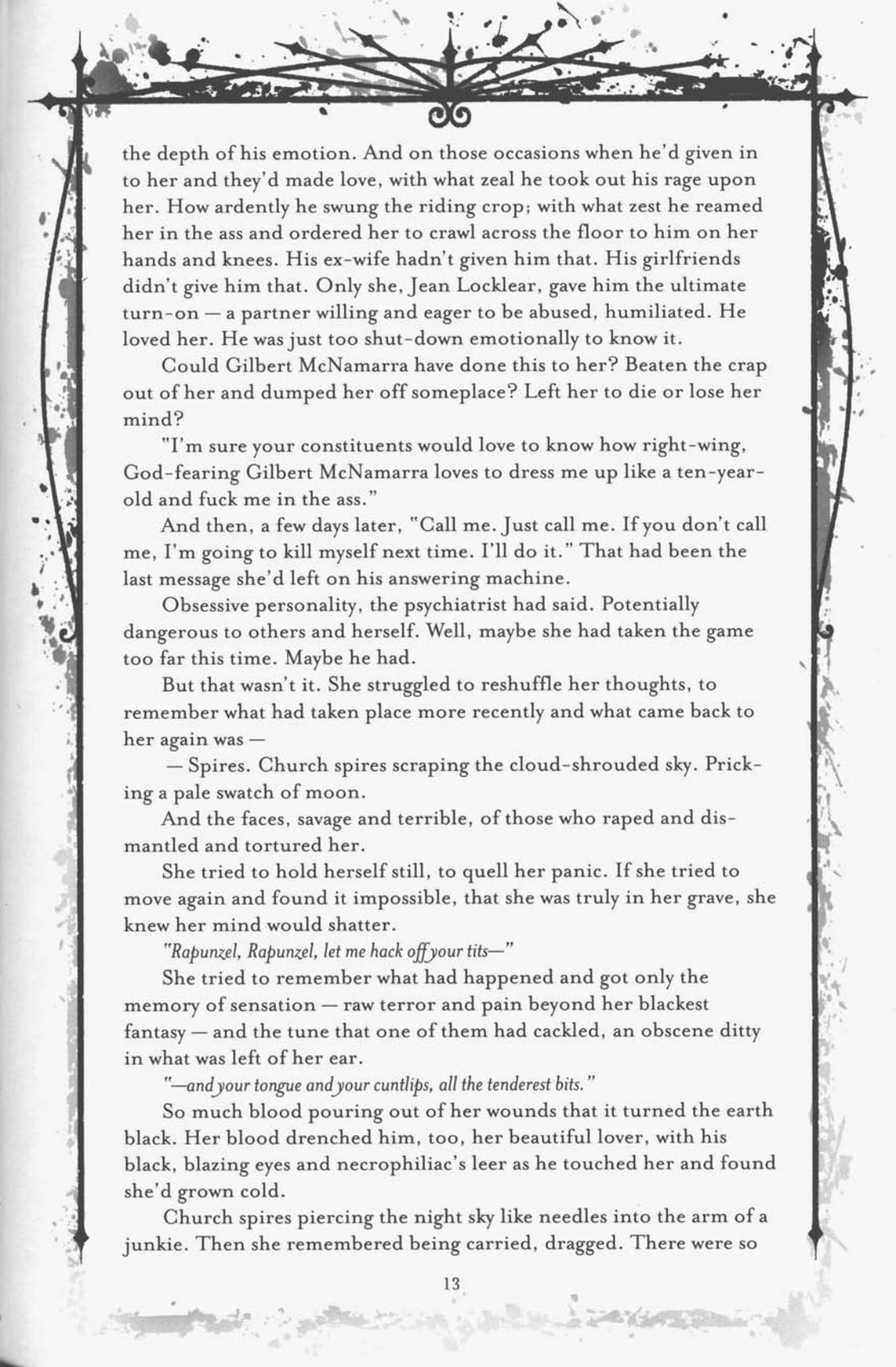
— just Jean Locklear, twenty-three years old, part-time clerk at Hot Vibrations Sex Emporium, former stripper at the Gold Coast Lounge in Arlington, sex addict and devout computer geek.

And, since January of last year, out on bond facing felony stalking charges that could get her put away for five years.

The object of her merciless devotion: one Senator Gilbert McNamarra. A tight-assed bureaucrat and misogynistic prick, but damn, if he couldn't give head. Three times since he dumped her, she'd broken into McNamarra's house. She'd invaded his office on the pretext of applying for a job, sent death threats to his girlfriends, mailed sets of her soiled undergarments to his home, and phoned in the announcement of their upcoming wedding to the tabloids.

Gilbert McNamarra told the cops if she broke into his house again, he'd shoot her.

But he was only kidding. She knew that. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. Loved her, even. She knew that. Knew it even though he tried to cover it up with harsh words and fierce expressions. The very tremor that infused his voice when he tried to feign fury betrayed



the depth of his emotion. And on those occasions when he'd given in to her and they'd made love, with what zeal he took out his rage upon her. How ardently he swung the riding crop; with what zest he reamed her in the ass and ordered her to crawl across the floor to him on her hands and knees. His ex-wife hadn't given him that. His girlfriends didn't give him that. Only she, Jean Locklear, gave him the ultimate turn-on — a partner willing and eager to be abused, humiliated. He loved her. He was just too shut-down emotionally to know it.

Could Gilbert McNamarra have done this to her? Beaten the crap out of her and dumped her off someplace? Left her to die or lose her mind?

"I'm sure your constituents would love to know how right-wing, God-fearing Gilbert McNamarra loves to dress me up like a ten-year-old and fuck me in the ass."

And then, a few days later, "Call me. Just call me. If you don't call me, I'm going to kill myself next time. I'll do it." That had been the last message she'd left on his answering machine.

Obsessive personality, the psychiatrist had said. Potentially dangerous to others and herself. Well, maybe she had taken the game too far this time. Maybe he had.

But that wasn't it. She struggled to reshuffle her thoughts, to remember what had taken place more recently and what came back to her again was —

— Spires. Church spires scraping the cloud-shrouded sky. Pricking a pale swatch of moon.

And the faces, savage and terrible, of those who raped and dismantled and tortured her.

She tried to hold herself still, to quell her panic. If she tried to move again and found it impossible, that she was truly in her grave, she knew her mind would shatter.

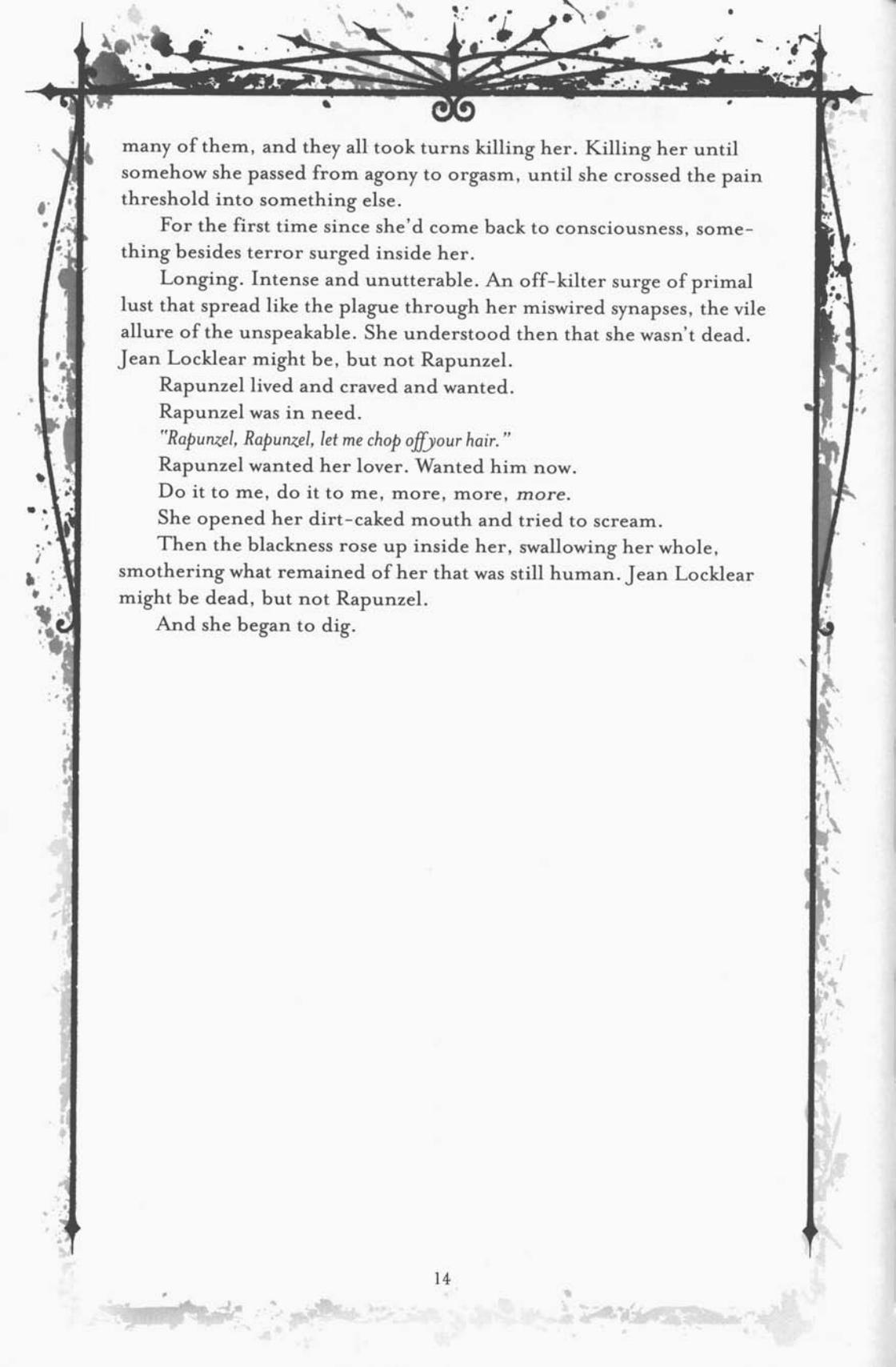
"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let me hack off your tits—"

She tried to remember what had happened and got only the memory of sensation — raw terror and pain beyond her blackest fantasy — and the tune that one of them had cackled, an obscene ditty in what was left of her ear.

"—and your tongue and your cuntlips, all the tenderest bits."

So much blood pouring out of her wounds that it turned the earth black. Her blood drenched him, too, her beautiful lover, with his black, blazing eyes and necrophiliac's leer as he touched her and found she'd grown cold.

Church spires piercing the night sky like needles into the arm of a junkie. Then she remembered being carried, dragged. There were so



many of them, and they all took turns killing her. Killing her until somehow she passed from agony to orgasm, until she crossed the pain threshold into something else.

For the first time since she'd come back to consciousness, something besides terror surged inside her.

Longing. Intense and unutterable. An off-kilter surge of primal lust that spread like the plague through her miswired synapses, the vile allure of the unspeakable. She understood then that she wasn't dead. Jean Locklear might be, but not Rapunzel.

Rapunzel lived and craved and wanted.

Rapunzel was in need.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let me chop off your hair."

Rapunzel wanted her lover. Wanted him now.

Do it to me, do it to me, more, more, *more*.

She opened her dirt-caked mouth and tried to scream.

Then the blackness rose up inside her, swallowing her whole, smothering what remained of her that was still human. Jean Locklear might be dead, but not Rapunzel.

And she began to dig.

CHAPTER TWO

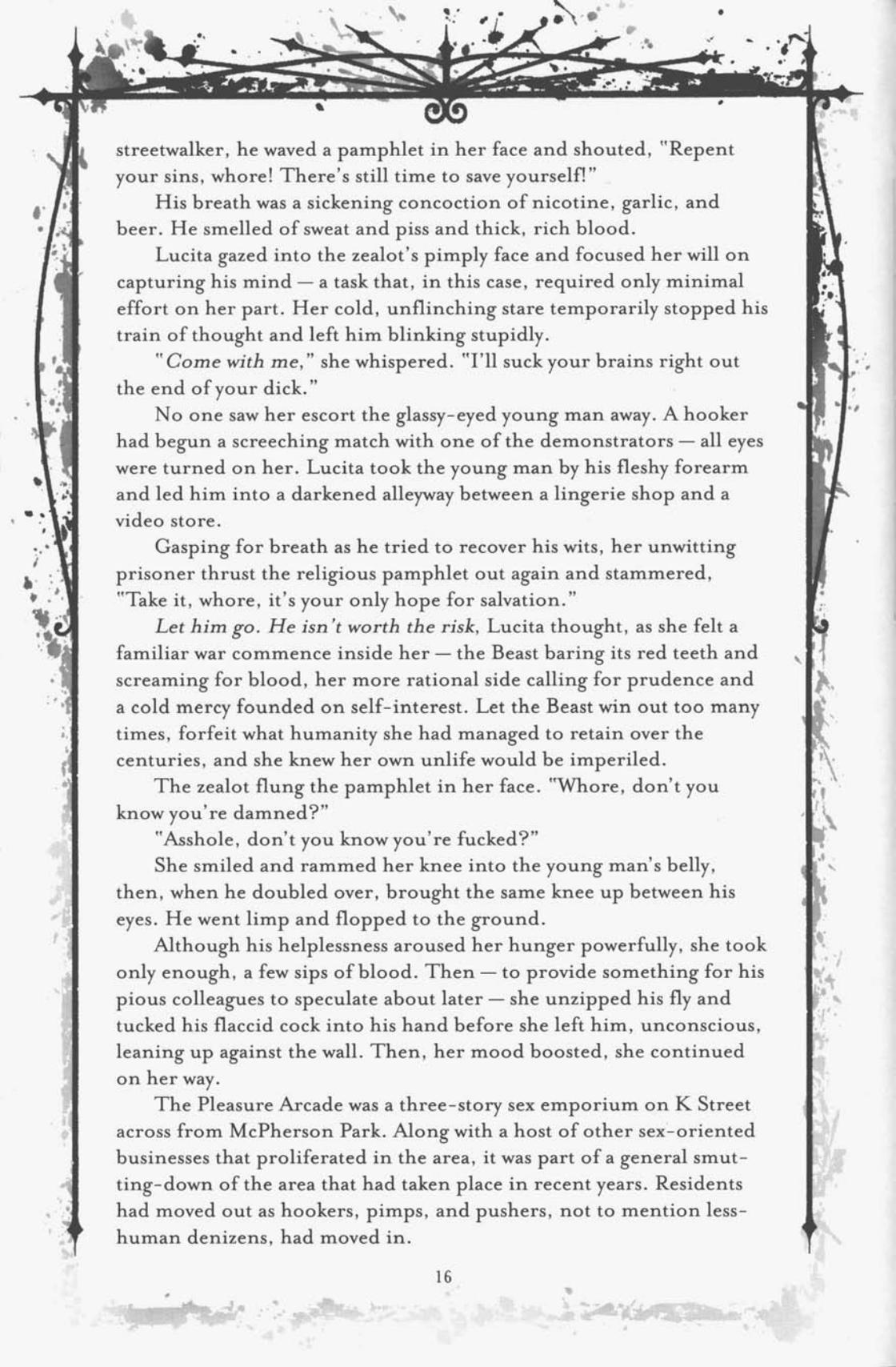
Lucita observed the derelicts and junkies slumped in alleyways, the prowling hookers leaning into car windows, the crack dealers plying their wares under the sallow neon of porn shops and massage parlors, and marveled at the fertile hunting ground that was Washington, D.C. The majority of people in the area between McPherson Square and Thomas Circle could disappear tonight and no one would miss them or question their disappearance. Kindred could hunt here with impunity, and the greatest risk would be blood tainted with a witch's brew of street drugs or disease.

At the corner of L Street and Vermont, a mini-skirted hooker with ebony skin, white-blond hair, and inch-long scarlet nails caught Lucita's eye. Probably thinking that the striking, raven-haired woman in black jeans, high heels, and a leather jacket could only be competition, the girl scowled, spat on the sidewalk, and uttered a string of obscenities so slurred that Lucita was at a loss to comprehend. Had she not been heading for an important rendezvous, she would have taken time to show the girl that not all johns were male and that some pleasures, truly, were to die for. Perhaps later, she thought, and hoped this business with the "Council of Ragnarok" wouldn't take all night.

After all, she was due for some recreation that went beyond feeding. As a hired mercenary and one of the most feared and lethal *antitribu* of the Lasombra clan, Lucita stayed on the move. There was often precious little time for dalliances that indulged appetites other than mere hunger.

Nearing McPherson Square, she heard the discordant rumble of angry voices and saw a crowd of demonstrators waving placards as they paraded back and forth before a porn shop. They chanted slogans: Sanitize Our Streets — Wipe Out Filth — Destroy the Godless. The scene was so disturbing that, momentarily, it stopped Lucita in her tracks. The sight of these religious zealots protesting the presence of hookers, sex shops and X-rated video parlors revived old memories of other times, other "righteous" causes espoused by those who deemed themselves morally pure. The hair rose on the back of her neck, and a shudder undulated up her spine. Even centuries later, she could still remember the cries of the tortured, Kindred and kine alike, when they were put to the Inquisitor's rack.

As she approached the address she'd been given, a young man, bloated, ashen-faced, leaped out into her path. Taking her for a



streetwalker, he waved a pamphlet in her face and shouted, "Repent your sins, whore! There's still time to save yourself!"

His breath was a sickening concoction of nicotine, garlic, and beer. He smelled of sweat and piss and thick, rich blood.

Lucita gazed into the zealot's pimply face and focused her will on capturing his mind — a task that, in this case, required only minimal effort on her part. Her cold, unflinching stare temporarily stopped his train of thought and left him blinking stupidly.

"Come with me," she whispered. "I'll suck your brains right out the end of your dick."

No one saw her escort the glassy-eyed young man away. A hooker had begun a screeching match with one of the demonstrators — all eyes were turned on her. Lucita took the young man by his fleshy forearm and led him into a darkened alleyway between a lingerie shop and a video store.

Gasping for breath as he tried to recover his wits, her unwitting prisoner thrust the religious pamphlet out again and stammered, "Take it, whore, it's your only hope for salvation."

Let him go. He isn't worth the risk, Lucita thought, as she felt a familiar war commence inside her — the Beast baring its red teeth and screaming for blood, her more rational side calling for prudence and a cold mercy founded on self-interest. Let the Beast win out too many times, forfeit what humanity she had managed to retain over the centuries, and she knew her own unlife would be imperiled.

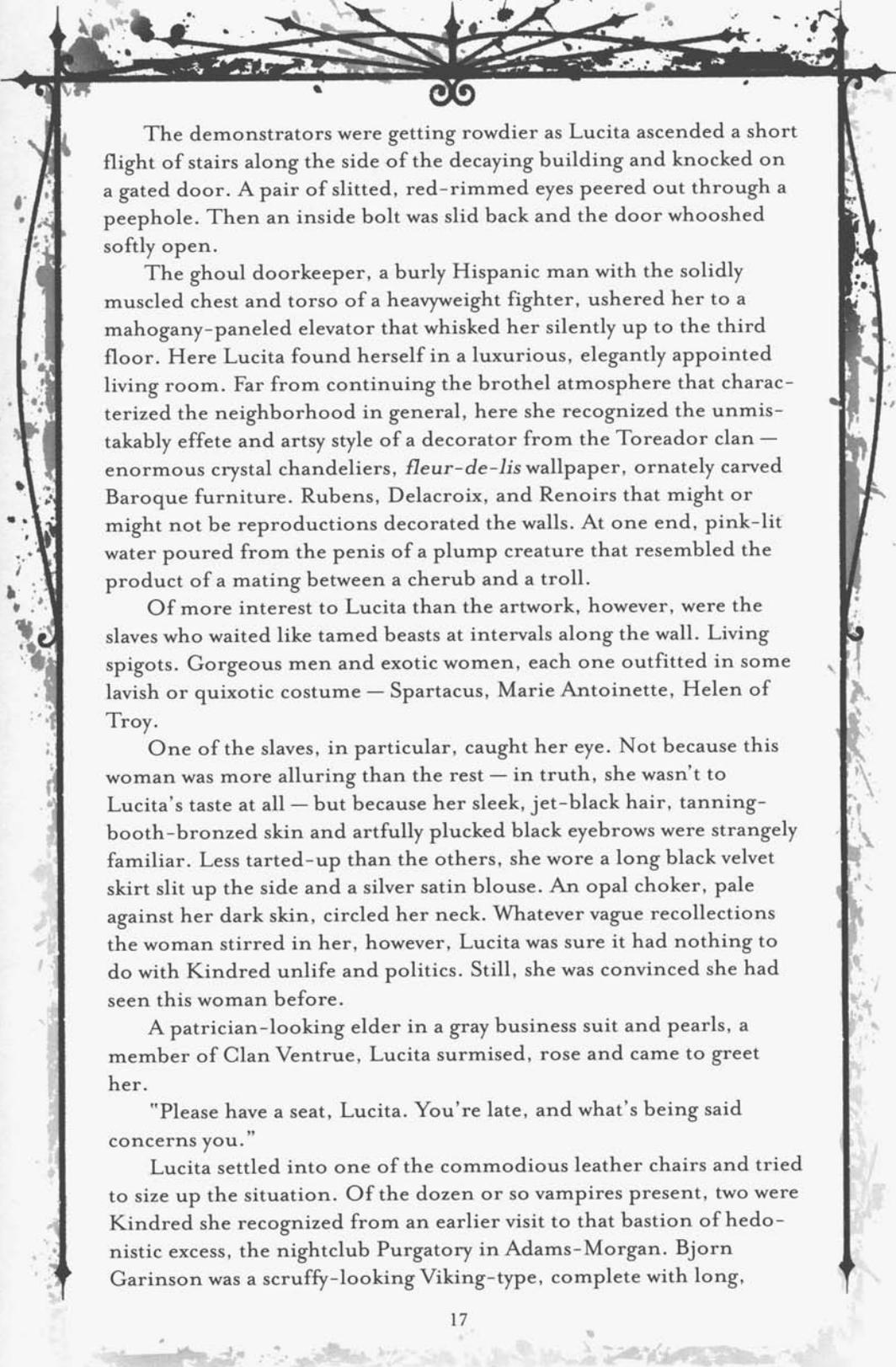
The zealot flung the pamphlet in her face. "Whore, don't you know you're damned?"

"Asshole, don't you know you're fucked?"

She smiled and rammed her knee into the young man's belly, then, when he doubled over, brought the same knee up between his eyes. He went limp and flopped to the ground.

Although his helplessness aroused her hunger powerfully, she took only enough, a few sips of blood. Then — to provide something for his pious colleagues to speculate about later — she unzipped his fly and tucked his flaccid cock into his hand before she left him, unconscious, leaning up against the wall. Then, her mood boosted, she continued on her way.

The Pleasure Arcade was a three-story sex emporium on K Street across from McPherson Park. Along with a host of other sex-oriented businesses that proliferated in the area, it was part of a general smutting-down of the area that had taken place in recent years. Residents had moved out as hookers, pimps, and pushers, not to mention less-human denizens, had moved in.



The demonstrators were getting rowdier as Lucita ascended a short flight of stairs along the side of the decaying building and knocked on a gated door. A pair of slitted, red-rimmed eyes peered out through a peephole. Then an inside bolt was slid back and the door whooshed softly open.

The ghoul doorkeeper, a burly Hispanic man with the solidly muscled chest and torso of a heavyweight fighter, ushered her to a mahogany-paneled elevator that whisked her silently up to the third floor. Here Lucita found herself in a luxurious, elegantly appointed living room. Far from continuing the brothel atmosphere that characterized the neighborhood in general, here she recognized the unmistakably effete and artsy style of a decorator from the Toreador clan — enormous crystal chandeliers, *fleur-de-lis* wallpaper, ornately carved Baroque furniture. Rubens, Delacroix, and Renoirs that might or might not be reproductions decorated the walls. At one end, pink-lit water poured from the penis of a plump creature that resembled the product of a mating between a cherub and a troll.

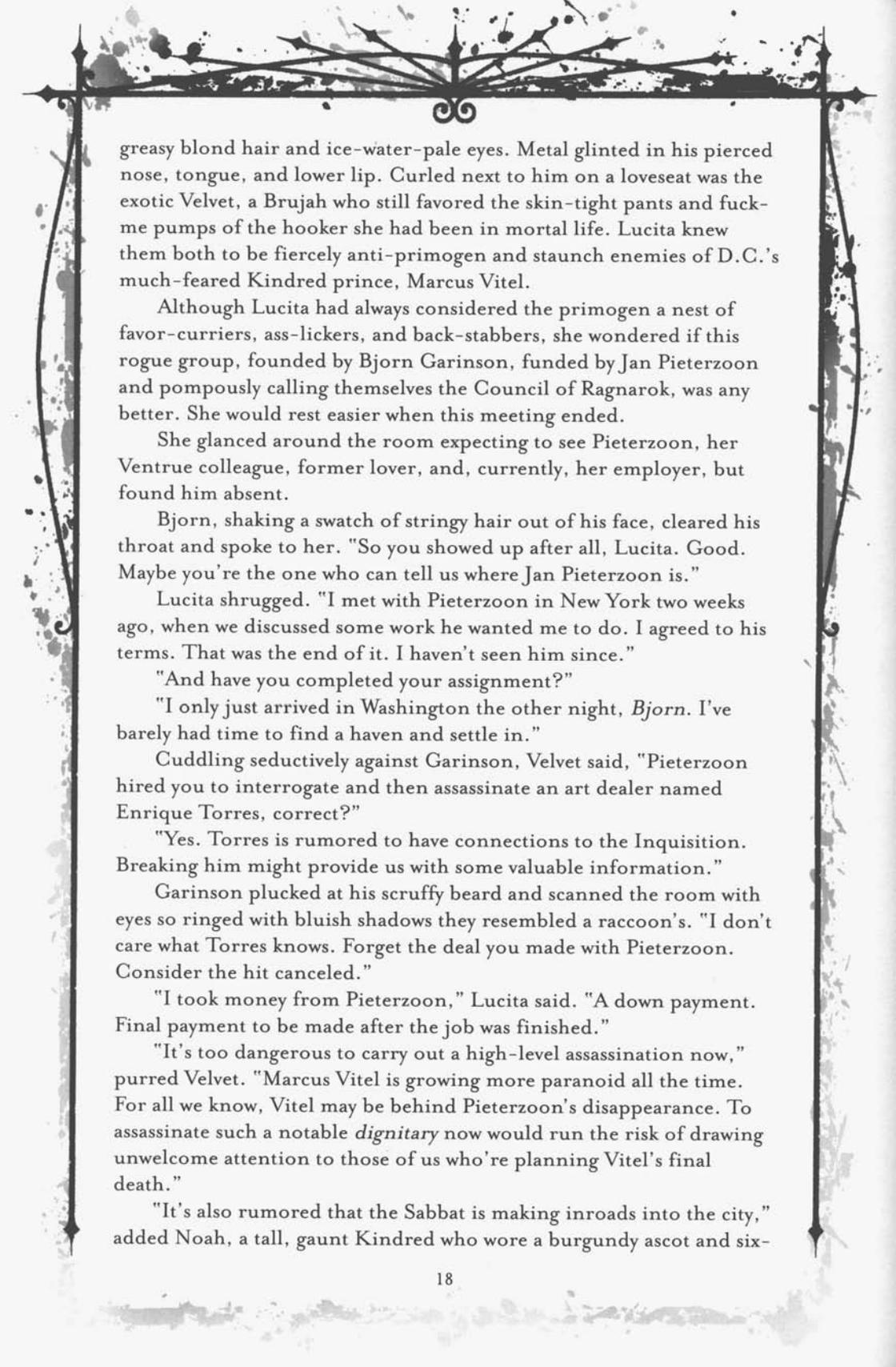
Of more interest to Lucita than the artwork, however, were the slaves who waited like tamed beasts at intervals along the wall. Living spigots. Gorgeous men and exotic women, each one outfitted in some lavish or quixotic costume — Spartacus, Marie Antoinette, Helen of Troy.

One of the slaves, in particular, caught her eye. Not because this woman was more alluring than the rest — in truth, she wasn't to Lucita's taste at all — but because her sleek, jet-black hair, tanning-booth-bronzed skin and artfully plucked black eyebrows were strangely familiar. Less tarted-up than the others, she wore a long black velvet skirt slit up the side and a silver satin blouse. An opal choker, pale against her dark skin, circled her neck. Whatever vague recollections the woman stirred in her, however, Lucita was sure it had nothing to do with Kindred unlife and politics. Still, she was convinced she had seen this woman before.

A patrician-looking elder in a gray business suit and pearls, a member of Clan Ventrue, Lucita surmised, rose and came to greet her.

"Please have a seat, Lucita. You're late, and what's being said concerns you."

Lucita settled into one of the commodious leather chairs and tried to size up the situation. Of the dozen or so vampires present, two were Kindred she recognized from an earlier visit to that bastion of hedonistic excess, the nightclub Purgatory in Adams-Morgan. Bjorn Garinson was a scruffy-looking Viking-type, complete with long,



greasy blond hair and ice-water-pale eyes. Metal glinted in his pierced nose, tongue, and lower lip. Curled next to him on a loveseat was the exotic Velvet, a Brujah who still favored the skin-tight pants and fuck-me pumps of the hooker she had been in mortal life. Lucita knew them both to be fiercely anti-primogen and staunch enemies of D.C.'s much-feared Kindred prince, Marcus Vitel.

Although Lucita had always considered the primogen a nest of favor-curriers, ass-lickers, and back-stabbers, she wondered if this rogue group, founded by Bjorn Garinson, funded by Jan Pieterzoon and pompously calling themselves the Council of Ragnarok, was any better. She would rest easier when this meeting ended.

She glanced around the room expecting to see Pieterzoon, her Ventruue colleague, former lover, and, currently, her employer, but found him absent.

Bjorn, shaking a swatch of stringy hair out of his face, cleared his throat and spoke to her. "So you showed up after all, Lucita. Good. Maybe you're the one who can tell us where Jan Pieterzoon is."

Lucita shrugged. "I met with Pieterzoon in New York two weeks ago, when we discussed some work he wanted me to do. I agreed to his terms. That was the end of it. I haven't seen him since."

"And have you completed your assignment?"

"I only just arrived in Washington the other night, *Bjorn*. I've barely had time to find a haven and settle in."

Cuddling seductively against Garinson, Velvet said, "Pieterzoon hired you to interrogate and then assassinate an art dealer named Enrique Torres, correct?"

"Yes. Torres is rumored to have connections to the Inquisition. Breaking him might provide us with some valuable information."

Garinson plucked at his scruffy beard and scanned the room with eyes so ringed with bluish shadows they resembled a raccoon's. "I don't care what Torres knows. Forget the deal you made with Pieterzoon. Consider the hit canceled."

"I took money from Pieterzoon," Lucita said. "A down payment. Final payment to be made after the job was finished."

"It's too dangerous to carry out a high-level assassination now," purred Velvet. "Marcus Vitel is growing more paranoid all the time. For all we know, Vitel may be behind Pieterzoon's disappearance. To assassinate such a notable *dignitary* now would run the risk of drawing unwelcome attention to those of us who're planning Vitel's final death."

"It's also rumored that the Sabbat is making inroads into the city," added Noah, a tall, gaunt Kindred who wore a burgundy ascot and six-

hundred-dollar Bruno Magli shoes. "Obviously the Sabbat rabble have no respect for the Masquerade, but we have reason to believe Vitel may be involved with them as well. At such a time, any assassination must be considered with utmost attention to decorum and prudence."

"From what I've heard, Vitel is too engrossed with his two degenerate daughters to keep a sharp eye on what goes on in the City," Lucita said. "Pieterzoon told me he's fond of fornicating with his darling Monica and Cynthia on top of the Washington Monument."

"Vitel likes to give the impression he's consumed by his own private lusts," said Garinson. "In truth, the only lust that rules him is killing off his enemies."

Lucita was starting to regret she'd ever consented to attend the council meeting. Remembering the slutty, dark-skinned blonde with the foul mouth, she thought her evening could truly have been better spent. "I agreed to do a hit for Pieterzoon and took his money. I plan to get the rest of my payment very soon." Turning to Noah, she added haughtily, "As for your much-venerated prudence and decorum, those are just two more synonyms for cowardice and fear."

Bjorn jumped to his feet. A muscle at the corner of his mouth twitched with agitation. "Who the hell are you to question us, Lucita, when we're the ones taking the chances? We're the ones who're going to overthrow Vitel."

"And who are you to tell me to renege on a contract?" said Lucita. "If you have a problem with it, take it up with Pieterzoon."

"We don't know where he is!" bellowed Bjorn.

"New York is under the influence of the Black Hand," said Noah in his thin, insectile voice. "Pieterzoon may well have met with foul play there. For all we know, you may have betrayed him to the Sabbat."

Lucita eyed the effeminate Giovanni with contempt. "My loyalty is only to myself. But for the record, I don't betray Kindred for whom I work."

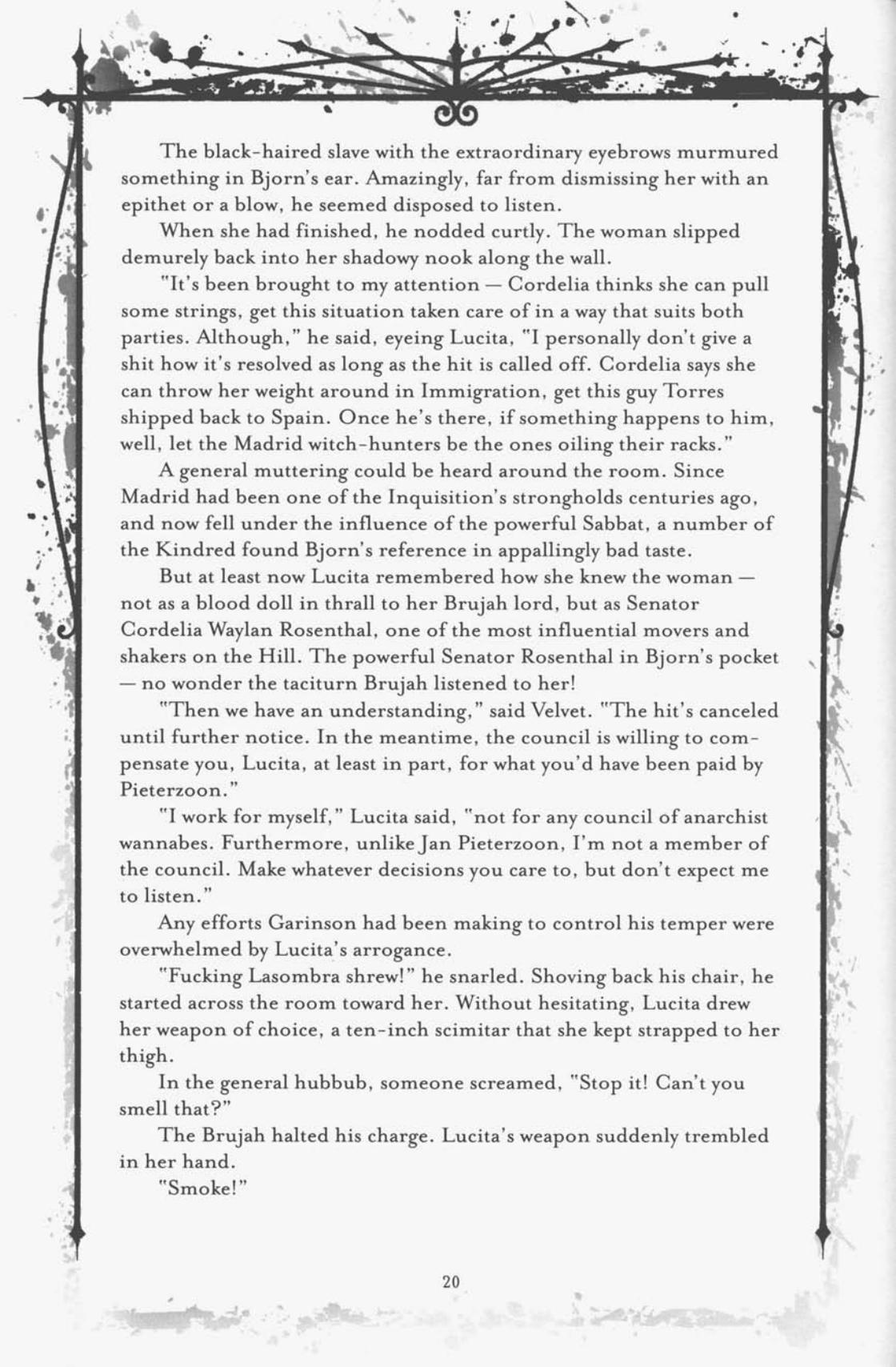
The door opened to admit a latecomer; with him came the wailing of sirens and a general commotion. Screams. Glass breaking.

"What's happening out there?" someone said.

"Mob of Christians is probably violating the hookers," laughed a stylishly dressed Ventrué. "We should go help."

"Shut up; we aren't finished here!" snapped Garinson.

"Please. I need to speak with you, master." To Lucita's surprise, it was the female slave she'd noticed before who spoke. Kine addressing Kindred as *master* in so casual a fashion — it was unheard of!



The black-haired slave with the extraordinary eyebrows murmured something in Bjorn's ear. Amazingly, far from dismissing her with an epithet or a blow, he seemed disposed to listen.

When she had finished, he nodded curtly. The woman slipped demurely back into her shadowy nook along the wall.

"It's been brought to my attention — Cordelia thinks she can pull some strings, get this situation taken care of in a way that suits both parties. Although," he said, eyeing Lucita, "I personally don't give a shit how it's resolved as long as the hit is called off. Cordelia says she can throw her weight around in Immigration, get this guy Torres shipped back to Spain. Once he's there, if something happens to him, well, let the Madrid witch-hunters be the ones oiling their racks."

A general muttering could be heard around the room. Since Madrid had been one of the Inquisition's strongholds centuries ago, and now fell under the influence of the powerful Sabbat, a number of the Kindred found Bjorn's reference in appallingly bad taste.

But at least now Lucita remembered how she knew the woman — not as a blood doll in thrall to her Brujah lord, but as Senator Cordelia Waylan Rosenthal, one of the most influential movers and shakers on the Hill. The powerful Senator Rosenthal in Bjorn's pocket — no wonder the taciturn Brujah listened to her!

"Then we have an understanding," said Velvet. "The hit's canceled until further notice. In the meantime, the council is willing to compensate you, Lucita, at least in part, for what you'd have been paid by Pieterzoon."

"I work for myself," Lucita said, "not for any council of anarchist wannabes. Furthermore, unlike Jan Pieterzoon, I'm not a member of the council. Make whatever decisions you care to, but don't expect me to listen."

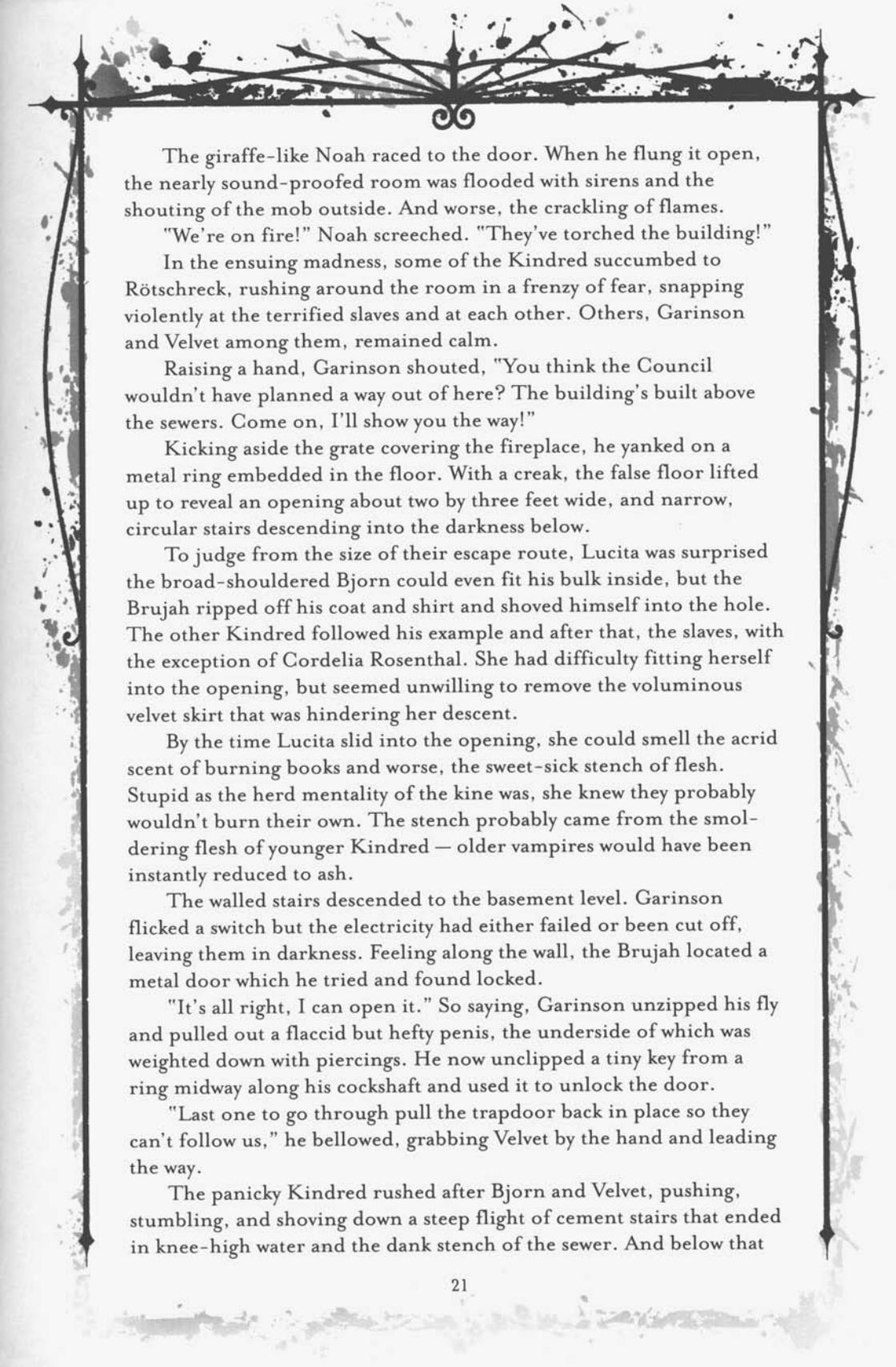
Any efforts Garinson had been making to control his temper were overwhelmed by Lucita's arrogance.

"Fucking Lasombra shrew!" he snarled. Shoving back his chair, he started across the room toward her. Without hesitating, Lucita drew her weapon of choice, a ten-inch scimitar that she kept strapped to her thigh.

In the general hubbub, someone screamed, "Stop it! Can't you smell that?"

The Brujah halted his charge. Lucita's weapon suddenly trembled in her hand.

"Smoke!"



The giraffe-like Noah raced to the door. When he flung it open, the nearly sound-proofed room was flooded with sirens and the shouting of the mob outside. And worse, the crackling of flames.

"We're on fire!" Noah screeched. "They've torched the building!"

In the ensuing madness, some of the Kindred succumbed to Röttschreck, rushing around the room in a frenzy of fear, snapping violently at the terrified slaves and at each other. Others, Garinson and Velvet among them, remained calm.

Raising a hand, Garinson shouted, "You think the Council wouldn't have planned a way out of here? The building's built above the sewers. Come on, I'll show you the way!"

Kicking aside the grate covering the fireplace, he yanked on a metal ring embedded in the floor. With a creak, the false floor lifted up to reveal an opening about two by three feet wide, and narrow, circular stairs descending into the darkness below.

To judge from the size of their escape route, Lucita was surprised the broad-shouldered Bjorn could even fit his bulk inside, but the Brujah ripped off his coat and shirt and shoved himself into the hole. The other Kindred followed his example and after that, the slaves, with the exception of Cordelia Rosenthal. She had difficulty fitting herself into the opening, but seemed unwilling to remove the voluminous velvet skirt that was hindering her descent.

By the time Lucita slid into the opening, she could smell the acrid scent of burning books and worse, the sweet-sick stench of flesh. Stupid as the herd mentality of the kine was, she knew they probably wouldn't burn their own. The stench probably came from the smoldering flesh of younger Kindred — older vampires would have been instantly reduced to ash.

The walled stairs descended to the basement level. Garinson flicked a switch but the electricity had either failed or been cut off, leaving them in darkness. Feeling along the wall, the Brujah located a metal door which he tried and found locked.

"It's all right, I can open it." So saying, Garinson unzipped his fly and pulled out a flaccid but hefty penis, the underside of which was weighted down with piercings. He now unclipped a tiny key from a ring midway along his cockshaft and used it to unlock the door.

"Last one to go through pull the trapdoor back in place so they can't follow us," he bellowed, grabbing Velvet by the hand and leading the way.

The panicky Kindred rushed after Bjorn and Velvet, pushing, stumbling, and shoving down a steep flight of cement stairs that ended in knee-high water and the dank stench of the sewer. And below that

stronger stink, another odor that Lucita recognized — the musky, ripe smell of the Nosferatu who, as in most other cities, must inhabit this place.

"Come on, hurry!" yelled Garinson.

Unexpectedly, the slave Cordelia, who up until now had been the only mortal to remain calm, suddenly hoisted her long, water-slogged skirt and ran splashing ahead of the others. About ten feet ahead of the group, she whirled and fumbled with the petticoat of her elaborate garment. An object dropped into the water and she scooped it up.

"Stop right there!" She raised her hands. One held a cigarette lighter, the other a metal flask of the type used to carry whiskey, which had been concealed under her voluminous gown.

She flicked the lighter on, and a tiny flame erupted.

"Don't come any closer, you fucking bunch of corpses!"

"Fucking bitch, have you lost your mind?" yelled Velvet.

"Kill her," Noah shouted. "She can't hurt us with that!"

"He's right," said Garinson. "What do you think you're going to do, cremate all of us with that pathetic little flame?"

Cordelia continued to wave the lighter. Her voice, given the circumstances, was flat and almost placid, infused with a bitter calm. "All of you sicken me, but you, Bjorn, you disgust me the most with your pathetic fantasies of power and revolution. You don't know anything about real power, but *it* does. It told me there'd be a riot tonight, that the neighborhood would be torched. It told me how to destroy you."

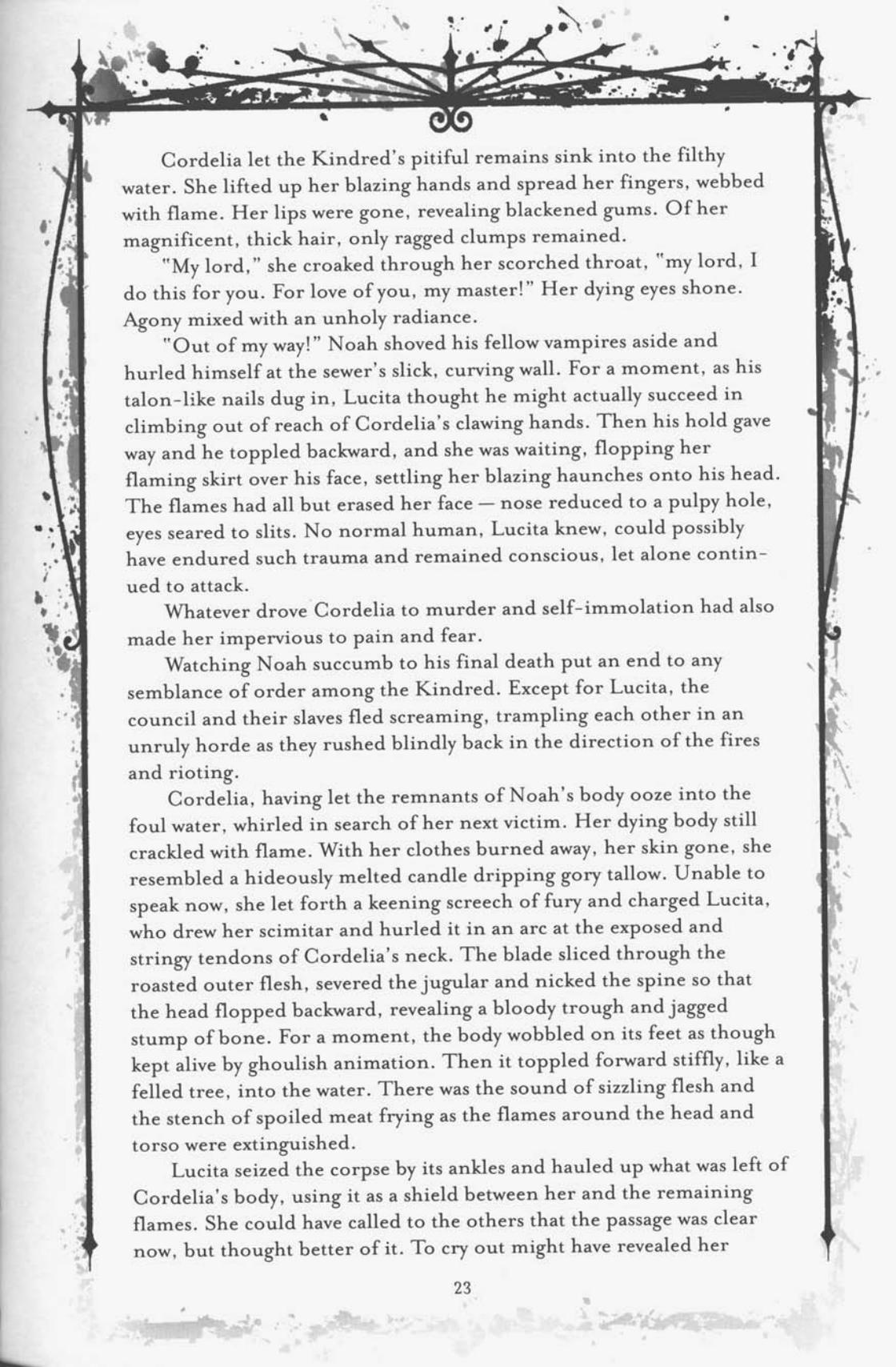
Tilting the flask, she doused her hair and chest with gasoline. The rest she emptied into the water between her and the horror-stricken Garinson.

"Burn in hell, you fucking monsters," she hissed as she touched the flame to her gasoline-soaked hair.

There was a gigantic whoosh. Senator Cordelia Rosenthal and the water around her exploded into flames.

"Die, you bastards!" Pinwheeling her arms, the woman made of fire charged the cringing Kindred. Her eyes gleamed with a bizarre, almost lust-struck radiance. Whatever madness gripped her apparently made her impervious to pain, for even as the skin charred on her bones, she was laughing, screeching, capering like a crazed jester as the Kindred fled before her.

A vampire in the grip of Röttschreck tried to rush past her through the burning water. Cordelia swerved and caught the woman, embracing her in flame. The Kindred's screams, the sight of her undead flesh reduced instantly to ash, increased the others' panic.



Cordelia let the Kindred's pitiful remains sink into the filthy water. She lifted up her blazing hands and spread her fingers, webbed with flame. Her lips were gone, revealing blackened gums. Of her magnificent, thick hair, only ragged clumps remained.

"My lord," she croaked through her scorched throat, "my lord, I do this for you. For love of you, my master!" Her dying eyes shone. Agony mixed with an unholy radiance.

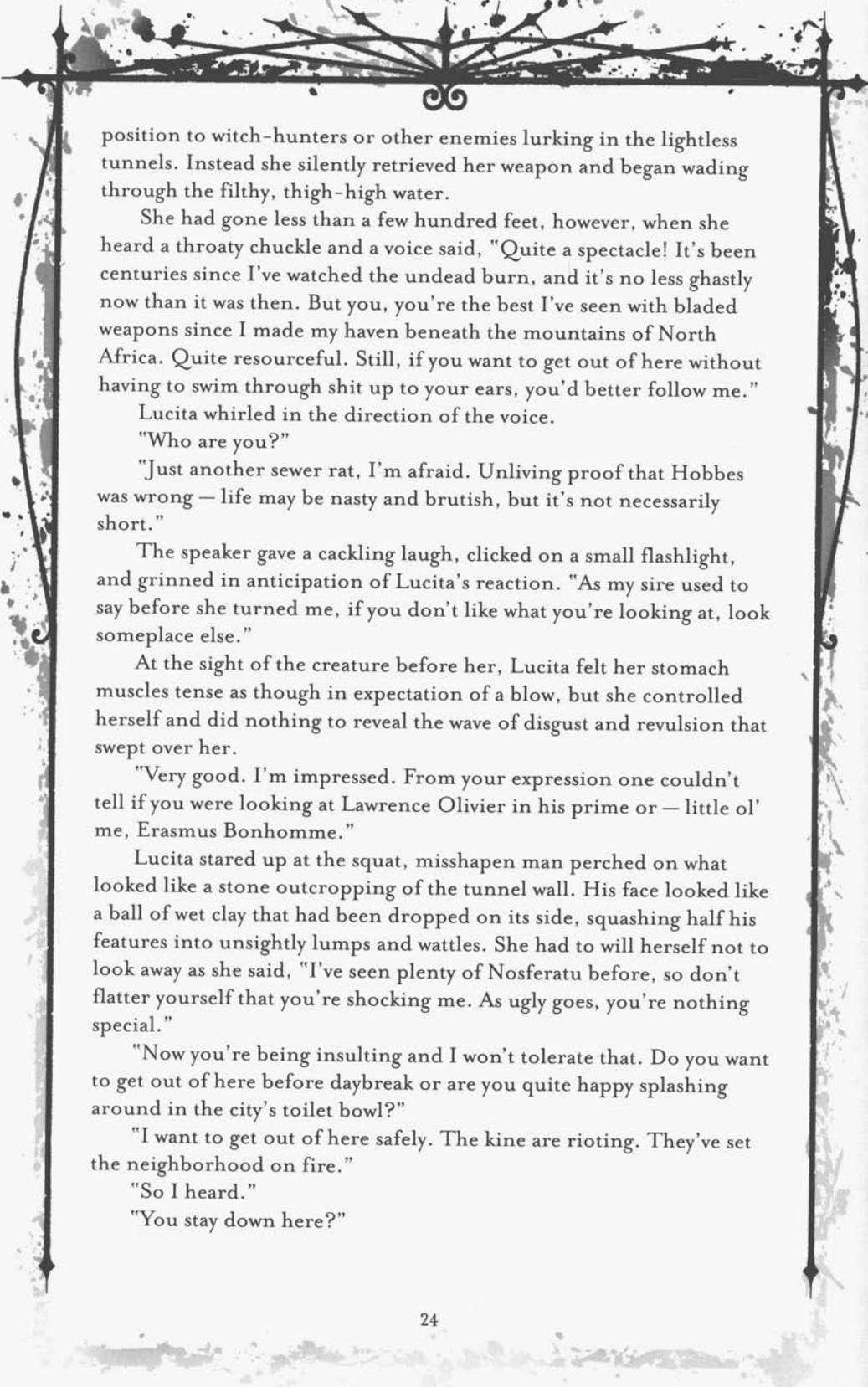
"Out of my way!" Noah shoved his fellow vampires aside and hurled himself at the sewer's slick, curving wall. For a moment, as his talon-like nails dug in, Lucita thought he might actually succeed in climbing out of reach of Cordelia's clawing hands. Then his hold gave way and he toppled backward, and she was waiting, flopping her flaming skirt over his face, settling her blazing haunches onto his head. The flames had all but erased her face — nose reduced to a pulpy hole, eyes seared to slits. No normal human, Lucita knew, could possibly have endured such trauma and remained conscious, let alone continued to attack.

Whatever drove Cordelia to murder and self-immolation had also made her impervious to pain and fear.

Watching Noah succumb to his final death put an end to any semblance of order among the Kindred. Except for Lucita, the council and their slaves fled screaming, trampling each other in an unruly horde as they rushed blindly back in the direction of the fires and rioting.

Cordelia, having let the remnants of Noah's body ooze into the foul water, whirled in search of her next victim. Her dying body still crackled with flame. With her clothes burned away, her skin gone, she resembled a hideously melted candle dripping gory tallow. Unable to speak now, she let forth a keening screech of fury and charged Lucita, who drew her scimitar and hurled it in an arc at the exposed and stringy tendons of Cordelia's neck. The blade sliced through the roasted outer flesh, severed the jugular and nicked the spine so that the head flopped backward, revealing a bloody trough and jagged stump of bone. For a moment, the body wobbled on its feet as though kept alive by ghoulish animation. Then it toppled forward stiffly, like a felled tree, into the water. There was the sound of sizzling flesh and the stench of spoiled meat frying as the flames around the head and torso were extinguished.

Lucita seized the corpse by its ankles and hauled up what was left of Cordelia's body, using it as a shield between her and the remaining flames. She could have called to the others that the passage was clear now, but thought better of it. To cry out might have revealed her



position to witch-hunters or other enemies lurking in the lightless tunnels. Instead she silently retrieved her weapon and began wading through the filthy, thigh-high water.

She had gone less than a few hundred feet, however, when she heard a throaty chuckle and a voice said, "Quite a spectacle! It's been centuries since I've watched the undead burn, and it's no less ghastly now than it was then. But you, you're the best I've seen with bladed weapons since I made my haven beneath the mountains of North Africa. Quite resourceful. Still, if you want to get out of here without having to swim through shit up to your ears, you'd better follow me."

Lucita whirled in the direction of the voice.

"Who are you?"

"Just another sewer rat, I'm afraid. Unliving proof that Hobbes was wrong — life may be nasty and brutish, but it's not necessarily short."

The speaker gave a cackling laugh, clicked on a small flashlight, and grinned in anticipation of Lucita's reaction. "As my sire used to say before she turned me, if you don't like what you're looking at, look someplace else."

At the sight of the creature before her, Lucita felt her stomach muscles tense as though in expectation of a blow, but she controlled herself and did nothing to reveal the wave of disgust and revulsion that swept over her.

"Very good. I'm impressed. From your expression one couldn't tell if you were looking at Lawrence Olivier in his prime or — little ol' me, Erasmus Bonhomme."

Lucita stared up at the squat, misshapen man perched on what looked like a stone outcropping of the tunnel wall. His face looked like a ball of wet clay that had been dropped on its side, squashing half his features into unsightly lumps and wattles. She had to will herself not to look away as she said, "I've seen plenty of Nosferatu before, so don't flatter yourself that you're shocking me. As ugly goes, you're nothing special."

"Now you're being insulting and I won't tolerate that. Do you want to get out of here before daybreak or are you quite happy splashing around in the city's toilet bowl?"

"I want to get out of here safely. The kine are rioting. They've set the neighborhood on fire."

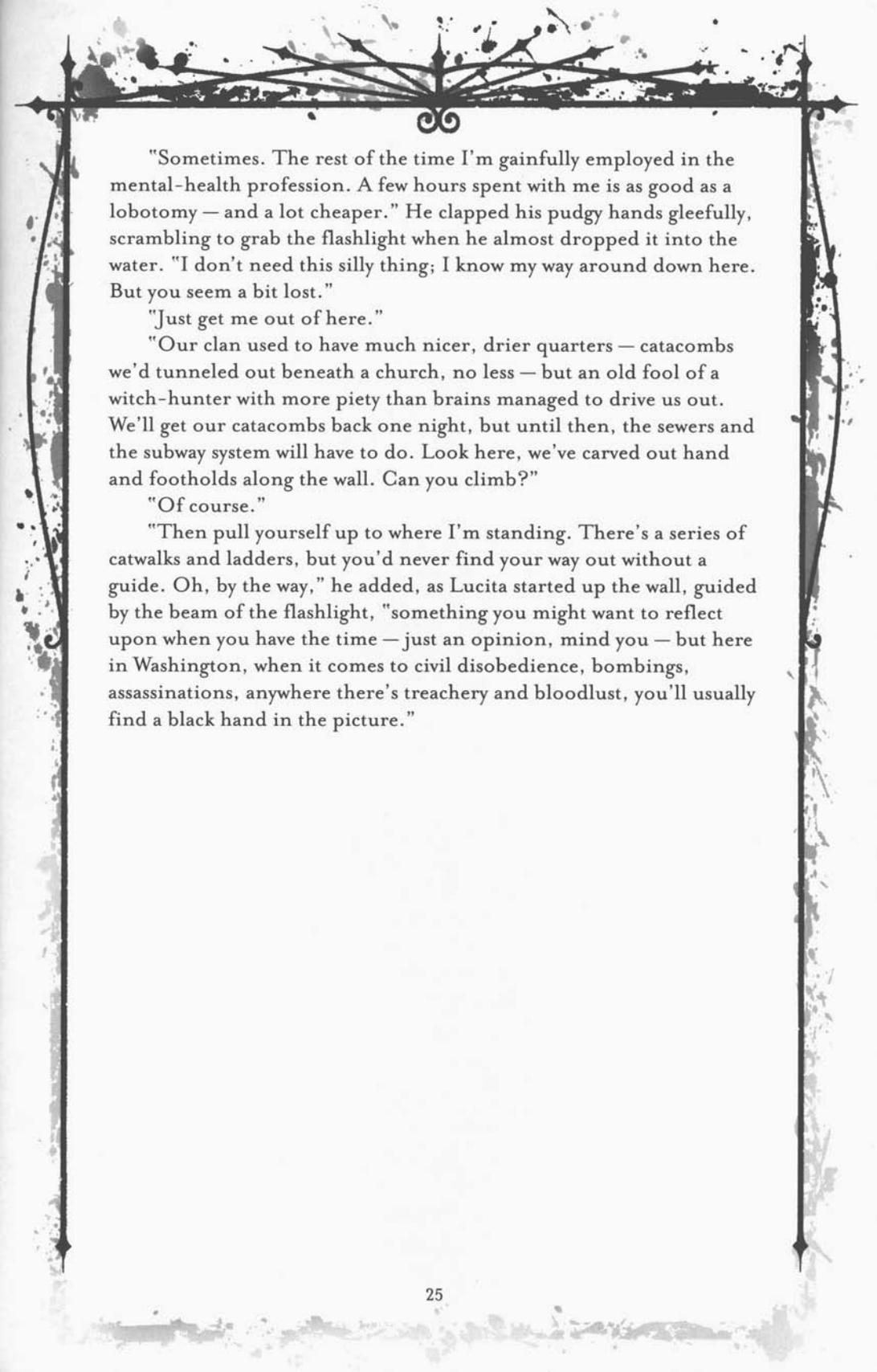
"So I heard."

"You stay down here?"



BOLTON 99

Erasmus welcomes Lucita to his subterranean domain.



"Sometimes. The rest of the time I'm gainfully employed in the mental-health profession. A few hours spent with me is as good as a lobotomy — and a lot cheaper." He clapped his pudgy hands gleefully, scrambling to grab the flashlight when he almost dropped it into the water. "I don't need this silly thing; I know my way around down here. But you seem a bit lost."

"Just get me out of here."

"Our clan used to have much nicer, drier quarters — catacombs we'd tunneled out beneath a church, no less — but an old fool of a witch-hunter with more piety than brains managed to drive us out. We'll get our catacombs back one night, but until then, the sewers and the subway system will have to do. Look here, we've carved out hand and footholds along the wall. Can you climb?"

"Of course."

"Then pull yourself up to where I'm standing. There's a series of catwalks and ladders, but you'd never find your way out without a guide. Oh, by the way," he added, as Lucita started up the wall, guided by the beam of the flashlight, "something you might want to reflect upon when you have the time — just an opinion, mind you — but here in Washington, when it comes to civil disobedience, bombings, assassinations, anywhere there's treachery and bloodlust, you'll usually find a black hand in the picture."

CHAPTER THREE

Smiling crookedly, the crack dealer sauntered over to the black Olds Cutlass that had been parked at the corner of U Street for the last two hours or more. He was lean and wolfish, with unnaturally white front teeth and yellowed incisors, long hands so chapped from the cold that blood crusted in tiny cracks along the knuckles.

Seeing him coming and guessing his intent, the portly, florid-faced man rolled the window down a half inch and said, "No, no, not interested in that."

The dealer's eyes, one of which was specked with red, narrowed into coin slots. "How you know what 'that' it be that you ain't interested in?"

Emmet Vargas, in his mid-sixties, but solidly built with a thick head of silver-gray hair, said, "I know, all right. Leave us alone."

"You be Vice, you and the young lady there, you doin' it all wrong."

"If you think we're cops, why'd you come over?"

The man bent over so far his nose was almost pressed against the glass as he scoped out the good-looking woman and the car's expensive stereo, thinking he might be interested in some transaction here even if the sour old dude behind the wheel thought differently.

"Hey, hold on a second. Ain't I seen you someplace?"

Emmet held the man's gaze, but said nothing.

"Holy shit, I know you! I seen you on TV. You that preacher dude my sister watches, the one preaches angels are coming to earth one day, gonna set things right with us sinners — the one just announced you was running for mayor of D.C.! Holy shit, wait till I tell her where I saw the Reverend-future-mayor-piece-of-shit! Can't help but wonder what you and a sweet young thang like your girl there be doin' sittin' here this time of night, though, when you could be in a nice warm motel room smokin' some first-rate product while the young honey sucks your dick."

"Suck on this," said Emmet as he pulled aside his overcoat to show the semi-automatic Glock in his lap. The effect was instantaneous. Like fog evaporating, the dealer slid back into the night that seemed to have spawned him.

The woman, in her late twenties with eyes that vacillated between green and gray, depending on the weather and her mood, and dark red hair worn with bangs to hide the deep scar above her eyebrow, said,

"Dad, do you think that was necessary? Showing him the gun? It just draws attention to us."

Emmet tucked the pistol back into the holster he wore underneath his coat. Pulling a flask from his coat pocket, he took a discreet sip. "It would've drawn more attention if I'd had to shoot the son-of-a-bitch."

After that, the silence reigned again, but that in itself was not comforting, since each tiny noise — a sudden gust of wind whirling fast-food wrappers along the street, a yowling cat, a TV suddenly snapped on in an upstairs apartment — seemed to punctuate their isolation and vulnerability.

Several times, Becca glanced at her watch, gnawed at her lower lip, but said nothing. From years' experience, they had learned that the hours between two and four portended the most danger. Sleep was its most seductive, and they were likely to be exhausted, wanting to give up and go home if nothing had happened by then. What they stalked, however, wouldn't be tired at all, but refreshed and revitalized, acute senses honed even sharper by a night's infusion of blood. But still they kept their vigils, tipped off by informants who eked out a living plying the kind of information the hunters sought, or by zealots in the movement — sometimes as dangerous as the prey — who kept an eye out for those whose reclusiveness and eccentricity, legitimate or otherwise, might make them suspect.

When the sirens started, Becca was almost asleep. Her head jerked up and she looked around, eyes big and dark and frightened.

"It's nothing," Emmet said, "just an ambulance."

But then another siren joined the wailing and another. Becca twisted around in her seat.

"My God, Dad, look!"

Behind them, to the south, they saw the fire. Jagged triangles steeppling the rooftops. Garish orange curls of the kind a child might color with a crayon.

"Holy God," breathed Emmet.

"Where do you think it is? Foggy Bottom?"

"No, too far east for that. McPherson Circle, I'd say, that area."

"Where Bjorn Garinson hangs out, you mean?"

"The very same — couldn't happen to a nicer fiend."

"We don't know for sure Garinson's one of them."

Her father gave a short, derisive snort. "No, he's just your average club owner who's never been seen in daylight and whose one photograph we've been able to track down shows he hasn't aged a day in fifty years."

More sirens wailed. This time it was two police cars, speeding around the corner, heading south.

"I knew there was going to be a rally in the sex district tonight," Emmet said. "Some kind of anti-porn demonstration. Rumor was it might get rough, that's why I told the members of our congregation not to participate. But setting buildings on fire, that's—" He broke off, apparently realizing how what he was about to say would sound.

Becca finished it for him. "That's what the Society of Leopold does, right, Dad?"

He looked aggrieved. "Only when absolutely necessary, and when we're sure no one else will get hurt."

"Which is impossible, as you well know."

They sat in silence, each nursing private fears. Finally Becca gave voice to one of hers, saying, "I hope Tony's not involved. He takes too many chances. Acts like if what he hunts is immortal, then he must be, too."

Tony DiAngelo, twenty-six years old, was Emmet's assistant, a roofer by day, by night a practiced hunter, the only one whose skills and experience equaled Becca's.

"Tony knows what he's doing." Emmet paused, uncapped his flask, and drank from it again before he ventured into uncharted territory by asking, "You're not involved with him, are you?"

"Am I cheating on Francine, you mean? What do you think, Dad?"

"I think you love Francine and you're loyal. You're also bisexual, Tony's an attractive man, and — well, the flesh is weak."

She shook her head, then crossed a boundary of her own by saying, "Sometimes he fucks them, Dad. I told him he was crazy, that it's what they want, it turns him into prey. He said it's how he infiltrates them, learns where their havens are, ferrets out their human groupies. He's lying to himself, I told him. He's being seduced and he doesn't even know it."

Her father nodded in that perfunctory manner he adopted when communicating to a troubled parishioner that a counseling session was at an end. She knew better than to criticize Tony, even implicitly. With David, her half-brother, lost to drug and alcohol addiction, Tony had become a surrogate son to Emmet. As with David, she criticized him at her peril.

Another police car and fire engine screeched around the corner, the latter going so fast that it narrowly missed taking the front bumper off the Olds.

"Jesus," Becca said, "they must be torching the whole neighborhood." A new urgency infused her tone as she added, "Dad, tell me the truth. You and Tony didn't have anything to do with this?"

"Of course not. Even if I had the power to make people set an entire *neighborhood* on fire, which I don't, you think I'd do it?"

There was a long, pained silence before Becca said, "I don't know what you're capable of doing anymore, Dad. I know sometimes you use fire—"

"—When it's appropriate," said Emmet fiercely, "when it can be contained."

"Oh, bullshit, Dad, how does anyone ever know a fire can be contained? Half of Montreal burned to the ground last year because some hunters thought they could burn out a nest of them. Hundreds of innocent people died. You've killed innocent people, too. We both know it."

"We're in a war," Emmet said softly. "It's a holy war, a just war, a war between good and evil. But in any war, even a holy one, there are always civilian casualties. You have to understand that."

More sirens. In the distance, someone yelling through a bullhorn. Becca said, "I thought I understood you, too, Dad. Except lately, I'm not sure. Ever since Mom was killed, I—"

"Hush," hissed Emmet fiercely. "There."

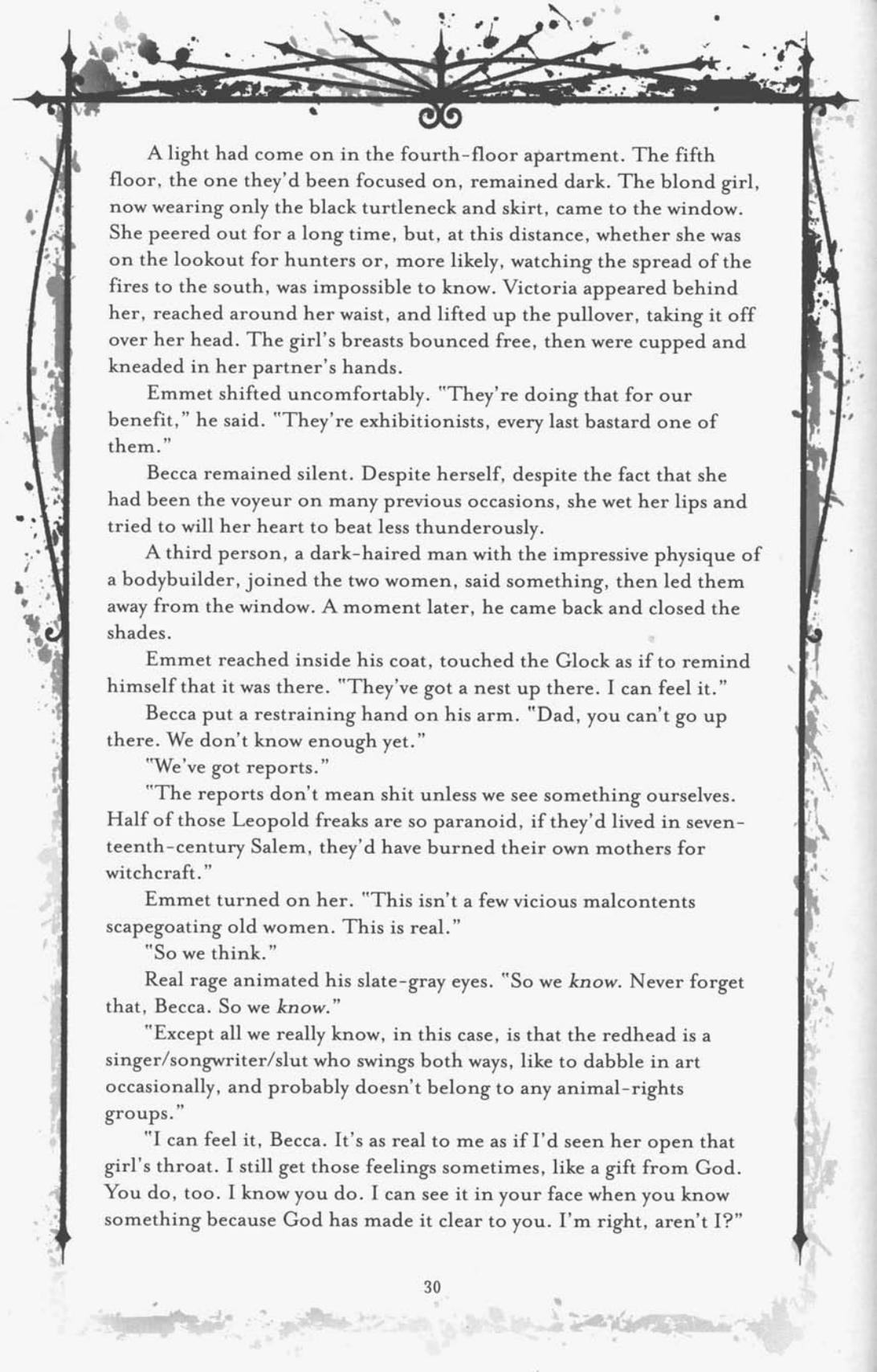
Two women had rounded the corner and were approaching on the opposite side of the street. One was a blonde, elegantly thin, tottering along on four-inch spikes. Her suede coat hung open, revealing a leather skirt slit up the side and a black turtleneck under a leather bustier. Her make-up was so heavily applied that she almost appeared masked, but something about the eyes looked frightened and childlike, more like a high school girl tarted up for Halloween than an adult woman. The other face was already familiar to Becca — singing sensation Victoria Ash. The rising pop star was a good three inches taller than her girlfriend. She wore an ermine jacket over a swirling, blue velvet skirt, and her dark hair was highlighted with streaks of red so rich that it looked almost purple.

Arm in arm, they walked to the third apartment building from the corner, where they exchanged a long, open-mouthed kiss before Victoria pulled out a key and let them in.

"First time I've seen her with a woman," Emmet said.

Despite the tension, Becca couldn't resist a jibe. "Maybe her taste's improving."

"There, look."



A light had come on in the fourth-floor apartment. The fifth floor, the one they'd been focused on, remained dark. The blond girl, now wearing only the black turtleneck and skirt, came to the window. She peered out for a long time, but, at this distance, whether she was on the lookout for hunters or, more likely, watching the spread of the fires to the south, was impossible to know. Victoria appeared behind her, reached around her waist, and lifted up the pullover, taking it off over her head. The girl's breasts bounced free, then were cupped and kneaded in her partner's hands.

Emmet shifted uncomfortably. "They're doing that for our benefit," he said. "They're exhibitionists, every last bastard one of them."

Becca remained silent. Despite herself, despite the fact that she had been the voyeur on many previous occasions, she wet her lips and tried to will her heart to beat less thunderously.

A third person, a dark-haired man with the impressive physique of a bodybuilder, joined the two women, said something, then led them away from the window. A moment later, he came back and closed the shades.

Emmet reached inside his coat, touched the Glock as if to remind himself that it was there. "They've got a nest up there. I can feel it."

Becca put a restraining hand on his arm. "Dad, you can't go up there. We don't know enough yet."

"We've got reports."

"The reports don't mean shit unless we see something ourselves. Half of those Leopold freaks are so paranoid, if they'd lived in seveneenth-century Salem, they'd have burned their own mothers for witchcraft."

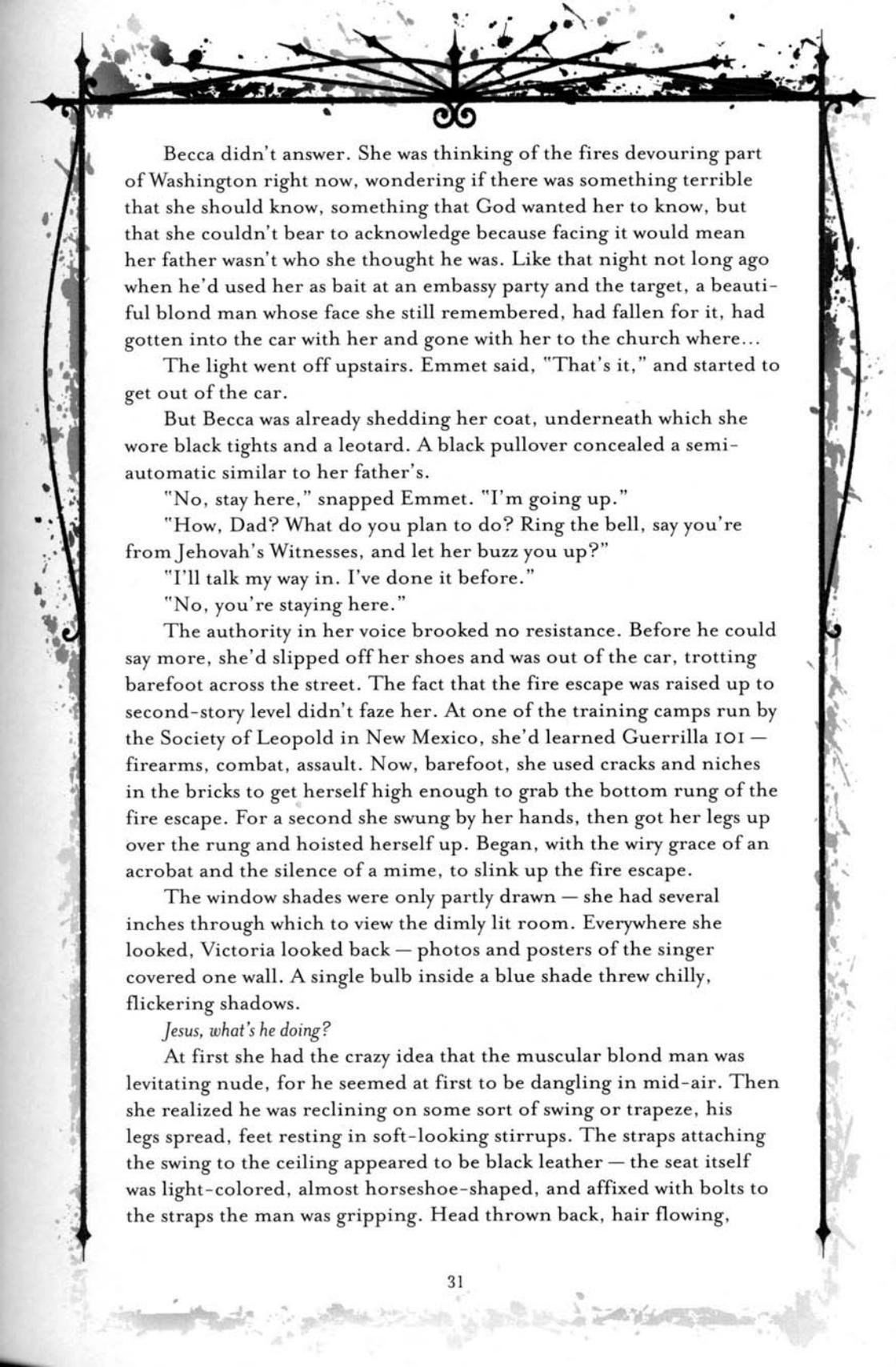
Emmet turned on her. "This isn't a few vicious malcontents scapegoating old women. This is real."

"So we think."

Real rage animated his slate-gray eyes. "So we *know*. Never forget that, Becca. So we *know*."

"Except all we really know, in this case, is that the redhead is a singer/songwriter/slut who swings both ways, like to dabble in art occasionally, and probably doesn't belong to any animal-rights groups."

"I can feel it, Becca. It's as real to me as if I'd seen her open that girl's throat. I still get those feelings sometimes, like a gift from God. You do, too. I know you do. I can see it in your face when you know something because God has made it clear to you. I'm right, aren't I?"



Becca didn't answer. She was thinking of the fires devouring part of Washington right now, wondering if there was something terrible that she should know, something that God wanted her to know, but that she couldn't bear to acknowledge because facing it would mean her father wasn't who she thought he was. Like that night not long ago when he'd used her as bait at an embassy party and the target, a beautiful blond man whose face she still remembered, had fallen for it, had gotten into the car with her and gone with her to the church where...

The light went off upstairs. Emmet said, "That's it," and started to get out of the car.

But Becca was already shedding her coat, underneath which she wore black tights and a leotard. A black pullover concealed a semi-automatic similar to her father's.

"No, stay here," snapped Emmet. "I'm going up."

"How, Dad? What do you plan to do? Ring the bell, say you're from Jehovah's Witnesses, and let her buzz you up?"

"I'll talk my way in. I've done it before."

"No, you're staying here."

The authority in her voice brooked no resistance. Before he could say more, she'd slipped off her shoes and was out of the car, trotting barefoot across the street. The fact that the fire escape was raised up to second-story level didn't faze her. At one of the training camps run by the Society of Leopold in New Mexico, she'd learned Guerrilla 101 — firearms, combat, assault. Now, barefoot, she used cracks and niches in the bricks to get herself high enough to grab the bottom rung of the fire escape. For a second she swung by her hands, then got her legs up over the rung and hoisted herself up. Began, with the wiry grace of an acrobat and the silence of a mime, to slink up the fire escape.

The window shades were only partly drawn — she had several inches through which to view the dimly lit room. Everywhere she looked, Victoria looked back — photos and posters of the singer covered one wall. A single bulb inside a blue shade threw chilly, flickering shadows.

Jesus, what's he doing?

At first she had the crazy idea that the muscular blond man was levitating nude, for he seemed at first to be dangling in mid-air. Then she realized he was reclining on some sort of swing or trapeze, his legs spread, feet resting in soft-looking stirrups. The straps attaching the swing to the ceiling appeared to be black leather — the seat itself was light-colored, almost horseshoe-shaped, and affixed with bolts to the straps the man was gripping. Head thrown back, hair flowing,

admiring himself in the mirrored ceiling. No bed or bureau in sight. But then it wasn't a bedroom, at all, she realized, but a sex den.

The kittenish little blonde, clothes shed, came into view. Tits bouncing, nipples hard little stones. Victoria's hand — manicured, bejeweled — passed her what looked like a few tabs of acid or MDMA. She swallowed one and gave another to the man, who was now rotating lazily in the sling. The girl reached down between her legs to part her plump lips, then climbed up onto the man's lap and lowered herself onto his cock. She held onto the sides of the swing and leaned back as her partner did the same, setting the swing in motion. Her long hair flowed in ashen waves, her ribby torso heaved. Without thinking, Becca reached between her legs, caressed herself, then realized what she was doing and drew away.

From her spy's position at the window, she suddenly felt ashamed, disgusted with herself. What kind of sickness did her father and she indulge in anyway, fabricating honorable reasons to spy on other people's sex lives, play Peeping Tom in the name of Jesus? Francine was right — she ought to leave this madness to her father and go to law school.

Now Veronica moved back into view, naked but for an elaborate necklace made of what looked like oblong beads that hung down over her breasts and belly. She grabbed the swing to stop its movement, bent down and kissed the younger woman long and lingeringly — mouth and neck and breasts. The girl's eyes looked glassy — drunk, drugged or both — unblinking in the weird light.

More touching, tonguing, popping tabs or pills. The swing began to move again, the man adjusting his rump, trying to get more comfortable. The blonde throwing her head back, hair flying off her face to reveal the dark red smear along her neck.

Becca froze, not breathing, staring at the red.

Lipstick. She let her breath out. Only lipstick. And on Victoria's mouth, that same dark red shade, but paler now, her make-up rubbing off. Jesus, only lipstick.

There's nothing going on here, but a good old-fashioned fuckfest, she thought angrily. Jesus, who's the pervert here? Those people letting off a little steam or me crouched outside their window dying to jerk off?

Slowly she began inching her way backward toward the fire escape. Eager now to tell her father he'd been wrong this time — to hell with his informants — there was nothing here but—



TONO 99

—Nothing here but — the ends of the swing were weird-looking, knobby, almost like...

Oh, fuck, oh, fuck. She wasn't one to lose her cool. She was professional. *Easy, easy*, inching her way backward. One foot on the fire escape, then the next one, *easy, easy*, not hurrying, reminding herself that the first rule was to *breathe, breathe, breathe*.

When she was halfway down, the sirens started up again. A hook-and-ladder truck this time, escorted by two police cars, screaming up U Street. She glanced upstairs. The drapes had parted. Someone was looking out. Looking at the fire engines or at her?

She didn't wait to see if anyone pursued nor did she take the time to climb back down the wall, but risked a broken ankle for the sake of speed and jumped. Took the impact, rolled, got up, then sprinted for the car. Her father reached over, flipping up the lock. Becca hurled herself inside.

"They've got a swing up there they're having sex on. The seat's a human pelvis."

"Sons of bitches! Sons of fucking bitches!"

Upstairs the window lifted.

"Go on, Dad, drive!"

Victoria Ash stepped out onto the fire escape. Her gleaming flesh was sheened in bluish shadows. Beautiful, thought Becca. Like a moon goddess, dipped in silver, mother-of-pearl.

"You wait, I'll get the fuckers!" Emmet hissed.

He gunned the engine and they sped off into the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two nights later

After dark, Potomac Park seethed with a seedy, largely unseen nocturnal life. Beguiling hustlers, some as lewdly beautiful as a Toulouse-Lautrec painting, shared prowling space with sultry-eyed transvestites, while hordes of Washington's homeless — panhandlers, the indigent, the mentally ill — camped in cardboard boxes or snuggled next to garbage bags in the denser regions of the park. Thieves and pickpockets reconnoitered in the park after a night's work and those in disfavour with the Mob were brought here to be roughed up or to take a bullet through the ear. Not a place for a romantic stroll unless some hardcore kink was on the night's agenda.

That was why Lucita had been caught off guard when Enrique Torres, noted art collector, suggested ending their evening with a promenade through an area that prudent Washingtonians scrupulously avoided after dark. Fearing some sort of trap, she'd almost told him the area was too unsafe, but then decided to go along with his unorthodox plan. Maybe, as a foreigner newly appointed to a diplomatic post, Enrique was simply ignorant of the dangers. On the other hand, maybe he was setting her up. Either way, she had to find out.

"Should I be worried?" she teased him as they left the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts after attending the ballet. "I've heard of men bringing unfaithful wives and lovers to the Park at night to murder them, but if that's the case, then I'm afraid you have reversed the natural order of things. Unless, of course," she'd added slyly, "you've a bent toward necrophilia."

Torres, whose English was superb, but whose sensibilities didn't incline themselves toward gallows humor, had feigned incomprehension. If he had a clue that, in one sense, he'd be committing necrophilia the first time he made love to the beauty on his arm, he didn't show it.

"Please don't be nervous," he said gallantly, taking her arm. "I can protect you."

"I've no doubt. But tell me, what are we doing here? I thought by now we'd be trying to decide between your hotel or my apartment. Unless, of course, my attraction to you isn't reciprocated."

"My dear, I can't imagine anything I'd love more than to have your company for the rest of the night. It's more than I could have hoped for." As she had calculated, with his masculinity subtly impugned, he

felt the need to explain himself. "It's just that — the collector with whom I'm currently negotiating business—"

"You mean the mysterious art acquisition that you won't discuss?"

"The man I'm dealing with, an old friend actually, he's told me about some rather remarkable things that supposedly have taken place here after dark — murders, strange disappearances, and the like. Such stories circulate in Madrid as well, of course, but I never gave them any credence. I always dismissed them as ridiculous, the talk of the credulous and superstitious. Since talking with him, however, I've become less skeptical."

"Murders and disappearances?" She let a hand flutter up to the collar of her lush sable coat. "Now you're really frightening me, Enrique. You're not really some sort of spy or undercover agent, are you?"

"Oh hardly," he protested, although he was clearly flattered. She had an image of him in his home back in Madrid, watching Spanish-dubbed American cop shows, imagining himself the ace detective cracking a case after giving a good boinking to the damsel in distress.

"Then why this interest in murders here in the park?"

"I've said too much already," he said. "I'm frightening you and that was never my intention. Come on, we'll look for a cab. Suffice it to say, you don't have to worry, though — I'm armed."

She laughed. "And dangerous?"

"Quite possibly."

They paused at the curbside for a few moments, but there was very little traffic, and no cabs came into view, which, now that her curiosity was piqued, pleased Lucita just fine. She reflected that it was to her advantage, and the advantage of Kindred in general that increasingly, like other major cities, Washington was composed almost entirely of the obscenely wealthy and the desperately poor. The former hired their own chauffeurs and bodyguards; the latter merely scabbled to survive.

"You are truly beautiful," said Torres. He turned her head toward his and kissed her, probing her mouth with his tongue while he slid his hands up underneath the luxurious coat to fondle her breasts. Such clumsy antics she found infinitely tiresome, but sometimes such drudgery was necessary.

"I'm staying at the Sofitel. It isn't far." A cab approached, and Torres tried to hail it, but this time of night the driver wasn't taking any chances. He changed lanes and sped past.

Lucita let her hand brush languidly against Torres's crotch.

"There's time for everything. We've all night long. Let's continue our walk."

"If you're sure you're not afraid."

"How could I be, with you to protect me?"

But as she doled out the ridiculous flattery, Lucita was distracted by a movement in the bushes near the edge of the park. Her eyes widened slightly as she searched for the source of the sound. Without knowing why, she had a bad feeling about this night and wanted to accomplish her purpose with this pompous fool as quickly and efficiently as possible.

"What is it, *querida*?" Torres asked.

A squirrel, etched in moonlight so that it resembled a Dürer engraving, skittered out of the bushes and disappeared up the trunk of an oak.

Lucita let her taut muscles relax a little. "Nothing. It was just a squirrel."

He took her arm. "You're nervous about walking through the park this time of night. You're right. It was thoughtless of me to bring you here. This isn't Madrid, after all."

No, this isn't Madrid, she thought ruefully, though she knew that elegant Spanish city was no less dangerous than Washington, D.C. — especially since it happened to be the haven of her sire, the dreaded Sabbat Archbishop Monçada.

"I'm not afraid," she said, fixing her bright, dark eyes on her escort. "Sometimes I enjoy living dangerously."

She let her fur coat fall open a bit and leaned against him, allowing him to slide a hand down the neck of her gown. He clutched her breast greedily. They kissed and once again, she breathed in his odors — this short, puffy former museum director, now ambassador, was redolent with smells that both repulsed and attracted her. Leather and suede and saliva and sex, all those subtle secretions that even the most scrupulously bathed body exudes. She breathed in the aroma of his expensive cologne, the faint, muskier tang of the sweat that underlay it, the scent of tobacco from the cigar he'd smoked an hour or so before they had rendezvoused for dinner at *Bistro Française* in Georgetown.

And blood. Always, ever-present, the odor that all prey shared in common, blood.

"It's too bad you're only here for a few weeks," she said, disengaging from his embrace and continuing to walk. Her stiletto heels clicked hollowly on the sidewalk. A sudden, harsh wind sent a confetti of colored leaves tumbling around their ankles.

"Oh, I'll be back and forth," he said. "And you must visit me in Madrid. It's a splendid city."

"I know."

"You've been there?"

"Not for some time." She let the tip of her tongue flick out and moisten her lower lip. Saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "You were telling me about your work here in Washington. Something about arranging to borrow some artwork?"

"For the Prado, yes. When a particularly important piece comes along, especially if it's of a religious nature, understandably sometimes museums are reluctant to let such items leave the country. I'm hoping to come to some agreement for a loan of, oh, two to three months, with the guarantee that the piece will be returned in mint condition."

"You're speaking of a painting?"

"Actually, no, it's a type of sculpture. Very valuable. I can honestly say I've never seen anything like it. Between you and me, I'm not sure I ever want to see anything like it again. But it's unforgettable, believe me."

"And this sculpture, is it with the Smithsonian, the National Gallery?"

"Actually it's in a private collection."

"The friend you spoke of?"

"Exactly."

His lips smiled, but his eyes cocked to the side, a sign of deception that amused and aroused her. She snuggled closer. Wondering how many brandies it would take — or how many orgasms — to get him to talk more freely. She didn't have a lot of time. And the night still felt wrong. Like a vast, obsidian ocean whose currents had shifted almost imperceptibly, whose flow was altered by the passing of something treacherous and stealthy, the shadow of a shark passing just above her, like a cloud.

She persisted, keeping her voice mellow, her manner calculatedly seductive.

"You intrigue me. Is your business really so secretive or do you simply enjoy toying with a woman's natural curiosity?"

They were moving out of the arc of the streetlamps, into the darker reaches of the park. Derelicts camped on the ground, swaddled in blankets, bottles clutched in grimy fists. Their odors were much louder than her escort's — olfactory screams and roars that assaulted her senses. A trio of slate-colored, dome-shaped rocks amid the trees bore the motley hieroglyphics of graffiti artists — gang tags and inventive obscenities mingled with the obligatory declarations of infatuation.

"I'll tell you what. You come back to my hotel room and spend the night. Then tomorrow we'll go to church together."

"Church?" She almost spat the word, then glanced away, so he wouldn't see the worry her face. "That's not something I'd expect from you."

"Oh, I understand your surprise. Few educated people have time for religion these days — unless it's of the fire and brimstone, Armageddon-is-at-hand variety that's so popular now, and that's as close to real spirituality as a tramp playing the harmonica for change is to Mozart."

"Then why?"

"I'd like you to meet someone. My friend who owns the piece of sculpture I'm negotiating for. In some ways, he's a man of God, and yet sometimes I admit he frightens me. But he's the reason I've become more open to certain ideas. Look, here, I'll show you something, but you must promise not to tell anyone we had this conversation."

"Of course, Enrique."

"Remember I told you I was armed?"

"A gun, you mean?"

"A gun I carry as a matter of course, but these—" He reached into the lining of his topcoat and reverently removed two items. A four-inch-long silver cross and a metal stake twice that length.

For a second, Lucita was truly speechless, not knowing whether to kill the imbecile outright or burst into peals of laughter. Torres actually believed he could take on a Kindred with these foolish toys?

Containing her contempt as much as possible, she said, "Enrique, what does this mean? Surely you're not one of those who believes in monsters? And, if such creatures did exist, what could a cross and a stick possibly do?"

He allowed himself a conspiratorial smile. "You'd be surprised. If there was a vampire around, he or she would be cringing in terror at just the sight of these."

"I'm amazed that a man of your education would even entertain the notion that—"

"Of course, I understand your skepticism. Believe me, until a few days ago, I'd have jeered at the notion myself," he said, putting away his 'weaponry,' "but now I feel very differently. Not to alarm you, but I've been told the creatures actually form factions, much like human beings, if such a thing can be believed. There's something called the Sabbath. I'm told that after centuries during which vampires passed as

human, this group advocates 'coming out,' so to speak, taking over. Seizing control of humanity and making us their slaves."

He'd said all this in one rapid breath. Now, pausing for air, he studied Lucita's face as though searching for confirmation that his trust had not been misplaced.

It took all her powers of self-control, but she made her face completely neutral. "Why, Enrique, this is all quite astonishing. I admit I've been a skeptic in such matters, but if you'd care to tell me more about where you got this information, then perhaps—"

"I'd be delighted to," he said. "You see—"

But then the talking stopped, because the darkness parted on all sides and the tribe of savages was on them. She remembered thinking "tribe" because that's what they reminded her of — feral children grown into barbarous adults, creatures that might have come to life from the graffiti-tagged rocks. Two grabbed Torres as he was reaching for his gun while a third one punched him in the face and stomach. He doubled over, retching. His toupee slid off, revealing a glossy dome. He looked scalped. For an insane second, she fought the urge to laugh. Then a fourth one seized her by her long hair, twisting her head down toward his crotch, forcing her to her knees as he yanked the fur coat from her and flung it to the ground.

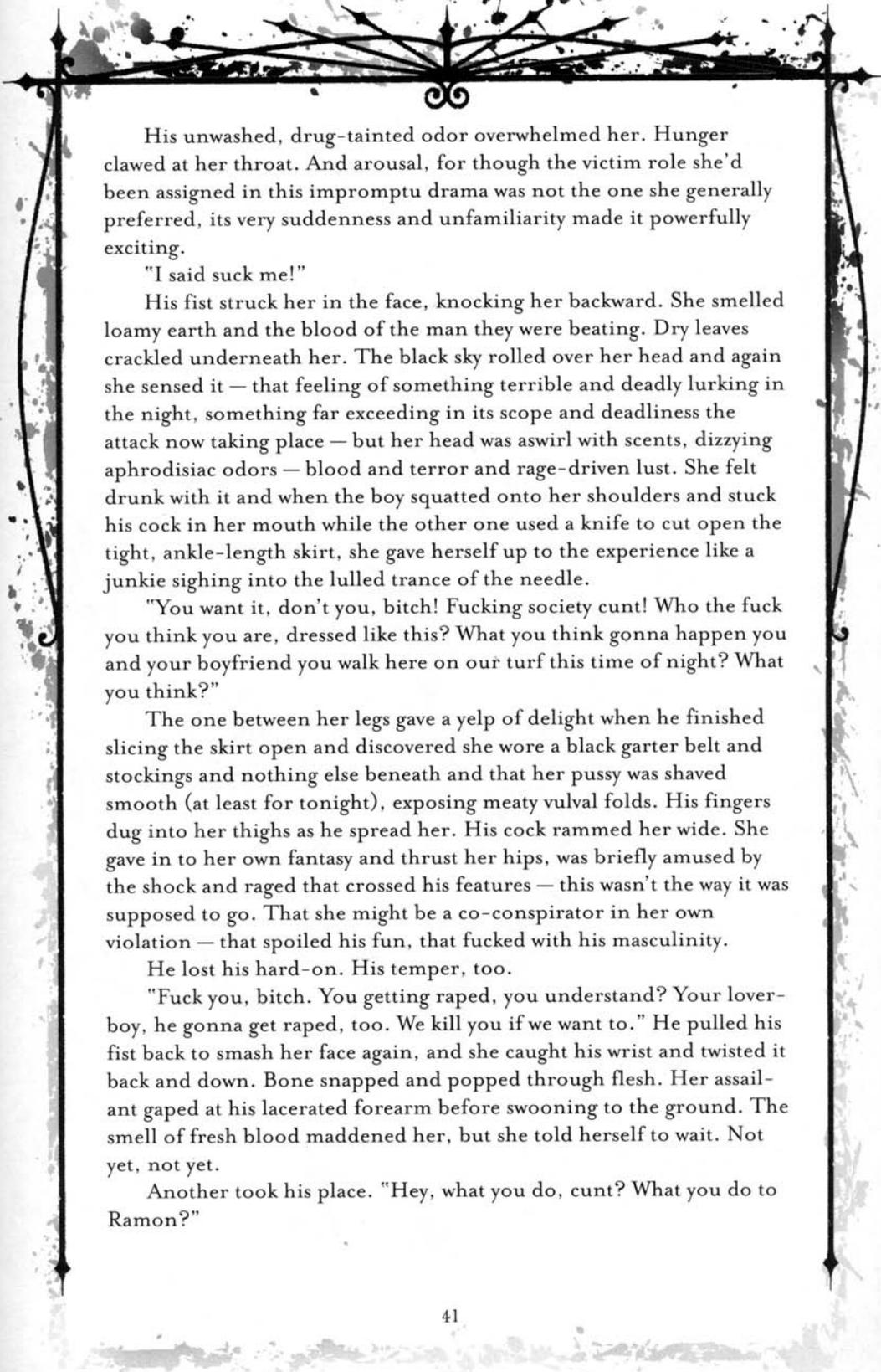
"Suck me, bitch."

She looked up at him, memorizing his features, not to describe later to the police, but for future fantasies. Barely out of his teens, he scalp was shaved down to a bleached blond stubble that contrasted starkly with his dark skin and feverish black eyes. Full, rosy shaded lips and a flattened nose, broken and badly set. And scarred, very scarred. At first she thought it was the result of a knife fight until she realized the scars were measured out according to a rough sense of the aesthetic, progressing symmetrically down both cheekbones and along the slope of his jaw. Short, deep slashes that gave his feral features a masked and savage look. Scarification in various distinctive patterns taking the place of colors. The current rage among the East Coast gangs.

"No, please! Please stop."

She turned to see Torres, on his hands and knees, bleeding from the mouth, blustering and screeching as he tried to crawl away.

"Forget about your boyfriend, bitch." Her head jerked back again. The sound of his zipper opening. "You're mine now." His dick in her face, a lighter flesh tone than his face, a rosy pink at the tip, like his lips.



His unwashed, drug-tainted odor overwhelmed her. Hunger clawed at her throat. And arousal, for though the victim role she'd been assigned in this impromptu drama was not the one she generally preferred, its very suddenness and unfamiliarity made it powerfully exciting.

"I said suck me!"

His fist struck her in the face, knocking her backward. She smelled loamy earth and the blood of the man they were beating. Dry leaves crackled underneath her. The black sky rolled over her head and again she sensed it — that feeling of something terrible and deadly lurking in the night, something far exceeding in its scope and deadliness the attack now taking place — but her head was aswirl with scents, dizzying aphrodisiac odors — blood and terror and rage-driven lust. She felt drunk with it and when the boy squatted onto her shoulders and stuck his cock in her mouth while the other one used a knife to cut open the tight, ankle-length skirt, she gave herself up to the experience like a junkie sighing into the lulled trance of the needle.

"You want it, don't you, bitch! Fucking society cunt! Who the fuck you think you are, dressed like this? What you think gonna happen you and your boyfriend you walk here on our turf this time of night? What you think?"

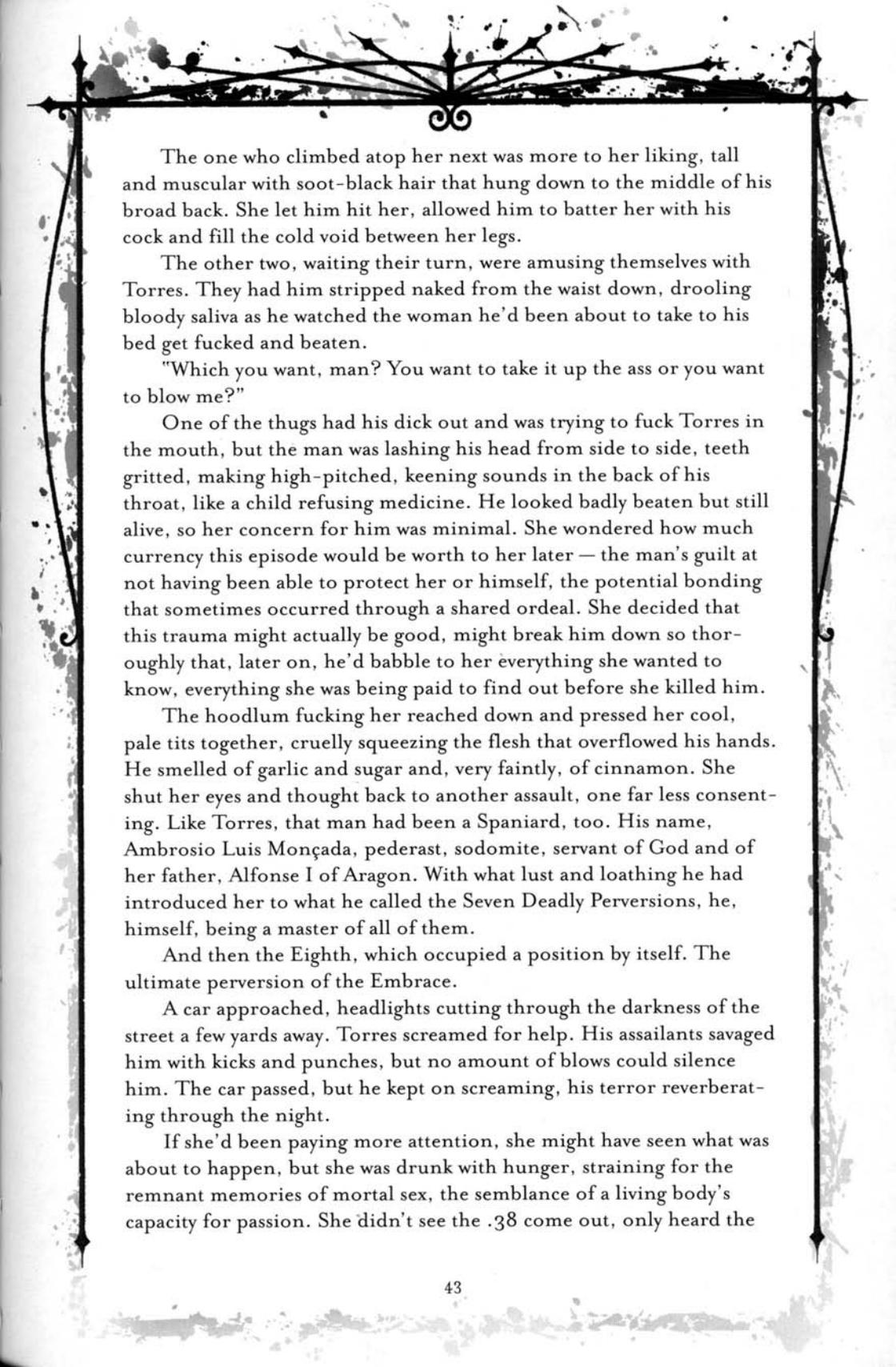
The one between her legs gave a yelp of delight when he finished slicing the skirt open and discovered she wore a black garter belt and stockings and nothing else beneath and that her pussy was shaved smooth (at least for tonight), exposing meaty vulval folds. His fingers dug into her thighs as he spread her. His cock rammed her wide. She gave in to her own fantasy and thrust her hips, was briefly amused by the shock and raged that crossed his features — this wasn't the way it was supposed to go. That she might be a co-conspirator in her own violation — that spoiled his fun, that fucked with his masculinity.

He lost his hard-on. His temper, too.

"Fuck you, bitch. You getting raped, you understand? Your lover-boy, he gonna get raped, too. We kill you if we want to." He pulled his fist back to smash her face again, and she caught his wrist and twisted it back and down. Bone snapped and popped through flesh. Her assailant gaped at his lacerated forearm before swooning to the ground. The smell of fresh blood maddened her, but she told herself to wait. Not yet, not yet.

Another took his place. "Hey, what you do, cunt? What you do to Ramon?"





The one who climbed atop her next was more to her liking, tall and muscular with soot-black hair that hung down to the middle of his broad back. She let him hit her, allowed him to batter her with his cock and fill the cold void between her legs.

The other two, waiting their turn, were amusing themselves with Torres. They had him stripped naked from the waist down, drooling bloody saliva as he watched the woman he'd been about to take to his bed get fucked and beaten.

"Which you want, man? You want to take it up the ass or you want to blow me?"

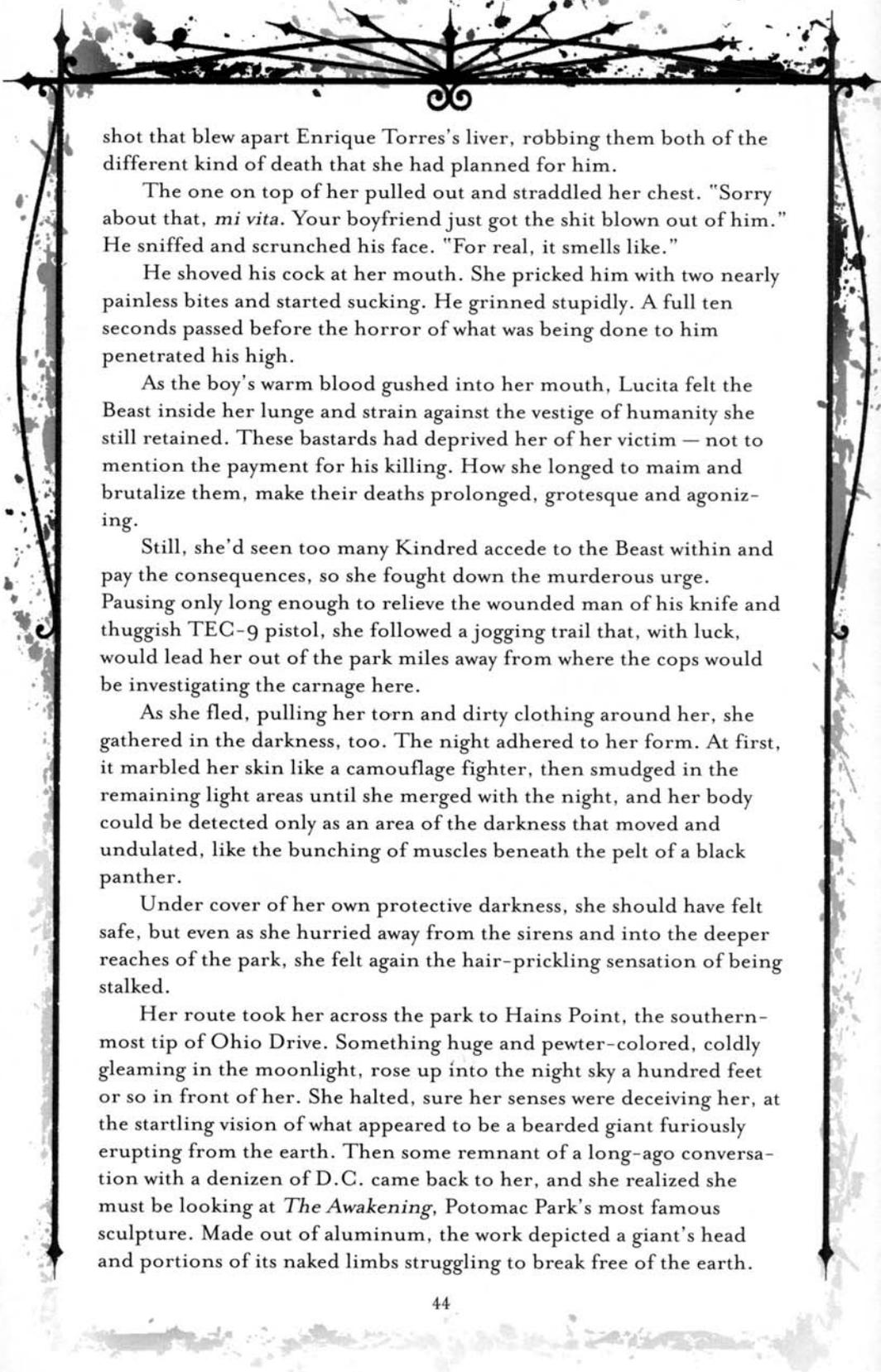
One of the thugs had his dick out and was trying to fuck Torres in the mouth, but the man was lashing his head from side to side, teeth gritted, making high-pitched, keening sounds in the back of his throat, like a child refusing medicine. He looked badly beaten but still alive, so her concern for him was minimal. She wondered how much currency this episode would be worth to her later — the man's guilt at not having been able to protect her or himself, the potential bonding that sometimes occurred through a shared ordeal. She decided that this trauma might actually be good, might break him down so thoroughly that, later on, he'd babble to her everything she wanted to know, everything she was being paid to find out before she killed him.

The hoodlum fucking her reached down and pressed her cool, pale tits together, cruelly squeezing the flesh that overflowed his hands. He smelled of garlic and sugar and, very faintly, of cinnamon. She shut her eyes and thought back to another assault, one far less consenting. Like Torres, that man had been a Spaniard, too. His name, Ambrosio Luis Monçada, pederast, sodomite, servant of God and of her father, Alfonse I of Aragon. With what lust and loathing he had introduced her to what he called the Seven Deadly Perversions, he, himself, being a master of all of them.

And then the Eighth, which occupied a position by itself. The ultimate perversion of the Embrace.

A car approached, headlights cutting through the darkness of the street a few yards away. Torres screamed for help. His assailants savaged him with kicks and punches, but no amount of blows could silence him. The car passed, but he kept on screaming, his terror reverberating through the night.

If she'd been paying more attention, she might have seen what was about to happen, but she was drunk with hunger, straining for the remnant memories of mortal sex, the semblance of a living body's capacity for passion. She didn't see the .38 come out, only heard the



shot that blew apart Enrique Torres's liver, robbing them both of the different kind of death that she had planned for him.

The one on top of her pulled out and straddled her chest. "Sorry about that, *mi vita*. Your boyfriend just got the shit blown out of him." He sniffed and scrunched his face. "For real, it smells like."

He shoved his cock at her mouth. She pricked him with two nearly painless bites and started sucking. He grinned stupidly. A full ten seconds passed before the horror of what was being done to him penetrated his high.

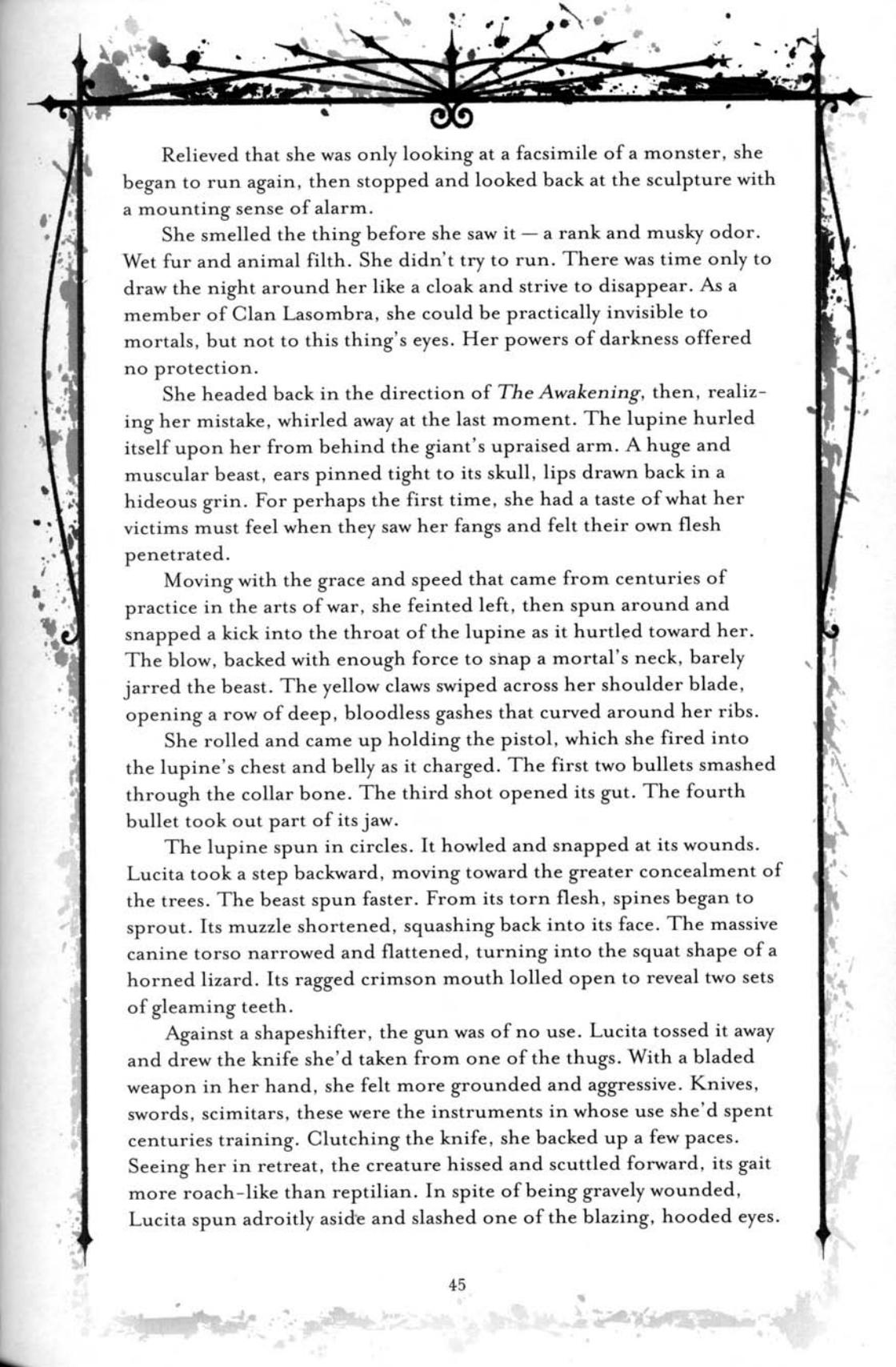
As the boy's warm blood gushed into her mouth, Lucita felt the Beast inside her lunge and strain against the vestige of humanity she still retained. These bastards had deprived her of her victim — not to mention the payment for his killing. How she longed to maim and brutalize them, make their deaths prolonged, grotesque and agonizing.

Still, she'd seen too many Kindred accede to the Beast within and pay the consequences, so she fought down the murderous urge. Pausing only long enough to relieve the wounded man of his knife and thuggish TEC-9 pistol, she followed a jogging trail that, with luck, would lead her out of the park miles away from where the cops would be investigating the carnage here.

As she fled, pulling her torn and dirty clothing around her, she gathered in the darkness, too. The night adhered to her form. At first, it marbled her skin like a camouflage fighter, then smudged in the remaining light areas until she merged with the night, and her body could be detected only as an area of the darkness that moved and undulated, like the bunching of muscles beneath the pelt of a black panther.

Under cover of her own protective darkness, she should have felt safe, but even as she hurried away from the sirens and into the deeper reaches of the park, she felt again the hair-prickling sensation of being stalked.

Her route took her across the park to Hains Point, the southernmost tip of Ohio Drive. Something huge and pewter-colored, coldly gleaming in the moonlight, rose up into the night sky a hundred feet or so in front of her. She halted, sure her senses were deceiving her, at the startling vision of what appeared to be a bearded giant furiously erupting from the earth. Then some remnant of a long-ago conversation with a denizen of D.C. came back to her, and she realized she must be looking at *The Awakening*, Potomac Park's most famous sculpture. Made out of aluminum, the work depicted a giant's head and portions of its naked limbs struggling to break free of the earth.



Relieved that she was only looking at a facsimile of a monster, she began to run again, then stopped and looked back at the sculpture with a mounting sense of alarm.

She smelled the thing before she saw it — a rank and musky odor. Wet fur and animal filth. She didn't try to run. There was time only to draw the night around her like a cloak and strive to disappear. As a member of Clan Lasombra, she could be practically invisible to mortals, but not to this thing's eyes. Her powers of darkness offered no protection.

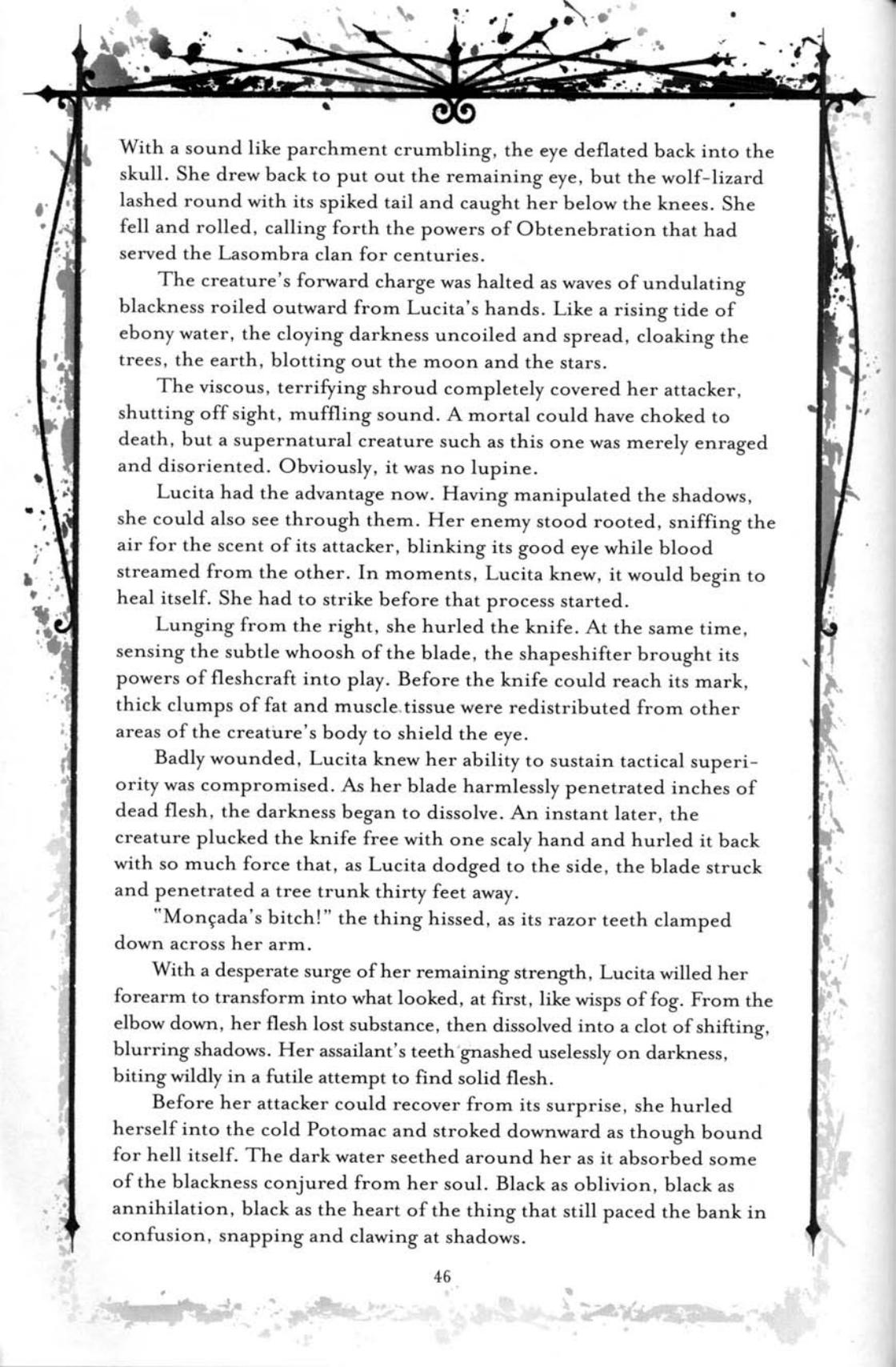
She headed back in the direction of *The Awakening*, then, realizing her mistake, whirled away at the last moment. The lupine hurled itself upon her from behind the giant's upraised arm. A huge and muscular beast, ears pinned tight to its skull, lips drawn back in a hideous grin. For perhaps the first time, she had a taste of what her victims must feel when they saw her fangs and felt their own flesh penetrated.

Moving with the grace and speed that came from centuries of practice in the arts of war, she feinted left, then spun around and snapped a kick into the throat of the lupine as it hurtled toward her. The blow, backed with enough force to snap a mortal's neck, barely jarred the beast. The yellow claws swiped across her shoulder blade, opening a row of deep, bloodless gashes that curved around her ribs.

She rolled and came up holding the pistol, which she fired into the lupine's chest and belly as it charged. The first two bullets smashed through the collar bone. The third shot opened its gut. The fourth bullet took out part of its jaw.

The lupine spun in circles. It howled and snapped at its wounds. Lucita took a step backward, moving toward the greater concealment of the trees. The beast spun faster. From its torn flesh, spines began to sprout. Its muzzle shortened, squashing back into its face. The massive canine torso narrowed and flattened, turning into the squat shape of a horned lizard. Its ragged crimson mouth lolled open to reveal two sets of gleaming teeth.

Against a shapeshifter, the gun was of no use. Lucita tossed it away and drew the knife she'd taken from one of the thugs. With a bladed weapon in her hand, she felt more grounded and aggressive. Knives, swords, scimitars, these were the instruments in whose use she'd spent centuries training. Clutching the knife, she backed up a few paces. Seeing her in retreat, the creature hissed and scuttled forward, its gait more roach-like than reptilian. In spite of being gravely wounded, Lucita spun adroitly aside and slashed one of the blazing, hooded eyes.



With a sound like parchment crumbling, the eye deflated back into the skull. She drew back to put out the remaining eye, but the wolf-lizard lashed round with its spiked tail and caught her below the knees. She fell and rolled, calling forth the powers of Obtenebration that had served the Lasombra clan for centuries.

The creature's forward charge was halted as waves of undulating blackness roiled outward from Lucita's hands. Like a rising tide of ebony water, the cloying darkness uncoiled and spread, cloaking the trees, the earth, blotting out the moon and the stars.

The viscous, terrifying shroud completely covered her attacker, shutting off sight, muffling sound. A mortal could have choked to death, but a supernatural creature such as this one was merely enraged and disoriented. Obviously, it was no lupine.

Lucita had the advantage now. Having manipulated the shadows, she could also see through them. Her enemy stood rooted, sniffing the air for the scent of its attacker, blinking its good eye while blood streamed from the other. In moments, Lucita knew, it would begin to heal itself. She had to strike before that process started.

Lunging from the right, she hurled the knife. At the same time, sensing the subtle whoosh of the blade, the shapeshifter brought its powers of fleshcraft into play. Before the knife could reach its mark, thick clumps of fat and muscle tissue were redistributed from other areas of the creature's body to shield the eye.

Badly wounded, Lucita knew her ability to sustain tactical superiority was compromised. As her blade harmlessly penetrated inches of dead flesh, the darkness began to dissolve. An instant later, the creature plucked the knife free with one scaly hand and hurled it back with so much force that, as Lucita dodged to the side, the blade struck and penetrated a tree trunk thirty feet away.

"Monçada's bitch!" the thing hissed, as its razor teeth clamped down across her arm.

With a desperate surge of her remaining strength, Lucita willed her forearm to transform into what looked, at first, like wisps of fog. From the elbow down, her flesh lost substance, then dissolved into a clot of shifting, blurring shadows. Her assailant's teeth gnashed uselessly on darkness, biting wildly in a futile attempt to find solid flesh.

Before her attacker could recover from its surprise, she hurled herself into the cold Potomac and stroked downward as though bound for hell itself. The dark water seethed around her as it absorbed some of the blackness conjured from her soul. Black as oblivion, black as annihilation, black as the heart of the thing that still paced the bank in confusion, snapping and clawing at shadows.

CHAPTER FIVE

David Vargas closed his eyes and pretended he was with another woman. Unlike the flabby but exuberant brunette that he was fucking doggie-style on the narrow bed, the woman in his fantasy was slim-hipped and bosomy with wide-set green eyes fringed with thick black lashes that looked very much like David's. She moaned and writhed, but not with pleasure. Her shudders came not from ecstasy, but terror.

Daphne's voice shook him back to a less enjoyable reality. "Oh, God, oh God, don't stop, that feels so good, oh God."

"Shhh," he said, slowing his strokes and smoothing her short, bobbed hair. "We don't want the others to hear."

He reached over her broad rump to caress her heavy, pendulous breasts, less from any desire to pleasure her as to end the incessant smack of their larded mass against her flesh. At this angle he could see himself in the small oval mirror — the only mirror provided in this institutional hellhole of a room — and he scrutinized himself, entranced. Jet-black hair, eyes even more beautiful than his half-sister Becca's, so captivating that he could often enchant a woman or make an argumentative person go silent with just a glance. And his body. At thirty-six, he looked years younger — nor did he require a fastidious regimen of exercise and diet to maintain the hard, lean muscles, the flat belly and narrow waist. David's secret for eternal youth was a simple one based entirely on self-indulgence — booze, drugs and sex, preferably all three at the same time.

On this ignominious occasion, however, he was lucky just to be getting a piece of ass. Although he'd tried every way he could think of to get some crank or coke or, hell, even a fifth of whiskey smuggled in, the sobriety Nazis at Harmony in the Hills were diabolical in their obsession that no one should enjoy even a moment of exquisite escape from reality. The bitch behind the intake desk must have a nose like a drug-smelling hound and the rest of the counselors were even more despicably virtuous.

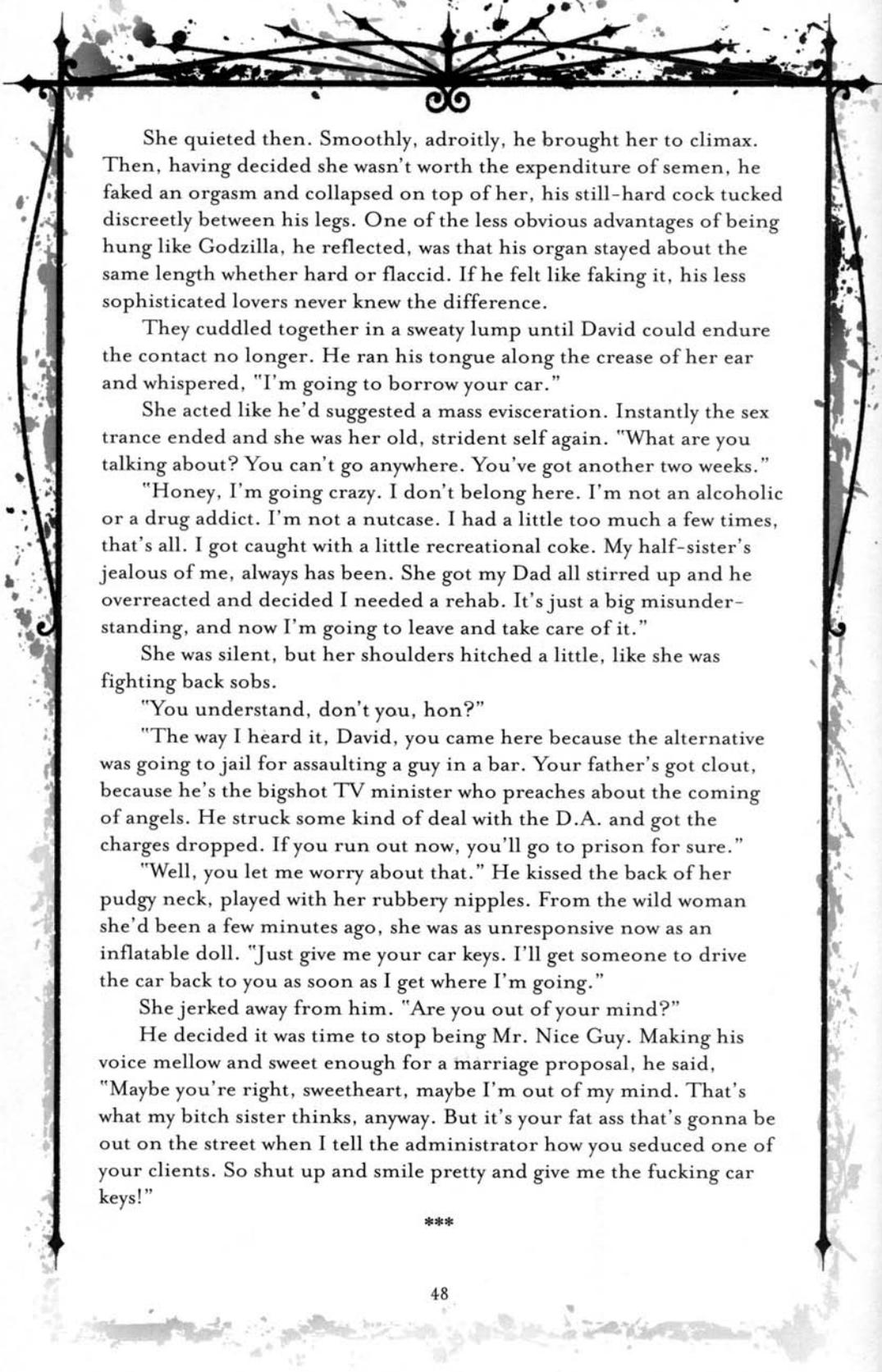
Except for Daphne.

Daphne Kellerman, bless her horny little heart, was the weak link in Harmony's iron chain of command.

"Oh, God, David, please. Please, harder, David, harder."

The way she was carrying on, he figured she hadn't been fucked since her weight passed one-eighty — probably quite a few pounds ago.

"Sweetheart, keep it down, will you?" he whispered. "It's not me I'm worried about. It's your job on the line if they catch us."



She quieted then. Smoothly, adroitly, he brought her to climax. Then, having decided she wasn't worth the expenditure of semen, he faked an orgasm and collapsed on top of her, his still-hard cock tucked discreetly between his legs. One of the less obvious advantages of being hung like Godzilla, he reflected, was that his organ stayed about the same length whether hard or flaccid. If he felt like faking it, his less sophisticated lovers never knew the difference.

They cuddled together in a sweaty lump until David could endure the contact no longer. He ran his tongue along the crease of her ear and whispered, "I'm going to borrow your car."

She acted like he'd suggested a mass evisceration. Instantly the sex trance ended and she was her old, strident self again. "What are you talking about? You can't go anywhere. You've got another two weeks."

"Honey, I'm going crazy. I don't belong here. I'm not an alcoholic or a drug addict. I'm not a nutcase. I had a little too much a few times, that's all. I got caught with a little recreational coke. My half-sister's jealous of me, always has been. She got my Dad all stirred up and he overreacted and decided I needed a rehab. It's just a big misunderstanding, and now I'm going to leave and take care of it."

She was silent, but her shoulders hitched a little, like she was fighting back sobs.

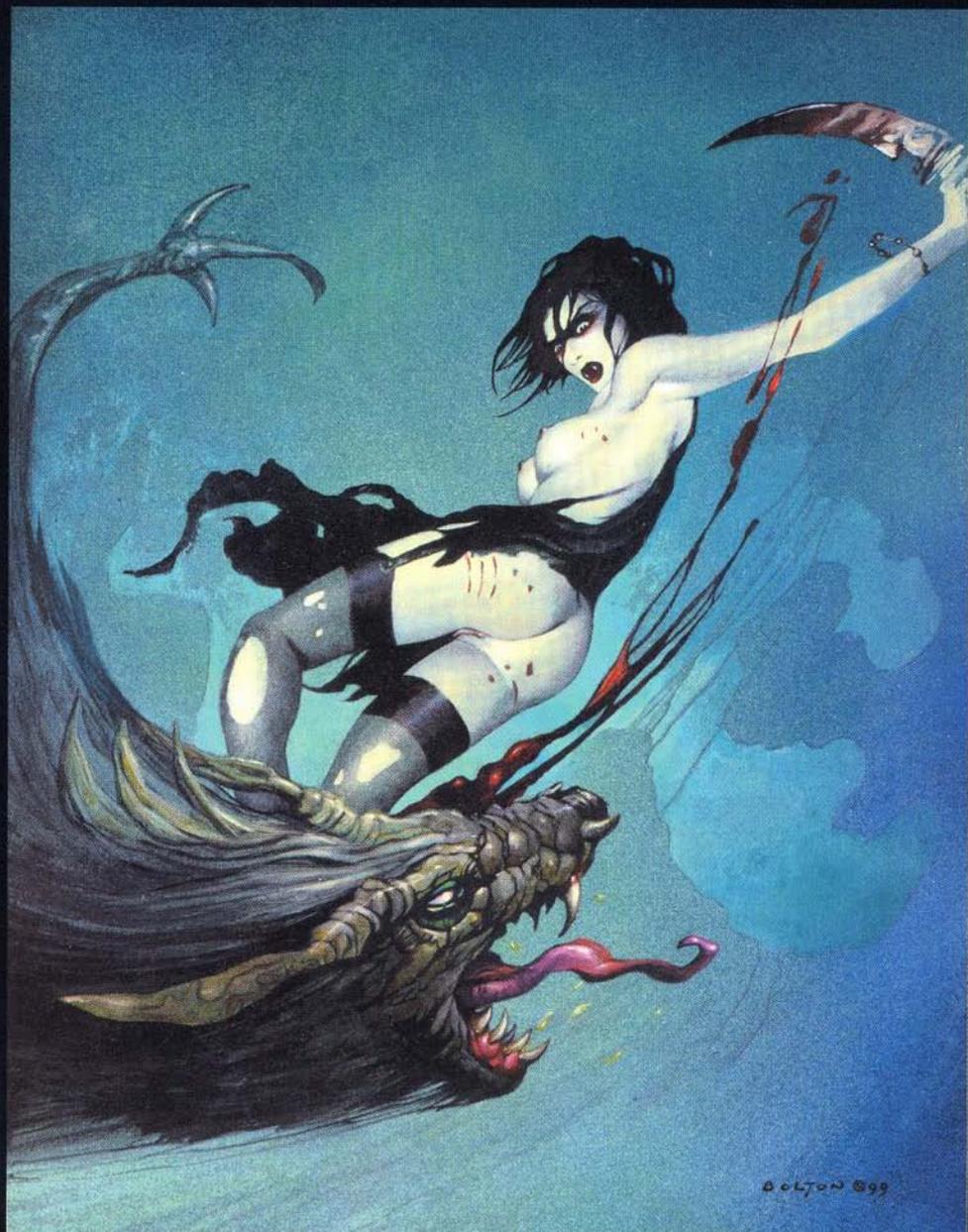
"You understand, don't you, hon?"

"The way I heard it, David, you came here because the alternative was going to jail for assaulting a guy in a bar. Your father's got clout, because he's the bigshot TV minister who preaches about the coming of angels. He struck some kind of deal with the D.A. and got the charges dropped. If you run out now, you'll go to prison for sure."

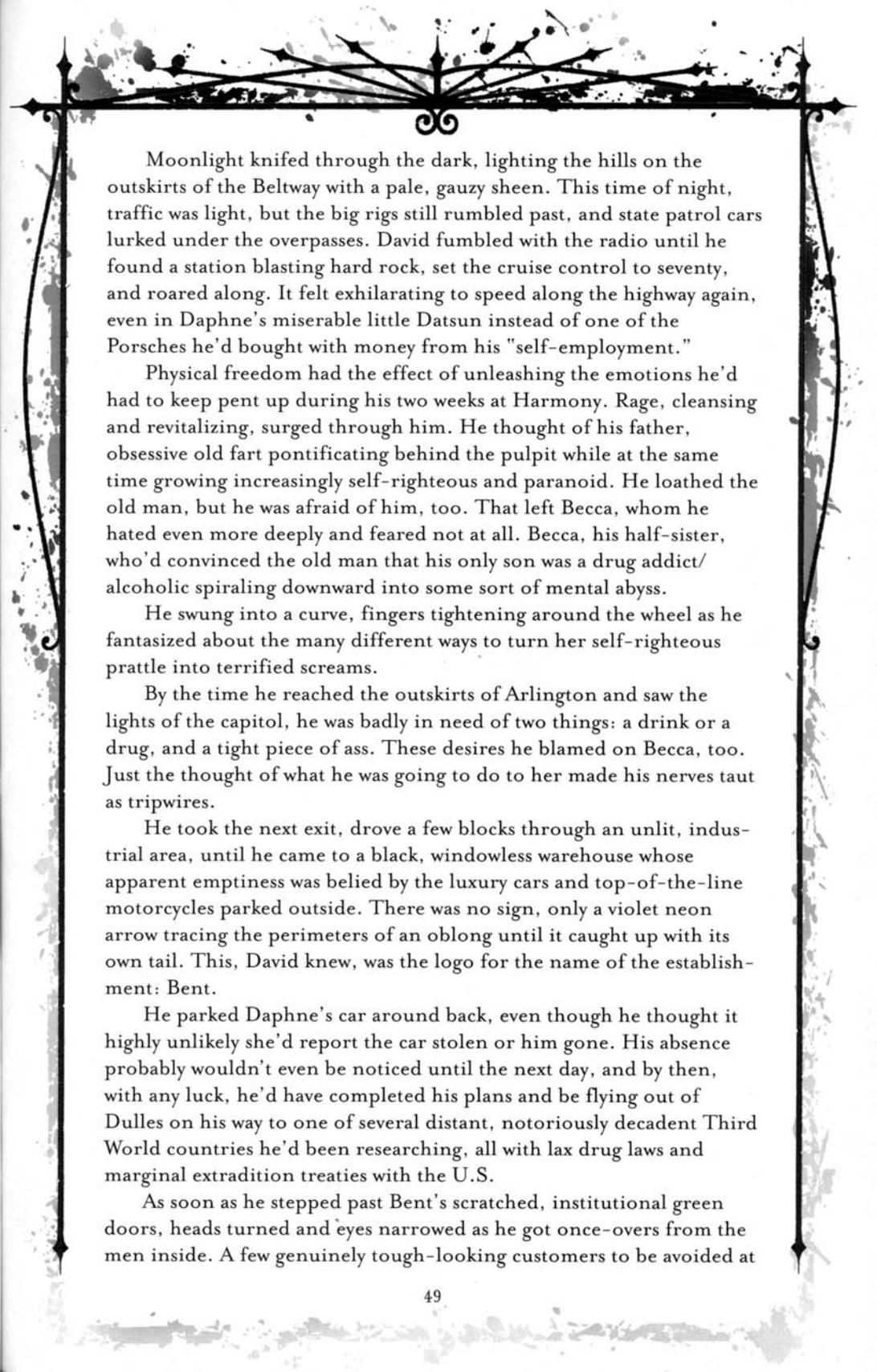
"Well, you let me worry about that." He kissed the back of her pudgy neck, played with her rubbery nipples. From the wild woman she'd been a few minutes ago, she was as unresponsive now as an inflatable doll. "Just give me your car keys. I'll get someone to drive the car back to you as soon as I get where I'm going."

She jerked away from him. "Are you out of your mind?"

He decided it was time to stop being Mr. Nice Guy. Making his voice mellow and sweet enough for a marriage proposal, he said, "Maybe you're right, sweetheart, maybe I'm out of my mind. That's what my bitch sister thinks, anyway. But it's your fat ass that's gonna be out on the street when I tell the administrator how you seduced one of your clients. So shut up and smile pretty and give me the fucking car keys!"



Sascha Vykos ambushes Lucita in the *zulo* form.



Moonlight knifed through the dark, lighting the hills on the outskirts of the Beltway with a pale, gauzy sheen. This time of night, traffic was light, but the big rigs still rumbled past, and state patrol cars lurked under the overpasses. David fumbled with the radio until he found a station blasting hard rock, set the cruise control to seventy, and roared along. It felt exhilarating to speed along the highway again, even in Daphne's miserable little Datsun instead of one of the Porsches he'd bought with money from his "self-employment."

Physical freedom had the effect of unleashing the emotions he'd had to keep pent up during his two weeks at Harmony. Rage, cleansing and revitalizing, surged through him. He thought of his father, obsessive old fart pontificating behind the pulpit while at the same time growing increasingly self-righteous and paranoid. He loathed the old man, but he was afraid of him, too. That left Becca, whom he hated even more deeply and feared not at all. Becca, his half-sister, who'd convinced the old man that his only son was a drug addict/alcoholic spiraling downward into some sort of mental abyss.

He swung into a curve, fingers tightening around the wheel as he fantasized about the many different ways to turn her self-righteous prattle into terrified screams.

By the time he reached the outskirts of Arlington and saw the lights of the capitol, he was badly in need of two things: a drink or a drug, and a tight piece of ass. These desires he blamed on Becca, too. Just the thought of what he was going to do to her made his nerves taut as tripwires.

He took the next exit, drove a few blocks through an unlit, industrial area, until he came to a black, windowless warehouse whose apparent emptiness was belied by the luxury cars and top-of-the-line motorcycles parked outside. There was no sign, only a violet neon arrow tracing the perimeters of an oblong until it caught up with its own tail. This, David knew, was the logo for the name of the establishment: Bent.

He parked Daphne's car around back, even though he thought it highly unlikely she'd report the car stolen or him gone. His absence probably wouldn't even be noticed until the next day, and by then, with any luck, he'd have completed his plans and be flying out of Dulles on his way to one of several distant, notoriously decadent Third World countries he'd been researching, all with lax drug laws and marginal extradition treaties with the U.S.

As soon as he stepped past Bent's scratched, institutional green doors, heads turned and eyes narrowed as he got once-overs from the men inside. A few genuinely tough-looking customers to be avoided at



all costs, then the wannabe macho dudes sprinkled in with college types and, David's personal preference, the girlish, cute-boy types with lithe, hard-bodied, androgynous frames. He paused momentarily, long enough to soak up the attention and get a feel for the place. Far from rattling him, the obvious interest his entrance engendered turned him on. Taking a seat at the bar, he ordered a double scotch. The bartender brought it, along with the information that someone was already picking up the tab. He sat back and sipped, inhaling the aphrodisiac aromas of testosterone, male sweat, and unfettered libidos, while mentally measuring his own physical attractiveness against those of the other men in the bar.

As queer bars went, in David's experience, Bent wasn't bad. Drinks strong and guys either sexily studly or seductively fey, air pungent with a hormonal brew of jockstrap and semen, lighting so subdued and smoky that when a short, square-faced dude in tight denim and a black muscle shirt set his trim butt on the stool beside him, David could barely tell the color of his eyes. Not that he cared. But when the other man gazed at him, he liked to be able to see whether the pupils were dilated with lust or with chemicals.

"I'm Charley," said the other. He was slender, with a wide mouth, generous lips, and the smooth, expressive hands of an artist. Smiling, he offered David a joint.

David took a long toke and slugged back the rest of his scotch while his new friend ordered another round, peeling off a fifty-dollar bill from a roll as thick as the bulge in his crotch. David sized up both with equal interest.

"Want something stronger?" Charley said, nodding toward the john.

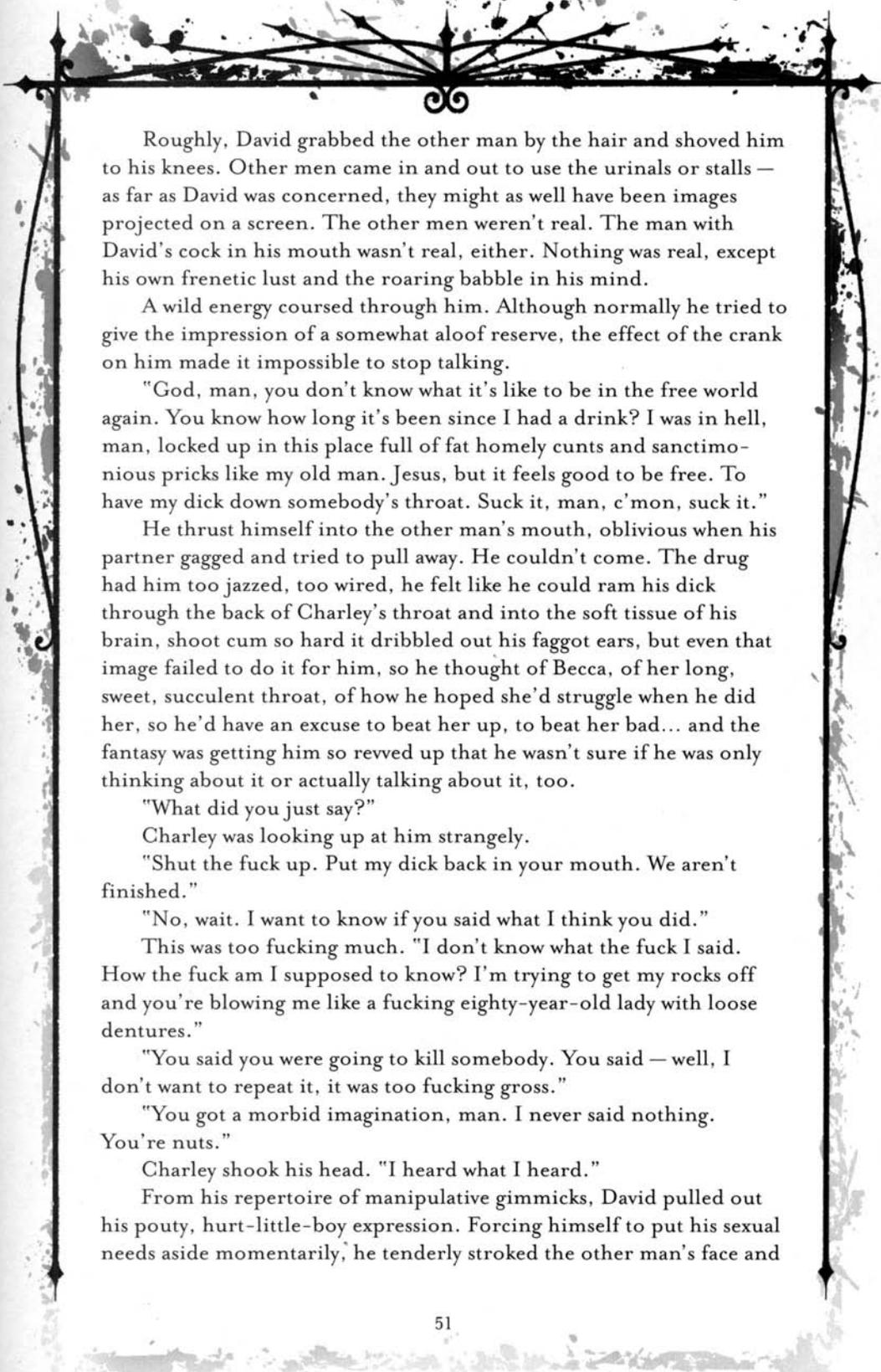
"Always."

In the bathroom, Charley took out a plastic envelope containing a yellowish nugget of crank. Using the blunt end of a cigarette lighter, he ground the drug into a powdery consistency, then snorted half, leaving the rest for David.

Although he sometimes referred to it derisively as a poor man's coke, David loved the effect of crank — the way it set his blood to hissing and careening through his veins, a tsunami of blood thundering into his pelvis, engorging his dick until the shaft bobbed straight up against his belly and his head throbbed with the pulsing of more blood than his heart felt capable of pumping.

"You're hot," Charley was saying.

"Then suck me. C'mon. Show me what a whore you can be."



Roughly, David grabbed the other man by the hair and shoved him to his knees. Other men came in and out to use the urinals or stalls — as far as David was concerned, they might as well have been images projected on a screen. The other men weren't real. The man with David's cock in his mouth wasn't real, either. Nothing was real, except his own frenetic lust and the roaring babble in his mind.

A wild energy coursed through him. Although normally he tried to give the impression of a somewhat aloof reserve, the effect of the crank on him made it impossible to stop talking.

"God, man, you don't know what it's like to be in the free world again. You know how long it's been since I had a drink? I was in hell, man, locked up in this place full of fat homely cunts and sanctimonious pricks like my old man. Jesus, but it feels good to be free. To have my dick down somebody's throat. Suck it, man, c'mon, suck it."

He thrust himself into the other man's mouth, oblivious when his partner gagged and tried to pull away. He couldn't come. The drug had him too jazzed, too wired, he felt like he could ram his dick through the back of Charley's throat and into the soft tissue of his brain, shoot cum so hard it dribbled out his faggot ears, but even that image failed to do it for him, so he thought of Becca, of her long, sweet, succulent throat, of how he hoped she'd struggle when he did her, so he'd have an excuse to beat her up, to beat her bad... and the fantasy was getting him so revved up that he wasn't sure if he was only thinking about it or actually talking about it, too.

"What did you just say?"

Charley was looking up at him strangely.

"Shut the fuck up. Put my dick back in your mouth. We aren't finished."

"No, wait. I want to know if you said what I think you did."

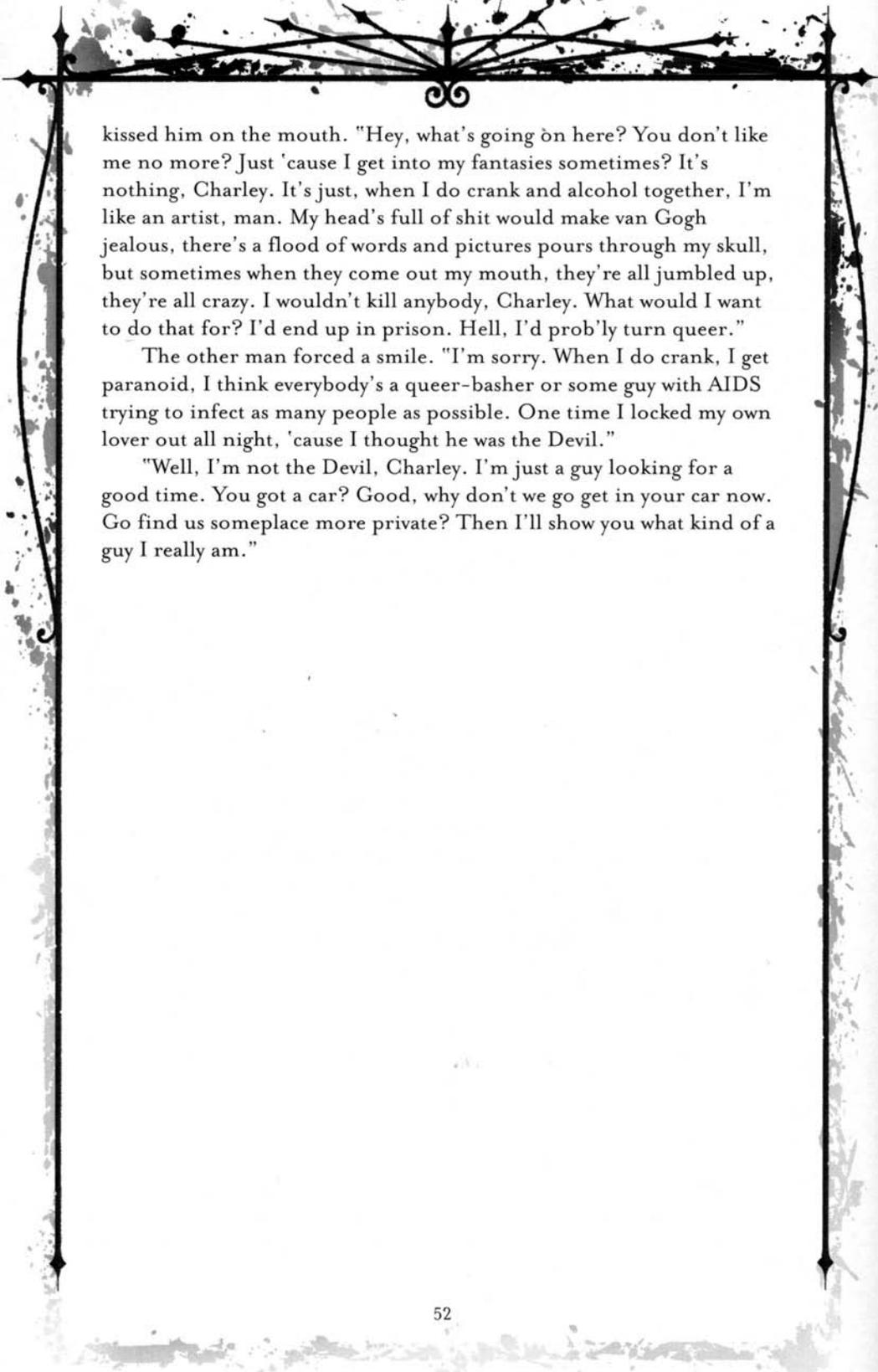
This was too fucking much. "I don't know what the fuck I said. How the fuck am I supposed to know? I'm trying to get my rocks off and you're blowing me like a fucking eighty-year-old lady with loose dentures."

"You said you were going to kill somebody. You said — well, I don't want to repeat it, it was too fucking gross."

"You got a morbid imagination, man. I never said nothing. You're nuts."

Charley shook his head. "I heard what I heard."

From his repertoire of manipulative gimmicks, David pulled out his pouty, hurt-little-boy expression. Forcing himself to put his sexual needs aside momentarily, he tenderly stroked the other man's face and



kissed him on the mouth. "Hey, what's going on here? You don't like me no more? Just 'cause I get into my fantasies sometimes? It's nothing, Charley. It's just, when I do crank and alcohol together, I'm like an artist, man. My head's full of shit would make van Gogh jealous, there's a flood of words and pictures pours through my skull, but sometimes when they come out my mouth, they're all jumbled up, they're all crazy. I wouldn't kill anybody, Charley. What would I want to do that for? I'd end up in prison. Hell, I'd prob'ly turn queer."

The other man forced a smile. "I'm sorry. When I do crank, I get paranoid, I think everybody's a queer-basher or some guy with AIDS trying to infect as many people as possible. One time I locked my own lover out all night, 'cause I thought he was the Devil."

"Well, I'm not the Devil, Charley. I'm just a guy looking for a good time. You got a car? Good, why don't we go get in your car now. Go find us someplace more private? Then I'll show you what kind of a guy I really am."

CHAPTER SIX

"For God's sake, William, stay still! And please don't make me shout. You know how bad that is for my voice."

Victoria Ash stepped back, horsehair paintbrush held in inch-long, scarlet nails and studied her creation — the languid, hooded eyes and narrow nose, the ripe, exotic mouth parted just enough to hint at incipient desire or prolonged ennui. Her canvas was a broad, triangular one — the tanned, muscular back of a construction worker and amateur bodybuilder she'd acquired at a bar in Adams-Morgan a few weeks earlier. A spattering of freckles across his shoulders and a small scar the size of a bottlecap flawed him, but in all other ways his massive body was close to perfect, both as a canvas and for any other uses she cared to put it to.

The self-portrait was a copy of the photograph that graced her latest CD, the one featuring her pop hit, "4ever 1," currently ranked at Billboard #8. Although her career had progressed quite nicely in recent months, she was between gigs at the moment and was already obsessing over which of several tempting offers to accept.

Despite her preoccupation with her singing career, Victoria's haven gave testimony to the constant war she waged with boredom. The Beast might be her second deadly enemy, but ennui was her first. Her allies in that battle were sex, her singing career and death — if all three could somehow be combined, so much the better.

The loft above her U Street studio was used for housing slaves. The apartment below was where she slept, made love, and dabbled occasionally in painting, calligraphy, and sculpture. For the latter, she sometimes combined swatches of silk, bits of fur, and precious stones with human bones polished and painted to the luster of fine ivory. Under her tutelage, even William had proved he had a bent toward creativity — the sex swing constructed from a human pelvis had been his design.

Victoria reminded herself that she was not a monster — she'd obtained the bones from a ghoul with a penchant for graverobbing who belonged to a Nosferatu acquaintance. Recently, though, she'd decided to use other materials in her future sculptures. Just looking at the bones, knowing what they were, aroused the Beast and overtook what scant compassion still survived within her.

She checked the mirror opposite her, trying to decide if the features that she saw there matched the ones on her primitive canvas, wondering how the mortals who feared and hated her kind would

explain the fact that she could see herself reflected perfectly — so much the better, since all but the most sophisticated vampire-hunters still clung to the ancient superstitions about her race.

All to the good, too, that her looks were more those of a model than a calculating killer. Thick, dark red (this week) hair framed her heart-shaped face and set off the flecks of yellow in her green eyes. She wore a costly brocade robe imported from Bangkok — deep turquoise shot through with gold threads that gleamed in the light. Henna designs marked the backs of both hands, complex arabesques and *fleurs de lis* extending all the way to her varnished nails.

Wetting the tip of the brush with her tongue, she closed her eyes and shivered as the taste of rich, fresh blood thrilled through her. Hunger jittered in her stomach. She had fed once earlier in the evening — a hastily consumed meal from the neck of a teenaged girl she'd found passed out behind a townhouse where a rave was taking place. The girl's blood was a psychedelic brew of hallucinogens and opiates. Victoria had begun feeling the effects after only a few swallows. Not that she didn't enjoy getting a buzz on as much as the next lush, but she'd felt the need to keep her wits about her tonight. There was an electric quality to the air — a barely suppressed danger. At such times, the security of her haven was the only place she didn't feel herself on the verge of going mad.

Motioning to a corner of the room where shadows piled as thick as snow drifts, she said, "Come out, Odette, where I can see you. And stop sulking. I wouldn't have brought you here if I didn't find you beautiful. You should be flattered."

A barely discernable frisson from the shadows as the girl curled herself into a tighter ball.

"Don't play games. Come here to me. I need more paint."

The girl, Odette, her ribs and hip bones prominent under skin that was the sickly, bluish cast of skim milk, crawled forward to present her neck, where blood oozed from a recently punctured vein. Victoria dabbed the bristles into one of the wounds and added a bit of shading to the cheekbones formed by the male's muscular back, then pulled the girl to her with her free hand and took a deep, refreshing sip.

The girl's eyes closed and she shuddered weakly, either from fear or an approaching swoon. Victoria ran her tongue down the girl's chest, rimming one pale nipple while she tweaked the other between thumb and forefinger.

"Open your eyes. Look at me."



BOLTON © 99

The girl squinched them more tightly shut and shook her head. "No, I can't. I can't look. I won't." Her voice was raw and muffled, as though her constant crying had inflamed her vocal chords.

"You liked me well enough when you first came here, didn't you? You were so excited to be going home with a famous singer. You told me that you listened to '4ever I' all the time."

"I thought you were human then."

"But deep down, you hoped that I was more. You wanted something forbidden, something deliciously dangerous and decadent. Now you're scared and you want to go home and be a good little girl from now on. Well, I'm sorry. Truly I am, but it's too late for that."

The girl's frail body shook. She began to babble incoherently, a meaningless hodgepodge of glottal syllables. At first Victoria thought the girl had simply lost her mind. Then she remembered the obscene practice that was all the rage among religious zealots nowadays — speaking in tongues as a way to ward off supernatural evil.

William turned around. "Do you want me to quiet her, Mistress? Like I did last time?"

"You enjoyed that didn't you?" said Victoria, and William smirked.

Odette pawed the empty air. Eyes open now, but unseeing as she conversed with ghosts.

The bizarre speaking in tongues annoyed Victoria. When Odette was doing it, she found it impossible to discern the girl's thoughts. She also held the secret fear that the babbling might be some sort of spell or incantation, that Odette might have at one time been tutored by a mage.

"Stop that!" Her hand shot out and slammed the girl across the side of the head, sending her careening backward into a wall. Her eyes snapped open suddenly — glazed with shock — then closed again as she slithered to the floor, her head thrown back, blood meandering in bright candystripes across her waxy skin.

She caught the look of fear on William's face. "Don't worry, childe; you know I only chastise my slaves when absolutely necessary."

The slave loved it when she called him "childe." He gazed at her as happily as a praised poodle.

Victoria, staring in disgust at the crumpled condition of her still-living tube of paint, was reaching down to dab her brush with more warm, red ooze when her preternaturally acute hearing detected the sound of something sliding almost noiselessly along the outside hallway. She froze, expecting to smell the pungent, musky odor that

clung to even the cleanest human flesh; but there was nothing, not even a whiff of a living creature's subtle but distinctive scent.

"If you're finished, Mistress," said her canvas, "can I paint your lovely body? I'll use my cock."

William favored her with a lascivious sneer. Victoria had chosen him not just for his looks, but his compulsive sexuality. Ordinarily his obsessive lust aroused and titillated her. Now it was merely annoying.

"Hush!" she hissed. "Go outside the back way. See if someone's there."

He was eager, pumped. "And hurt them?"

"Of course not. Do you want to attract attention? Just have a look around."

She opened a drawer in the antique armoire next to a window covered with four layers of drapery, black silk and gray velvet beneath a billowing curtain of crimson and tourmaline brocade fine enough to adorn the casket of a king. She withdrew a semi-automatic, a compact silver weapon that accommodated both her slender hand and her penchant for sleek, well-crafted objects. Moving as silently as the presence in the outside hallway, she pulled back the slide and approached the door.

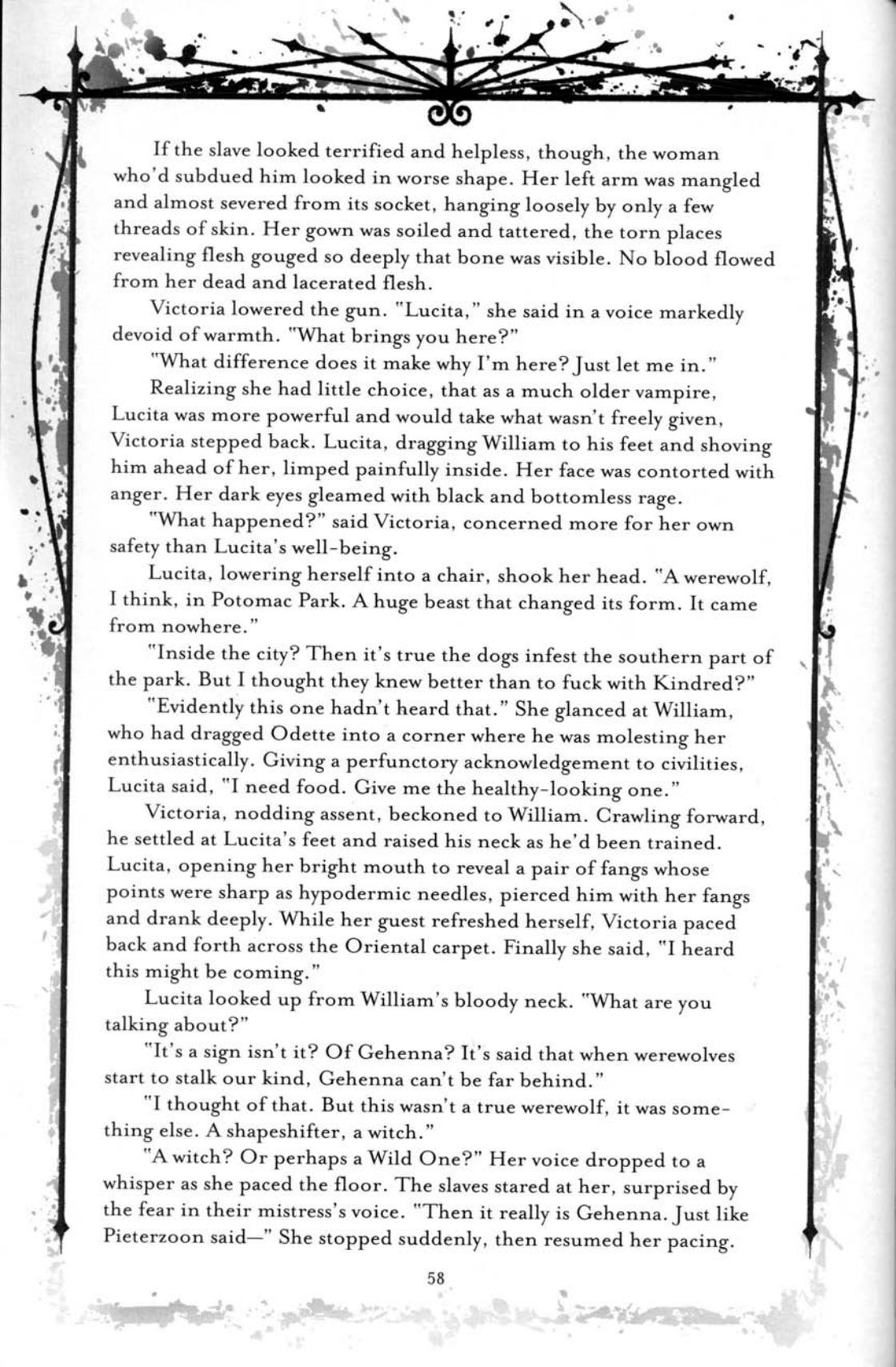
For the past few weeks, Victoria had suffered the sense that she was being observed. As a result, she had cut back on her singing engagements and pleaded illness to avoid performing at a fundraising gala to benefit a prominent D.C. jazz musician stricken with AIDS. Instead she had passed her nights prowling the fringe areas around Adam's Mark and dallying with her slaves, Odette, the little adventuress now wanting to return to her born-again ways and the doting, fuckstruck William.

Now she thought about that skin-crawly feeling of mortal eyes that fed on her while she dined on other mortals' blood and wondered who among the performers, fans and agents with whom she consorted might be an enemy. A witch-hunter, as the fanatics in the Society of Leopold sometimes called themselves.

The outside stairs sighed softly under carefully placed weight.

Aiming the gun, she yanked the door open.

"No, please don't shoot!" William implored, holding one hand up in supplicant fashion. The black-haired woman straddling him gripped his hair while twisting an arm behind his back. Blue veins stood out in stark relief across his biceps and along the corded tendons of his neck.



If the slave looked terrified and helpless, though, the woman who'd subdued him looked in worse shape. Her left arm was mangled and almost severed from its socket, hanging loosely by only a few threads of skin. Her gown was soiled and tattered, the torn places revealing flesh gouged so deeply that bone was visible. No blood flowed from her dead and lacerated flesh.

Victoria lowered the gun. "Lucita," she said in a voice markedly devoid of warmth. "What brings you here?"

"What difference does it make why I'm here? Just let me in."

Realizing she had little choice, that as a much older vampire, Lucita was more powerful and would take what wasn't freely given, Victoria stepped back. Lucita, dragging William to his feet and shoving him ahead of her, limped painfully inside. Her face was contorted with anger. Her dark eyes gleamed with black and bottomless rage.

"What happened?" said Victoria, concerned more for her own safety than Lucita's well-being.

Lucita, lowering herself into a chair, shook her head. "A werewolf, I think, in Potomac Park. A huge beast that changed its form. It came from nowhere."

"Inside the city? Then it's true the dogs infest the southern part of the park. But I thought they knew better than to fuck with Kindred?"

"Evidently this one hadn't heard that." She glanced at William, who had dragged Odette into a corner where he was molesting her enthusiastically. Giving a perfunctory acknowledgement to civilities, Lucita said, "I need food. Give me the healthy-looking one."

Victoria, nodding assent, beckoned to William. Crawling forward, he settled at Lucita's feet and raised his neck as he'd been trained. Lucita, opening her bright mouth to reveal a pair of fangs whose points were sharp as hypodermic needles, pierced him with her fangs and drank deeply. While her guest refreshed herself, Victoria paced back and forth across the Oriental carpet. Finally she said, "I heard this might be coming."

Lucita looked up from William's bloody neck. "What are you talking about?"

"It's a sign isn't it? Of Gehenna? It's said that when werewolves start to stalk our kind, Gehenna can't be far behind."

"I thought of that. But this wasn't a true werewolf, it was something else. A shapeshifter, a witch."

"A witch? Or perhaps a Wild One?" Her voice dropped to a whisper as she paced the floor. The slaves stared at her, surprised by the fear in their mistress's voice. "Then it really is Gehenna. Just like Pieterzoon said—" She stopped suddenly, then resumed her pacing.

"What about Jan Pieterzoon? Have you talked to him?"

"Not recently. I saw him at a party at the British embassy. You know how he drools for that sort of thing: Who's got blue blood and who drinks it. He knows all the royal riffraff, the latest gossip on who's on the move, who's been Embraced. There's talk, he says, that young Prince William has a steadfast admirer among the Kindred, that someday the throne of England may be occupied by one of ours."

"And there's talk that Gehenna is only a myth and soon vampires will rule the world," said Lucita. "That rumor circulated around the time of the Inquisition, too. You don't remember that, Victoria, but I do. Humans may be weak and vulgar, but their capacity for evil equals and sometimes exceeds ours." She finished drinking and shoved the slave away. Already some of her grosser injuries were starting to heal as William's fresh blood invigorated her system. "Now, what of Pieterzoon?"

Before she answered, Victoria dismissed the slaves, sending William and the still-dazed Odette upstairs to the loft.

"Pieterzoon believes Gehenna is at hand. That in the last part of the century science has given way to superstition. People believe in the supernatural again. They study runes and hunt for shapeshifters. They take note of those who're never seen by day, who never seem to age. There are cults that worship angels and those who believe in vampires."

"The Society of Leopold, you mean?"

Victoria nodded. "It's rumored they have a base of operations around Georgetown University. And, of course, there's the Arcanum, although those fools spend most of their time debating the existence of the undead."

"The Council of Ragnarok wants to know Pieterzoon's whereabouts — that is, what's left of the Council. You heard about the riots?"

"I was occupied that night with other things. But, yes, of course, the lunatic humans torched their own porno district; they cremated their own hookers and one of their own senators, no less. It must have stunk like a gigantic fish fry."

"I was there," Lucita said. "I almost burned."

"Then you've almost lost your unlife twice in four nights. Really, I hope you have more lives than a cat or I'd start worrying. Even if it was just a clusterfuck of religious fanatics following the orders of their witch-hunter leaders—"

"I don't think it was witch-hunters this time."

"Who else could get the kine stirred up to such a fever pitch? You can bet some minister's been showing them posters of Hieronymous

Bosch, reading passages from Dante, get the sheep all fired up to go burn and loot in the name of God."

"I think it was Sabbat."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Ever heard of Senator Cordelia Rosenthal?"

Victoria tossed her mane of dark red hair disdainfully.

"Wasn't she the one who burned to death?"

"It hasn't become public knowledge yet, but she killed herself that night. She was a blood doll for Bjorn Garinson and she went crazy. Set herself on fire and tried to burn as many Kindred as possible."

For the first time, Victoria felt the clammy stirrings of real fear. Betrayal on the part of ghouls and blood dolls was one of her secret terrors. No matter how submissive, how compliant, they all were capable of treachery. Unthinkingly her eyes drifted upward to where Odette and William were kept captive. She thought her slaves were safely in thrall to her, and yet... one never really knew.

"Witch-hunters can incite their flock to a degree of madness," Lucita went on, "but 'persuading' a powerful woman like the senator to self-immolate sounds more like the Sabbat's style. If that's the case, the danger's greater than we thought. So if you know anything about—"

"What would I know about the Sabbat?" Victoria played nervously with the beads of her necklace — human knuckles and nails threaded onto tightly woven strands of human hair.

"—If you know anything about the disappearance of Jan Pieterzoon, then it would be to your own advantage if you'd tell me."

"There's nothing to tell." She glanced down at the diamond and emerald Cartier bracelet on her wrist. "If you're feeling stronger now, Lucita, it would be better if you left."

"Is there some reason you don't want me here?"

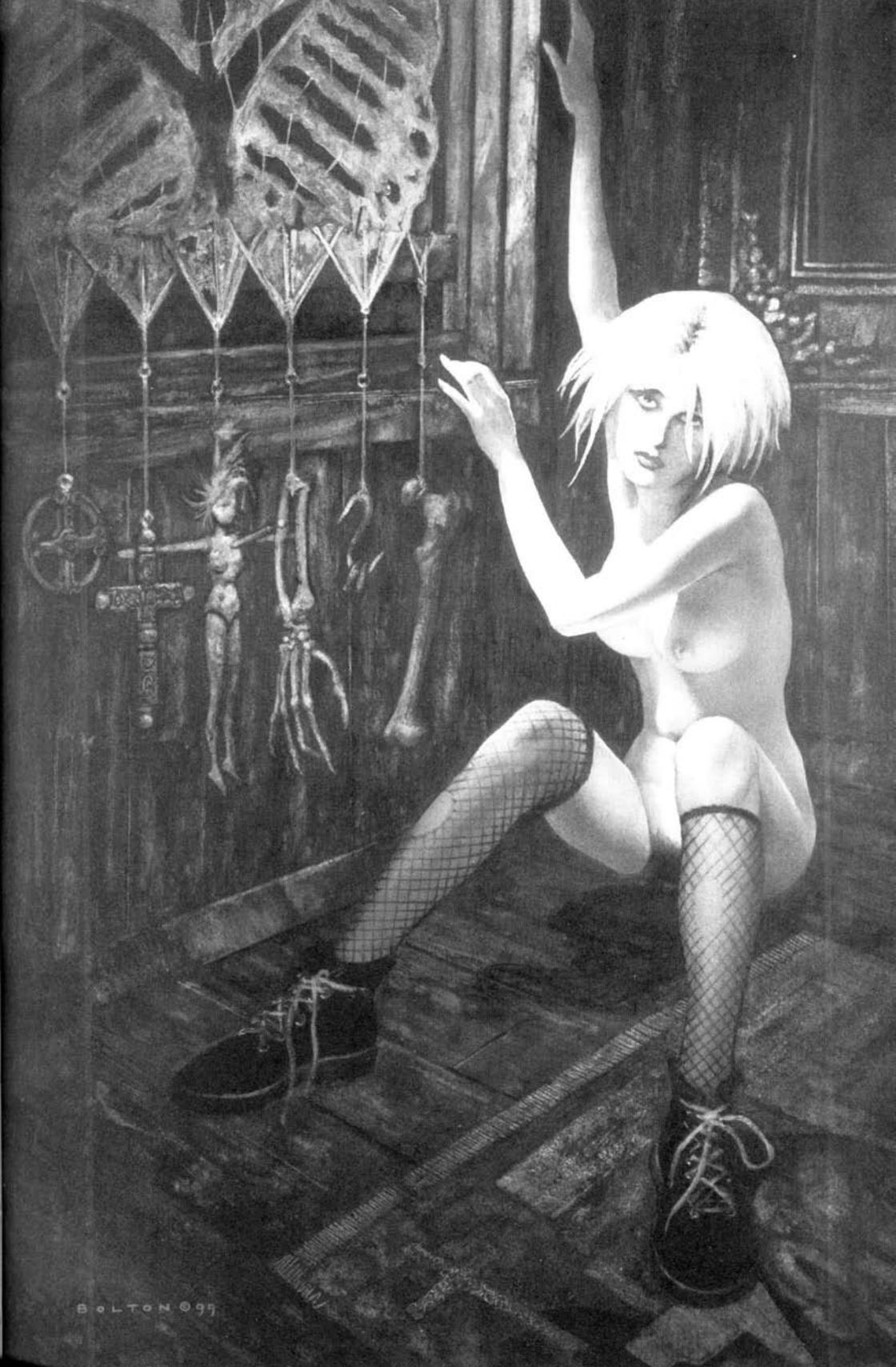
Victoria debated. Should she admit to this older, more powerful vampire whom she both feared and envied what she knew of Pieterzoon? Would Lucita somehow hold her responsible if harm had actually come to Pieterzoon?

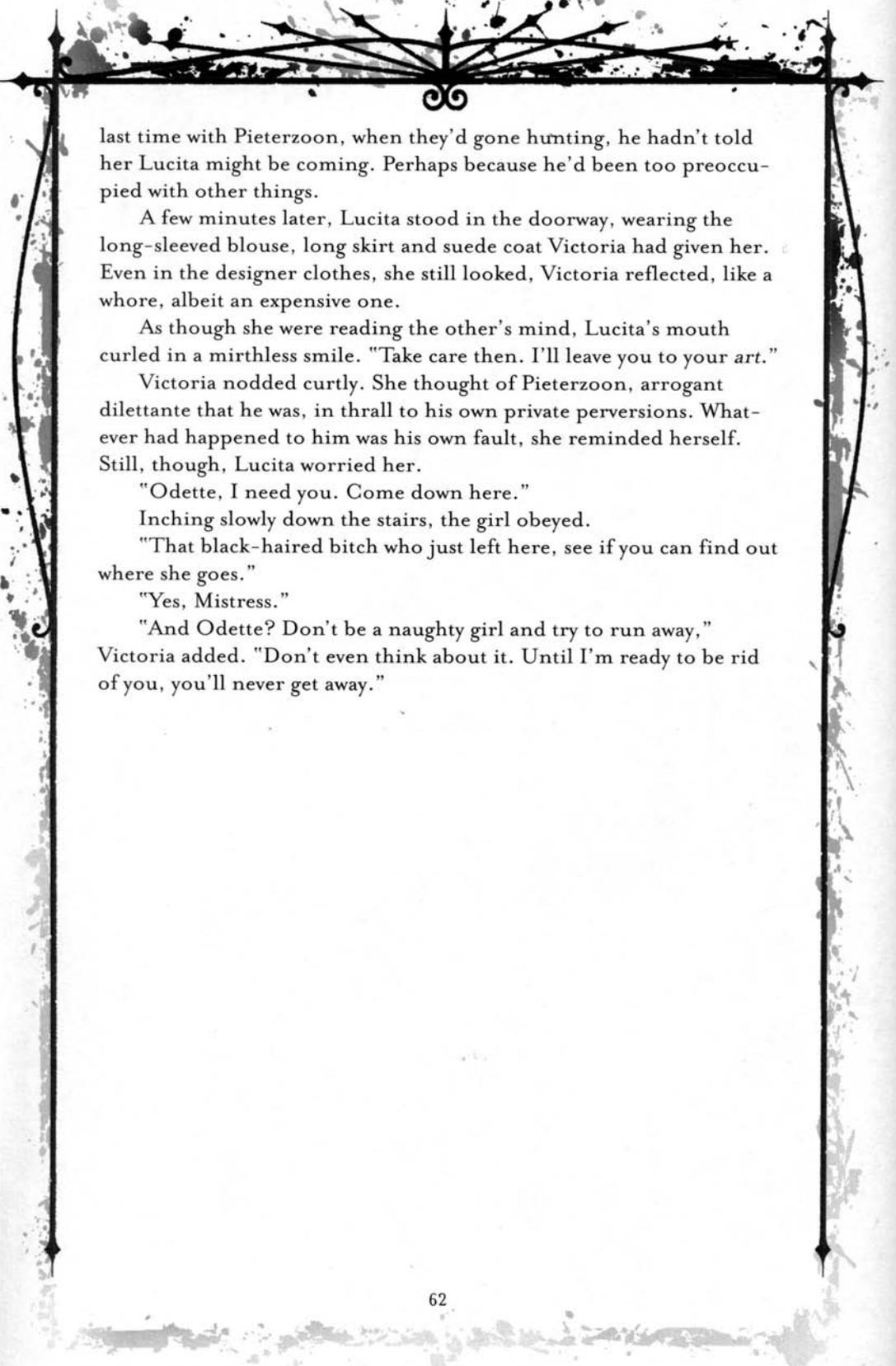
"Really, I prefer to be alone, so I can paint."

"You mean, to play with your food." Lucita smirked.

Victoria drew herself up. "Your clothes are ruined. Let me give you something to wear so you can go to your flat before dawn."

Lucita appraised the other vampire so coldly that Victoria felt a current of fear shimmy along her spine. Why had she ever risked currying Lucita's disfavor anyway? But she didn't know the more powerful and influential vampire would be here in Washington. Her





last time with Pieterzoon, when they'd gone hunting, he hadn't told her Lucita might be coming. Perhaps because he'd been too preoccupied with other things.

A few minutes later, Lucita stood in the doorway, wearing the long-sleeved blouse, long skirt and suede coat Victoria had given her. Even in the designer clothes, she still looked, Victoria reflected, like a whore, albeit an expensive one.

As though she were reading the other's mind, Lucita's mouth curled in a mirthless smile. "Take care then. I'll leave you to your *art*."

Victoria nodded curtly. She thought of Pieterzoon, arrogant dilettante that he was, in thrall to his own private perversions. Whatever had happened to him was his own fault, she reminded herself. Still, though, Lucita worried her.

"Odette, I need you. Come down here."

Inching slowly down the stairs, the girl obeyed.

"That black-haired bitch who just left here, see if you can find out where she goes."

"Yes, Mistress."

"And Odette? Don't be a naughty girl and try to run away," Victoria added. "Don't even think about it. Until I'm ready to be rid of you, you'll never get away."



CHAPTER SEVEN

Charley, it turned out, drove a late-model emerald green Jag, the trunk of which was now filled with Charley himself. He'd been alive when David threw him in there, but, in his drugged zeal, he must have gagged him too tightly, tying the cloth not just over Charley's mouth but closing off his nostrils as well. No matter. Hell, after he got through with Becca, maybe she'd like to pass some time with Charley, too.

Becca. How she occupied his thoughts!

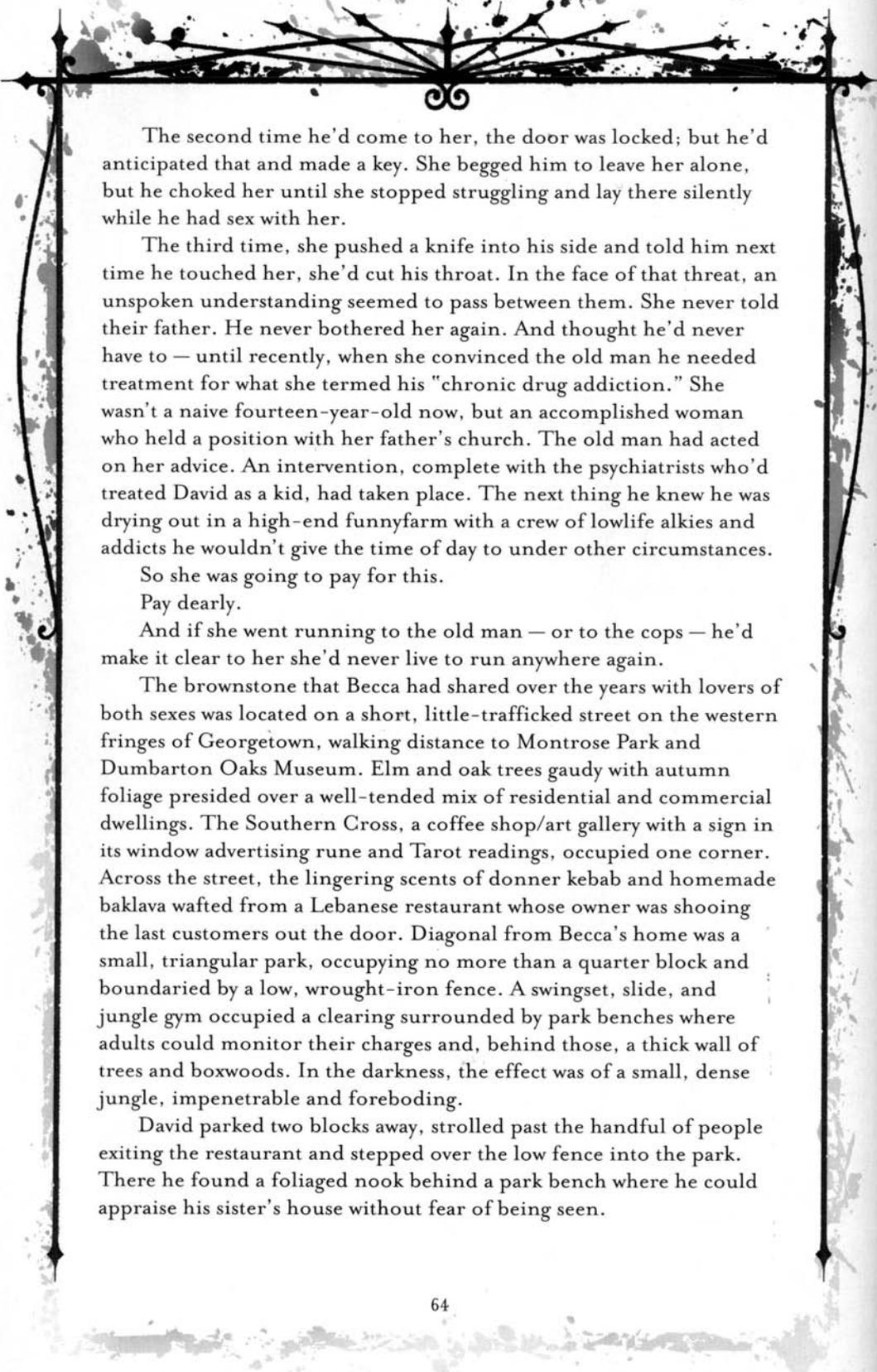
With all the warped sincerity of which he was capable, David believed he'd done her a big favor on the two occasions when he had raped her years ago. His only regret was that he hadn't had the opportunity to violate her more frequently, for surely, had she been favored with more of his masculine prowess, she might not have become the pervert that she was today.

As he cruised the streets around Georgetown, trying to locate his half-sister's address, David remembered that first time with Becca with all the groin-stirring nostalgia with which one might recall a teenage romance or a honeymoon. She'd been fourteen at the time. He was twenty and had just been kicked out of the University of Miami for cheating on an exam. He'd seen her and another girl sunning themselves on the lawn, two sleek and self-absorbed nymphets, Becca's tanned, freckled breasts mounded up inside a tight bikini top as she put an arm around her girlfriend's shoulder and whispered something. They had looked at him, giggling, as if he were something on display for their amusement, making him feel small and weak, a failure who had let the old man down again and Becca knew it, she knew....

She saw into his secret soul in a way the old man didn't dare. The old man was afraid to know the truth about his son, but Becca knew the truth.

That night was the first time he'd crept into her room, pressed a hand over her mouth, the other around her throat and whispered what he'd do to her if she didn't lie there like a sweet little sister and part her pretty legs.

That first time, he'd thought that she must have liked it, because she kept their secret. She must have realized the old man wouldn't believe her or, if he did, that believing David was capable of such a thing would destroy him. He'd had such hopes for David, his handsome, athletic only son, born to a woman he'd loved more deeply than he had his second wife, Becca's mother, dead now for many years.



The second time he'd come to her, the door was locked; but he'd anticipated that and made a key. She begged him to leave her alone, but he choked her until she stopped struggling and lay there silently while he had sex with her.

The third time, she pushed a knife into his side and told him next time he touched her, she'd cut his throat. In the face of that threat, an unspoken understanding seemed to pass between them. She never told their father. He never bothered her again. And thought he'd never have to — until recently, when she convinced the old man he needed treatment for what she termed his "chronic drug addiction." She wasn't a naive fourteen-year-old now, but an accomplished woman who held a position with her father's church. The old man had acted on her advice. An intervention, complete with the psychiatrists who'd treated David as a kid, had taken place. The next thing he knew he was drying out in a high-end funnyfarm with a crew of lowlife alkie and addicts he wouldn't give the time of day to under other circumstances.

So she was going to pay for this.

Pay dearly.

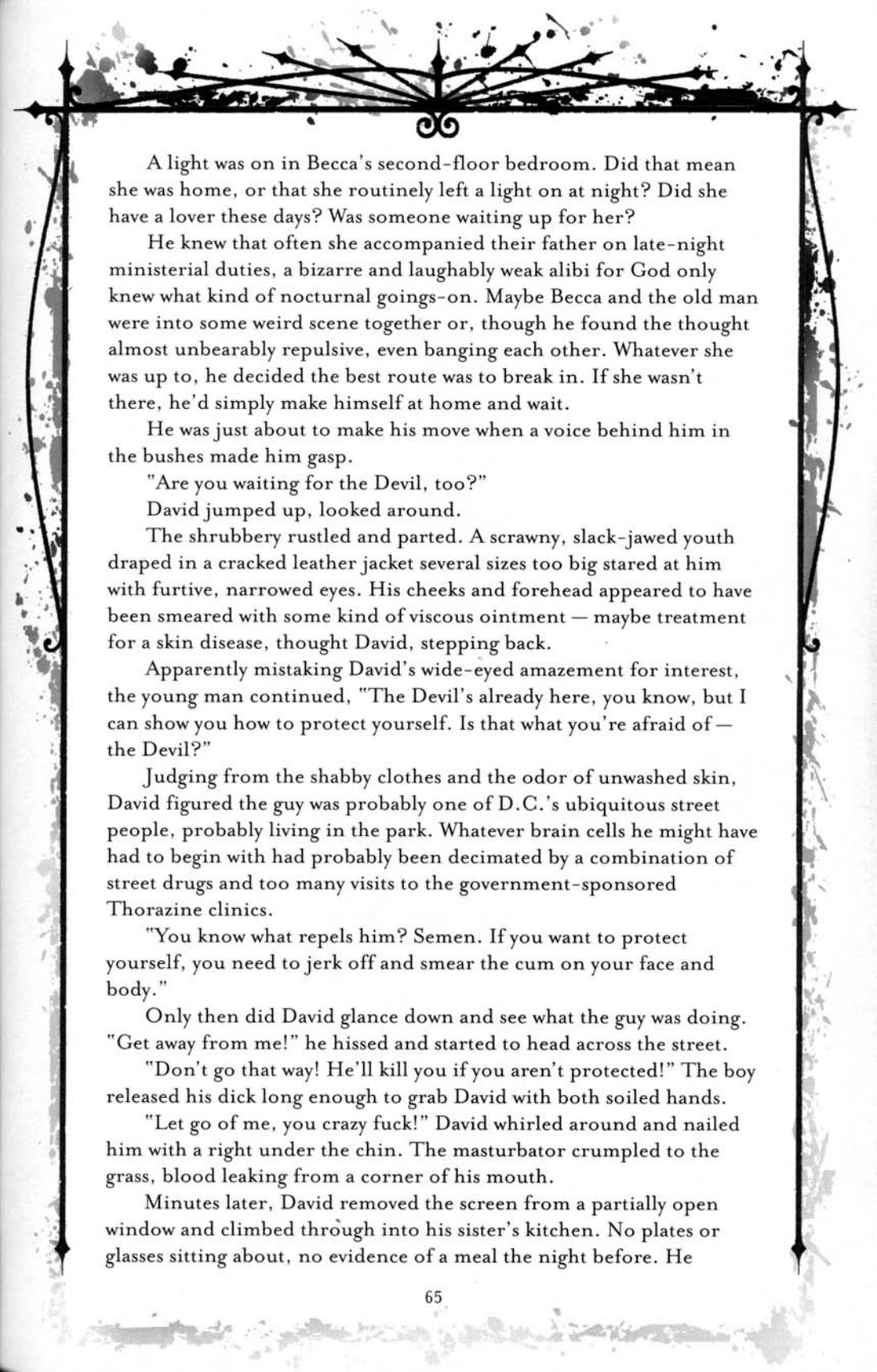
And if she went running to the old man — or to the cops — he'd make it clear to her she'd never live to run anywhere again.

The brownstone that Becca had shared over the years with lovers of both sexes was located on a short, little-trafficked street on the western fringes of Georgetown, walking distance to Montrose Park and Dumbarton Oaks Museum. Elm and oak trees gaudy with autumn foliage presided over a well-tended mix of residential and commercial dwellings. The Southern Cross, a coffee shop/art gallery with a sign in its window advertising rune and Tarot readings, occupied one corner. Across the street, the lingering scents of donner kebab and homemade baklava wafted from a Lebanese restaurant whose owner was shooing the last customers out the door. Diagonal from Becca's home was a small, triangular park, occupying no more than a quarter block and bounded by a low, wrought-iron fence. A swingset, slide, and jungle gym occupied a clearing surrounded by park benches where adults could monitor their charges and, behind those, a thick wall of trees and boxwoods. In the darkness, the effect was of a small, dense jungle, impenetrable and foreboding.

David parked two blocks away, strolled past the handful of people exiting the restaurant and stepped over the low fence into the park. There he found a foliated nook behind a park bench where he could appraise his sister's house without fear of being seen.



Isabel prepares an unpleasant greeting for David.



A light was on in Becca's second-floor bedroom. Did that mean she was home, or that she routinely left a light on at night? Did she have a lover these days? Was someone waiting up for her?

He knew that often she accompanied their father on late-night ministerial duties, a bizarre and laughably weak alibi for God only knew what kind of nocturnal goings-on. Maybe Becca and the old man were into some weird scene together or, though he found the thought almost unbearably repulsive, even banging each other. Whatever she was up to, he decided the best route was to break in. If she wasn't there, he'd simply make himself at home and wait.

He was just about to make his move when a voice behind him in the bushes made him gasp.

"Are you waiting for the Devil, too?"

David jumped up, looked around.

The shrubbery rustled and parted. A scrawny, slack-jawed youth draped in a cracked leather jacket several sizes too big stared at him with furtive, narrowed eyes. His cheeks and forehead appeared to have been smeared with some kind of viscous ointment — maybe treatment for a skin disease, thought David, stepping back.

Apparently mistaking David's wide-eyed amazement for interest, the young man continued, "The Devil's already here, you know, but I can show you how to protect yourself. Is that what you're afraid of — the Devil?"

Judging from the shabby clothes and the odor of unwashed skin, David figured the guy was probably one of D.C.'s ubiquitous street people, probably living in the park. Whatever brain cells he might have had to begin with had probably been decimated by a combination of street drugs and too many visits to the government-sponsored Thorazine clinics.

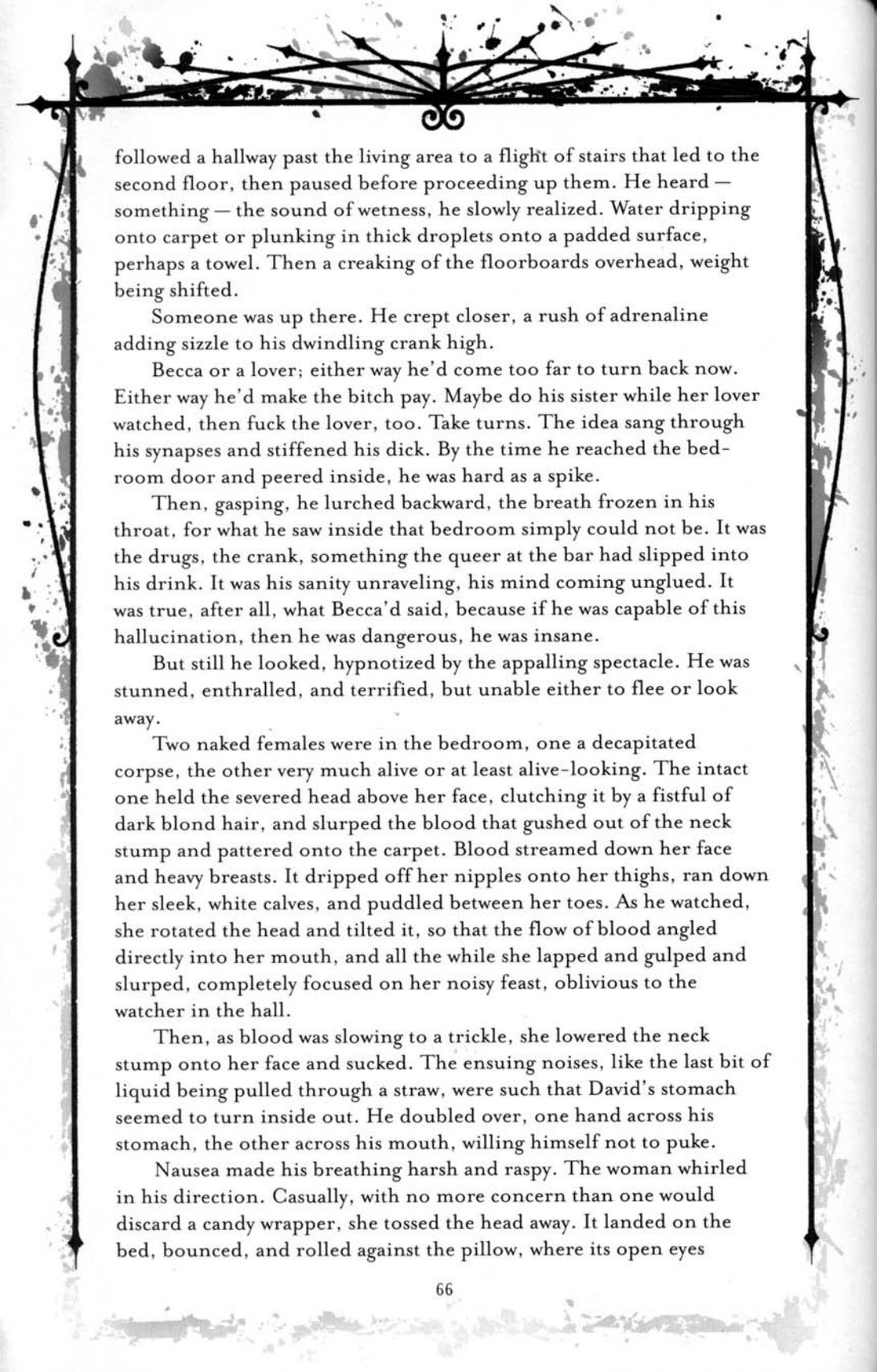
"You know what repels him? Semen. If you want to protect yourself, you need to jerk off and smear the cum on your face and body."

Only then did David glance down and see what the guy was doing. "Get away from me!" he hissed and started to head across the street.

"Don't go that way! He'll kill you if you aren't protected!" The boy released his dick long enough to grab David with both soiled hands.

"Let go of me, you crazy fuck!" David whirled around and nailed him with a right under the chin. The masturbator crumpled to the grass, blood leaking from a corner of his mouth.

Minutes later, David removed the screen from a partially open window and climbed through into his sister's kitchen. No plates or glasses sitting about, no evidence of a meal the night before. He



followed a hallway past the living area to a flight of stairs that led to the second floor, then paused before proceeding up them. He heard — something — the sound of wetness, he slowly realized. Water dripping onto carpet or plunking in thick droplets onto a padded surface, perhaps a towel. Then a creaking of the floorboards overhead, weight being shifted.

Someone was up there. He crept closer, a rush of adrenaline adding sizzle to his dwindling crank high.

Becca or a lover; either way he'd come too far to turn back now. Either way he'd make the bitch pay. Maybe do his sister while her lover watched, then fuck the lover, too. Take turns. The idea sang through his synapses and stiffened his dick. By the time he reached the bedroom door and peered inside, he was hard as a spike.

Then, gasping, he lurched backward, the breath frozen in his throat, for what he saw inside that bedroom simply could not be. It was the drugs, the crank, something the queer at the bar had slipped into his drink. It was his sanity unraveling, his mind coming unglued. It was true, after all, what Becca'd said, because if he was capable of this hallucination, then he was dangerous, he was insane.

But still he looked, hypnotized by the appalling spectacle. He was stunned, enthralled, and terrified, but unable either to flee or look away.

Two naked females were in the bedroom, one a decapitated corpse, the other very much alive or at least alive-looking. The intact one held the severed head above her face, clutching it by a fistful of dark blond hair, and slurped the blood that gushed out of the neck stump and pattered onto the carpet. Blood streamed down her face and heavy breasts. It dripped off her nipples onto her thighs, ran down her sleek, white calves, and puddled between her toes. As he watched, she rotated the head and tilted it, so that the flow of blood angled directly into her mouth, and all the while she lapped and gulped and slurped, completely focused on her noisy feast, oblivious to the watcher in the hall.

Then, as blood was slowing to a trickle, she lowered the neck stump onto her face and sucked. The ensuing noises, like the last bit of liquid being pulled through a straw, were such that David's stomach seemed to turn inside out. He doubled over, one hand across his stomach, the other across his mouth, willing himself not to puke.

Nausea made his breathing harsh and raspy. The woman whirled in his direction. Casually, with no more concern than one would discard a candy wrapper, she tossed the head away. It landed on the bed, bounced, and rolled against the pillow, where its open eyes

seemed to stare accusingly toward David — *he's there, he's there, I see him too.*

The blood-covered bitch turned toward where he cowered in the darkened hall. A red smile split her features.

"Sascha, is that you?" Her voice was bell-clear, sweet and honeyed, with undertones of an accent that reminded him of some actress he had seen once in a European movie. She waited, her wide-set, heavy-lidded eyes sweeping the darkness like flares. Her nostrils twitched, a predator scenting game.

"It's not you, is it, Sascha? Who is there? A voyeur? Let me see you. Come out, come out, little one, Isabel wants to see you."

David's heart was thundering so loudly it echoed in his head like a gong. He was sure the woman could hear it, but he couldn't move, couldn't run. The woman glided over to the bed, pausing only to kick the headless corpse out of her way. She sat down and spread her legs. Her inner thighs were streaked with blood. Her hands meandered down across her body, fingers spreading her cunt open as she leaned back, caressed herself.

"Look at me, little voyeur. You want to watch, I'll give you something to watch."

His synapses still rapid-firing from the effects of the crank, David clamped both hands across his mouth to keep from screaming. This couldn't be — the blood-soaked bedroom, the mutilated corpse, the demented bitch masturbating on the bed. He must have gone insane.

"Why don't you come out of the shadows? Why don't you crawl to me and bury your head right here, between my legs, and lick your sister's blood?"

Becca? In his terror, David had forgotten where he was. The thought that the headless body on the floor must be his sister's hadn't even occurred to him. Now that it did he felt a sour sense of loss and a childish pique at having been cheated of something that was owed him. Becca wasn't supposed to die this way. Becca was supposed to die the way he'd planned.

Because his wits were dulled with terror, it took a moment for the second awareness to sink in — how did this crazy, blood-drinking bitch know he was Becca's brother? And if she knew who he was, what else did she know about him?

"You like blood don't you?" the bitch was crooning, her foreign accent becoming more pronounced as she relaxed into this new game. "You dream of it. You came here for blood, didn't you? Well, here it is. All the blood you could ever imagine." She leaned back and spread herself wider. "You see? My cunt's all wet with it. All you have to do is

stick your tongue inside me and lick it up."

His head hurt with the force of his heartbeat. His legs twitched and trembled with the effort of remaining crouched by the door. He had to get out of there, but he didn't dare run. He knew that's what she would want him to do, that the very extremity of his fear would energize her. Slowly he shifted his weight and started crawling backward away from the door.

The woman, the creature — whatever she was — was reaching back to grab her victim's head, looking away from him. She wedged the head between her legs, positioning the face against her crotch. Laughter, low and sweet and utterly demented, issued from her. "If you don't want to give me head, maybe she will."

David kept crawling backward. When he reached the stairs, he decided he would break and run for it. All he had to do was make it to his car.

"Oh, Da-a-a-a-avid."

The sound of his name on the bitch's lips struck him like a kick to the kidneys.

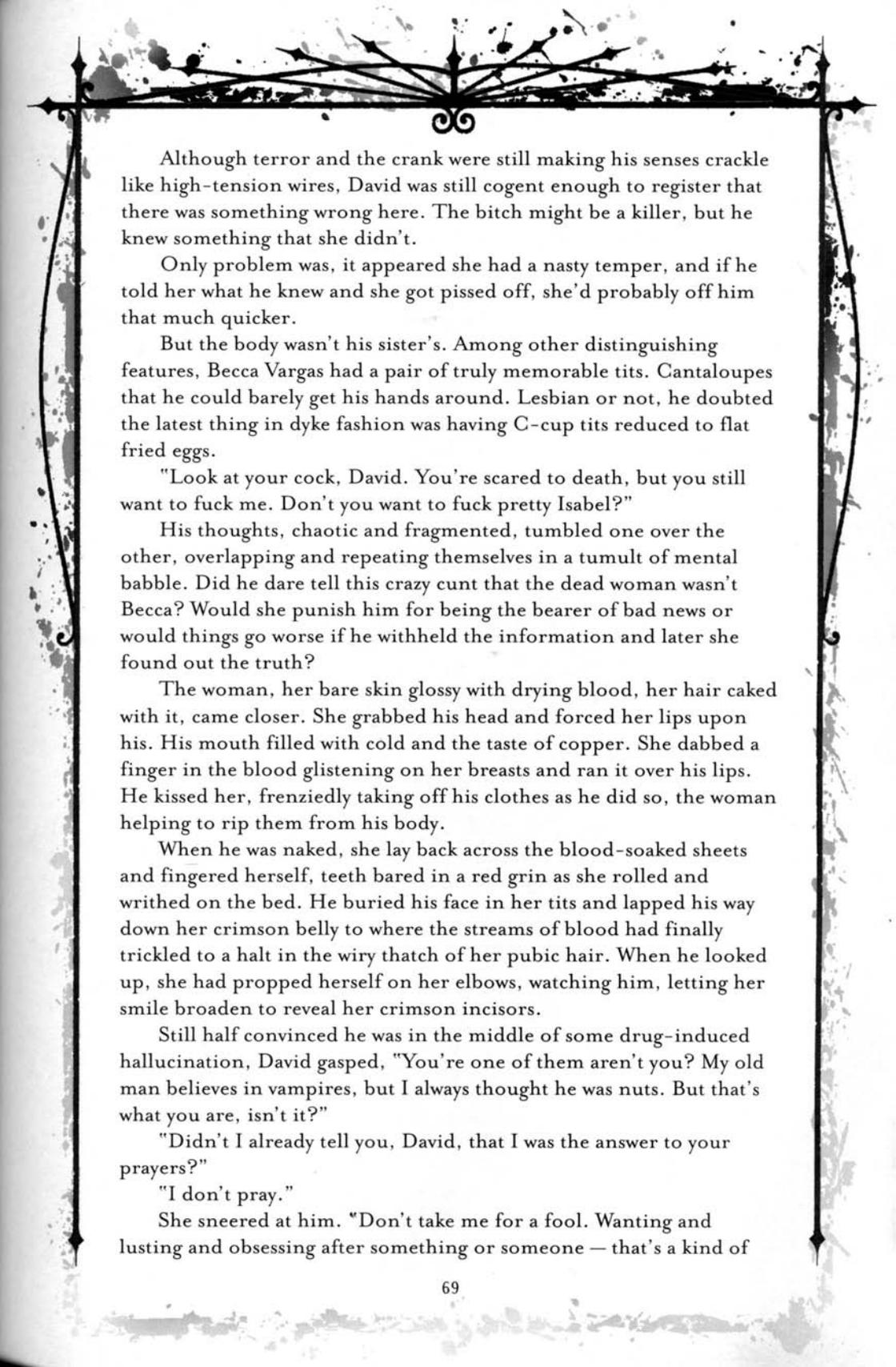
"Here, Da-a-a-avid, catch."

She lobbed the head at him. It slammed into his stomach with a wet oomph. Reflexively he grabbed it, but as his fingers closed over the mushy face, he screamed and flung the thing away. After that, all he remembered was freaking the fuck out, screaming, shrieking, trying to claw his way up toward the safety of the ceiling until the killer bitch's body pressed against his, yanking him to his feet, steering him toward the bed where he was forced to step over the mutilated body on the floor. He tried not to look at the corpse, but its very hideousness seduced him. He couldn't look away. His eyelids might as well have been nailed to his forehead.

"*Look at me, darling,*" crooned the bitch. "Look at Isabel, and don't be frightened."

Struggling to speak, he managed to get out the words, "Who are you? What are you?"

She laughed again. "If you prayed, I might say I'm the answer to those prayers, David. But since you don't, let's just say I'm the answer to your curses. For all the hatred you've poured out into the world, you've finally received an answer." She reached down, lifting up the headless corpse as though it were feather light, and laid it on the bed between them. David recoiled, but she grabbed him by the hair and forced his face down onto the dead woman's boyishly flat chest. "Isn't this what you wanted, David? To fuck your sister? Isn't this what you came here tonight to do?"



Although terror and the crank were still making his senses crackle like high-tension wires, David was still cogent enough to register that there was something wrong here. The bitch might be a killer, but he knew something that she didn't.

Only problem was, it appeared she had a nasty temper, and if he told her what he knew and she got pissed off, she'd probably off him that much quicker.

But the body wasn't his sister's. Among other distinguishing features, Becca Vargas had a pair of truly memorable tits. Cantaloupes that he could barely get his hands around. Lesbian or not, he doubted the latest thing in dyke fashion was having C-cup tits reduced to flat fried eggs.

"Look at your cock, David. You're scared to death, but you still want to fuck me. Don't you want to fuck pretty Isabel?"

His thoughts, chaotic and fragmented, tumbled one over the other, overlapping and repeating themselves in a tumult of mental babble. Did he dare tell this crazy cunt that the dead woman wasn't Becca? Would she punish him for being the bearer of bad news or would things go worse if he withheld the information and later she found out the truth?

The woman, her bare skin glossy with drying blood, her hair caked with it, came closer. She grabbed his head and forced her lips upon his. His mouth filled with cold and the taste of copper. She dabbed a finger in the blood glistening on her breasts and ran it over his lips. He kissed her, frenziedly taking off his clothes as he did so, the woman helping to rip them from his body.

When he was naked, she lay back across the blood-soaked sheets and fingered herself, teeth bared in a red grin as she rolled and writhed on the bed. He buried his face in her tits and lapped his way down her crimson belly to where the streams of blood had finally trickled to a halt in the wiry thatch of her pubic hair. When he looked up, she had propped herself on her elbows, watching him, letting her smile broaden to reveal her crimson incisors.

Still half convinced he was in the middle of some drug-induced hallucination, David gasped, "You're one of them aren't you? My old man believes in vampires, but I always thought he was nuts. But that's what you are, isn't it?"

"Didn't I already tell you, David, that I was the answer to your prayers?"

"I don't pray."

She sneered at him. "Don't take me for a fool. Wanting and lusting and obsessing after something or someone — that's a kind of

prayer. You pray all the time. You just don't do it on your knees and you don't do it to something you call God. But you pray for power and to be able to hurt the people you hate. Every time your heart beats, every time you draw a breath, you pray that same prayer."

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

Except, of course, he did. And this talk of prayer, even coming — especially coming — from her crimson lips, had the disorienting effect of both arousing and revolting him. Roughly he spread her legs wider apart. Angry now, angry because he was so afraid, determined to fuck her all night long if need be, to fuck that condescending smile right off her blood-smearred mouth.

"Stop, David."

The quiet authority in her tone brooked no defiance. "You're going to have sex, but not with me. Not yet."

"Huh?"

She indicated the butchered body on the floor. "You fuck that first."

"Jesus, you can't be serious."

"You're questioning me?"

"No, but, I mean — I just can't — ?"

"You refuse? I wouldn't do that, David. She's got a nice body, but she's not worth losing your head over."

"How do I know you're not going to kill me whether I fuck her or not?"

"Because we need you, David. We have work for you to do."

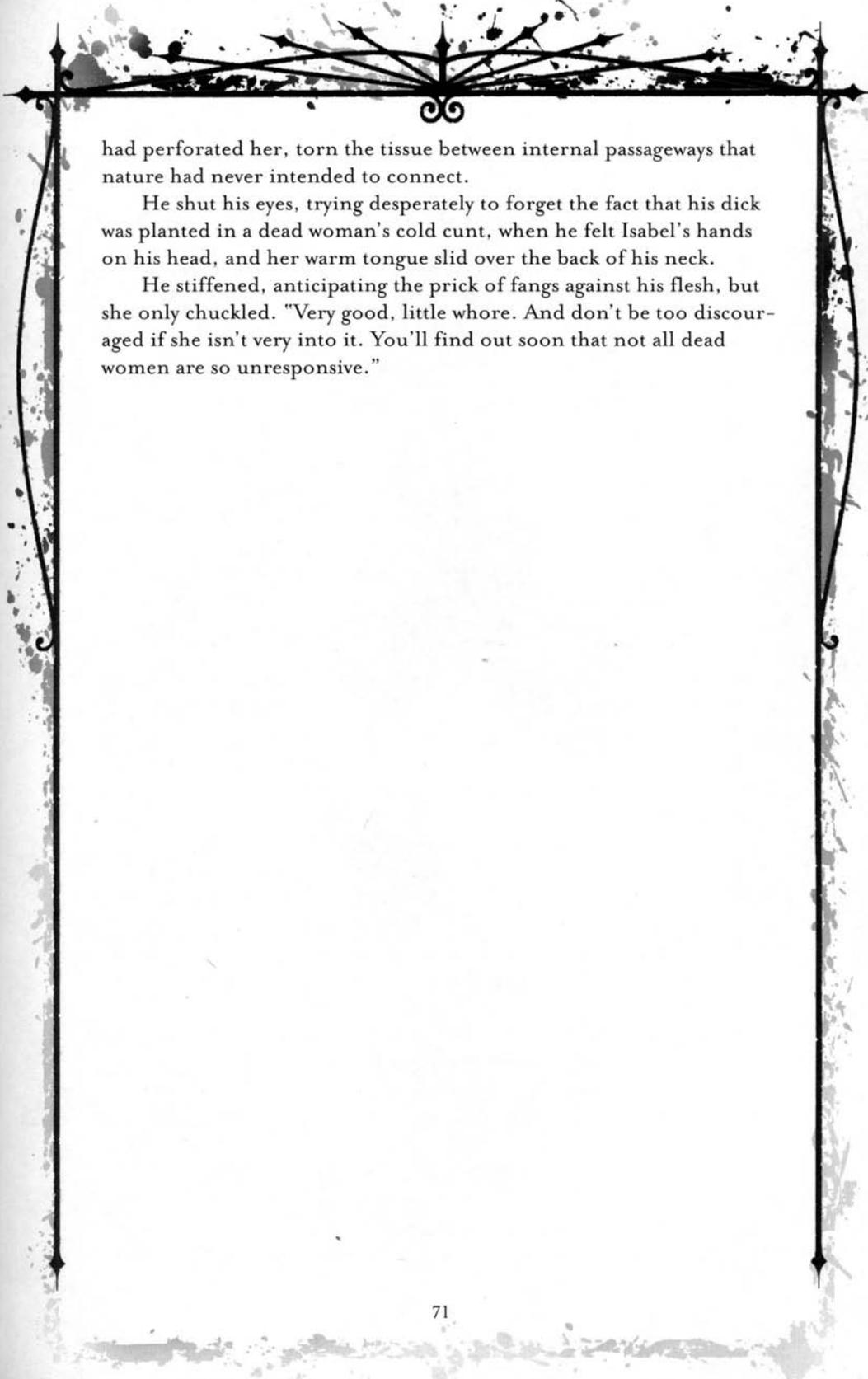
"Who's we?"

"You'll find out when the time comes. And stop looking at me with that sullen, untipped-waiter glare. It's very unbecoming. Pay some attention to that poor girl on the floor. Think about it, David. No one's ever going to make love to her again. No one's ever going to suck on her pretty pink nipples or slide his dick into her cunt or her tight little ass. No one's ever going to do that for her again, David, so make it good for her, understand? More importantly, since I'll be watching, make it good for me."

He took a deep breath through his nose, lips pressed tightly together so she wouldn't see his chin tremble. Slowly he knelt down between the dead woman's legs. The crank was working in his favor now, keeping his dick hard in spite of his terror.

"Go on," said Isabel.

He took hold of the corpse's hips and thrust himself blindly toward the red triangle between her thighs. Her interior was cold and swampy, not a birth canal but a vast and stinking tar pit. Something



had perforated her, torn the tissue between internal passageways that nature had never intended to connect.

He shut his eyes, trying desperately to forget the fact that his dick was planted in a dead woman's cold cunt, when he felt Isabel's hands on his head, and her warm tongue slid over the back of his neck.

He stiffened, anticipating the prick of fangs against his flesh, but she only chuckled. "Very good, little whore. And don't be too discouraged if she isn't very into it. You'll find out soon that not all dead women are so unresponsive."

CHAPTER EIGHT

For Tony d'Angelo, hunting vampires was the ultimate adrenaline rush — hotter than a coke whore's mouth, more addictive than primo-grade smack. Win and you were like the hero of your own action-adventure flick. Lose and you were way the hell worse off than dead. The only part of it that scared him was when the idea of "losing" didn't scare him as much as it should have.

Earlier in the evening, he and Becca had cruised the area around the White House. No traffic allowed within a half-mile radius since the bombing attempt last spring, so it had to be on foot. Tonight the hooded doomsayers were out in force, holding signs proclaiming the end of the world, shuffling along as they chanted in that low, monotonous drone that made him think of monks on lithium. Almost every night, usually around the Capital or the Lincoln Memorial, the growing band of cultists prophesied the coming Apocalypse. Waiting for Doomsday, waiting for Jesus, waiting for angels to appear on earth and save humanity from itself — everybody was waiting for something cataclysmic.

Except the vampires. They waited for nothing and nobody. They satisfied their immediate hunger. They fed. In that sense, he could almost respect them.

He carried two weapons with him, a .357 Magnum in the glove compartment of his truck, loaded with Glaser rounds, and a store-bought shotgun on the seat next to him. The scattergun was loaded with what Tony thought of as his "special, homemade rounds" — regular shells that he'd removed the buckshot from, filled with a stack of dimes, then crimped shut. They fired just like the regular kind, but when they hit, all that was left was pulp. You could blow a chunk out of the Washington Monument with one of these things or blast a vampire into so many tiny fleshscraps that their powers of regeneration weren't worth shit.

Of course, with ammo that powerful, there was a good chance you could take out more than just your immediate target, but Tony figured he'd worry about that when the time came.

Right now, with Becca doing some surveillance of her own, his thoughts went back to the sexy pop singer who called herself Victoria Ash and dressed like she was undulating down the runway at the House of Dior. Convinced that the fuckable-looking pop star was a vampire, he speculated on how ancient she might be and where her proclivities, sexual and otherwise, might have led her in ages past. Had she bedded

pharaohs or plotted intrigues with the Medicis? Whored the backstreets of Constantinople or consorted with French nobility? His fantasies around such possibilities were endless, the hard-ons they inspired almost indestructible.

And then, there were the beautiful women that Victoria seduced, and they were the best reasons yet to be a witch-hunter. He thought about her newest acquisition, the little blond one Becca had described to him. Damn, but it was a good night not to be dead. His breath quickened, and his cock stirred to life as he headed north toward U Street.

Now's your chance. You could run. You could just run right now, and she'd never find you. Do it, you know you want to, just do it, run away.

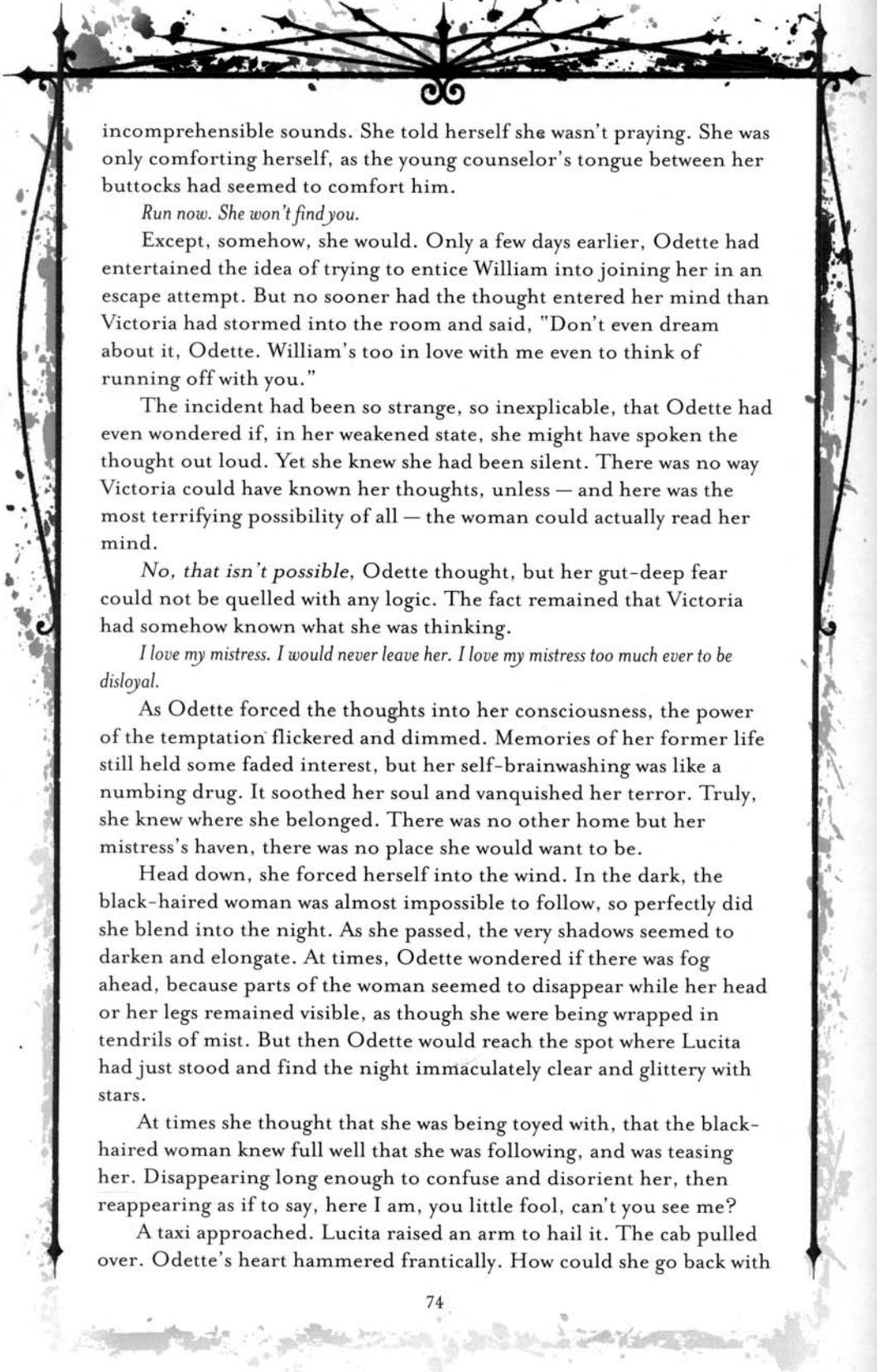
The evil, hectoring voice lashed out at Odette as she slipped outside onto U Street and leaned into the bitter, ratcheting wind. A week earlier, even a day earlier, she might have given in to that impulse, but now just knowing that the thought had crossed her mind filled her with terror. A part of her mind that she realized was child-like, primitive, now believed Victoria to be all-powerful, all-seeing, and all-punishing. Even to allow thoughts of escape was desperately unsafe. Just the fact that she was capable of such disloyalty was proof of what a wretched creature she was. And even if she did manage to escape, she would be lost because she'd never again taste Mistress's honeyed blood or feel the succulent sweetness of Mistress's mouth upon her neck.

It's not too late. You could run... you could go home... go to the cops... you could go to a church, ask for help....

She remembered once having believed in God. Religious rallies at the Washington Monument, her own passionately reverent face mirrored in the reflecting pool. Two hundred thousand voices lifted up, praising God, but when she raised her eyes to God, only blind babble poured from her lips. A sign, the camp counselor said, that she was chosen, gifted, one of God's. The counselor encouraged her, instructed her, convinced her she belonged only to God and to him. To believe that she belonged to herself was sacrilege and egomania. His fingers had smelled of sex and made her brain go liquid. He put his tongue into her mouth, into her ass, fucked her with objects, fingers, tongue, everything except his cock. That would be impure, he said. That was for God.

Get on a bus. Go anywhere. Just go.

She didn't believe in God anymore. She still spoke in tongues, but only when fear totally overwhelmed her and she babbled the strange,



incomprehensible sounds. She told herself she wasn't praying. She was only comforting herself, as the young counselor's tongue between her buttocks had seemed to comfort him.

Run now. She won't find you.

Except, somehow, she would. Only a few days earlier, Odette had entertained the idea of trying to entice William into joining her in an escape attempt. But no sooner had the thought entered her mind than Victoria had stormed into the room and said, "Don't even dream about it, Odette. William's too in love with me even to think of running off with you."

The incident had been so strange, so inexplicable, that Odette had even wondered if, in her weakened state, she might have spoken the thought out loud. Yet she knew she had been silent. There was no way Victoria could have known her thoughts, unless — and here was the most terrifying possibility of all — the woman could actually read her mind.

No, that isn't possible, Odette thought, but her gut-deep fear could not be quelled with any logic. The fact remained that Victoria had somehow known what she was thinking.

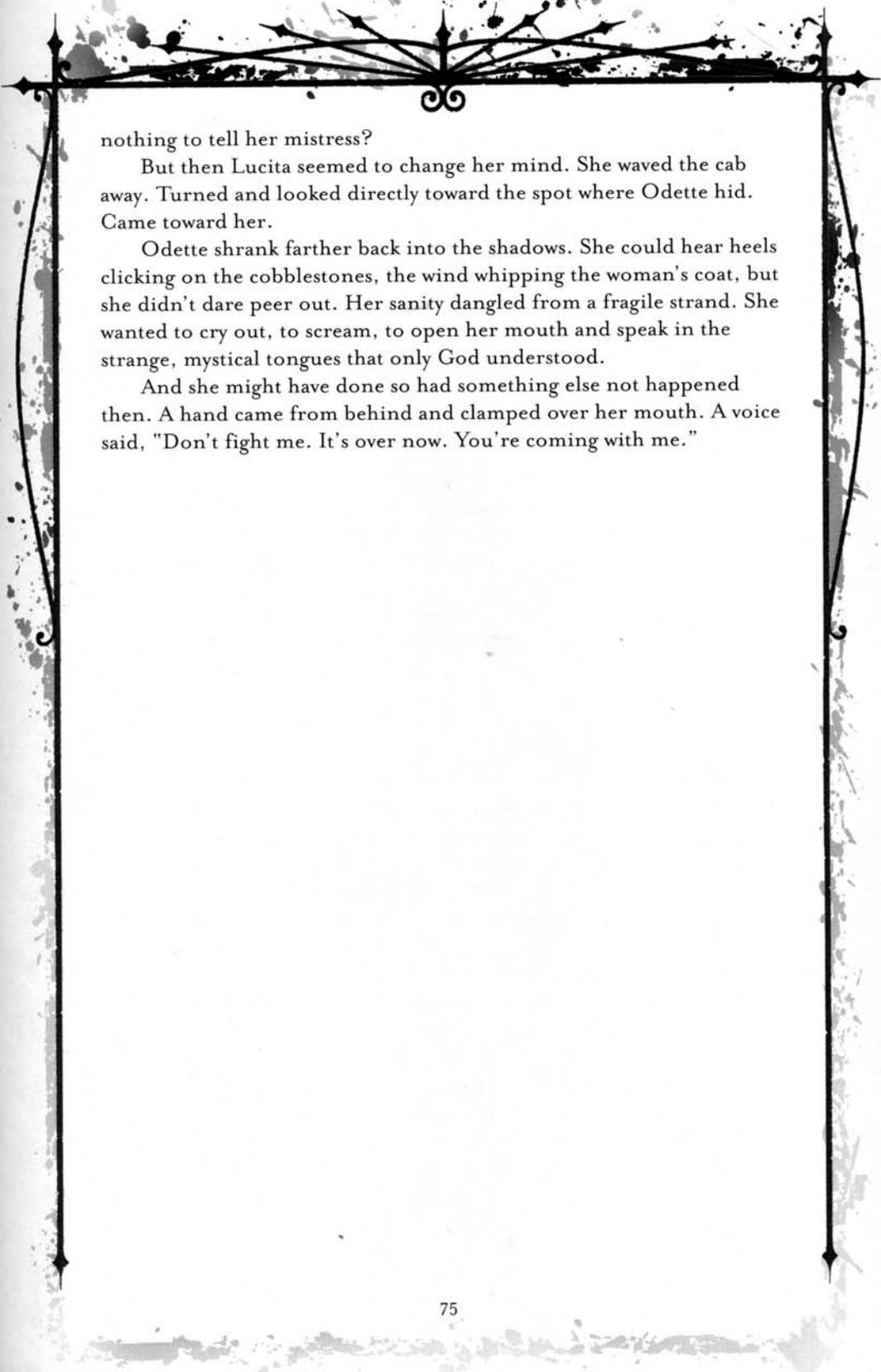
I love my mistress. I would never leave her. I love my mistress too much ever to be disloyal.

As Odette forced the thoughts into her consciousness, the power of the temptation flickered and dimmed. Memories of her former life still held some faded interest, but her self-brainwashing was like a numbing drug. It soothed her soul and vanquished her terror. Truly, she knew where she belonged. There was no other home but her mistress's haven, there was no place she would want to be.

Head down, she forced herself into the wind. In the dark, the black-haired woman was almost impossible to follow, so perfectly did she blend into the night. As she passed, the very shadows seemed to darken and elongate. At times, Odette wondered if there was fog ahead, because parts of the woman seemed to disappear while her head or her legs remained visible, as though she were being wrapped in tendrils of mist. But then Odette would reach the spot where Lucita had just stood and find the night immaculately clear and glittery with stars.

At times she thought that she was being toyed with, that the black-haired woman knew full well that she was following, and was teasing her. Disappearing long enough to confuse and disorient her, then reappearing as if to say, here I am, you little fool, can't you see me?

A taxi approached. Lucita raised an arm to hail it. The cab pulled over. Odette's heart hammered frantically. How could she go back with



nothing to tell her mistress?

But then Lucita seemed to change her mind. She waved the cab away. Turned and looked directly toward the spot where Odette hid. Came toward her.

Odette shrank farther back into the shadows. She could hear heels clicking on the cobblestones, the wind whipping the woman's coat, but she didn't dare peer out. Her sanity dangled from a fragile strand. She wanted to cry out, to scream, to open her mouth and speak in the strange, mystical tongues that only God understood.

And she might have done so had something else not happened then. A hand came from behind and clamped over her mouth. A voice said, "Don't fight me. It's over now. You're coming with me."

CHAPTER NINE

The fact that he was covered with the blood of a dead woman he'd just violated didn't bother David anymore. Neither the sight of her mangled flesh nor the stench of her brutal death disturbed him. He only knew that in the last few hours, the world as he knew it had been transformed, revealing to him a world he knew his father fervently believed in, but which he'd often scoffed at as the fantasy of the deranged and superstitious. A world that left him both terrified and elated, one with almost limitless potential for evil and for power.

A world, he realized, that could become his own.

They were real, these children of Satan with whom his father was obsessed. The old man had never called them vampires — he merely railed about a hidden society that David had always assumed was the product of his own fevered imagination and paranoia.

On his back now, he stared up at the creature whose cold, dead cunt enveloped his dick. Her eyes were open, gazing down at him with a rapt, unblinking sheen, but he could tell that she was somewhere else, riding someone else's cock, long nails twisting the matted chest hair of some man who might have been her lover centuries ago. A man fixed in her memory because he'd fucked her while she was still alive.

She certainly looked alive, thought David. Her thick auburn hair, strands of it still caked with blood, swung wildly around her head. Her skin, which was pale to the point of translucency, gave off a luminous sheen. Silk stippled in moonlight. For David, the fact that it was also streaked with blood did nothing to detract from her macabre allure.

The woman murmured something in a language he didn't understand. Her voice grew louder and more guttural until, at what he took to be the point of climax, she threw back her head and howled. In that moment, he saw all the ugliness behind her exotic beauty: the gleaming fangs and taut, clenched jaw, the craven greed and unholy appetite behind her animalistic cry. Her rapture echoed through his body. He felt joined with her in a way more intimate than any he had felt with human lovers. Felt as though, in fucking her, he took something of her into himself, that he became both stronger and at the same time, subtly less alive, in her proximity.

Dizziness washed over him. He shut his eyes. Felt a shifting and redistributing of her weight upon his hips, followed by a dismount so swift and painful that, despite the lingering influence of the crank, his hard-on withered.

When he opened his eyes again, Isabel was on her hands and knees between his legs, sucking him into her cold, red mouth. Whether it was the effect of the drugs still in his system, the woman's skillfulness or both, his cock stiffened again.

"Don't think that you can rest yet, *amore mio*," she pouted softly. "You haven't met your master yet."

"My master?"

"He's heard so much about you, that you are vain and selfish and arrogant, obsessed with sordid whims and paltry appetites, that you are the consummate narcissist of self-indulgence and self-seeking."

"Who the fuck's said that? What else do they say? Tell me and I'll snap their fucking necks!"

Isabel sucked a finger into her mouth, wet it, and began to caress herself with swift, light strokes. Her eyes looked brighter, darker. "Everyone maligns you, David. Your sister, your former lovers, everyone who's had any contact with you. They're jealous, you know. They despise you for being beautiful and seeing them for the hypocrites they really are." Her accent was even stronger now, twisting the words into almost incomprehensible new syllables. Her voice was rich with craft and menace. "The people who're supposed to love you speak of you with only disgust and scorn. Your own father wanted you put away."

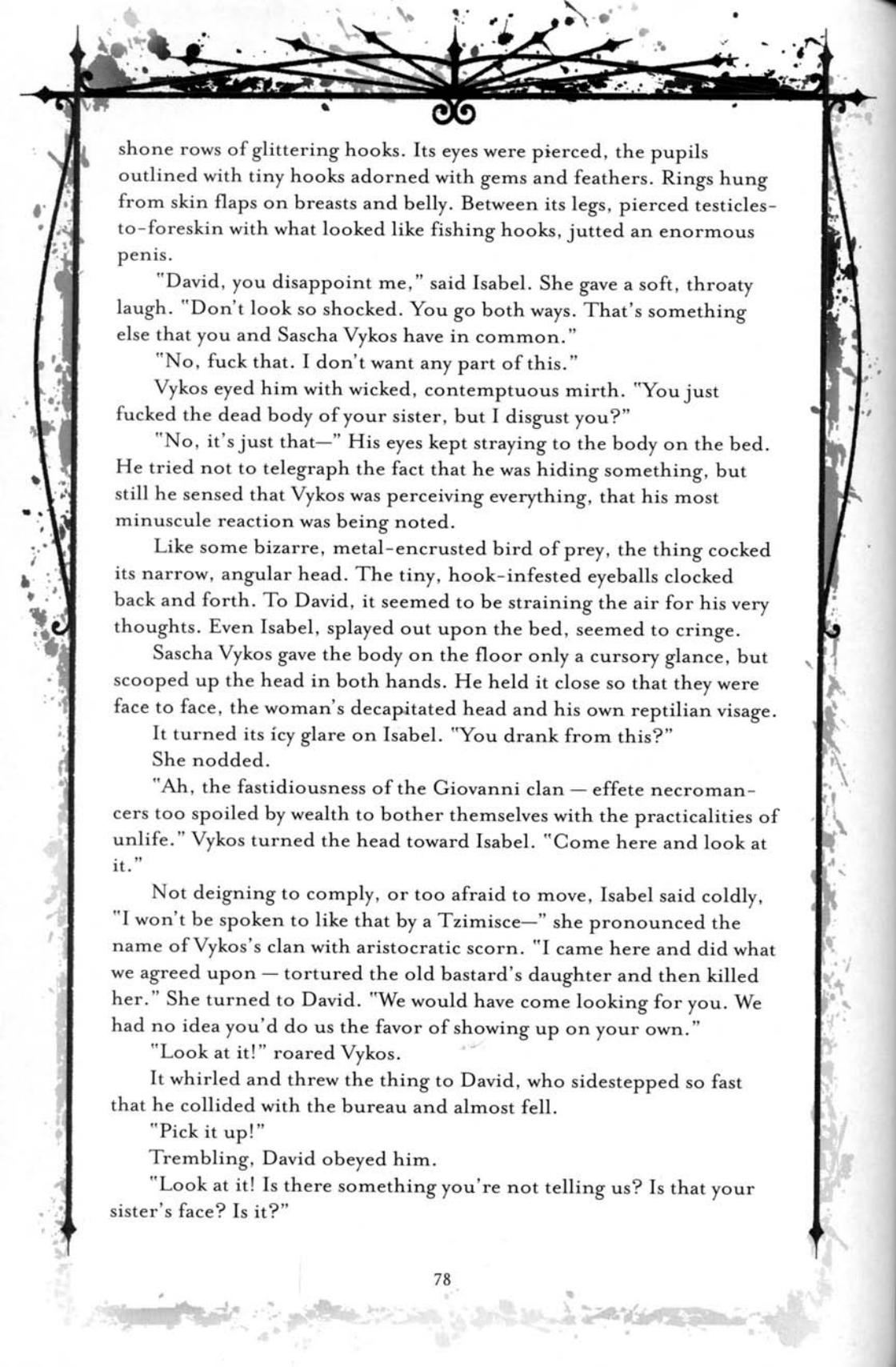
David stared at her, transfixed. Isabel's face was changing, the features rearranging themselves from those of a woman who was merely beautiful to one whose pallid symmetry was so perfect as to resemble an exquisitely crafted death mask. With a languid smile, she brought her fingers back to her mouth. Since David had no way of knowing that her skin was flavorless, that her undead body could produce no sexual discharge, he assumed that she was licking off the taste of herself, relishing the flavor of her cunt.

He grabbed her wrist and brought her hand away. "Don't touch yourself like that. Look at me! What I want to know is, who are you?"

Isabel gifted him with a fanged smile. "A better question might be, what am I."

From behind him, a woman's soft, melodic voice chimed in, "Yes, David, ask. Ask it what it is."

David leaped to his feet. There were two of them. Isabel behind him, reclining on the blood-soaked bed, lifting up one plump breast to suck her own nipple. And before him, the creature he had thought was Isabel now transforming into something else — a hideous male-female thing. Its skin was chitinous and armored, its lidless eyes were slitted and insectile. Where lavishly curled eyelashes had been now



shone rows of glittering hooks. Its eyes were pierced, the pupils outlined with tiny hooks adorned with gems and feathers. Rings hung from skin flaps on breasts and belly. Between its legs, pierced testicles-to-foreskin with what looked like fishing hooks, jutted an enormous penis.

"David, you disappoint me," said Isabel. She gave a soft, throaty laugh. "Don't look so shocked. You go both ways. That's something else that you and Sascha Vykos have in common."

"No, fuck that. I don't want any part of this."

Vykos eyed him with wicked, contemptuous mirth. "You just fucked the dead body of your sister, but I disgust you?"

"No, it's just that—" His eyes kept straying to the body on the bed. He tried not to telegraph the fact that he was hiding something, but still he sensed that Vykos was perceiving everything, that his most minuscule reaction was being noted.

Like some bizarre, metal-encrusted bird of prey, the thing cocked its narrow, angular head. The tiny, hook-infested eyeballs clocked back and forth. To David, it seemed to be straining the air for his very thoughts. Even Isabel, splayed out upon the bed, seemed to cringe.

Sascha Vykos gave the body on the floor only a cursory glance, but scooped up the head in both hands. He held it close so that they were face to face, the woman's decapitated head and his own reptilian visage.

It turned its icy glare on Isabel. "You drank from this?"

She nodded.

"Ah, the fastidiousness of the Giovanni clan — effete necromancers too spoiled by wealth to bother themselves with the practicalities of unlife." Vykos turned the head toward Isabel. "Come here and look at it."

Not deigning to comply, or too afraid to move, Isabel said coldly, "I won't be spoken to like that by a Tzimisce—" she pronounced the name of Vykos's clan with aristocratic scorn. "I came here and did what we agreed upon — tortured the old bastard's daughter and then killed her." She turned to David. "We would have come looking for you. We had no idea you'd do us the favor of showing up on your own."

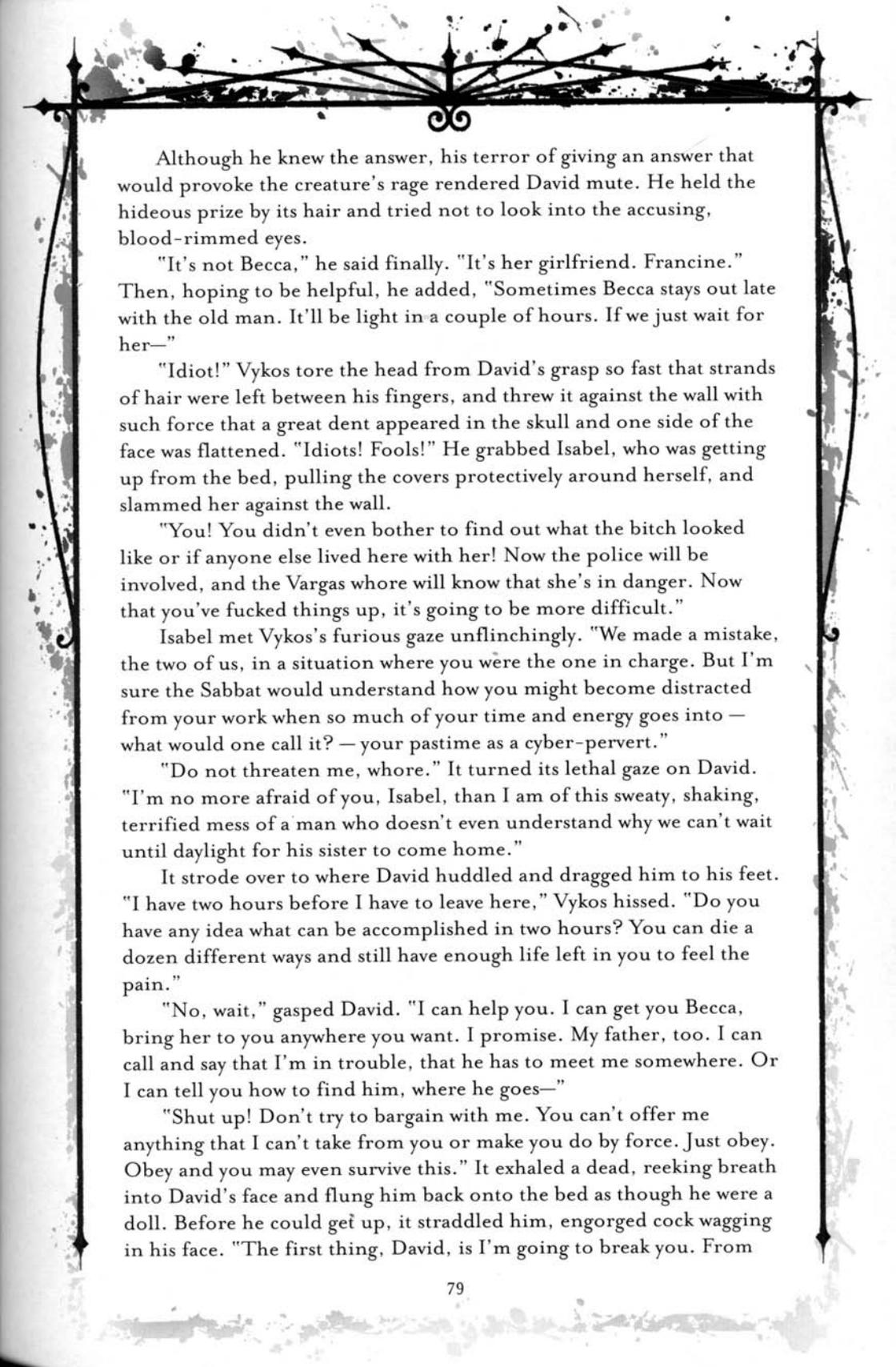
"Look at it!" roared Vykos.

It whirled and threw the thing to David, who sidestepped so fast that he collided with the bureau and almost fell.

"Pick it up!"

Trembling, David obeyed him.

"Look at it! Is there something you're not telling us? Is that your sister's face? Is it?"



Although he knew the answer, his terror of giving an answer that would provoke the creature's rage rendered David mute. He held the hideous prize by its hair and tried not to look into the accusing, blood-rimmed eyes.

"It's not Becca," he said finally. "It's her girlfriend. Francine." Then, hoping to be helpful, he added, "Sometimes Becca stays out late with the old man. It'll be light in a couple of hours. If we just wait for her—"

"Idiot!" Vykos tore the head from David's grasp so fast that strands of hair were left between his fingers, and threw it against the wall with such force that a great dent appeared in the skull and one side of the face was flattened. "Idiots! Fools!" He grabbed Isabel, who was getting up from the bed, pulling the covers protectively around herself, and slammed her against the wall.

"You! You didn't even bother to find out what the bitch looked like or if anyone else lived here with her! Now the police will be involved, and the Vargas whore will know that she's in danger. Now that you've fucked things up, it's going to be more difficult."

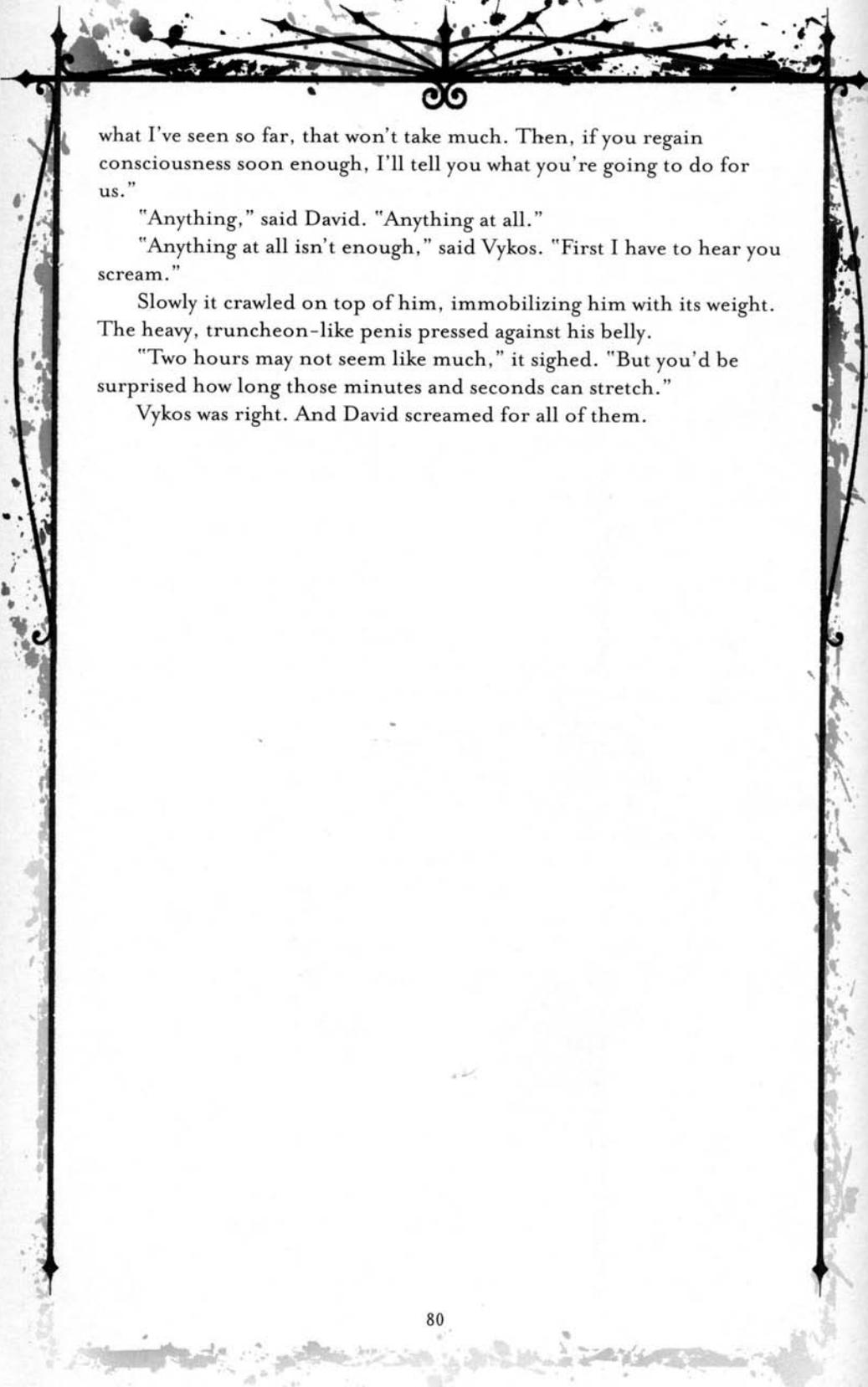
Isabel met Vykos's furious gaze unflinchingly. "We made a mistake, the two of us, in a situation where you were the one in charge. But I'm sure the Sabbath would understand how you might become distracted from your work when so much of your time and energy goes into — what would one call it? — your pastime as a cyber-pervert."

"Do not threaten me, whore." It turned its lethal gaze on David. "I'm no more afraid of you, Isabel, than I am of this sweaty, shaking, terrified mess of a man who doesn't even understand why we can't wait until daylight for his sister to come home."

It strode over to where David huddled and dragged him to his feet. "I have two hours before I have to leave here," Vykos hissed. "Do you have any idea what can be accomplished in two hours? You can die a dozen different ways and still have enough life left in you to feel the pain."

"No, wait," gasped David. "I can help you. I can get you Becca, bring her to you anywhere you want. I promise. My father, too. I can call and say that I'm in trouble, that he has to meet me somewhere. Or I can tell you how to find him, where he goes—"

"Shut up! Don't try to bargain with me. You can't offer me anything that I can't take from you or make you do by force. Just obey. Obey and you may even survive this." It exhaled a dead, reeking breath into David's face and flung him back onto the bed as though he were a doll. Before he could get up, it straddled him, engorged cock wagging in his face. "The first thing, David, is I'm going to break you. From



what I've seen so far, that won't take much. Then, if you regain consciousness soon enough, I'll tell you what you're going to do for us."

"Anything," said David. "Anything at all."

"Anything at all isn't enough," said Vykos. "First I have to hear you scream."

Slowly it crawled on top of him, immobilizing him with its weight. The heavy, truncheon-like penis pressed against his belly.

"Two hours may not seem like much," it sighed. "But you'd be surprised how long those minutes and seconds can stretch."

Vykos was right. And David screamed for all of them.



Victoria descends Pieterzoon's staircase.

CHAPTER TEN

Blindly, methodically, Rapunzel clawed and chewed and scraped at the earth, but as the hours passed — or was it days? — she grew increasingly confused and exhausted, her strength ebbing at a frightful rate. Occasionally, she was able to move one arm enough to explore herself in places, but this, she came to realize, was a terrible mistake. From what her trembling fingers found and didn't find, it was clear her body, her face especially, had been brutally redesigned. Things were missing, added, shoved off-center, and misaligned. Not only had she died a monstrous death, somehow along the way, she had been made a monster, too.

The discovery of her appalling disfigurement sapped her strength more than the digging. Lethargy settled into her muscles. A languid torpor invaded her limbs and mind. She lay still, floating in the silence like a dead embryo in an icy amniotic sack, her consciousness flickering and dwindling.

But slowly, subtly, something else began to happen, something that the one who had buried her might not have foreseen — or at any rate was helpless to prevent. In life, Rapunzel had entertained herself with an active fantasy life as much as drugs and sex. Now, in such a state of total sensory deprivation, her mind began to over-compensate with self-generated stimulation. A pyrotechnic porn show, rich with sounds and colors and laser lights, orchestrated itself in her brain. Body memories so vivid that her dead synapses shivered with phantom orgasms passed through her like electric current, emotions and sensations inundated her lifeless cells.

She didn't just remember — she re-lived. And the re-living was both a salvation linking her to some remnant of sanity and a terrifying return to the horror that had led up to her death.

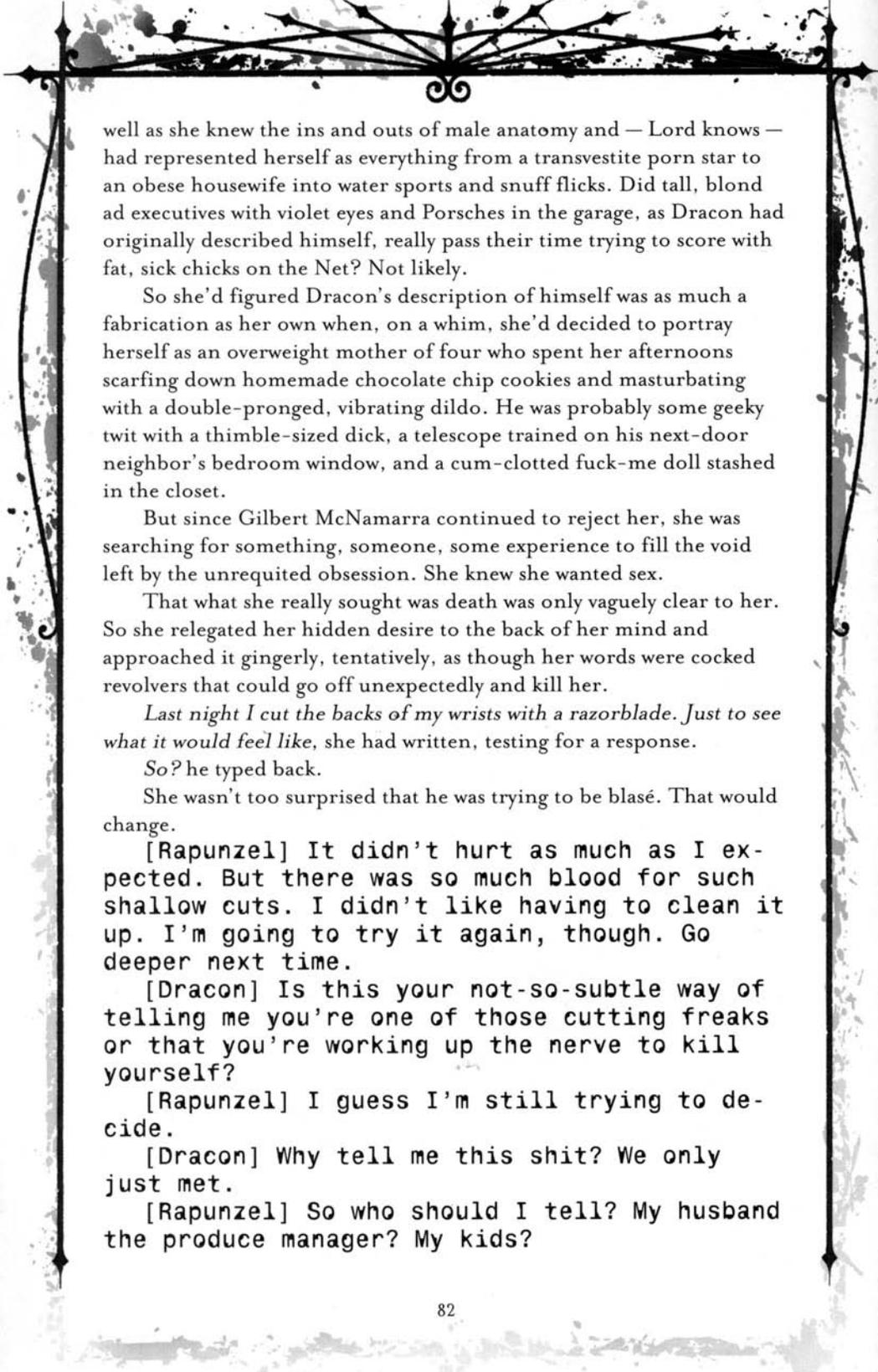
She was a prisoner not just underground, but a captive inside her skull where, if she didn't free herself, she'd spend eternity re-living her last mortal days.

Rapunzel opened up her dirt-clogged mouth and screamed her lover's name: "Dracon, Dracon... *Dracon!*"

And in her mind, like a summoned god, he came to her.

Her Dracon, her master, her death sentence.

From the beginning, she had guessed that everything he told her about himself was a lie. How could it be otherwise? Wasn't deception almost the unwritten rule behind computer sex? She'd been surfing the Net since she was twelve. She knew her way around a chatroom as



well as she knew the ins and outs of male anatomy and — Lord knows — had represented herself as everything from a transvestite porn star to an obese housewife into water sports and snuff flicks. Did tall, blond ad executives with violet eyes and Porsches in the garage, as Dracon had originally described himself, really pass their time trying to score with fat, sick chicks on the Net? Not likely.

So she'd figured Dracon's description of himself was as much a fabrication as her own when, on a whim, she'd decided to portray herself as an overweight mother of four who spent her afternoons scarfing down homemade chocolate chip cookies and masturbating with a double-pronged, vibrating dildo. He was probably some geeky twit with a thimble-sized dick, a telescope trained on his next-door neighbor's bedroom window, and a cum-clotted fuck-me doll stashed in the closet.

But since Gilbert McNamarra continued to reject her, she was searching for something, someone, some experience to fill the void left by the unrequited obsession. She knew she wanted sex.

That what she really sought was death was only vaguely clear to her. So she relegated her hidden desire to the back of her mind and approached it gingerly, tentatively, as though her words were cocked revolvers that could go off unexpectedly and kill her.

Last night I cut the backs of my wrists with a razorblade. Just to see what it would feel like, she had written, testing for a response.

So? he typed back.

She wasn't too surprised that he was trying to be blasé. That would change.

[Rapunzel] It didn't hurt as much as I expected. But there was so much blood for such shallow cuts. I didn't like having to clean it up. I'm going to try it again, though. Go deeper next time.

[Dracon] Is this your not-so-subtle way of telling me you're one of those cutting freaks or that you're working up the nerve to kill yourself?

[Rapunzel] I guess I'm still trying to decide.

[Dracon] Why tell me this shit? We only just met.

[Rapunzel] So who should I tell? My husband the produce manager? My kids?

[Dracon] Ever heard of therapy? Or suicide hotlines?

[Rapunzel] You're pretty fucking patronizing, aren't you?

[Dracon] I get bored with games, that's all.

[Rapunzel] And you think that's what this is, a game?

[Dracon] You said you cut the backs of your wrists. Need I say more?

[Rapunzel] I was trying to imagine a lover doing it to me, but I couldn't get past the fact that it was my hand holding the razor. Guess it's like trying to tickle yourself.

[Dracon] Now you're making a joke of it.

[Rapunzel] No way. I take sex very seriously.

[Dracon] I thought we were talking about suicide.

[Rapunzel] Maybe we're talking about suicide by sex.

Then he surprised her by typing. *This conversation is sick, warped, perverse! It's making me very uncomfortable. My dick is getting hard. I'm fondling myself and, given the subject matter, that's somewhat disconcerting.*

[Rapunzel] You mean you wouldn't want to ram your cock into a woman while the life slowly drains out of her?!!!

[Dracon] Such a romantic you are, aren't you? Okay, that's it! I'm ending this conversation.

[Rapunzel] Oh, hold on, Dracon, don't be a pussy. We'll talk about something else - my wrists maybe.

[Dracon] We already talked about your fucking wrists.

[Rapunzel] Oh, oh, he has a temper as well as a hard-on. No, forget about the cutting. I meant something else - the rope marks on my wrists this morning.

[Dracon] Just your wrists. Not your ankles, too?

[Rapunzel] My husband tied me to a hook in our laundry room. When I'm not wearing heels, I have to stand on tiptoe. I may have mentioned that I'm not exactly svelte, and it hurts like hell.

[Dracon] He tied you up. Then what?

[Rapunzel] He went upstairs and watched the stock report on CNN.

[Dracon] I thought you had kids? Or are they future-perverts-of-America already used to seeing Mom tied up?

[Rapunzel] The laundry room's off limits. We tell them there's a monster that lies in wait inside the clothes dryer. No, actually they were at school. My husband works the night shift at Leavers. He's the guy who makes sure the lettuce you buy at midnight isn't wormy. So morning's playtime.

[Dracon] And now? Is your beloved watching over your shoulder, jerking off as you write?

[Rapunzel] Hubby's at work. The four little pigs are in bed. And now's my playtime in a private chatroom.

[Dracon] You said you're heavy. Tell me, what do chubby women wear for sleaze and tease at the computer?

[Rapunzel] Oh, the usual bored housefrau shit. Dog collar, thong bikini, studded bra, ben wa balls clinking around in my cunt!

[Dracon] Ha, ha. But seriously...

[Rapunzel] Okay, okay. The truth: some of it anyway. Brown slacks, beige sweater, blue loafers. I wasn't kidding about the ben wa balls.

[Dracon] That's it? No lacy undies?

[Rapunzel] White underpants, white bra, 42DD. My tits are enormous. I tilt in the wind.

[Dracon] What else should I know about your appearance? Tattoos, perhaps?

[Rapunzel] You kidding? A nice Catholic girl?

[Dracon] Yet you let your husband tie you up?

[Rapunzel] Why not? Sex and punishment all at the same time – saves going to confession.

[Dracon] I hear Catholics can be rough on sinners.

[Rapunzel] Don't tell me you're Catholic?

[Dracon] Hardly. But I've been interrogated by a few.

[Rapunzel] So tell me, Dracon, do you believe suicide is a sin?

[Dracon] Are we back to suicide again? For your information, Rapunzel, I don't believe in sin. I do believe in stupidity. And suicide is definitely stupid.

[Rapunzel] I disagree.

[Dracon] So I gathered.

[Rapunzel] You've never thought about offing yourself?

[Dracon] I'm having too much fun. Besides, it's not my nature.

[Rapunzel] But I'll bet you've thought of killing someone else? A sex partner you had tied up, helpless, with a gag in her mouth and a scarf around her throat. You've thought how easy it would be, how painless, how she might even find it pleasurable.

[Dracon] That's not my nature either.

That remark had stopped her for a second. Maybe he wasn't even kinky. Maybe this was as far as it could go. She had contemplated cutting off the conversation and taking her hunt elsewhere. Until he typed:

[Dracon] What my real nature inclines me to do, you see, is torture. Sexual torture. Bringing a lover to the brink of death, then backing off, then back to the brink again. Not unlike hovering on the edge of orgasm a few times before the inevitable climax.

[Rapunzel] You sound like an artist.

[Dracon] And let me guess – you're about to say that you're a patron of the arts and you can't wait to meet me?

[Rapunzel] Possibly.

[Dracon] Forget it. If reality was what you wanted, you wouldn't be hiding out on the Net. You'd be searching for places where they make snuff flicks, you'd be walking in dark alleys, writing letters to murderers about to be paroled.

[Rapunzel] How do you know I haven't already done all that?

[Dracon] I know. You couldn't take what I'd dish out, Rapunzel. Not if it came down to real life. This lush erotic death you fantasize about, it's just that - a fantasy.

[Rapunzel] Maybe I'd surprise you. Maybe I'm exactly what you're looking for. Maybe you're afraid to find out.

[Dracon] I'm not afraid of anything, Rapunzel. With your permission, I can give you the most thrilling, the most exquisitely orgasmic of demises that your perverted little heart could ever desire. But you have to make a choice now.

[Rapunzel] There is no choice. I want to meet you.

[Dracon] Agreed then.

And they were off and running.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"You don't understand! I live here! Fucking let me through!"

Yellow crime tape stretched between sawhorses blocked the entrance to Becca's house. A female cop held onto Becca's arm as an older Asian man, a detective, made his way down the front steps with the over-cautious slowness of someone trying mightily not to vomit.

"You don't want to go in there," he said to Becca. She nodded as though she accepted this pronouncement, then the second the cop let her go, she ducked underneath the tape, bolted into the house, and upstairs.

Francine's body had already been bagged and removed, but to judge from the bedroom, most of her blood was still in the room. Blood splashed across the walls like a mad painter had sloshed it there in a bucket. Blood saturated the carpet and dried in dark crimson smears on the mirror and bed.

A second detective, middle-aged with jug ears, skin pockmarked from the ravages of adolescent acne, filled her in on as many details as she could stand to hear. Meanwhile forensics experts scurried, crawled and tiptoed around the room, gathering and bagging evidence.

In a voice that suggested he was reading a recipe, the detective continued enumerating the atrocities that had been committed upon Francine's body. Unable to listen any longer, Becca walked out of the room when he was in mid-sentence. She slumped down on the steps, buried her face in her hands, and gave way to sobs so harsh and gut-wrenching they made her ribs ache.

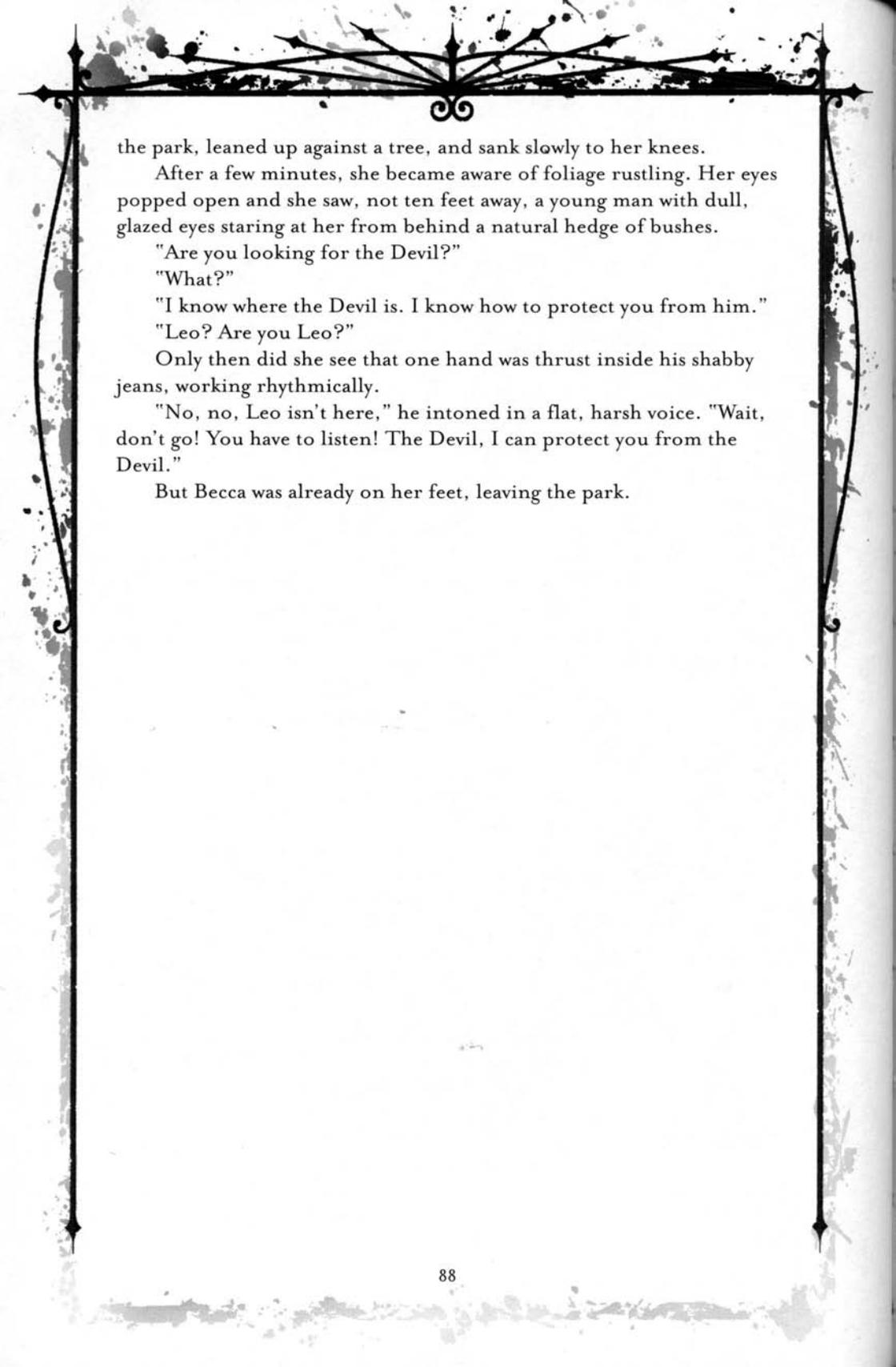
When she looked up again, the Asian detective was sitting beside her, pad and pen in hand. "Only a few questions," he said.

"I have one first," said Becca. "Who called the police?"

"A guy who said he was a neighbor called from a phone outside the Southern Cross. He said his name was Leo, then he hung up. We're checking into it. Now please, I need to ask you, your friend, did she have any enemies?"

"No, Francine had no enemies," she said, thinking: *And should I tell him how my father and I spend our evenings? That the kind of creatures he and I stalk wouldn't think twice about ripping off a woman's head and spraypainting the walls with her blood? That what happened to Francine was meant for me?*

The "few questions" the detective had ended up taking over an hour and would have gone on longer had not Becca insisted she'd be ill if she had to continue. Then, dazed, she drifted across the street to



the park, leaned up against a tree, and sank slowly to her knees.

After a few minutes, she became aware of foliage rustling. Her eyes popped open and she saw, not ten feet away, a young man with dull, glazed eyes staring at her from behind a natural hedge of bushes.

"Are you looking for the Devil?"

"What?"

"I know where the Devil is. I know how to protect you from him."

"Leo? Are you Leo?"

Only then did she see that one hand was thrust inside his shabby jeans, working rhythmically.

"No, no, Leo isn't here," he intoned in a flat, harsh voice. "Wait, don't go! You have to listen! The Devil, I can protect you from the Devil."

But Becca was already on her feet, leaving the park.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sitting in the front pew of the empty Cathedral of the Order of Angels, Emmet prayed.

It was a strange prayer: *God don't let me take pleasure in what I've done or what I still have to do.*

He'd just found out about his old friend Enrique Torres, murdered by a gang of hoodlums in Potomac Park. Now, aside from his grief over the man's death, there remained the matter of what to do with the "art object" in which Torres had shown such interest. Dispose of it, that was the only answer.

But let me not take pleasure in that, Lord. Let me not delight in causing suffering.

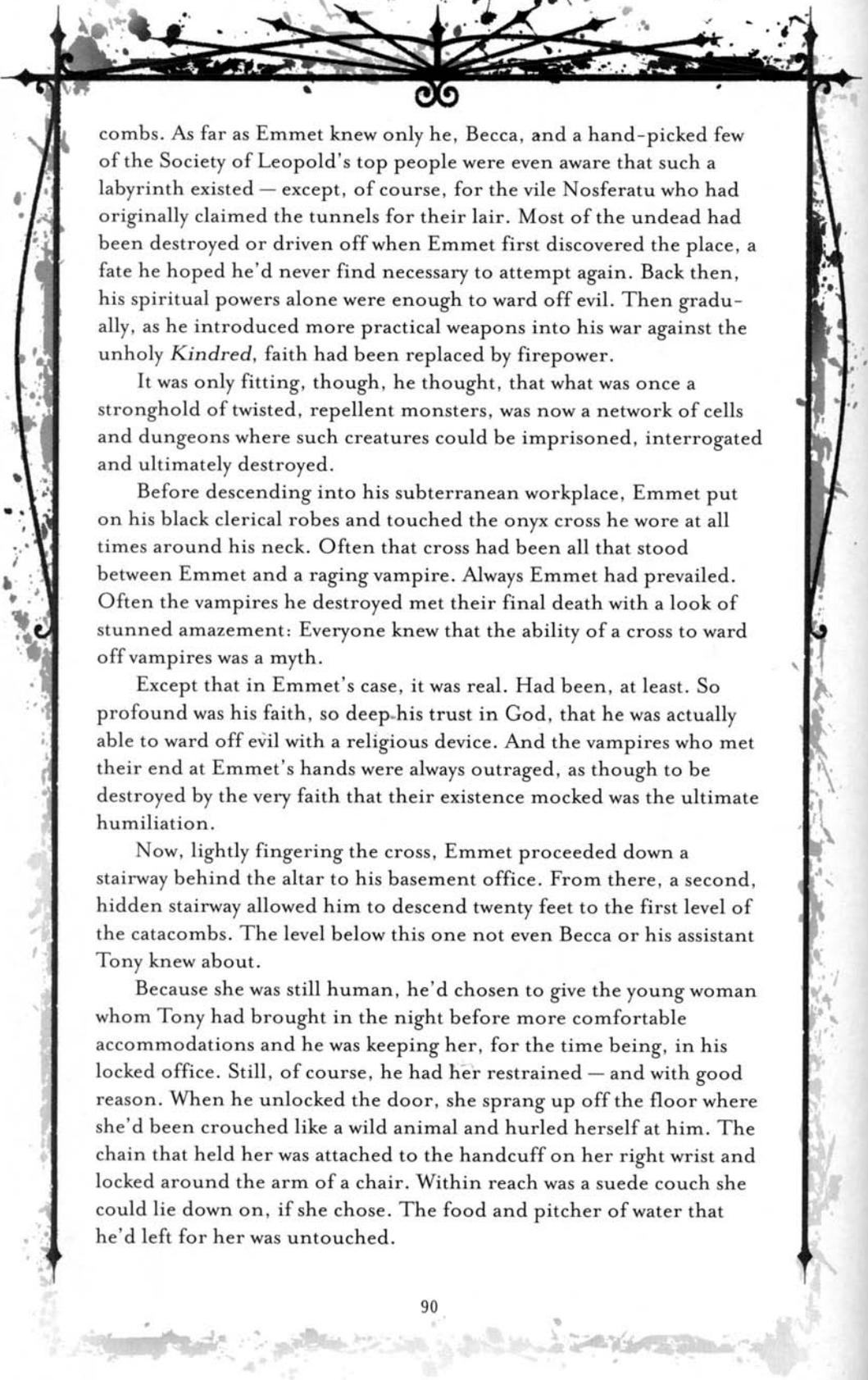
Because there, he knew, lay the danger. And he was already too close to the edge.

Finishing his prayer, he stood up and looked around the church's vast interior. Although remodeled less than twenty years earlier, the cathedral was a prime example of the revival in medieval architecture that had accompanied the upsurge in violent crime, doomsday cults, and mass suicides that swelled during the same period. Some said that superstition had flourished, too. Where once stained-glass windows had depicted the stations of the cross, now they illustrated sword-wielding angels battling demons. Above the nave, light filtered through a circular window spanned by the unfurling wings of a magnificent male angel.

Outside, of course, angels presided, too. Fierce-eyed warrior angels stood guard at the four corners of the roof; placid bronze angels with folded hands gazed down from above the doors; painted angels with serene smiles, floating against a ceiling of radiant clouds, embellished the gilded spires. Demigods who could be supplicated, believed in, and hoped for by people eager for something more personal than a distant, abstract God.

Emmet had given up believing in angels a long time ago. But he did believe in a certain fundamental goodness in the human spirit that transcended the squalor and desperation of the times. "The angel that resides in each of us," was how he thought of it, although certainly his work as a witch-hunter brought him into contact with much to argue against the presence of anything even minimally good or noble about present-day humanity.

Even this opulent cathedral that vaunted the existence of heavenly beings had, literally at its core, a dark secret. Few would have imagined that only thirty feet below the basement level lay a network of cata-



combs. As far as Emmet knew only he, Becca, and a hand-picked few of the Society of Leopold's top people were even aware that such a labyrinth existed — except, of course, for the vile Nosferatu who had originally claimed the tunnels for their lair. Most of the undead had been destroyed or driven off when Emmet first discovered the place, a fate he hoped he'd never find necessary to attempt again. Back then, his spiritual powers alone were enough to ward off evil. Then gradually, as he introduced more practical weapons into his war against the unholy *Kindred*, faith had been replaced by firepower.

It was only fitting, though, he thought, that what was once a stronghold of twisted, repellent monsters, was now a network of cells and dungeons where such creatures could be imprisoned, interrogated and ultimately destroyed.

Before descending into his subterranean workplace, Emmet put on his black clerical robes and touched the onyx cross he wore at all times around his neck. Often that cross had been all that stood between Emmet and a raging vampire. Always Emmet had prevailed. Often the vampires he destroyed met their final death with a look of stunned amazement: Everyone knew that the ability of a cross to ward off vampires was a myth.

Except that in Emmet's case, it was real. Had been, at least. So profound was his faith, so deep his trust in God, that he was actually able to ward off evil with a religious device. And the vampires who met their end at Emmet's hands were always outraged, as though to be destroyed by the very faith that their existence mocked was the ultimate humiliation.

Now, lightly fingering the cross, Emmet proceeded down a stairway behind the altar to his basement office. From there, a second, hidden stairway allowed him to descend twenty feet to the first level of the catacombs. The level below this one not even Becca or his assistant Tony knew about.

Because she was still human, he'd chosen to give the young woman whom Tony had brought in the night before more comfortable accommodations and he was keeping her, for the time being, in his locked office. Still, of course, he had her restrained — and with good reason. When he unlocked the door, she sprang up off the floor where she'd been crouched like a wild animal and hurled herself at him. The chain that held her was attached to the handcuff on her right wrist and locked around the arm of a chair. Within reach was a suede couch she could lie down on, if she chose. The food and pitcher of water that he'd left for her was untouched.

"Not hungry?"

In response she picked up the tray of food and threw it at him. He sidestepped, let it crash into the back of the door. "It's poisoned, isn't it?"

Before she could do likewise with the water, he moved that out of her reach, then picked up half the hamburger bun off the floor and bit into it.

"If it were poisoned, would I do this?"

"It's a trick. Mistress told me how you bastards operate."

"No, she didn't. You may not understand this, child, but I saved your life. Look at you — you're pale as milk. She's bled you down to nothing."

"Let me go. Just let me go and I won't say anything."

"I'll let you go, but not until I know you won't go scampering right back to where I found you. It's imperative you understand the danger you've been in, the evil that you've been consorting with." He inched closer, one hand outstretched, palm down, as one would approach a skittish animal. "There's mortal danger to you, your body and your soul, if you go back there."

"It's only dangerous because you're planning something, aren't you?" she sneered. "What are you going to do, burn her at the stake like they used to do to witches? You're the one who ought to be chained up. You're the one who's dangerous."

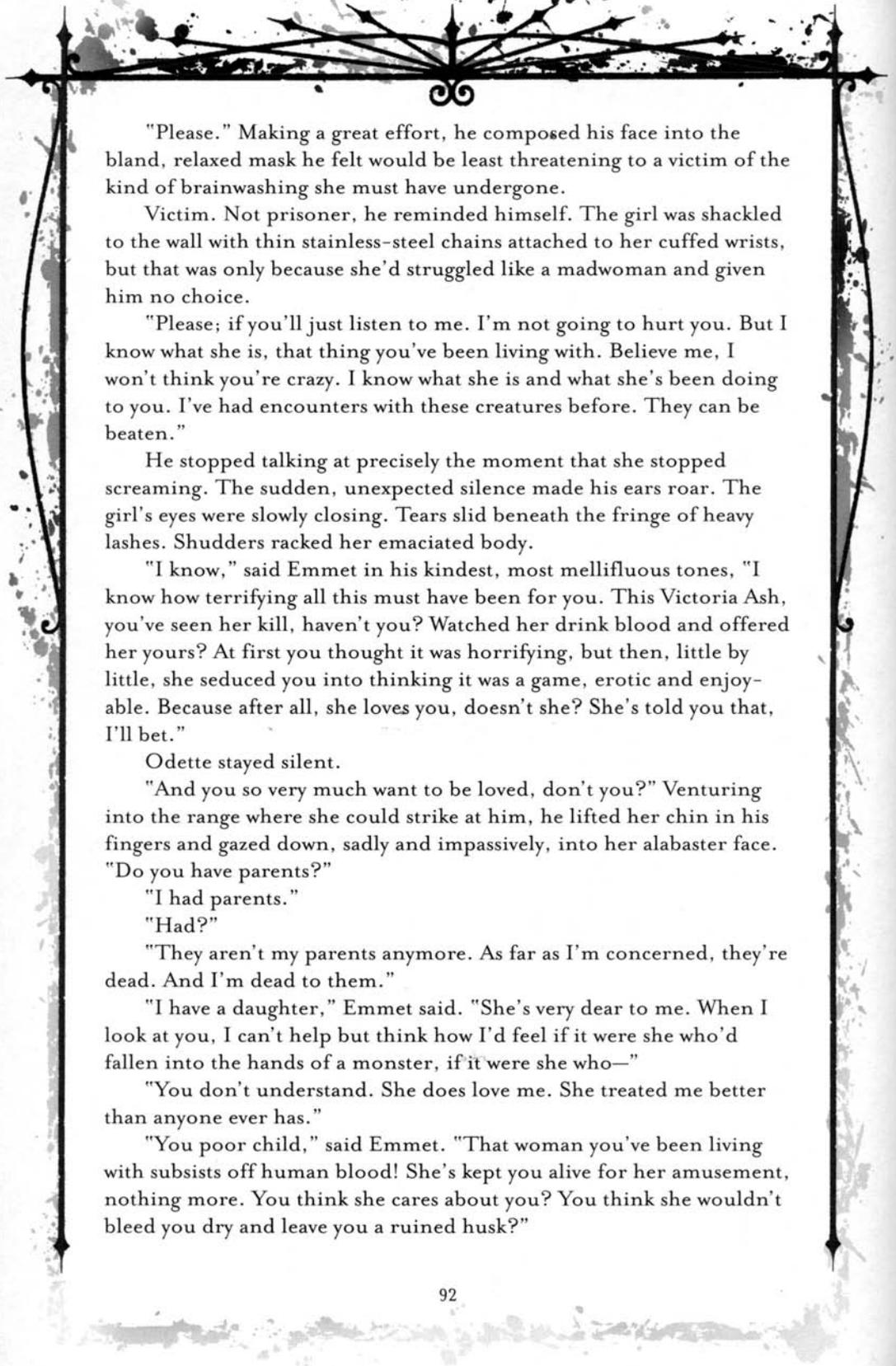
He made his voice low, avuncular. She doesn't understand, he told himself, that she's in thrall to demons.

"Listen to me. This can be easy or it can be hard. Your choice. But the one thing I can promise is that you're not going back there. Not ever, no matter how long I have to keep you here. That creature can't get to you here. You're safe."

The girl's fierce composure crumbled. She threw back her head and howled.

"Jesus God, help this poor girl." Emmet's fists clenched and unclenched. He stepped out of the room long enough to drop a couple of antacid tablets into the glass of water she hadn't touched, and drained it at a gulp. Thought about the bottle of scotch in his bottom desk drawer and wished to God that he could get at it without her seeing him.

The girl's screeching had become something else, a desperate gibbering in tongues. Her mindless babbling pierced his skull like an icepick. He wanted to cover his ears when he went back into the room, but he couldn't afford to let her see his vulnerability.



"Please." Making a great effort, he composed his face into the bland, relaxed mask he felt would be least threatening to a victim of the kind of brainwashing she must have undergone.

Victim. Not prisoner, he reminded himself. The girl was shackled to the wall with thin stainless-steel chains attached to her cuffed wrists, but that was only because she'd struggled like a madwoman and given him no choice.

"Please; if you'll just listen to me. I'm not going to hurt you. But I know what she is, that thing you've been living with. Believe me, I won't think you're crazy. I know what she is and what she's been doing to you. I've had encounters with these creatures before. They can be beaten."

He stopped talking at precisely the moment that she stopped screaming. The sudden, unexpected silence made his ears roar. The girl's eyes were slowly closing. Tears slid beneath the fringe of heavy lashes. Shudders racked her emaciated body.

"I know," said Emmet in his kindest, most mellifluous tones, "I know how terrifying all this must have been for you. This Victoria Ash, you've seen her kill, haven't you? Watched her drink blood and offered her yours? At first you thought it was horrifying, but then, little by little, she seduced you into thinking it was a game, erotic and enjoyable. Because after all, she loves you, doesn't she? She's told you that, I'll bet."

Odette stayed silent.

"And you so very much want to be loved, don't you?" Venturing into the range where she could strike at him, he lifted her chin in his fingers and gazed down, sadly and impassively, into her alabaster face. "Do you have parents?"

"I had parents."

"Had?"

"They aren't my parents anymore. As far as I'm concerned, they're dead. And I'm dead to them."

"I have a daughter," Emmet said. "She's very dear to me. When I look at you, I can't help but think how I'd feel if it were she who'd fallen into the hands of a monster, if it were she who—"

"You don't understand. She does love me. She treated me better than anyone ever has."

"You poor child," said Emmet. "That woman you've been living with subsists off human blood! She's kept you alive for her amusement, nothing more. You think she cares about you? You think she wouldn't bleed you dry and leave you a ruined husk?"

Odette started to sob softly. Moved by her distress, Emmet put his arms around her.

"I need her," Odette murmured. "She was good to me. She said she loved me."

The loose-fitting tunic top that she was wearing had slipped down over one shoulder, revealing the tops of her breasts. A trickle of sweat appeared between her collar bones and wended its way down. He followed it with his eyes, remembering the plump ripeness of those breasts when he had seen them through binoculars the night that he and Becca had spied upon Victoria Ash's apartment. An image came to him, unbidden, as pornographic as anything he'd ever witnessed in his years of spying. He tried to move away from her, but found he lacked the will.

As though reading his mind, or perhaps picking up on the change in his breathing, the girl twisted around and arched her back. Her breast nudged at Emmet's fingers as she murmured in his ear, "But maybe I don't need her to love me anymore. Maybe you can love me instead. Would you do that for me? Don't you want to?" The backs of her cuffed hands moved against his crotch.

He shoved her away, so that she sprawled back, legs akimbo, giving him a view of her he didn't want and couldn't afford.

"Stop it!"

"Shut up, you old pervert! You want it. You want it so bad is why you can't stand the thought of taking off these cuffs, letting me go. You're too busy having fantasies of how you'd like to fuck me, of how you'd like to shove your dick—"

He grabbed her by the neck. Shook her hard. Her eyes bounced back and forth inside the sockets a few times, then rolled up so he could see the white. Emmet withdrew a cigarette lighter from his pocket and flicked the flame on and off in her face until her eyes opened.

"Does that frighten you? It should." He moved the lighter toward her mouth, then downward to where the wildly tangled locks of hair fell across her chest. "What if she turns you into what she is?"

He touched the flame tip to Odette's shoulder and drew a scream from her that made all her previous cries seem inconsequential. "Because this is what's in store for your precious mistress and all the other monsters out there, you understand! And you're going to be one of them! Either dead — truly dead, if you're lucky — or undead, like that thing you're being loyal to!"

He brushed the flame so close to Odette's face that a tendril of blond hair singed and sizzled. The girl shook her head wildly.

"That's what's going to happen to your mistress, you hear me? She will burn. There are people working night and day, storing information, cataloguing, networking, and all to one end — so one day every vampire who walks this earth will burn down to soot and cinders!"

Behind him, a key turned in the lock. The door opened. Becca stood there, taking it all in, while Odette resumed her screaming. Becca looked as pale as Odette now, the freckles on her nose and forehead stood out like flecks of blood. Her eyes were red-rimmed, swollen from sobbing.

Tonelessly she said, "Francine was murdered last night. I called you, but you didn't answer. I needed you and now I find you—"

The lighter dropped from Emmet's hand. Quickly, he took Becca by the arm, led her into the corridor outside, out of reach of the girl's hearing. "Francine dead? My God, what happened?"

Quickly, Becca filled in him on what she knew, sparing some of the more lurid details.

"Oh, God, oh God, I'm so sorry." He tried to take her in his arms, but she jerked away.

"Don't touch me. That girl, what the hell were you doing to her?"

"That wasn't meant for you to see."

"I guess not. I'm only supposed to help you round them up, not stay around to watch them tortured."

"It isn't torture."

"For Christ's sake then, what name do you have for it? Interrogation techniques? Deprogramming, maybe?"

"She's been brainwashed. I'm only trying to bring her to her senses."

"You've got her in fucking chains. Jesus, what's happening to you? To all of us? I'm out hunting vampires while my lover's being raped and murdered. You're torturing a girl who's already been through hell."

"You don't understand, Becca."

"No, I understand real well. Give me the handcuff key."

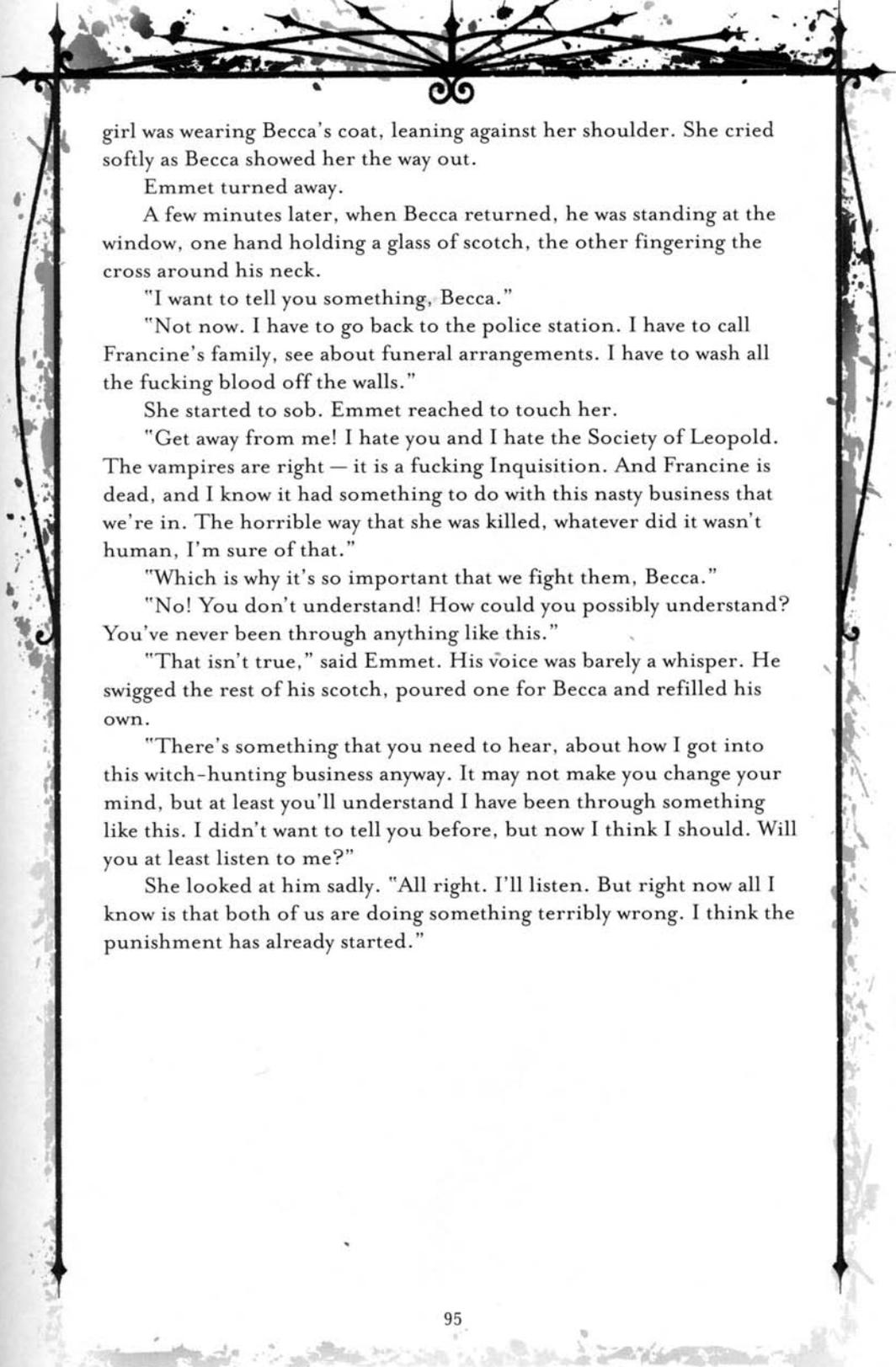
"Becca, we can't let her go yet. She's a danger to us and to herself. You've just had a terrible shock, and you're not thinking clearly."

"Maybe I'm thinking clearly for the first time in years."

"Listen to me."

"No arguments, Dad. I swear I'll call the police. I'll give this whole place up if I have to."

Emmet looked at her as though she'd struck him in the face, then handed over the key. He stayed outside while his daughter spoke to Odette, then freed her hands. When they came outside together, the



girl was wearing Becca's coat, leaning against her shoulder. She cried softly as Becca showed her the way out.

Emmet turned away.

A few minutes later, when Becca returned, he was standing at the window, one hand holding a glass of scotch, the other fingering the cross around his neck.

"I want to tell you something, Becca."

"Not now. I have to go back to the police station. I have to call Francine's family, see about funeral arrangements. I have to wash all the fucking blood off the walls."

She started to sob. Emmet reached to touch her.

"Get away from me! I hate you and I hate the Society of Leopold. The vampires are right — it is a fucking Inquisition. And Francine is dead, and I know it had something to do with this nasty business that we're in. The horrible way that she was killed, whatever did it wasn't human, I'm sure of that."

"Which is why it's so important that we fight them, Becca."

"No! You don't understand! How could you possibly understand? You've never been through anything like this."

"That isn't true," said Emmet. His voice was barely a whisper. He swigged the rest of his scotch, poured one for Becca and refilled his own.

"There's something that you need to hear, about how I got into this witch-hunting business anyway. It may not make you change your mind, but at least you'll understand I have been through something like this. I didn't want to tell you before, but now I think I should. Will you at least listen to me?"

She looked at him sadly. "All right. I'll listen. But right now all I know is that both of us are doing something terribly wrong. I think the punishment has already started."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Except for the teeth-clacking man in room 108 and the Hispanic woman in 111 who muttered Bible verses laced with obscenities day and night, all was quiet in the west wing. Erasmus Bonhomme slumped in a stiff-backed chair at the intersection of two hallways, one of which was a peeling, urine-spattered beige, the other a sick shade of regurgitated-looking pink. Intermittently he read from a small pocket volume of untranslated Proust, pausing every few paragraphs to contemplate a passage. His large, knobby hands rested on a gelatinous belly that lolled over the waistband of his trousers in flabby folds. A gray-black beard and mustache concealed some of his facial deformities. A wig helped hide the peculiar, half-inch high ridge of bone that jutted up along the center of his skull like a crested dinosaur. Nothing could improve the appearance of his eyes, however, which were like flat, reddish scabs imbedded in sockets of loamy, pitted flesh. Still he felt content tonight, even buoyant.

He had a coming assignation with the woman in 114.

The male nurse who made the rounds around one each evening had just passed through and would not be back for another half hour or so. He was evidently either a superstitious type or mildly "sensitive" and got so flustered in Erasmus's presence that the patients could probably be fornicating on the floor and he'd overlook it in his eagerness to avoid having to exchange words with the new orderly.

Erasmus slowly closed the book and got groaningly to his feet. Using his passkey, he unlocked the door to 114 and let himself into the woman's isolated chamber. Casually, almost meandering, he crossed the floor and posted himself next to the bed. For a long moment, he simply stared down at the sleeping woman. It had been a long time. He had missed her.

The woman's name was Valerie Chase. She and Erasmus were old acquaintances. In fact, her presence in a mental ward was the direct result of Erasmus's late-night visits, which had begun soon after her husband died and continued up until she suffered a complete mental collapse a few months later. Several years had passed since Erasmus had last seen her, but apparently Valerie Chase's nervous system had never fully recovered.

Now he laid one lumpen hand upon her mid-section, pulled down her nightgown and began to nibble at her breasts.

Her eyes snapped open like a doll's.

Vampire and mortal stared at one another.



Erasmus consoles one of his favored vessels.

Valerie Chase drew a deep breath. "No, not you. It can't be you. You aren't real."

"Of course I'm real," whispered the Nosferatu. He took her hand and pressed it to his face, his meaty chest, then further down. "My head is real, my body's real, my dick, as you can feel yourself, is hard and very, very real."

She yanked her hand away from the disgusting bulge protruding from the folds of softer belly flesh. "You're a hallucination."

He squinted down at her. "Who says?"

"My doctors say. My family says. I say. You're a nightmare and I'm going back to sleep now. When I wake up, this will all be over with."

Erasmus sighed. "Poor Valerie. Still so sure that she'll wake up tomorrow morning."

The woman's eyes, already huge, got even bigger. "You aren't real," she hissed. "Not either one of you."

Erasmus turned, but not quickly enough. As Valerie began to scream, Lucita lunged to clamp a hand across the woman's mouth. A quick and brutal twist, a grinding snap, and Valerie Chase — now rendered quadriplegic — sagged back into the pillows.

"That's a fine way to pay me back for how I helped you out the other night," Erasmus hissed. "What the hell do you think you're doing anyway? I wasn't finished with her yet."

"I only wanted to shut her up," Lucita said. "I didn't mean to break her neck." And, indeed, a part of her recoiled in horror at what she'd done, while at the same time she could feel the Beast rejoicing, maniacal and savage, aroused by the display of casual cruelty and wanting more.

She tried to quell the Beast's rising excitement by focusing on the hideousness of the Nosferatu and the revulsion he inspired. "Forget about her. I need information, and I don't intend to wait until you're done bugging that poor bitch. And anyway, I need to feed."

The woman wasn't dead, not yet. Just suffocating as her lungs failed to inflate on their own. Her face had gone a ghastly saffron-tinted white. Her eyes begged for mercy. Lucita dipped her head down to the woman's neck, pricked the clammy skin, and began to drink.

When she was finished feeding and while the woman's head still flipped spasmodically with the last twitches of life, they left the room, Erasmus locking the door behind them.

Outside in the hallway, Lucita rubbed her eyes, trying to shake the numbness creeping over her. She felt woozy and light-headed. The walls of the corridor seemed to be breathing in and out, like a slowing heart.

"You really have to acquire a tolerance for Thorazine before you feed here," Erasmus said. "I would have warned you, but you seemed in such a hurry."

"Quite a cocktail." She blinked hard while the walls came slowly to a standstill. "At least, with this much medication in her blood, she didn't feel much pain."

"Yes, well, before you give yourself too much credit for human impulses, let me remind you that you shouldn't have killed her in the first place. Now there'll be a hue and cry about abuse, and an investigation. I won't be able to keep my job here any longer."

"How sad. A man who owns three square blocks of prime D.C. real estate is out of work."

"That woman was my hobby," he pouted. "I drove her straight down the road to paranoid schizophrenia. I had plans for her — a life as a catatonic vegetable. *Mon petit chou*, as the French would say. My little cabbage. Now you've ruined her."

Lucita eyed the Nosferatu with scorn. "Fuck your perverted little peccadilloes. Where can we talk that we won't be interrupted?"

Erasmus scowled, but said, "You look like you could use some diversion. How about where they keep their torture equipment?"

He led Lucita into a basement storage area where equipment from years past was kept — restraints and straitjackets and machines for delivering electroconvulsive shock. "You see?" Erasmus said. "It's a fucking S&M boutique down here."

Fingering one of the straitjackets, Lucita had an image of a captive, struggling prey, and smiled despite herself.

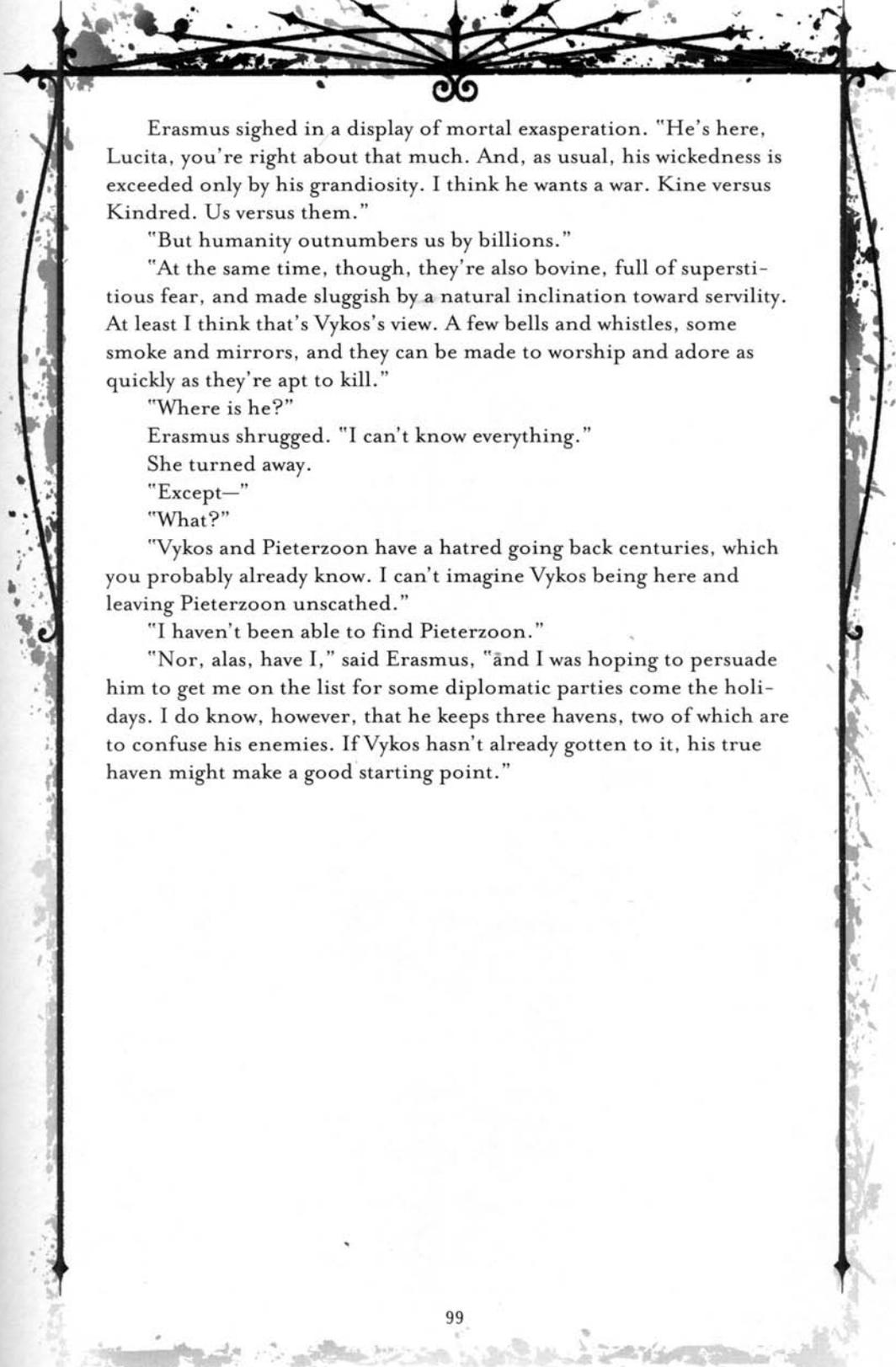
"You Nosferatu always claim you know everything that goes on among the kine and Kindred. Now's your chance to back that up. I want to know what Sascha Vykos is doing in D.C. I know it's here. I know it tried to kill me."

"Ah, Vykos. Caine's Angel of the Black Hand. You'd do well to stay away from that one."

"No fucking shit. And it would do well to stay away from me, but after what happened in Potomac Park, it's too late for that now. And I'm sure it had something to do with Cordelia Rosenthal freaking out the other night. Her mind was gone. She was a sinkhole. It was like somebody had fucked their way into her head and stolen her soul."

Erasmus faked a shudder. "Soul? Really, such language, Lucita."

"What do you know of Vykos? I mean, that I wouldn't know after having dealt with it for eight hundred years?" Lucita glowered at Erasmus.



Erasmus sighed in a display of mortal exasperation. "He's here, Lucita, you're right about that much. And, as usual, his wickedness is exceeded only by his grandiosity. I think he wants a war. Kine versus Kindred. Us versus them."

"But humanity outnumbers us by billions."

"At the same time, though, they're also bovine, full of superstitious fear, and made sluggish by a natural inclination toward servility. At least I think that's Vykos's view. A few bells and whistles, some smoke and mirrors, and they can be made to worship and adore as quickly as they're apt to kill."

"Where is he?"

Erasmus shrugged. "I can't know everything."

She turned away.

"Except—"

"What?"

"Vykos and Pieterzoon have a hatred going back centuries, which you probably already know. I can't imagine Vykos being here and leaving Pieterzoon unscathed."

"I haven't been able to find Pieterzoon."

"Nor, alas, have I," said Erasmus, "and I was hoping to persuade him to get me on the list for some diplomatic parties come the holidays. I do know, however, that he keeps three havens, two of which are to confuse his enemies. If Vykos hasn't already gotten to it, his true haven might make a good starting point."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The line snaking out the door of the Club Osiris was an eclectic assortment: the pierced, the dreadlocked, the drop-dead beautiful and the outlandishly bizarre. At the front door, a young man with a blond buzzcut and a chest like a wall safe packed into his Armani suit surveyed the crowd, bestowing entry or rejection with a curt nod or a small, jaded smirk.

As she glided past, Victoria Ash surveyed the crowd with cold, knowing eyes, ignoring the gawkers who recognized her as a singing star, but acknowledging those few whom she might wish to know with a gaze held slightly longer than normal. Inevitably these objects of her interest either grew wide-eyed with abject enthralment or shrank subtly away, as though struck by a whiff of disease. For the most part, though, where she passed, only whispers and longing stares followed. One thing was assured — that she would pass through the gilded doors of the Club Osiris with no waiting in line and no questions.

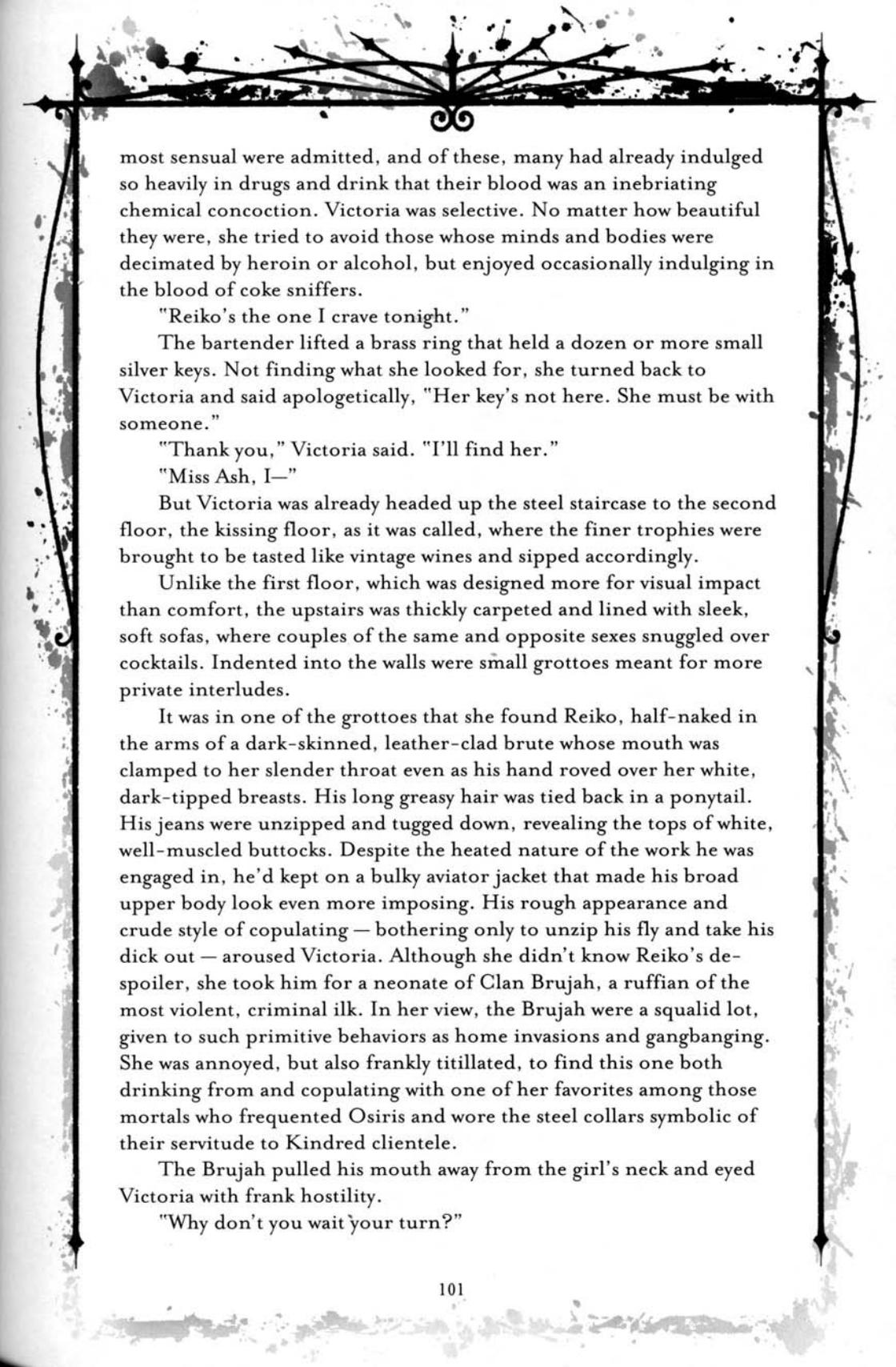
When he saw her, the beefy blond guarding the door stepped aside and held open the door. He knew the regulars. Knew that on a night with clients like Victoria on hand, the bribes offered him to get past the front door would be exorbitant.

Inside, the multilevel club was adorned with steel sculptures of gigantic, plated insects and bizarre, twisted trees whose emaciated branches bore foliage of sculpted hands and feet. Steel sheeting covered the tables, bars, and light fixtures, while the bartender and waitstaff, unusually comely specimens all, wore steel armbands and high, chokingly tight steel collars over their black spandex uniforms. The clientele crowded around the bar, where drink menus listed forty-six different kinds of martinis and the glittering array of bottles was bookended by vending machines offering Cuban and other imported cigars. The air stung with smoke and pulsed with the rhythm of hypnotic acid jazz.

The crowd shuffled aside to accommodate Victoria as she made her way to the bar.

One of the bartenders, a slender, poppy-lipped girl with pinprick pupils and sleepy voice to go with the track marks on her arms, gave Victoria a lazy smile and said, "Miss Ash, good evening. What can I do for you? Who will you have?"

Victoria had been contemplating her choice on the way here. That was one of the delights of the Osiris Club — the variety and the beauty of the possibilities it offered. Only the loveliest, the most exotic and



most sensual were admitted, and of these, many had already indulged so heavily in drugs and drink that their blood was an inebriating chemical concoction. Victoria was selective. No matter how beautiful they were, she tried to avoid those whose minds and bodies were decimated by heroin or alcohol, but enjoyed occasionally indulging in the blood of coke sniffers.

"Reiko's the one I crave tonight."

The bartender lifted a brass ring that held a dozen or more small silver keys. Not finding what she looked for, she turned back to Victoria and said apologetically, "Her key's not here. She must be with someone."

"Thank you," Victoria said. "I'll find her."

"Miss Ash, I—"

But Victoria was already headed up the steel staircase to the second floor, the kissing floor, as it was called, where the finer trophies were brought to be tasted like vintage wines and sipped accordingly.

Unlike the first floor, which was designed more for visual impact than comfort, the upstairs was thickly carpeted and lined with sleek, soft sofas, where couples of the same and opposite sexes snuggled over cocktails. Indented into the walls were small grottoes meant for more private interludes.

It was in one of the grottoes that she found Reiko, half-naked in the arms of a dark-skinned, leather-clad brute whose mouth was clamped to her slender throat even as his hand roved over her white, dark-tipped breasts. His long greasy hair was tied back in a ponytail. His jeans were unzipped and tugged down, revealing the tops of white, well-muscled buttocks. Despite the heated nature of the work he was engaged in, he'd kept on a bulky aviator jacket that made his broad upper body look even more imposing. His rough appearance and crude style of copulating — bothering only to unzip his fly and take his dick out — aroused Victoria. Although she didn't know Reiko's despoiler, she took him for a neonate of Clan Brujah, a ruffian of the most violent, criminal ilk. In her view, the Brujah were a squalid lot, given to such primitive behaviors as home invasions and gangbangng. She was annoyed, but also frankly titillated, to find this one both drinking from and copulating with one of her favorites among those mortals who frequented Osiris and wore the steel collars symbolic of their servitude to Kindred clientele.

The Brujah pulled his mouth away from the girl's neck and eyed Victoria with frank hostility.

"Why don't you wait your turn?"

Excitement, that most sorely missed emotion, thrilled through her. The Brujah was a mere neonate. Amazing that he'd even been admitted, let alone that he would behave so disrespectfully toward her, his obvious better.

"Do you know who I am?" she said coldly.

"Should I?" He eyed her up and down. "Oh, yeah, I've seen your picture. Sorry if I don't ask for an autograph, but as you can see, I'm busy."

Victoria said, "I came here tonight for Reiko. And I'm not in the habit of waiting for what I want."

"Oh, you want something?" His gaze became more frankly insolent. "Well, maybe I want something, too. And I *never* wait for what I want."

He fixed her with that dangerous stare. Unshaven, with irregular teeth and a broad flat nose that looked as though it had been reshaped by somebody's fist, Victoria couldn't possibly have considered him good-looking. But even she, with her finely attuned sense of the aesthetic, knew beauty and carnality weren't always intertwined.

And she was hungry now for more than blood and bored with familiar partners.

She stared down at the Brujah. "Get her dressed and on her feet. I want to go somewhere private."

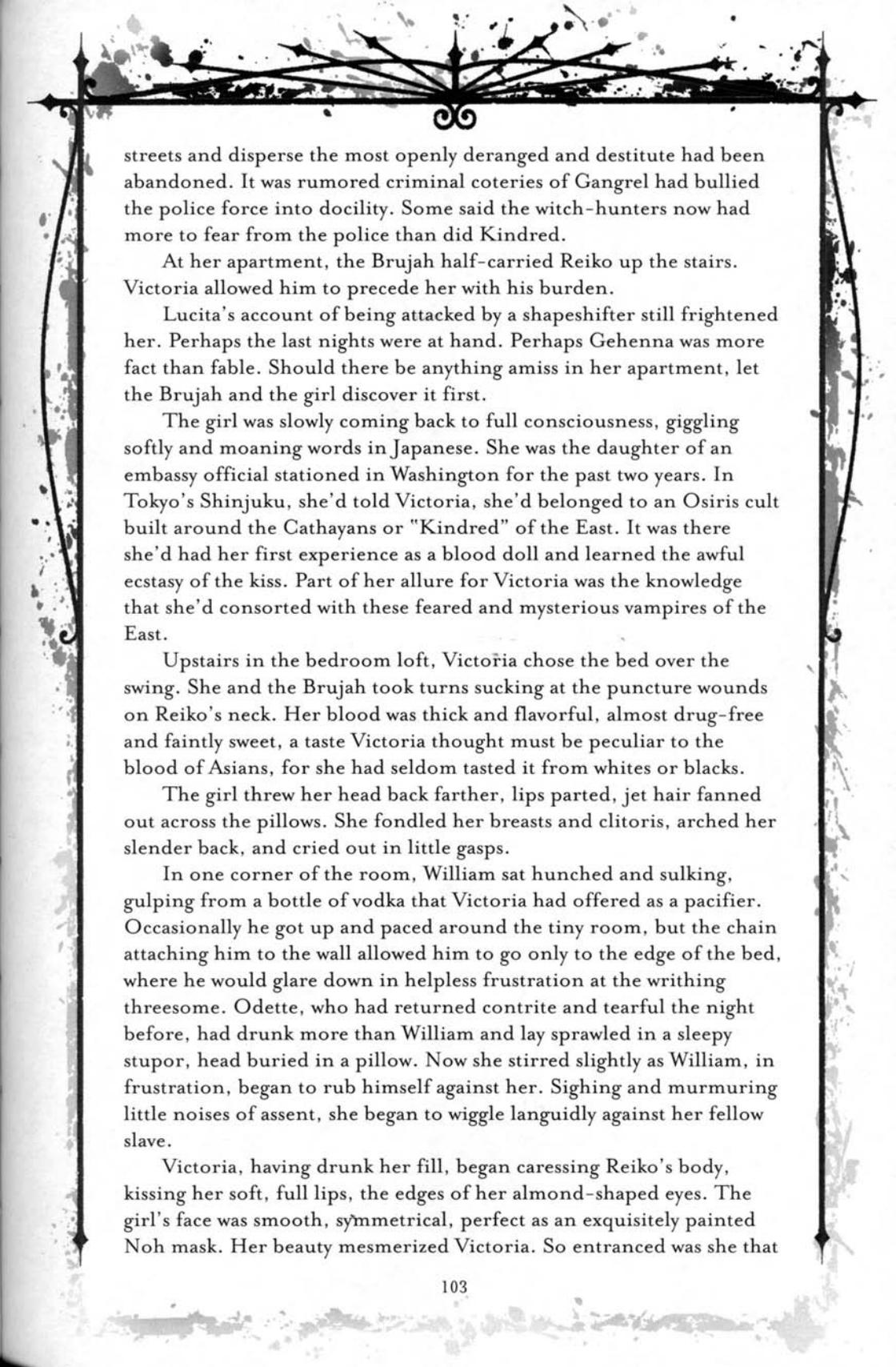
He glowered at her, but zipped up and got to his feet. "You look like a bitch who wants a helluva lot."

She smiled. "Indeed I do. And you look like you can deliver it."

I want. Those simple words had summed up her life and now summed up her unlife. *I want.* With what terror she looked forward to the time when all her wants would have been satisfied, when there'd be nothing left, no drug-laced blood, no celebrity ego trip, no debauchery degraded enough to arouse in her the faded echo of what it had been like to live.

The trio left Osiris and started toward Victoria's apartment. Reiko, who was barely able to totter along, walked in the middle. They passed a sidewalk shantytown where derelicts camped in lean-tos made from plastic garbage bags and cardboard boxes, and crossed the street to avoid a small band of doomsayers, who carried signs predicting the end of the world and ranted about dark forces at work beneath the unsuspecting noses of humankind.

A cruising police car passed by slowly, ignoring the activity on the street. Victoria and the Brujah exchanged contemptuous glances. The police, once feared by Kindred, meant little now. In recent months, even the attempts to clear away the vagrants camped out on public



streets and disperse the most openly deranged and destitute had been abandoned. It was rumored criminal coteries of Gangrel had bullied the police force into docility. Some said the witch-hunters now had more to fear from the police than did Kindred.

At her apartment, the Brujah half-carried Reiko up the stairs. Victoria allowed him to precede her with his burden.

Lucita's account of being attacked by a shapeshifter still frightened her. Perhaps the last nights were at hand. Perhaps Gehenna was more fact than fable. Should there be anything amiss in her apartment, let the Brujah and the girl discover it first.

The girl was slowly coming back to full consciousness, giggling softly and moaning words in Japanese. She was the daughter of an embassy official stationed in Washington for the past two years. In Tokyo's Shinjuku, she'd told Victoria, she'd belonged to an Osiris cult built around the Cathayans or "Kindred" of the East. It was there she'd had her first experience as a blood doll and learned the awful ecstasy of the kiss. Part of her allure for Victoria was the knowledge that she'd consorted with these feared and mysterious vampires of the East.

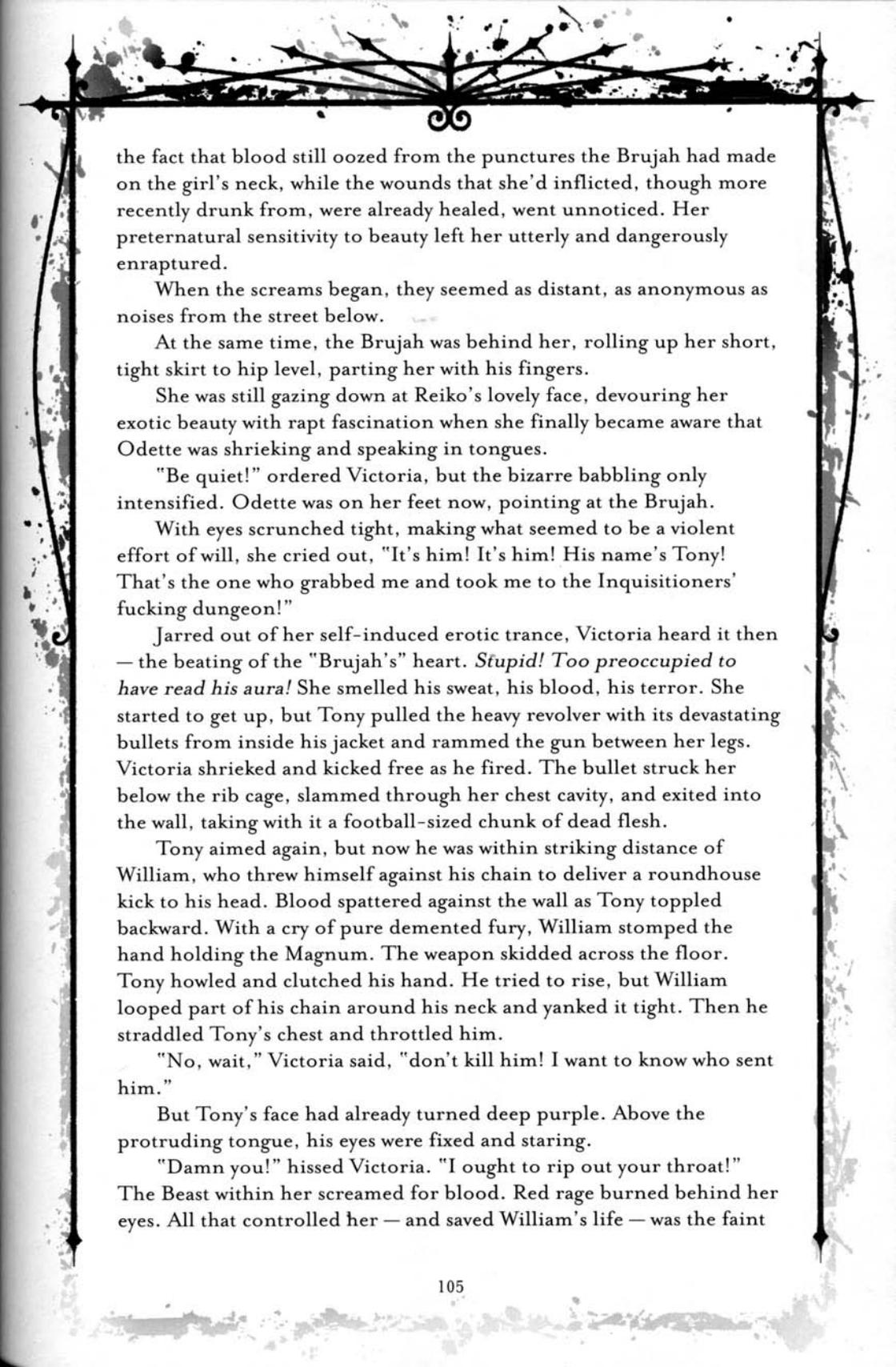
Upstairs in the bedroom loft, Victoria chose the bed over the swing. She and the Brujah took turns sucking at the puncture wounds on Reiko's neck. Her blood was thick and flavorful, almost drug-free and faintly sweet, a taste Victoria thought must be peculiar to the blood of Asians, for she had seldom tasted it from whites or blacks.

The girl threw her head back farther, lips parted, jet hair fanned out across the pillows. She fondled her breasts and clitoris, arched her slender back, and cried out in little gasps.

In one corner of the room, William sat hunched and sulking, gulping from a bottle of vodka that Victoria had offered as a pacifier. Occasionally he got up and paced around the tiny room, but the chain attaching him to the wall allowed him to go only to the edge of the bed, where he would glare down in helpless frustration at the writhing threesome. Odette, who had returned contrite and tearful the night before, had drunk more than William and lay sprawled in a sleepy stupor, head buried in a pillow. Now she stirred slightly as William, in frustration, began to rub himself against her. Sighing and murmuring little noises of assent, she began to wiggle languidly against her fellow slave.

Victoria, having drunk her fill, began caressing Reiko's body, kissing her soft, full lips, the edges of her almond-shaped eyes. The girl's face was smooth, symmetrical, perfect as an exquisitely painted Noh mask. Her beauty mesmerized Victoria. So entranced was she that





the fact that blood still oozed from the punctures the Brujah had made on the girl's neck, while the wounds that she'd inflicted, though more recently drunk from, were already healed, went unnoticed. Her preternatural sensitivity to beauty left her utterly and dangerously enraptured.

When the screams began, they seemed as distant, as anonymous as noises from the street below.

At the same time, the Brujah was behind her, rolling up her short, tight skirt to hip level, parting her with his fingers.

She was still gazing down at Reiko's lovely face, devouring her exotic beauty with rapt fascination when she finally became aware that Odette was shrieking and speaking in tongues.

"Be quiet!" ordered Victoria, but the bizarre babbling only intensified. Odette was on her feet now, pointing at the Brujah.

With eyes scrunched tight, making what seemed to be a violent effort of will, she cried out, "It's him! It's him! His name's Tony! That's the one who grabbed me and took me to the Inquisitioners' fucking dungeon!"

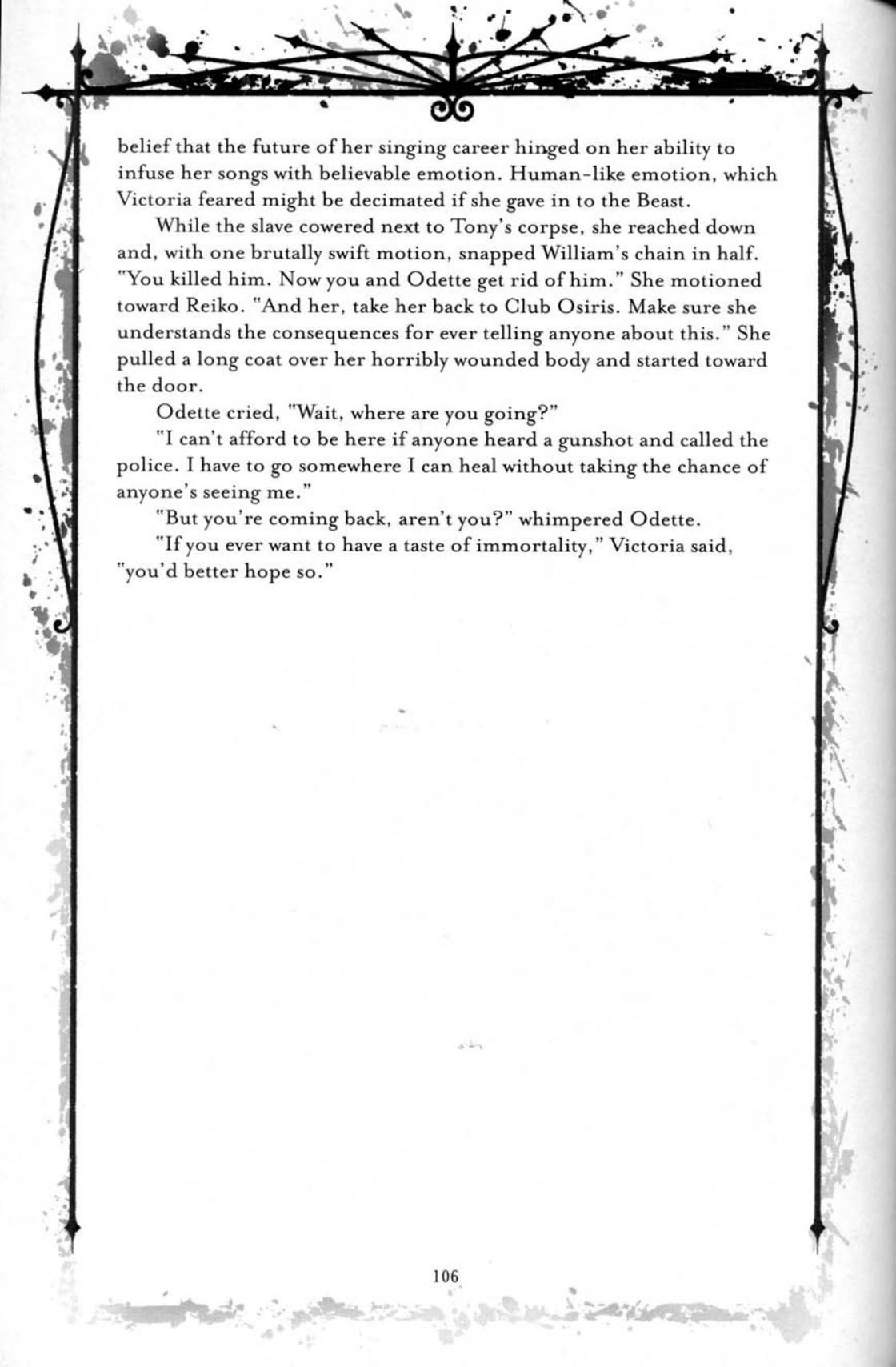
Jarred out of her self-induced erotic trance, Victoria heard it then — the beating of the "Brujah's" heart. *Stupid! Too preoccupied to have read his aura!* She smelled his sweat, his blood, his terror. She started to get up, but Tony pulled the heavy revolver with its devastating bullets from inside his jacket and rammed the gun between her legs. Victoria shrieked and kicked free as he fired. The bullet struck her below the rib cage, slammed through her chest cavity, and exited into the wall, taking with it a football-sized chunk of dead flesh.

Tony aimed again, but now he was within striking distance of William, who threw himself against his chain to deliver a roundhouse kick to his head. Blood splattered against the wall as Tony toppled backward. With a cry of pure demented fury, William stomped the hand holding the Magnum. The weapon skidded across the floor. Tony howled and clutched his hand. He tried to rise, but William looped part of his chain around his neck and yanked it tight. Then he straddled Tony's chest and throttled him.

"No, wait," Victoria said, "don't kill him! I want to know who sent him."

But Tony's face had already turned deep purple. Above the protruding tongue, his eyes were fixed and staring.

"Damn you!" hissed Victoria. "I ought to rip out your throat!" The Beast within her screamed for blood. Red rage burned behind her eyes. All that controlled her — and saved William's life — was the faint



belief that the future of her singing career hinged on her ability to infuse her songs with believable emotion. Human-like emotion, which Victoria feared might be decimated if she gave in to the Beast.

While the slave cowered next to Tony's corpse, she reached down and, with one brutally swift motion, snapped William's chain in half. "You killed him. Now you and Odette get rid of him." She motioned toward Reiko. "And her, take her back to Club Osiris. Make sure she understands the consequences for ever telling anyone about this." She pulled a long coat over her horribly wounded body and started toward the door.

Odette cried, "Wait, where are you going?"

"I can't afford to be here if anyone heard a gunshot and called the police. I have to go somewhere I can heal without taking the chance of anyone's seeing me."

"But you're coming back, aren't you?" whimpered Odette.

"If you ever want to have a taste of immortality," Victoria said, "you'd better hope so."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Outside the windows of the upstairs office, the wind was howling like a feral animal. This was one the most important sermons of Emmet's life and he was finding it impossible to concentrate on writing it. Tonight he was going to explain to the congregation why he was stepping down from his position in the Church to run for office as the mayor of Washington, D.C.

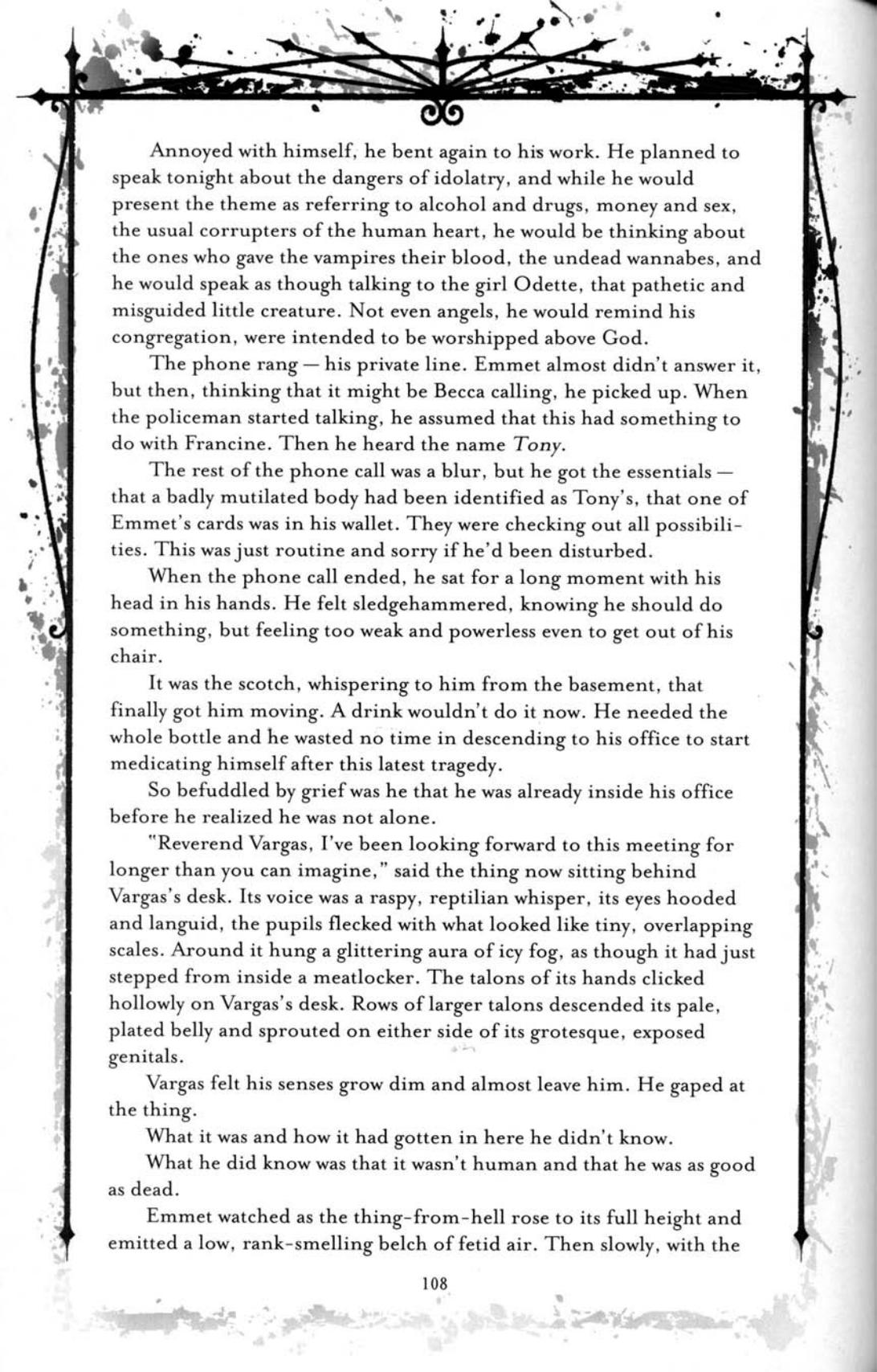
But, with night approaching, a bad case of jitters lured his thoughts again and again to the bottle of scotch in the desk drawer of his private office downstairs. He knew he drank too much and that he especially needed to be sober for the service that would take place in a few hours, but his hands were shaking and when he ran his tongue across his lips, they were parchment dry. Maybe scheduling a Sunday evening service was a bad idea, a foolish and unnecessary risk. But somehow he harbored the faint hope that his enemies, if permitted to by darkness, might actually be bold enough to attack him here, behind the pulpit. Not openly, perhaps, but with their eyes and the taint of evil they brought with them. Once Emmet had been capable of ferreting out Kindred with just his sixth sense alone. In recent years, though, blunted by alcohol, his paranormal abilities had been severely compromised.

I could change that, he thought. I could stop drinking. I could change my tactics, too. Go back to just destroying the monsters, not torturing them underground and telling myself it's a necessary evil. It isn't necessary. I torture vampires because it gives me pleasure.

There. He'd finally admitted it to himself. The sordid truth that Becca had already guessed — that evil was a disease caught by proximity, and he'd allowed himself too much exposure.

And he had tried to make her understand by telling her the truth about her mother — which, given what had just happened to her lover, had perhaps been both unwise and needlessly cruel. But he had wanted to make her hate the monsters as much as he did. Telling Becca the truth about her mother's death was his way of doing that.

From all the way down in the basement, he could hear the bottle of scotch croon his name. Well, maybe not aloud, but knowing it was there was damned distracting. He should pour the damn stuff out, he thought, then remembered that he'd already done that with several previous bottles and it had never stopped him from going out and buying more.



Annoyed with himself, he bent again to his work. He planned to speak tonight about the dangers of idolatry, and while he would present the theme as referring to alcohol and drugs, money and sex, the usual corrupters of the human heart, he would be thinking about the ones who gave the vampires their blood, the undead wannabes, and he would speak as though talking to the girl Odette, that pathetic and misguided little creature. Not even angels, he would remind his congregation, were intended to be worshipped above God.

The phone rang — his private line. Emmet almost didn't answer it, but then, thinking that it might be Becca calling, he picked up. When the policeman started talking, he assumed that this had something to do with Francine. Then he heard the name *Tony*.

The rest of the phone call was a blur, but he got the essentials — that a badly mutilated body had been identified as Tony's, that one of Emmet's cards was in his wallet. They were checking out all possibilities. This was just routine and sorry if he'd been disturbed.

When the phone call ended, he sat for a long moment with his head in his hands. He felt sledgehammered, knowing he should do something, but feeling too weak and powerless even to get out of his chair.

It was the scotch, whispering to him from the basement, that finally got him moving. A drink wouldn't do it now. He needed the whole bottle and he wasted no time in descending to his office to start medicating himself after this latest tragedy.

So befuddled by grief was he that he was already inside his office before he realized he was not alone.

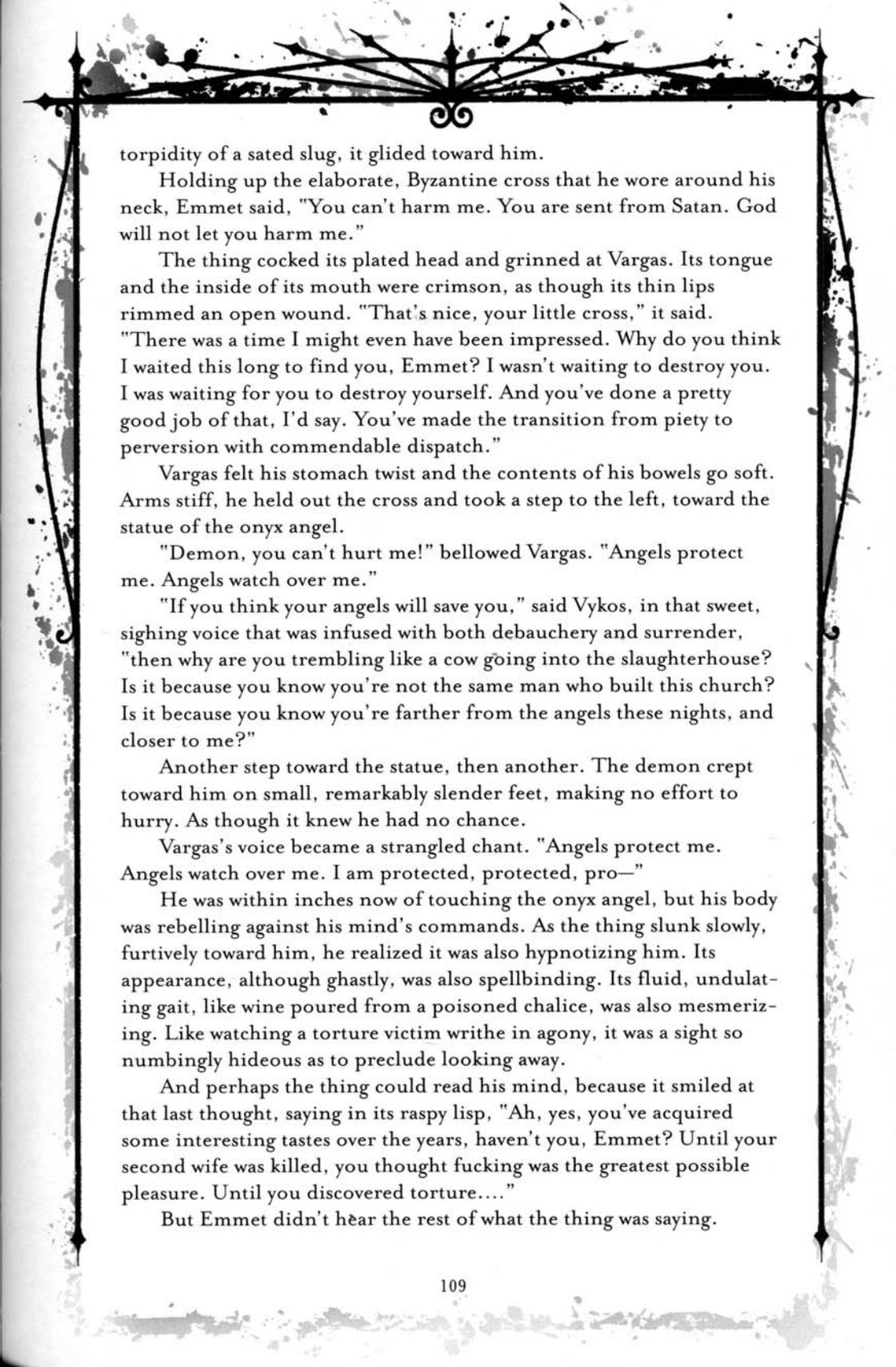
"Reverend Vargas, I've been looking forward to this meeting for longer than you can imagine," said the thing now sitting behind Vargas's desk. Its voice was a raspy, reptilian whisper, its eyes hooded and languid, the pupils flecked with what looked like tiny, overlapping scales. Around it hung a glittering aura of icy fog, as though it had just stepped from inside a meatlocker. The talons of its hands clicked hollowly on Vargas's desk. Rows of larger talons descended its pale, plated belly and sprouted on either side of its grotesque, exposed genitals.

Vargas felt his senses grow dim and almost leave him. He gaped at the thing.

What it was and how it had gotten in here he didn't know.

What he did know was that it wasn't human and that he was as good as dead.

Emmet watched as the thing-from-hell rose to its full height and emitted a low, rank-smelling belch of fetid air. Then slowly, with the



torpidity of a sated slug, it glided toward him.

Holding up the elaborate, Byzantine cross that he wore around his neck, Emmet said, "You can't harm me. You are sent from Satan. God will not let you harm me."

The thing cocked its plated head and grinned at Vargas. Its tongue and the inside of its mouth were crimson, as though its thin lips rimmed an open wound. "That's nice, your little cross," it said. "There was a time I might even have been impressed. Why do you think I waited this long to find you, Emmet? I wasn't waiting to destroy you. I was waiting for you to destroy yourself. And you've done a pretty good job of that, I'd say. You've made the transition from piety to perversion with commendable dispatch."

Vargas felt his stomach twist and the contents of his bowels go soft. Arms stiff, he held out the cross and took a step to the left, toward the statue of the onyx angel.

"Demon, you can't hurt me!" bellowed Vargas. "Angels protect me. Angels watch over me."

"If you think your angels will save you," said Vykos, in that sweet, sighing voice that was infused with both debauchery and surrender, "then why are you trembling like a cow going into the slaughterhouse? Is it because you know you're not the same man who built this church? Is it because you know you're farther from the angels these nights, and closer to me?"

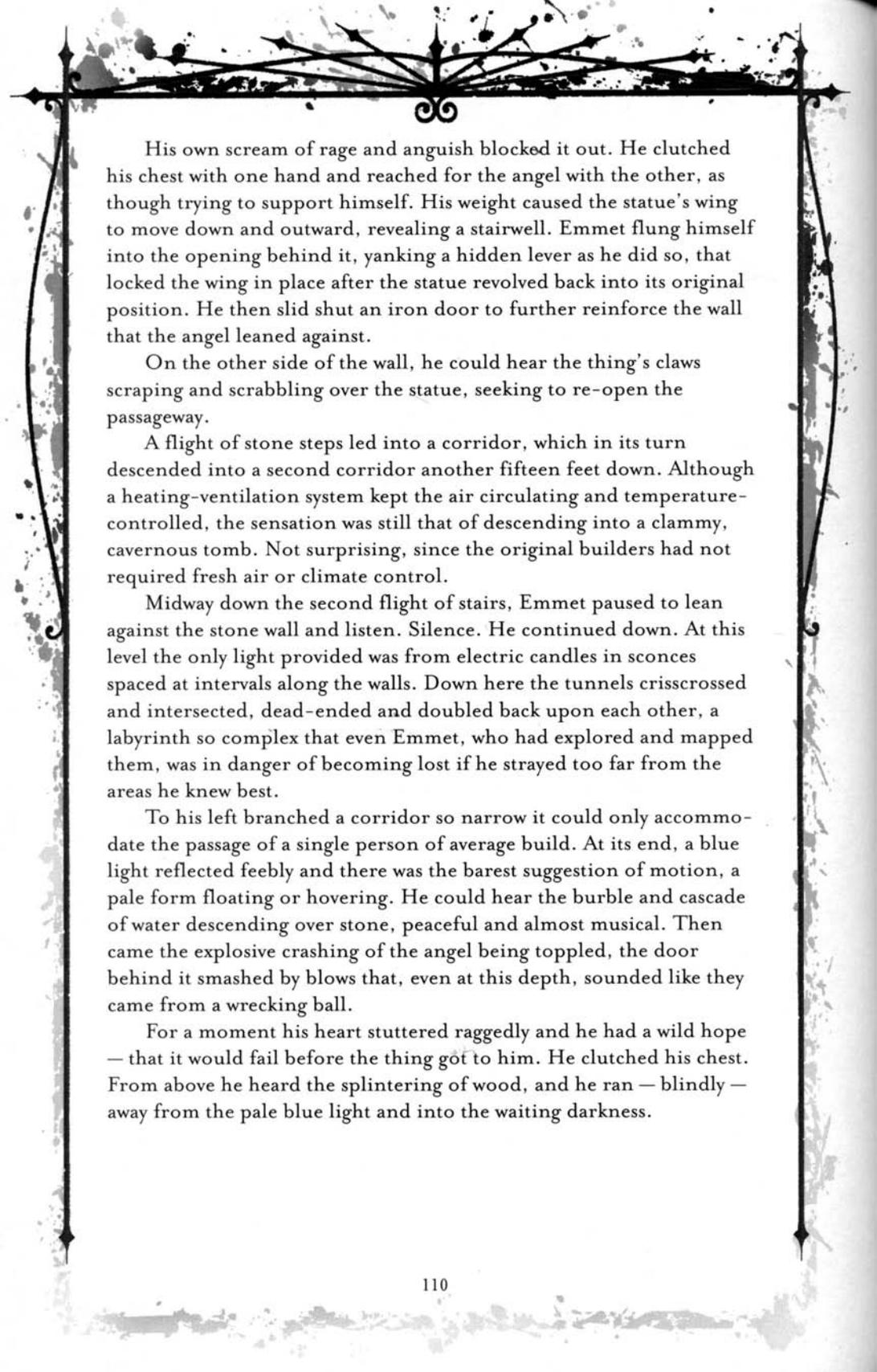
Another step toward the statue, then another. The demon crept toward him on small, remarkably slender feet, making no effort to hurry. As though it knew he had no chance.

Vargas's voice became a strangled chant. "Angels protect me. Angels watch over me. I am protected, protected, pro—"

He was within inches now of touching the onyx angel, but his body was rebelling against his mind's commands. As the thing slunk slowly, furtively toward him, he realized it was also hypnotizing him. Its appearance, although ghastly, was also spellbinding. Its fluid, undulating gait, like wine poured from a poisoned chalice, was also mesmerizing. Like watching a torture victim writhe in agony, it was a sight so numbingly hideous as to preclude looking away.

And perhaps the thing could read his mind, because it smiled at that last thought, saying in its raspy lisp, "Ah, yes, you've acquired some interesting tastes over the years, haven't you, Emmet? Until your second wife was killed, you thought fucking was the greatest possible pleasure. Until you discovered torture...."

But Emmet didn't hear the rest of what the thing was saying.



His own scream of rage and anguish blocked it out. He clutched his chest with one hand and reached for the angel with the other, as though trying to support himself. His weight caused the statue's wing to move down and outward, revealing a stairwell. Emmet flung himself into the opening behind it, yanking a hidden lever as he did so, that locked the wing in place after the statue revolved back into its original position. He then slid shut an iron door to further reinforce the wall that the angel leaned against.

On the other side of the wall, he could hear the thing's claws scraping and scrabbling over the statue, seeking to re-open the passageway.

A flight of stone steps led into a corridor, which in its turn descended into a second corridor another fifteen feet down. Although a heating-ventilation system kept the air circulating and temperature-controlled, the sensation was still that of descending into a clammy, cavernous tomb. Not surprising, since the original builders had not required fresh air or climate control.

Midway down the second flight of stairs, Emmet paused to lean against the stone wall and listen. Silence. He continued down. At this level the only light provided was from electric candles in sconces spaced at intervals along the walls. Down here the tunnels crisscrossed and intersected, dead-ended and doubled back upon each other, a labyrinth so complex that even Emmet, who had explored and mapped them, was in danger of becoming lost if he strayed too far from the areas he knew best.

To his left branched a corridor so narrow it could only accommodate the passage of a single person of average build. At its end, a blue light reflected feebly and there was the barest suggestion of motion, a pale form floating or hovering. He could hear the burble and cascade of water descending over stone, peaceful and almost musical. Then came the explosive crashing of the angel being toppled, the door behind it smashed by blows that, even at this depth, sounded like they came from a wrecking ball.

For a moment his heart stuttered raggedly and he had a wild hope — that it would fail before the thing got to him. He clutched his chest. From above he heard the splintering of wood, and he ran — blindly — away from the pale blue light and into the waiting darkness.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Even from the outside, it was immediately obvious that Erasmus Bonhomme's description hadn't done justice to Jan Pieterzoon's lavish haven.

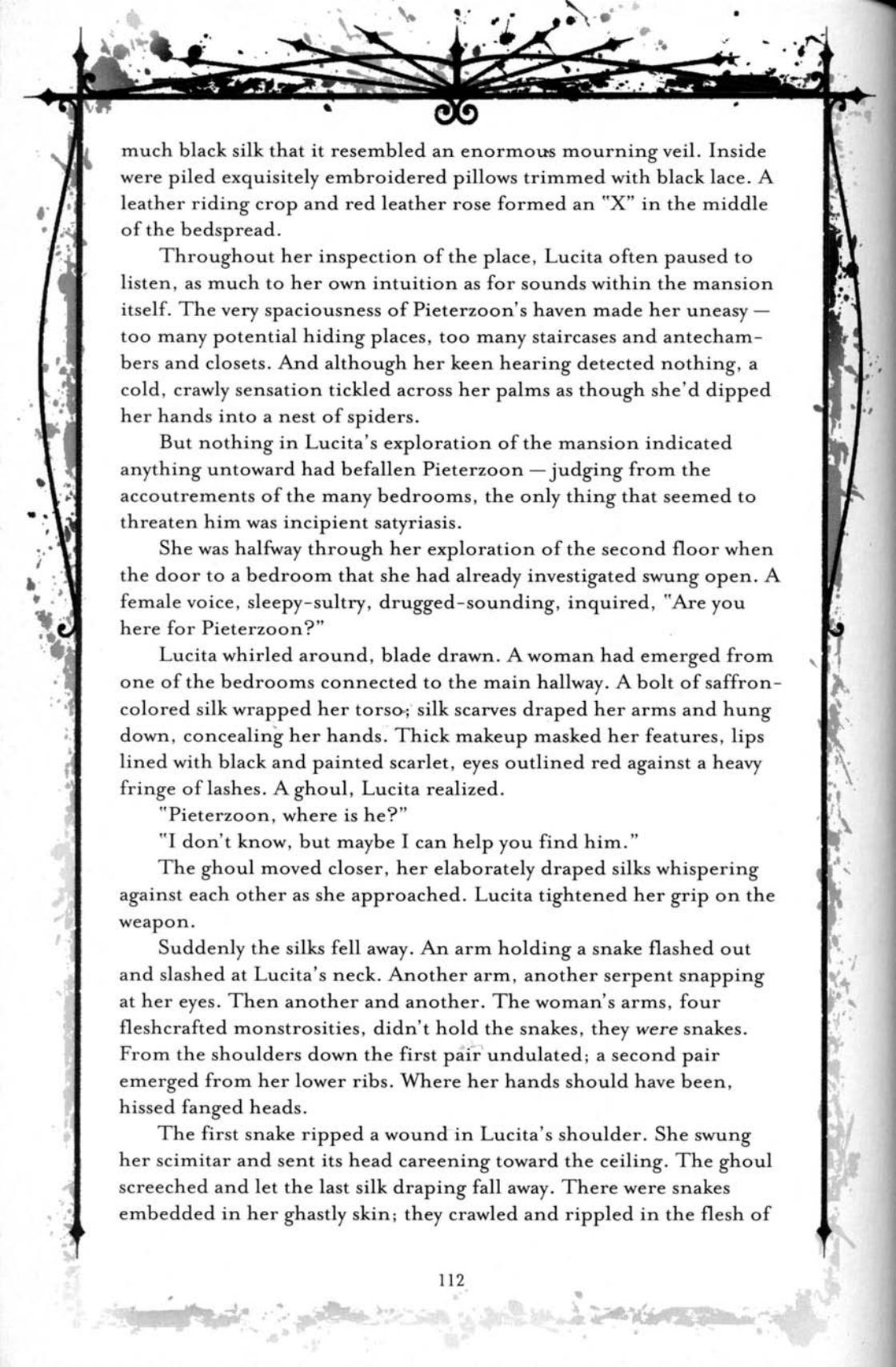
Tall hedges set against a high, wrought-iron fence surrounded the Tudor-style mansion that had once been home to a visiting dignitary from France. Lighted fountains illuminated the home's ivied facade and the gleaming luxury cars parked in the circular drive — a gleaming Bentley, a silver Rolls Royce, a dark blue, late-model Mercedes.

Despite evidence of an elaborate alarm system, Lucita gained entry by prying apart the bars across a first-floor window, punching the glass out and slithering inside. Finding herself in what looked like a small sitting room, she began to explore the house. Its interior opulence reminded her of certain rooms in London's Victoria and Albert Museum, or the most grand and gilded of French chateaux. Exquisitely carved wood paneling along walls hung with medieval tapestries; ornately designed chairs cushioned with velvet; a curving marble staircase displaying banisters embellished with gleaming mahogany falcons. On the second floor, Pieterzoon's bent toward furnishing his home with museum-quality art was still more in evidence. A huge painting that Lucita recognized as Delacroix's *Rape of the Sabines* hung at the top of the stairs. Voluptuous nude women helpless to fend off the assault of enemy soldiers. Other, less familiar, paintings depicted lascivious-eyed satyrs molesting willowy nymphs, a leering centaur galloping away with a captive maiden on his back.

Having been his lover off and on over the centuries, Lucita was familiar with Pieterzoon's fetishistic obsession with rape; viewed in this light, even great classical artwork such as Delacroix's seemed blemished with the tang of pornography.

Other, less refined evidence of Pieterzoon's erotic predilections could be found in the enormous master bedroom: wooden stocks like those used on miscreants in Colonial America, a leather horse of the type used by gymnasts for vaulting — this one complete with leather manacles for the wrists and ankles of the person bending over — a plush-lined, slide-out bed equipped with manacles beneath the larger one — presumably for the convenient storing away of slaves after a hard night's play.

Although there were no windows in this room, the walls, like the interior of some Byzantine seraglio, were lushly draped in yards of overlapping brocades and velvets. The bed, likewise, was tented with so



much black silk that it resembled an enormous mourning veil. Inside were piled exquisitely embroidered pillows trimmed with black lace. A leather riding crop and red leather rose formed an "X" in the middle of the bedspread.

Throughout her inspection of the place, Lucita often paused to listen, as much to her own intuition as for sounds within the mansion itself. The very spaciousness of Pieterzoon's haven made her uneasy — too many potential hiding places, too many staircases and antechambers and closets. And although her keen hearing detected nothing, a cold, crawly sensation tickled across her palms as though she'd dipped her hands into a nest of spiders.

But nothing in Lucita's exploration of the mansion indicated anything untoward had befallen Pieterzoon — judging from the accoutrements of the many bedrooms, the only thing that seemed to threaten him was incipient syphilis.

She was halfway through her exploration of the second floor when the door to a bedroom that she had already investigated swung open. A female voice, sleepy-sultry, drugged-sounding, inquired, "Are you here for Pieterzoon?"

Lucita whirled around, blade drawn. A woman had emerged from one of the bedrooms connected to the main hallway. A bolt of saffron-colored silk wrapped her torso; silk scarves draped her arms and hung down, concealing her hands. Thick makeup masked her features, lips lined with black and painted scarlet, eyes outlined red against a heavy fringe of lashes. A ghoul, Lucita realized.

"Pieterzoon, where is he?"

"I don't know, but maybe I can help you find him."

The ghoul moved closer, her elaborately draped silks whispering against each other as she approached. Lucita tightened her grip on the weapon.

Suddenly the silks fell away. An arm holding a snake flashed out and slashed at Lucita's neck. Another arm, another serpent snapping at her eyes. Then another and another. The woman's arms, four fleshcrafted monstrosities, didn't hold the snakes, they *were* snakes. From the shoulders down the first pair undulated; a second pair emerged from her lower ribs. Where her hands should have been, hissed fanged heads.

The first snake ripped a wound in Lucita's shoulder. She swung her scimitar and sent its head careening toward the ceiling. The ghoul screeched and let the last silk draping fall away. There were snakes embedded in her ghastly skin; they crawled and rippled in the flesh of

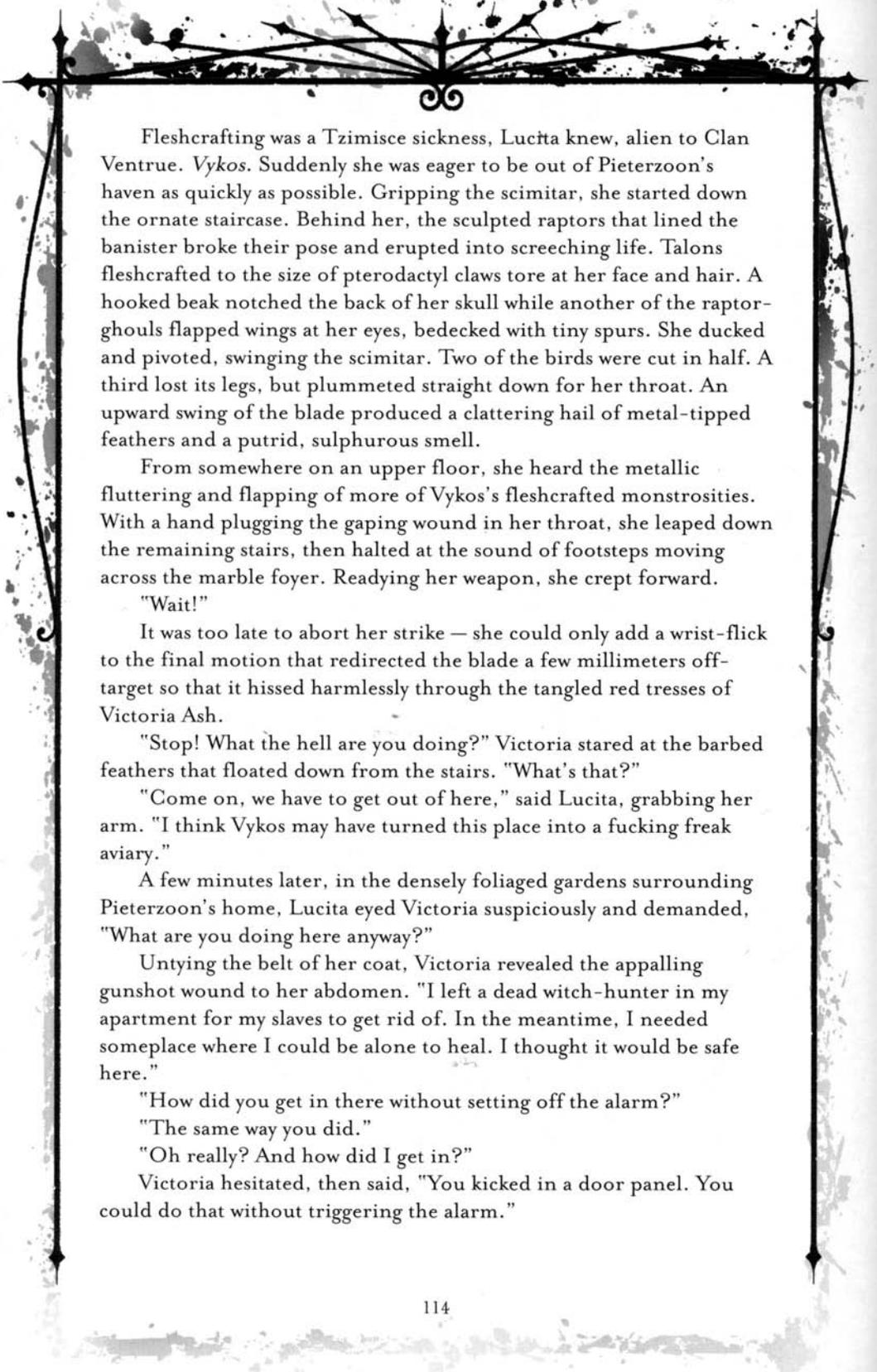


Lucita gains insight after defeating a fleshcrafted ghoul.

her ribcage. Snakes dangled from her genitals and anus, writhed to life in the matted snarls of hair between her thighs.

She aimed a high kick at Lucita's face. Lucita spun away and grabbed one of the writhing arms. Before the ghoul could react, she looped it twice around her neck and yanked it taut. The ghoul hissed and struggled, then went limp, but the fleshcrafted serpent limbs continued to flop with feeble life.





Fleshcrafting was a Tzimisce sickness, Lucita knew, alien to Clan Ventrue. Vykos. Suddenly she was eager to be out of Pieterzoon's haven as quickly as possible. Gripping the scimitar, she started down the ornate staircase. Behind her, the sculpted raptors that lined the banister broke their pose and erupted into screeching life. Talons fleshcrafted to the size of pterodactyl claws tore at her face and hair. A hooked beak notched the back of her skull while another of the raptor-ghouls flapped wings at her eyes, bedecked with tiny spurs. She ducked and pivoted, swinging the scimitar. Two of the birds were cut in half. A third lost its legs, but plummeted straight down for her throat. An upward swing of the blade produced a clattering hail of metal-tipped feathers and a putrid, sulphurous smell.

From somewhere on an upper floor, she heard the metallic fluttering and flapping of more of Vykos's fleshcrafted monstrosities. With a hand plugging the gaping wound in her throat, she leaped down the remaining stairs, then halted at the sound of footsteps moving across the marble foyer. Readying her weapon, she crept forward.

"Wait!"

It was too late to abort her strike — she could only add a wrist-flick to the final motion that redirected the blade a few millimeters off-target so that it hissed harmlessly through the tangled red tresses of Victoria Ash.

"Stop! What the hell are you doing?" Victoria stared at the barbed feathers that floated down from the stairs. "What's that?"

"Come on, we have to get out of here," said Lucita, grabbing her arm. "I think Vykos may have turned this place into a fucking freak aviary."

A few minutes later, in the densely foliaged gardens surrounding Pieterzoon's home, Lucita eyed Victoria suspiciously and demanded, "What are you doing here anyway?"

Untying the belt of her coat, Victoria revealed the appalling gunshot wound to her abdomen. "I left a dead witch-hunter in my apartment for my slaves to get rid of. In the meantime, I needed someplace where I could be alone to heal. I thought it would be safe here."

"How did you get in there without setting off the alarm?"

"The same way you did."

"Oh really? And how did I get in?"

Victoria hesitated, then said, "You kicked in a door panel. You could do that without triggering the alarm."



"I could have, but I didn't," Lucita said. "You must know the code that shuts off Pieterzoon's alarm system. I thought you only encountered him occasionally at swank parties, yet here you are waltzing into his haven like you know the place well."

"Not lately," said Victoria. "Since Pieterzoon disappeared, I've stayed away. But tonight, after I had such a fright—" She looked around, shuddering when she realized pieces of the fleshcrafted raptors still adhered to her coat. "I fear this is the end, Lucita. The witch-hunters are getting bolder. If they convince the world that we exist, then we won't exist much longer."

"Then help me *protect* your fucking *Masquerade*. You can start by telling me everything you know about what happened to Pieterzoon. And I know you know more than you're telling me."

"You know about Pieterzoon's fetish?"

Lucita touched the hole in her neck, which was already starting to heal. "He claims that when he takes the blood of rape victims, he can vicariously relive the surge of sadistic power that the rapists felt. Sometimes he can even see images. I asked him once why he doesn't just rape the women himself, but that would prey on his conscience too much. When he fucks them, he does it consensually. He's a strange man, Pieterzoon. There are moments he likes to fancy he's still human. Like the rest of your Camarilla Kindred, I suppose." She nodded toward Victoria. "Go on."

"Jan met a woman at a party who'd been raped at some point in her life. He was obsessed with her, wanted to turn her. The soirée was on Diplomat's Row — lovely women, beautiful men, idyllic hunting fare. After we'd both fed, I wanted Pieterzoon to leave with me, but he was hellbent on pursuing this one woman. They got into a car together — a black Olds, but before that, he told me where they were going — he even joked about it. To a church, he said, the Holy Order of Angels. There were catacombs beneath it where she wanted him to fuck her — some kind of fantasy of hers. I told him that was crazy, it sounded like a set-up. I haven't seen him since."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rapunzel dug. For every bit of earth that she dislodged, it seemed that more collapsed upon her face. No matter. She kept going.

And all the while, she played their "conversations" back inside her head, obsessing over every obscene tidbit, every morsel of degeneracy... longing to continue it.

[Rapunzel] So how do you plan to kill me?

[Dracon] If I told you, you might change your mind and stand me up. Like a betrayed bridegroom, I'd be waiting in the churchyard all alone.

[Rapunzel] Will it be painful?

[Dracon] Of course it will. Sometimes. But other times it will be so pleasurable you'll want it to go on forever. Make no mistake, you won't die slowly. You'll be dying for so long that it will seem you've lived your whole life that way. Does that frighten you?

[Rapunzel] No.

[Dracon] It's easy to say that when it's just a word. If I could see your face or hear your voice, I'd know you're lying.

[Rapunzel] If I didn't want to die, I wouldn't ask you to kill me.

[Dracon] That doesn't mean you're not afraid or that you didn't lie to me. For one, I don't believe that you're a fat housewife with kids in school and a face like a cheese-cake, not for a minute. I think you're something else entirely.

[Rapunzel] Why not? If I were going to lie, wouldn't I describe myself as someone glamorous?

[Dracon] No, because that's too obvious. You think if you describe yourself as an obese Plain-Jane who happens to be into kink, then you'll sound more believable. But I don't buy it. Come on, Rapunzel, spit it out - what do you really look like? I'm going to find out, after all. When this is over I won't just know

what your outsides look like, but your insides, too.

And so, amazingly, she had described herself — coolly and dispassionately, unforgiving of her defects while not too modest to point out her assets, too — the exotic black and green tattoos encircling her breasts; the lustrous, long platinum-blond hair she'd once had and which men had always told her was her finest feature.

[Rapunzel] My long hair, it's my favorite sex toy.

[Dracon] It sounds beautiful. Exotic.

[Rapunzel] Oh, it is. Except it's not attached to my head anymore. I shaved it off.

[Dracon] Your long blond hair? All of it?

[Rapunzel] I'm bald.

[Dracon] Fresh out of chemo, is that the look?

[Rapunzel] Oh, but I still have the hair. I braided it and hung it from the headboard of my bed. It's long and glossy and it feels like silk. Like silken rope.

[Dracon] Ahh, I think I'm getting the idea.

[Rapunzel] It feels so good around my neck. Like a long, delicate scarf, but so strong.

[Dracon] And is it long enough to loop around your neck twice?

[Rapunzel] Three times. I told you it was very long. Before I cut it off, I had a lover who used to gather it up in his fist and wind it around my neck. Loosely at first, but then he'd tighten it. At first it hurt, but then —

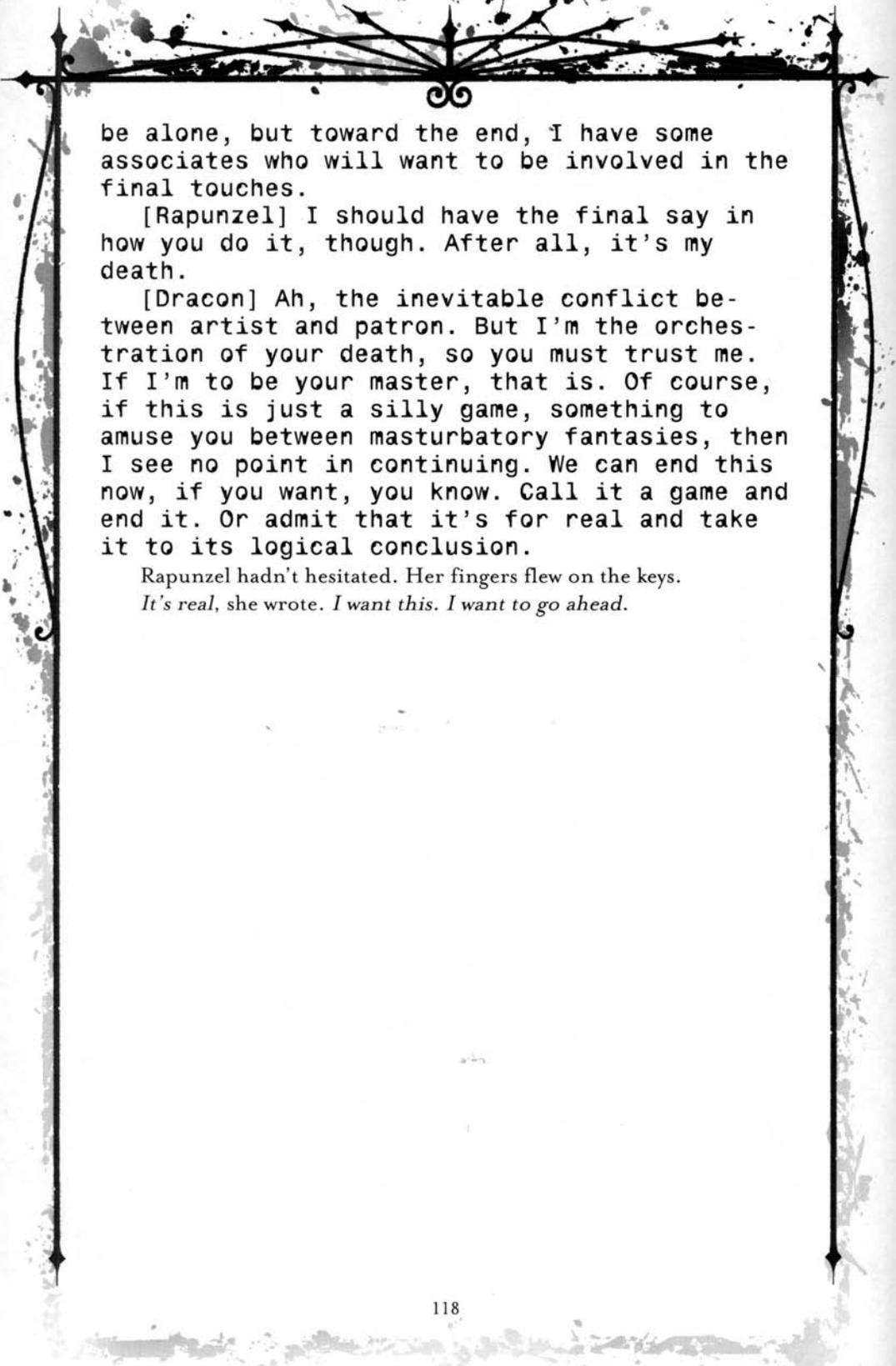
[Dracon] Then you loved it. It felt like sinking into a blissful dream. Like floating away on a sea of sensuality.

[Rapunzel] How did you know?

[Dracon] You won't be the first person I've choked back and forth along the brink of consciousness.

[Rapunzel] That's how you plan to kill me?

[Dracon] No, dear, that's only foreplay. Something more elaborate, more prolonged, is what I have in mind for you. At first, we'll



be alone, but toward the end, I have some associates who will want to be involved in the final touches.

[Rapunzel] I should have the final say in how you do it, though. After all, it's my death.

[Dracon] Ah, the inevitable conflict between artist and patron. But I'm the orchestration of your death, so you must trust me. If I'm to be your master, that is. Of course, if this is just a silly game, something to amuse you between masturbatory fantasies, then I see no point in continuing. We can end this now, if you want, you know. Call it a game and end it. Or admit that it's for real and take it to its logical conclusion.

Rapunzel hadn't hesitated. Her fingers flew on the keys.

It's real, she wrote. I want this. I want to go ahead.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

By the time Becca returned home, the police, detectives, and forensics experts had finished their work. Only the yellow crime-scene tape that still cordoned off the area remained to remind her of the horror that had taken place here. Exhausted, she dragged herself back into the house and forced herself to go upstairs to the bedroom.

The body had been taken away, but no one had scrubbed out the blood stains. No one had remade the bed, or righted the lamp or swept up the glass shards of what had once been a crystal elephant. To Becca, this bedroom didn't look like anywhere she'd ever slept, much less made love or lounged on a Sunday morning with a copy of the *Post* and a hazelnut latte in a ceramic mug. It looked like a stage set, a room in one of those awful Halloween Hell Houses designed to scare teenagers away from doing drugs or having sex or crossing any one of a thousand confusing and contradictory lines that presumably defined morality.

Whatever or whomever had butchered Francine had intended to kill Becca, too — that much she knew. And if her father was right, that this was the work of vampires bent on avenging others whom she and Emmet and Tony had destroyed, then surely it was only a matter of time before they tracked her down.

Suddenly she felt too weary, too diminished, either to hate or be afraid. She remembered what her father had told her about the murder of her mother. That it wasn't a human intruder who killed her, but one of them.

"I would have left the Church altogether," he'd told her, "but being a minister was too good a cover-up, too close to people in positions of authority who might know something. I used all that pain of losing your mother to find energy to fight them. You have to do that, too. For Francine."

But she had no energy. Grief had drained her of it as thoroughly as the exsanguinating bastards had emptied Francine's corpse of blood.

She stood there for a long time until suddenly she became aware that she was no longer alone, that someone had crept quietly up the stairs and stood behind her. She whirled, kicked high and hard, and struck the man squarely on the temple. He groaned and dropped. She stood above him, readying another kick.

"No, please."

She recognized the masturbator from the park the day before. No voice came out, but she read his lips.

"I ought to crush your skull. What are you doing in here?"

He cringed and got to his knees. He wore a beige vest of the type favored by hunters, and his long blond hair was tied back in a ponytail. Tears gathered in his eyes.

"Your girlfriend died."

She nodded grimly. "Who the hell are you? What do you know about Francine?"

"She was a nice woman. She used to leave food for the Devil, but I'd eat it instead. One time she tried to take me to a shelter, but Leo didn't like it, so we left."

"You live in the park, is that it?"

He shook his head. "I don't, but Leo does."

"Leo?"

"You met Leo the other day. He was rude and scared you. I wanted to tell you I'm sorry about what he did. That's why I came in here. To apologize for him." He squinted up at her. "Can I stand up now?"

"Go ahead."

In getting up, he grabbed her hand, a gesture so abrupt and uninvited that it took all her control not to swipe at him again. But she realized now he wasn't dangerous, just a pathetic, mentally disturbed street person. Apparently one with multiple personalities.

"So you're not Leo then, who are you?"

"Moss."

"All right then, Moss, the night Francine was murdered, did you see anything?"

In an eyeblink, his expression went from timid blandness to dark ferocity. "I won't talk to the cops. I don't care what you do. I don't talk to cops. They hurt Leo 'cause he lives in the park, 'cause he shits on the street and 'cause he plays with himself where people can see him."

"Nobody said anything about cops," said Becca. "Just talk to me. What did you — or Leo — see that night?"

"Leo says there was a man in the park. He thought he wanted to buy sex, so he walked up to him. The man got mad."

Suddenly it was Becca holding onto Moss's hand, squeezing it.

"This man, what did he look like?"

"Leo can't remember."

"Ask him to try."

"He can't."

"Please, Moss."

"He can't remember, but—"

From a back pocket, he withdrew a meticulously folded square of paper, which he opened up and put in Becca's hand. She stared at the

familiar face in disbelief.

"Leo draws good, doesn't he?" said Moss.

"Oh, he does," said Becca. "Jesus God, he surely does."

In all the years she'd helped her father, Becca had never ventured farther than the first level of the catacombs. She knew a second level existed, of course. It was there that Emmet had some of his fiercest battles with the vampires who weren't eager to abandon the place. Nor had Emmet ever expressly forbidden her to explore the lower levels. He simply hadn't encouraged it, nor had she ever asked. Because, she now admitted to herself, she hadn't really wanted to know what went on down there.

As long as she didn't know what went on, she wasn't really guilty. What cowardly, dishonest rot!

On the car phone as she drove to the cathedral, she called Harmony in the Hills and talked to the director, who confirmed her worst fear — that David had left days earlier. She then tried her father's private number, got no answer, and left a message for him to call her back immediately.

Minutes later, she pulled up again outside the cathedral and used her key to enter the rectory through a basement door. She locked it behind her, then traversed a series of corridors to her father's study.

As soon as she saw the shattered statue and the destroyed wall in Emmet's office, all Becca's instincts told her to turn back. Whatever David might be capable of, he couldn't smash his way through a solid wall. No, this was something else entirely, something worse.

Instead of going back, however, she went through her father's desk until she found a flashlight, then started down the stairs.

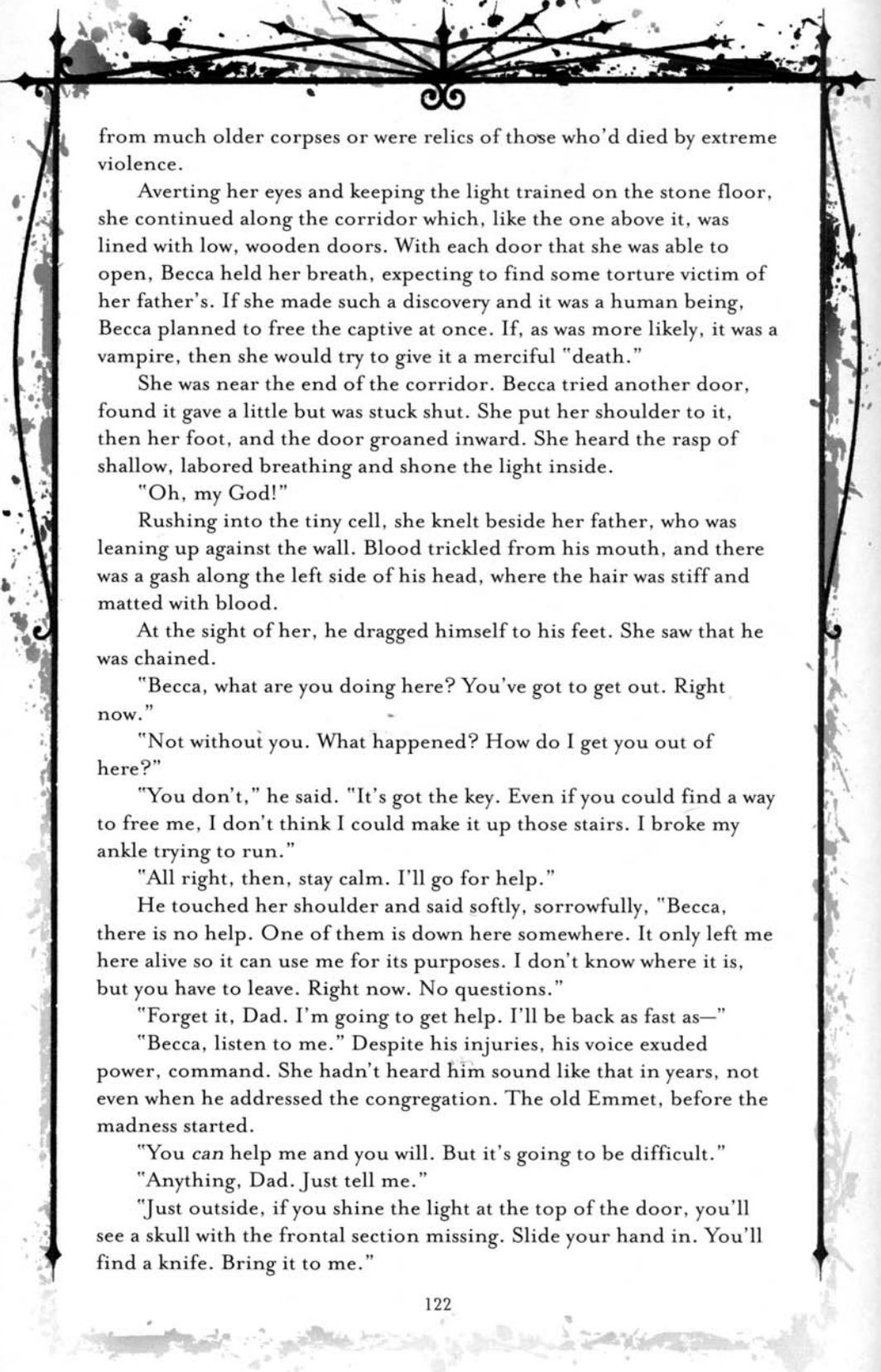
Nothing stirred inside the upper level of the catacombs, the one with which she was already familiar. But halfway down the stairs to the second level, she became aware of an odor — musky and fetid like wet animal fur, and a second scent that was less disagreeable, almost familiar, but which in her overwrought state she couldn't identify.

The stairway curved steeply, the steps narrowed. She had to brace one hand against the wall to keep from slipping while with the other she held the flashlight.

At the bottom of the steps, she shone the flashlight high and to the right, let out a gasp.

"Jesus God!"

Skulls and fibulae arranged in layers made up the walls. Some, intact, looked as though they had belonged to the recently deceased; others, crumbling, missing lower jaws and parts of skull, were either



from much older corpses or were relics of those who'd died by extreme violence.

Averting her eyes and keeping the light trained on the stone floor, she continued along the corridor which, like the one above it, was lined with low, wooden doors. With each door that she was able to open, Becca held her breath, expecting to find some torture victim of her father's. If she made such a discovery and it was a human being, Becca planned to free the captive at once. If, as was more likely, it was a vampire, then she would try to give it a merciful "death."

She was near the end of the corridor. Becca tried another door, found it gave a little but was stuck shut. She put her shoulder to it, then her foot, and the door groaned inward. She heard the rasp of shallow, labored breathing and shone the light inside.

"Oh, my God!"

Rushing into the tiny cell, she knelt beside her father, who was leaning up against the wall. Blood trickled from his mouth, and there was a gash along the left side of his head, where the hair was stiff and matted with blood.

At the sight of her, he dragged himself to his feet. She saw that he was chained.

"Becca, what are you doing here? You've got to get out. Right now."

"Not without you. What happened? How do I get you out of here?"

"You don't," he said. "It's got the key. Even if you could find a way to free me, I don't think I could make it up those stairs. I broke my ankle trying to run."

"All right, then, stay calm. I'll go for help."

He touched her shoulder and said softly, sorrowfully, "Becca, there is no help. One of them is down here somewhere. It only left me here alive so it can use me for its purposes. I don't know where it is, but you have to leave. Right now. No questions."

"Forget it, Dad. I'm going to get help. I'll be back as fast as—"

"Becca, listen to me." Despite his injuries, his voice exuded power, command. She hadn't heard him sound like that in years, not even when he addressed the congregation. The old Emmet, before the madness started.

"You *can* help me and you will. But it's going to be difficult."

"Anything, Dad. Just tell me."

"Just outside, if you shine the light at the top of the door, you'll see a skull with the frontal section missing. Slide your hand in. You'll find a knife. Bring it to me."

Using the flashlight, she easily located the skull. Less easy was plunging her hand wrist-deep inside the cranial cavity, but when she did, her hand closed around the handle of a knife. She drew it out, a six-inch blade.

"I've got it, Dad."

"This is what you have to do, Becca. You promise you'll do what I ask?"

"Of course."

"You're going to cut through my robe, unbutton my shirt and open it. You know where the heart is. One good hard stroke, if you put your strength and mind to it, should do the trick."

"You're asking me to kill you?"

"Not asking, Becca, telling."

"No."

"Do as I say."

"No, I won't. I can't. I'm going to get help."

"It'll be too late. Don't you understand — in only a short time, the church will be packed with people. You were right — I was an idiot to plan a nighttime service, to use myself as bait. If it hadn't had some further use for me, it wouldn't have left me alive. And if that's the case then I — and all of us — are better off if I'm dead."

She backed away from him, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'm so sorry, but I can't. I'm going to get help. I'll be back."

"Becca, no."

"Take the flashlight. I can find my way out without it. And I'll keep the knife. And Dad — ?"

"What is it?"

"If anything should happen to me, you need to know something. David was at my house the night Francine was murdered. I think he killed her."

"Becca, no, I can't believe that. He wouldn't—"

"We can discuss it later, Dad. Right now, you take the flashlight. I'll find my way without it. And I'll keep the knife."

Before he could protest further, she was gone, feeling her way along the corridor, her hand brushing over the smooth, cold domes of the skulls.

Then, off to her right, she saw an extremely narrow branch of corridor, at the end of which a pale blue light flickered wanly. Something about the light proved irresistible, and Becca moved toward it.

She found herself in a room, at one end of which there appeared to be, incongruously enough, a huge television. Against a deep blue backdrop appeared the image of an alabaster figure, so pale and



perfectly sculpted that it might have been Michelangelo's *David*. Even in the dim lighting, she could tell the figure was that of a male and that its proportions and musculature were exquisitely formed.

There had been a few occasions in Becca's life, notably at the Louvre in Paris and the National Gallery of the Arts, when the beauty of a work of art had overwhelmed her, but never had she found herself so captivated by the sheer aesthetic perfection of an image, especially one she was unable to see completely clearly. She could only think that her mind, in turmoil with guilt and grief, was somehow more susceptible to distraction and that the limpid image on the screen, which surely she thought now must be an angel, offered a soothing visual oasis.

An angel, of course, she thought as she moved closer. For now she realized that the figure wasn't completely still but possessed of a subtle, hovering motion that brought it at first slightly closer to, then farther back from the screen.

An angel, yes, but a man, too, for now as her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw the fleshy swaying of his heavy genitals. Male beauty never had greatly moved her — it was usually the female form that made her blood rush and her vulva moisten — but now she felt an unfamiliar, almost mortifying stirring of physical response.

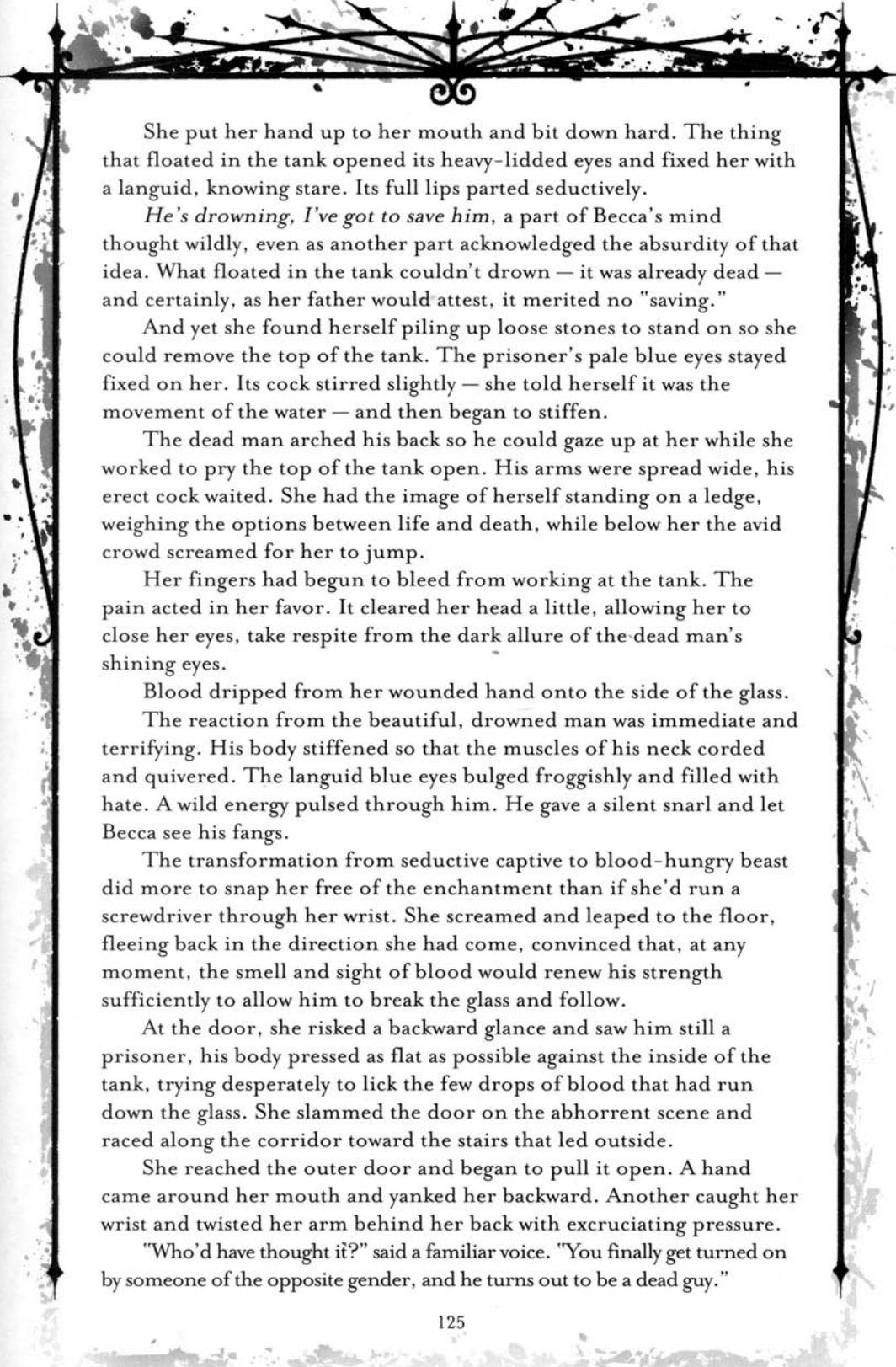
Jesus, what am I doing, but — it's all right, he's an angel, isn't he? An angel...no, don't look...

She shut her eyes, but found it was impossible to keep them closed. She had to get a better look. The gleaming pallor of the naked man, the glimmering translucency of his flesh, was captivating. She inched closer. The experience began to take on the unreal, twilight quality of a dream.

And, as in a dream, things seemed to transform of their own accord. She realized that the blue rectangle that she'd taken for a TV screen was really a huge aquarium. What floated in it was the body of a naked man, a man whose face brought back a sudden rush of unwanted memories. With a sudden pang of horror, she saw herself running through the alleyway behind the church, running till the cold air hitched in her throat, then hurling herself through a doorway that led down to these very catacombs. Hearing his footfalls on the stairs behind her as she hid, waiting for him to come closer.

Come on, come on, you bastard, get a little closer. Come see what my father's got planned for you.

Except Emmet had never really told her what he'd do once he overpowered the captive. And never in her wildest dreams would Becca have imagined this.



She put her hand up to her mouth and bit down hard. The thing that floated in the tank opened its heavy-lidded eyes and fixed her with a languid, knowing stare. Its full lips parted seductively.

He's drowning, I've got to save him, a part of Becca's mind thought wildly, even as another part acknowledged the absurdity of that idea. What floated in the tank couldn't drown — it was already dead — and certainly, as her father would attest, it merited no "saving."

And yet she found herself piling up loose stones to stand on so she could remove the top of the tank. The prisoner's pale blue eyes stayed fixed on her. Its cock stirred slightly — she told herself it was the movement of the water — and then began to stiffen.

The dead man arched his back so he could gaze up at her while she worked to pry the top of the tank open. His arms were spread wide, his erect cock waited. She had the image of herself standing on a ledge, weighing the options between life and death, while below her the avid crowd screamed for her to jump.

Her fingers had begun to bleed from working at the tank. The pain acted in her favor. It cleared her head a little, allowing her to close her eyes, take respite from the dark allure of the dead man's shining eyes.

Blood dripped from her wounded hand onto the side of the glass.

The reaction from the beautiful, drowned man was immediate and terrifying. His body stiffened so that the muscles of his neck corded and quivered. The languid blue eyes bulged froggishly and filled with hate. A wild energy pulsed through him. He gave a silent snarl and let Becca see his fangs.

The transformation from seductive captive to blood-hungry beast did more to snap her free of the enchantment than if she'd run a screwdriver through her wrist. She screamed and leaped to the floor, fleeing back in the direction she had come, convinced that, at any moment, the smell and sight of blood would renew his strength sufficiently to allow him to break the glass and follow.

At the door, she risked a backward glance and saw him still a prisoner, his body pressed as flat as possible against the inside of the tank, trying desperately to lick the few drops of blood that had run down the glass. She slammed the door on the abhorrent scene and raced along the corridor toward the stairs that led outside.

She reached the outer door and began to pull it open. A hand came around her mouth and yanked her backward. Another caught her wrist and twisted her arm behind her back with excruciating pressure.

"Who'd have thought it?" said a familiar voice. "You finally get turned on by someone of the opposite gender, and he turns out to be a dead guy."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"David, what are you doing here?"

His mouth was on her ear. She felt his warm breath and the pressure of his lips as they curved into a smile. "Can't a loving brother comfort his little sister in her time of grief?"

"Dad's hurt bad. We've got to get help!"

"Can't do that, Sis. Too bad about the old man, though. Guess the excitement of launching a political career from the pulpit in the same week his dyke daughter-in-law gets her head cut off was too much for him."

"You fucking bastard! Let me go!"

She didn't try to break his grip, but kicked backward so that the heel of her boot snapped crunchingly into his knee. Then, without losing momentum, she brought the boot heel down as hard as she could across the arch of his foot. He howled and his leg buckled under him while his grip on her wrist relaxed. She wrenched free and whirled around, smashing an elbow into his ribs with all her weight behind the blow. He staggered backward, almost toppling before he caught himself and lunged for her again.

His fist slammed into the side of her head. She crashed into the concrete wall. Her skull seemed to shatter into fragments like a crystal chandelier. Fiery confetti raged across her vision. Slowly she slumped to the floor. She saw David standing over her, silhouetted in a blazing pyrotechnical display.

"David, why?"

Her voice was an unfamiliar croak. Blood filled her mouth. She spat and felt a back tooth wobble loose. Trying to rise, she saw the coming blow almost before he launched it, but was unable to dodge. His fist caught her below the chin, slamming her head back into the wall. A seam opened up in her skull and darkness rushed in, filling her head like black water.

She woke up to such a sharp pain in her wrists and elbows that she thought her arms were broken. Then she realized that her arms were tied above her head and had been supporting all her weight while she was unconscious. When she stood straight and put her weight back on her feet, the ferocity of the pain ebbed, but her wrists still felt like they were bound with razor wire, and blood ran along her forearms. More blood oozed from her mouth. She thought about the dead thing in the tank and how a few drops of blood had roused it to a frenzy. She

wondered if it smelled her now, if it clawed against the glass, and if the tank could hold it.

She heard the heavy scrape of feet on concrete. A door opened and David shouldered his way through it, stooped under the weight of their father, whom he carried fireman-style across his shoulder.

She took a deep breath, spat blood out onto the floor, and said, "Is he dead?"

David's head jerked up. He seemed surprised that she was capable of speaking. "Not yet. But that's only because we've got plans for the old bastard."

"We?"

"Don't ask so many questions. You'll find out soon enough."

"Please, David, listen to me. You've got to get Dad to a hospital."

"You just don't get it, do you? You never have." He dumped the old man unceremoniously onto the floor. Becca winced and shut her eyes. David said, "He's had this coming for a long time, the sanctimonious old prick."

"He's our father."

"He's a used-up old piece of meat," said David. "I've taken his shit all these years. I've bowed and scraped—"

"—You've done nothing of the kind. He adored you."

"—Nothing I ever did was good enough, nothing satisfied him."

"That isn't true."

"But I understand why he thought I was a fuck-up. It was because of all the crap you fed him all these years. Don't look at me like that. You're worse than he is. You poisoned him against me. God only knows what lies you told him about me."

"You mean like how you raped me?"

"You fucking bitch! I never raped you. You seduced me. You practically begged me to come to your room and fuck your brains out." He began to pace, gesticulating wildly. "See, this is what I mean. Your malicious lies have ruined everything. Destroyed my life. Kept me down. That's why there's got to be some punishment, some long-overdue justice meted out."

If the circumstances hadn't been so ghastly, she might have laughed hysterically. To think that David actually believed she'd been a co-conspirator in her own rape, that he was capable of this much self-deception, strained credulity. Yet, of course, she thought, he's capable of anything. He's already proved that.

"You killed Francine, didn't you?"

He whirled around. "What?"

"You killed her and mutilated her body. Jesus, David, if you hated me so much, why didn't you kill me? Why her?"

"I didn't kill your fucking girlfriend."

"Someone saw you there, David. It's only a matter of time before the cops come for you."

"I might have been there, but that doesn't mean I fucking killed anybody! Maybe I came to see you."

"You killed Francine. I know you did. So when are you going to kill me?"

A smirk spread slowly across David's features. His eyes narrowed into hate-filled slits. Whatever physical beauty he'd once possessed, she realized sadly, had been forfeited to dissipation and self-loathing.

"I'll kill you when I'm good and ready, but I don't think I'll tell you when that's going to be." His mouth turned downward in a tight, pinched arc. "Just like Dad, always in control, aren't you? Although I must say the old man has some interesting ways of making sure he holds the upper hand. You'd be fucking amazed at some of the stuff I found in one of his dungeon rooms."

He reached into his trouser pocket, pulled out a small cylindrical object and touched it to her neck. A jolt of electricity hit her like a brick to the back of the head. She blacked out.

When she opened her eyes, David was using a knife to cut her clothes away. Blood dribbled from shallow cuts on her breasts and thighs.

"That dead thing in the other room, he can smell my blood," she said. "When he breaks free, he won't care whether it's you or me he kills first, but we'll both die, I promise you."

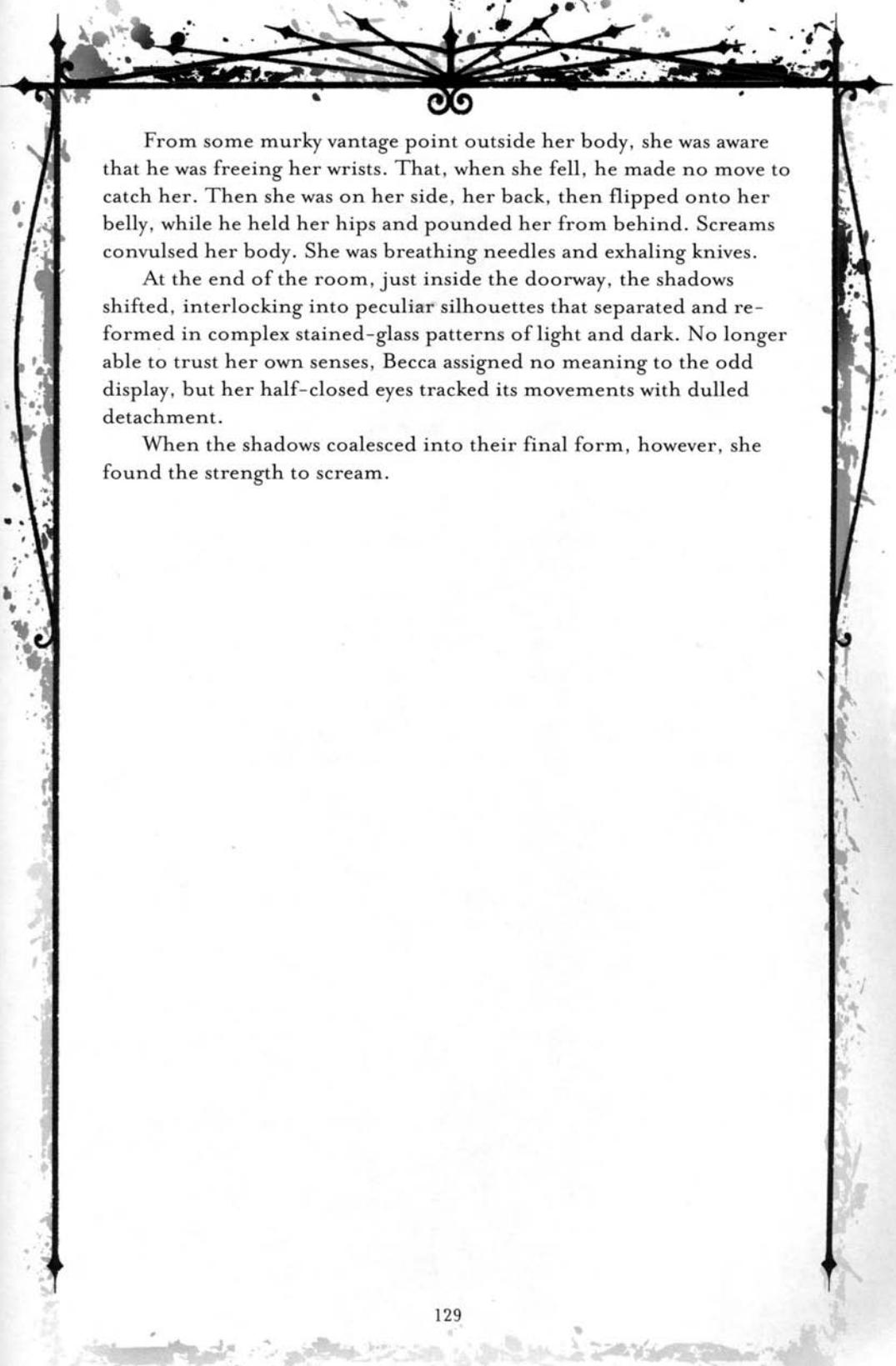
"You mean the Human Guppy," David scoffed.

"More like piranha," Becca said.

"I'm not afraid of him." He bent down to yank her boots off. The stungun was on the ground. She saw her chance and snapped a kick into his face, felt, with satisfaction, the solid thunk of boot leather on flesh. He grunted and toppled sideways. When he got up, groaning and looking bleary and disoriented, his right eyebrow was a smear of blood. The eye under it was closing.

"You'll be fucking sorry you did that."

She braced herself for a blow. His fist slammed into the soft flesh below her rib cage. The breath went out of her in an agonizing whoosh. The room melted into red. The ceiling dropped while the floor rose up to meet it. His fists fell on her like rocks, while the room twisted into an impossible kaleidoscope of shapes, a thousand screaming shades of black and scarlet.



From some murky vantage point outside her body, she was aware that he was freeing her wrists. That, when she fell, he made no move to catch her. Then she was on her side, her back, then flipped onto her belly, while he held her hips and pounded her from behind. Screams convulsed her body. She was breathing needles and exhaling knives.

At the end of the room, just inside the doorway, the shadows shifted, interlocking into peculiar silhouettes that separated and reformed in complex stained-glass patterns of light and dark. No longer able to trust her own senses, Becca assigned no meaning to the odd display, but her half-closed eyes tracked its movements with dulled detachment.

When the shadows coalesced into their final form, however, she found the strength to scream.

CHAPTER TWENTY

For the past few minutes, Lucita had used her control of light and dark to keep herself invisible as she threaded her way through the catacombs. Now gradually she uncloaked herself. The woman lying on the floor, getting fucked by her manic assailant, opened her eyes, saw Lucita and screamed.

Without missing a beat, Lucita kicked the man off her, hauled the girl to her feet. She spat out the words, "Where's Pieterzoon?"

The girl stared at her, groggy, uncomprehending.

Lucita shook her, making her head snap back and forth, but her eyes cleared somewhat. "Who are you?"

"Becca. Becca Vargas."

"Where's Pieterzoon?"

"I don't know what you're—" But then she remembered where she knew the name from and knew who her rescuer must be talking about. "You mean, the blond man? The man underwater? He's—" She gestured with her head, although even that small motion caused fresh runnels of blood to leak out of her nose. "I don't know where he is."

Wounded as Lucita was from the fight with Vykos's ghouls, the smell of Becca's blood was maddening to her. She pressed her face to Becca's mouth and upper lip and licked the blood off. Then, bending her backward, she pierced her neck and began to drink in long, famished swallows.

Realizing the young woman was already weakened, Lucita willed herself to drink sparingly, but the lust for blood and the pleasure of drinking it consumed her thoughts and attention. She barely noticed as the man on the ground shook off the effects of her kick and got up.

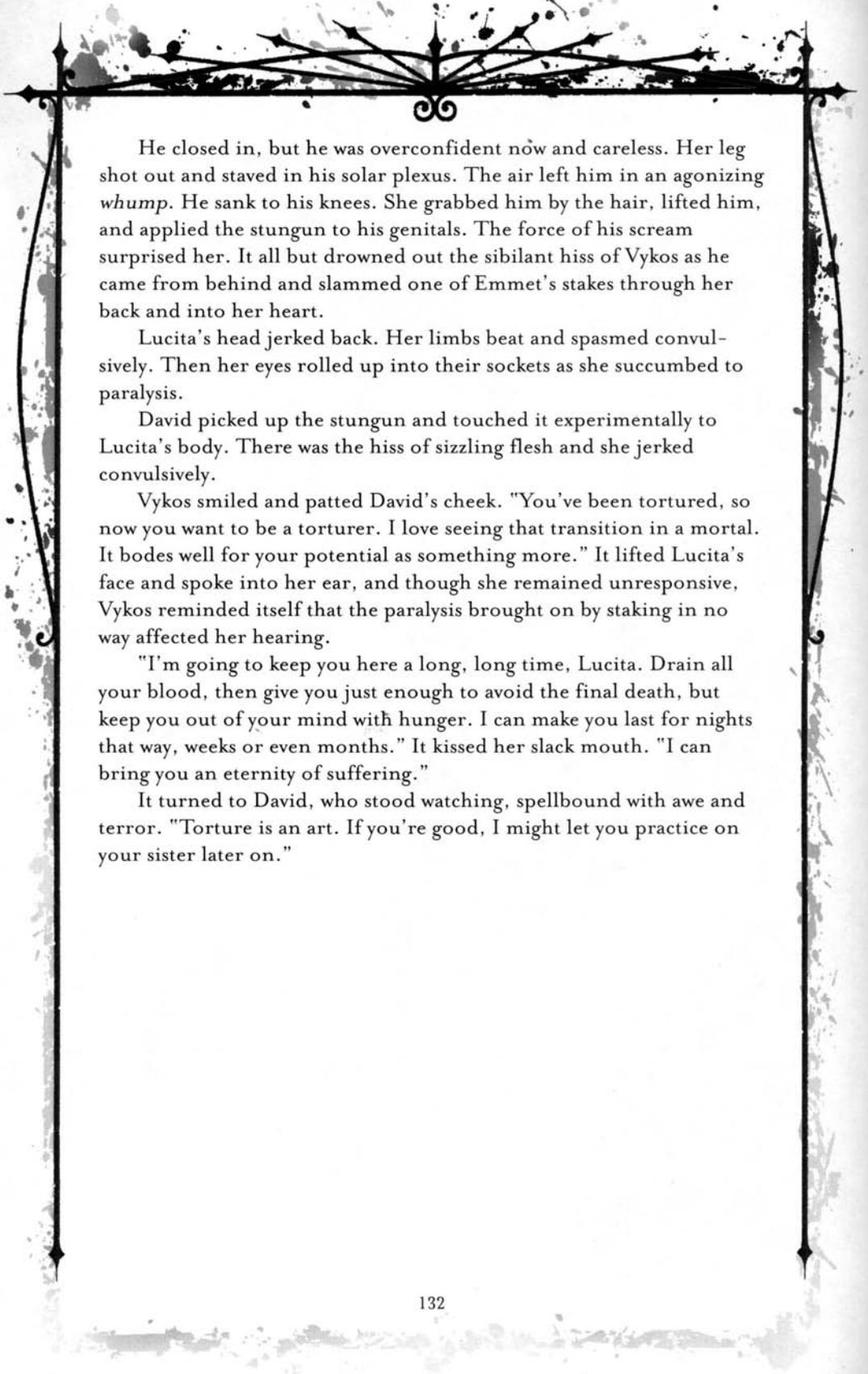
"Fucking bitch, you're one of them!"

Knees bent in a crouch, he came scuttling at her. So great was Lucita's need for blood that it was impossible to tear herself away from Becca's throat in time to evade the charge. The stungun was turned to maximum. It jabbed her in the hollow between her collar bones. No external burning, but a blistering corrosive heat and the paralyzing sensation of charred internal flesh.

She howled and dropped and rolled away, trying to enshroud herself again. Pain prevented her from doing so, from calling forth the dark.

Exultant in his ability to drop her, David renewed the attack. Caught her on the knee, the elbow. A oily, noxious smell wafted from her wounds, her undead flesh searing and baking.





He closed in, but he was overconfident now and careless. Her leg shot out and staved in his solar plexus. The air left him in an agonizing *whump*. He sank to his knees. She grabbed him by the hair, lifted him, and applied the stungun to his genitals. The force of his scream surprised her. It all but drowned out the sibilant hiss of Vykos as he came from behind and slammed one of Emmet's stakes through her back and into her heart.

Lucita's head jerked back. Her limbs beat and spasmed convulsively. Then her eyes rolled up into their sockets as she succumbed to paralysis.

David picked up the stungun and touched it experimentally to Lucita's body. There was the hiss of sizzling flesh and she jerked convulsively.

Vykos smiled and patted David's cheek. "You've been tortured, so now you want to be a torturer. I love seeing that transition in a mortal. It bodes well for your potential as something more." It lifted Lucita's face and spoke into her ear, and though she remained unresponsive, Vykos reminded itself that the paralysis brought on by staking in no way affected her hearing.

"I'm going to keep you here a long, long time, Lucita. Drain all your blood, then give you just enough to avoid the final death, but keep you out of your mind with hunger. I can make you last for nights that way, weeks or even months." It kissed her slack mouth. "I can bring you an eternity of suffering."

It turned to David, who stood watching, spellbound with awe and terror. "Torture is an art. If you're good, I might let you practice on your sister later on."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When had she decided to make it real? To actually let Dracon go through with it? When had sex and death become so united in her mind that not to experience both together seemed a tragic lack? She wasn't doing this to punish Gil McNamarra anymore, she told herself, or because some sick part of her craved annihilation. She was doing this because she wanted to experience everything.

[Rapunzel] So where are we going to do this?

[Dracon] I've been thinking about that. And I believe you'll like this part, Rapunzel. Remember I once mentioned a churchyard? I want to meet you on the grounds of that church. At night, when all is quiet. In the cathedral gardens. We can do whatever we want.

[Rapunzel] Outdoors?

[Dracon] Later I'll take you somewhere else, of course. But I'd like us to meet at this particular location. It's special to me. An old acquaintance of mine, an arrogant old fool, presides there. To defile the ground that he considers sacred would be quite satisfying.

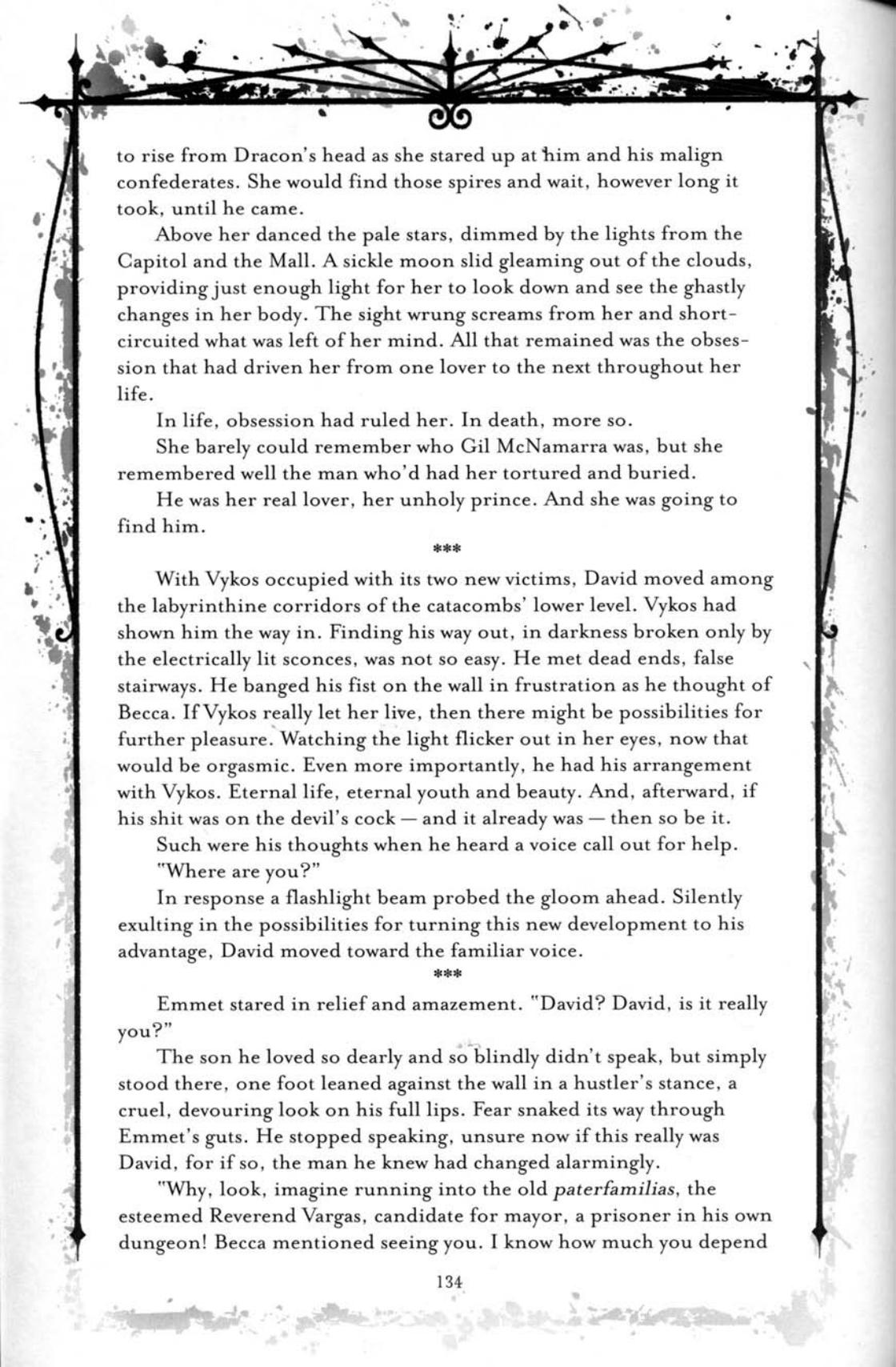
[Rapunzel] But you won't actually — you know — kill me there?

[Dracon] Of course not, Rapunzel. We must be somewhere very safe. I want to kill you and make love to all night long. I want to kill you forever.

[Rapunzel] While you fuck me every way you possibly can.

[Dracon] Certainly. Sex acts you can't even imagine. I'll give new meaning to the expression 'to fuck your brains out.'

The dirt fell away from Rapunzel's eyes as she hauled herself up out of the grave and staggered to her feet. She was in a wooded area, but close by, she could hear the rumble of traffic. To the west, she could see the tip of the Washington Monument. She scanned the night sky, looking for the spires she remembered, the spires that had seemed



to rise from Dracon's head as she stared up at him and his malign confederates. She would find those spires and wait, however long it took, until he came.

Above her danced the pale stars, dimmed by the lights from the Capitol and the Mall. A sickle moon slid gleaming out of the clouds, providing just enough light for her to look down and see the ghastly changes in her body. The sight wrung screams from her and short-circuited what was left of her mind. All that remained was the obsession that had driven her from one lover to the next throughout her life.

In life, obsession had ruled her. In death, more so.

She barely could remember who Gil McNamarra was, but she remembered well the man who'd had her tortured and buried.

He was her real lover, her unholy prince. And she was going to find him.

With Vykos occupied with its two new victims, David moved among the labyrinthine corridors of the catacombs' lower level. Vykos had shown him the way in. Finding his way out, in darkness broken only by the electrically lit sconces, was not so easy. He met dead ends, false stairways. He banged his fist on the wall in frustration as he thought of Becca. If Vykos really let her live, then there might be possibilities for further pleasure. Watching the light flicker out in her eyes, now that would be orgasmic. Even more importantly, he had his arrangement with Vykos. Eternal life, eternal youth and beauty. And, afterward, if his shit was on the devil's cock — and it already was — then so be it.

Such were his thoughts when he heard a voice call out for help. "Where are you?"

In response a flashlight beam probed the gloom ahead. Silently exulting in the possibilities for turning this new development to his advantage, David moved toward the familiar voice.

Emmet stared in relief and amazement. "David? David, is it really you?"

The son he loved so dearly and so blindly didn't speak, but simply stood there, one foot leaned against the wall in a hustler's stance, a cruel, devouring look on his full lips. Fear snaked its way through Emmet's guts. He stopped speaking, unsure now if this really was David, for if so, the man he knew had changed alarmingly.

"Why, look, imagine running into the old *paterfamilias*, the esteemed Reverend Vargas, candidate for mayor, a prisoner in his own dungeon! Becca mentioned seeing you. I know how much you depend

on her, but unfortunately, she's in no condition right now to be of any help."

"What are you talking about? Where is she? What's happened?"

"Ah, as usual all your concern is for her, Dad. None for me. But that's all right. I'm used to it."

"David, listen—"

"No, you listen to me!" Raw hatred rent his features. Emmet found himself cringing, stunned by the display. "In a few minutes, when the pews are full, Vykos is going to drag you back upstairs to address the faithful. And don't go all noble and tell me you won't cooperate, because believe me, Dad, you'll do what it tells you to. I know, I've been there."

"Tell me where Becca is."

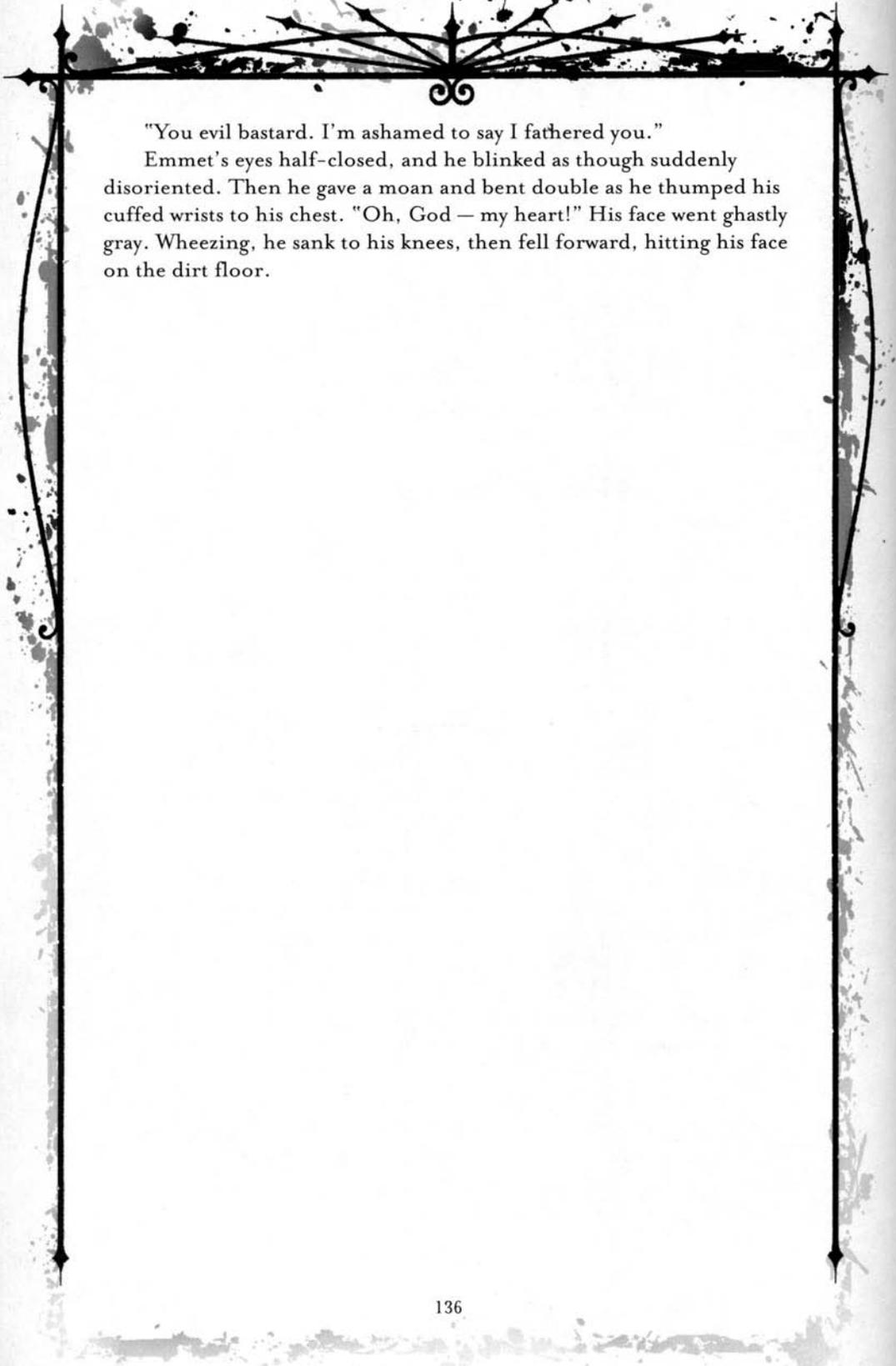
"It doesn't really matter. If she's still alive — and I doubt it — she won't be for much longer."

"Oh God." Emmet shook his head. "Tell me what she said isn't true. Tell me you had nothing to do with Francine's death."

David raised an eyebrow, rubbed a hand beneath his chin, and mimed deep contemplation. "Well, let's see. I didn't actually kill her, no, you're right on that part. I did fuck her, though. Both parts of her, as a matter of fact. The torso, of course, and then the head, although I gotta tell you, Dad, she doesn't have Becca's skills when it comes to cocksucking."

"Jesus God, Becca was right. You're sick."

"Shut up! You want to know who needs help, Dad? It's you. I mean, Christ, look at this — this tomb you've got yourself down here. All these years you've dedicated your life to fighting vampires. Why? Because you thought Becca's mother was killed by a vampire. Stuck his fangs in her neck and his dick up her twat, drained her blood out, left you a widower with a lifetime grudge against the world." He let out a laugh. "That's a hoot, Dad, because you know what? Your wife wasn't killed by a vampire. I killed her. I killed Becca's mother, because she got in my face, said I was an evil influence on Becca, some such garbage. I knew you were obsessed with the supernatural, so I set it up so you'd believe what you wanted to believe anyway—" He made his voice sarcastic, campy, Twilight Zonish, "dark forces are afoot in the universe. It isn't other people we have to be afraid of, it's them, the spooks and the goblins, the things that go bump in the night. You pathetic old fool — Elaine's murderer was right there at your dinner table and you were too busy ramming stakes through dead guys' chests to realize it."



"You evil bastard. I'm ashamed to say I fathered you."

Emmet's eyes half-closed, and he blinked as though suddenly disoriented. Then he gave a moan and bent double as he thumped his cuffed wrists to his chest. "Oh, God — my heart!" His face went ghastly gray. Wheezing, he sank to his knees, then fell forward, hitting his face on the dirt floor.



2017/09/09

Sascha reveals its full malignant majesty.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

An endless hour passed, during which David medicated his mood with alcohol and tried to recover his wits. Vykos's rage, when it discovered Emmet semiconscious from a heart attack, had been terrible. It had wanted the old man alive and capable of endorsing David as the new director of matters spiritual in the church. Now that opportunity was gone. *Whatever*, David thought. Nothing mattered to him as long as he could persuade Vykos to give him what he wanted.

When he peered out from behind the curtain at the people filling the church, David fantasized what it would be like when he could look at such a scene and see only one thing — food. Living bags of blood — sack lunches, if you would. Nourishment for the future rulers of the world — himself, of course, among them. It hadn't happened yet, but it would. It must. Vykos would turn him. Then not only immortality would be his, but power unimaginable.

For David, the change couldn't come soon enough.

"Why don't you have another drink?" hissed a reedy voice.

David jumped, then gave a weak, embarrassed laugh. He still wasn't accustomed to Vykos's stealth, or that tortured voice whose raspy whine reminded him of a psychotic child on uppers. For that matter, he wasn't accustomed to Vykos appearance, either; each of the creature's new forms seeming more repellent and horrific than the last.

At the moment, Vykos's face was again monstrous, the face flecked with glittery, pearl-white scales, the hairline marked with tiny, hook-infested sores. Its hands looked normal, but the skin along its arms was a thorny mass of corrugated tissue interspersed with smooth, slick patches that looked like candle tallow. Its overall appearance was horrific enough, but the worst was its eyes — unblinking drillbits embedded in sockets of unnatural depth. David avoided meeting that cold stare at all cost.

"Here, try this. It might settle your nerves," said Vykos, offering him one of the gold goblets that was used in the Communion service.

David had already fortified himself for the occasion with half a pint of Johnny Walker Black and a couple of joints, but refusing anything that Vykos offered seemed unwise.

"Thanks," he said, accepting the goblet.

Then looked at it. Felt his stomach turn. Looked back at Vykos questioningly.

Vykos threw back its head and emitted a noise that must have been intended as a laugh, but came out as a clipped, chittery screech. "No

wonder your father denigrates you, David. He's probably intimidated by your dry wit. I, however, find you quite amusing. After all, one who aspires to the Curse of Caine must acquire certain tastes. Now drink up."

Come on, you've swigged down worse than this and liked it, he told himself. He took a tentative sip. His heart raced at the import of his action. *I'm doing it; I'm actually drinking blood*, he thought wildly. The coppery taste was stronger than he'd anticipated, but otherwise, if he made a conscious effort to forget what he was drinking, if he pretended it was a really good Bordeaux, then he could get it down.

"If the taste's a tad on the sour side, there's a reason," said Vykos calmly. "It's your father's."

David's stomach felt as though it twisted inside out. He willed himself not to vomit. Not with that thing watching anyway.

"Don't tell me that bothers you? You hate the old man, don't you?"

"All my life." He tried to grin, but it came out a crimson grimace. "Blood's blood, right?"

"Indeed, it is," said Vykos. "Don't you even want to know if he's still alive?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"Not to me."

David twirled the goblet, trying to let his stomach settle before he risked another sip. "Well, is he?"

Vykos lipless mouth curved into a mirthless smirk. "Your concern for your father is touching, David. Now why don't you finish your drink. And don't be discouraged if you throw up. The night will come when blood will be the only thing that *won't* make you puke." It draped a bony arm around David's shoulders.

"Before I go out there," said David, "I need to know one thing."

Vykos cocked an eyebrow and smiled benignly, an indulgent god. "And what would that be, David?"

"I want to be one of you. I want to become a vampire. I think I've demonstrated loyalty enough that—"

"All you've demonstrated, David, is a willingness to sacrifice anyone and everyone to further your own cause. A penchant for manipulation and the forging of false alliances. You would betray your own mother, or should I say stepmother, if you hadn't killed her first." It favored David with a savagely red smile.

Still, despite his terror, David pressed on. "I need your word you'll turn me. Soon."

Vykos studied him. "Why not? God knows you're sufficiently vicious. I shall make you my childe," it said grandly. "Instruct you in the dark arts that you already have such a bent for."

"Your word?"

"You have it. You will be my childe."

"But beautiful, the way I know you can look," he added quickly. "Not looking the way you do now."

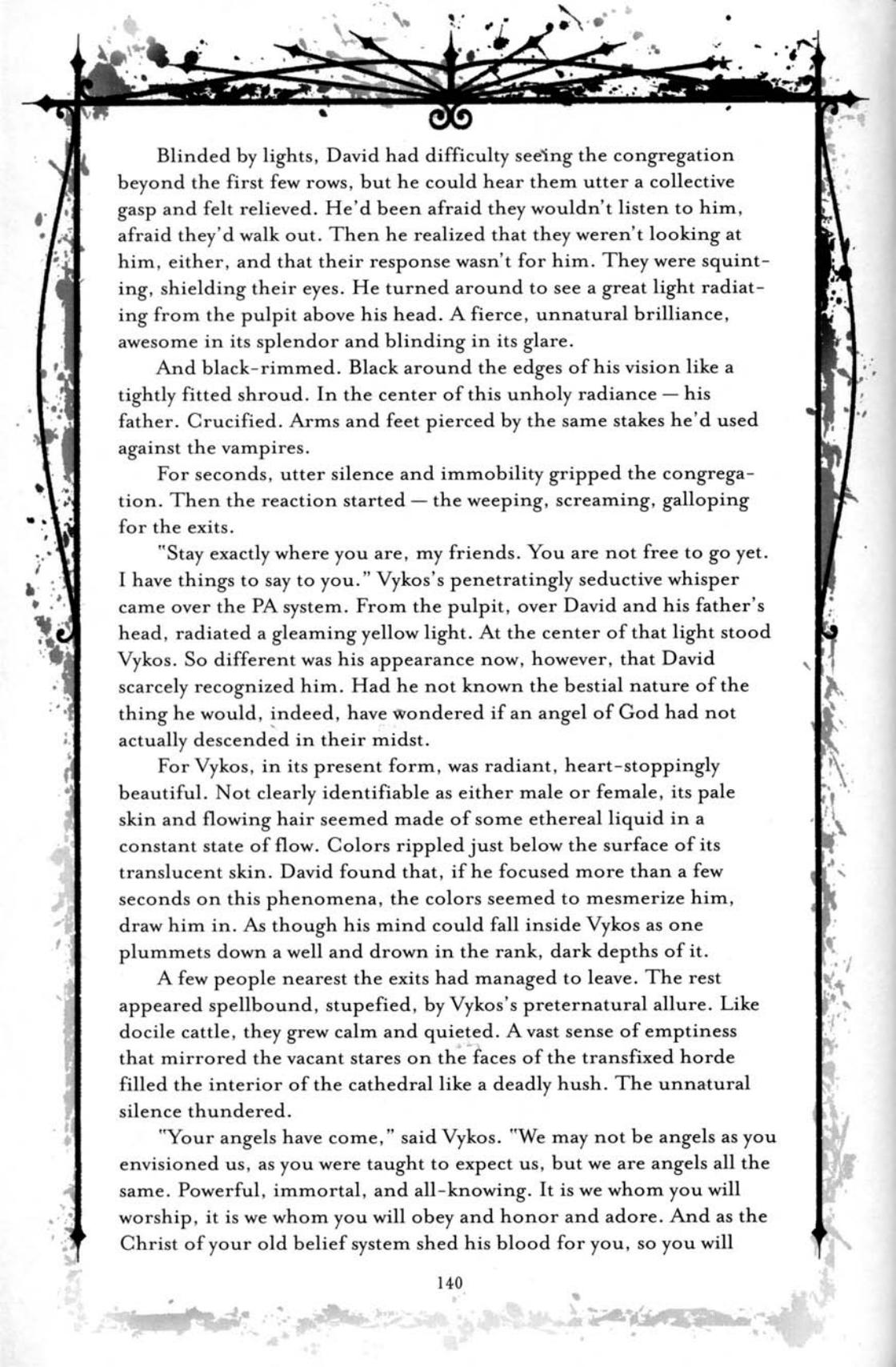
The hate in Vykos's ungodly stare almost stopped his mind from working, almost halted his heart. Then the thin lips twisted into a facsimile of a smile. "So you shall have it, David. More beautiful than you could ever imagine, for all eternity."

Wiping the blood he'd drunk from the corners of his mouth, David walked out before the congregation and took down the microphone. Gradually the crowd grew silent. They had been expecting Emmet Vargas, but a few recognized David as the minister's good-looking son, who made the occasional appearance at Christmas and Easter service and who had inherited his father's charm, if not his piety.

"The Reverend Vargas — my father — isn't able to speak to you tonight," David began, "so I'm here in his place. I want to clear up some of lies that have been propagated. Sadly, those lies are promises my father made to you. Well, you need to know that those are promises which won't be kept. My father promised you a Second Coming, when divine beings will walk among us, when angels will walk on Earth. My father talked about a time when superior beings would move among us. What my father promised was a lie — not because my father is an evil man who wanted to deceive you, but because he was deceived himself."

He paused to let this sink in. A ripple of disquiet spread throughout the church. Here and there people were leaving.

David raised his arms for quiet. "The lie is that this time is in the future. The lie is that we have to pray for angels, that we have to beseech a Higher Power to rule over us and guide us in our sinfulness and confusion and weakness. We are not weak or sinful or confused, but we've been duped into believing in all manner of hypocrisy. Deny yourself now, my father taught, and you will be rewarded later. Deny yourself wealth and pleasure and sex. Well, let me tell you, that time is over. The time of self-sacrifice and self-denial is ended. Because that time my father talked about is now. That time has come. An angel is among us tonight, the first of many who have come to lead us and guide us."



Blinded by lights, David had difficulty seeing the congregation beyond the first few rows, but he could hear them utter a collective gasp and felt relieved. He'd been afraid they wouldn't listen to him, afraid they'd walk out. Then he realized that they weren't looking at him, either, and that their response wasn't for him. They were squinting, shielding their eyes. He turned around to see a great light radiating from the pulpit above his head. A fierce, unnatural brilliance, awesome in its splendor and blinding in its glare.

And black-rimmed. Black around the edges of his vision like a tightly fitted shroud. In the center of this unholy radiance — his father. Crucified. Arms and feet pierced by the same stakes he'd used against the vampires.

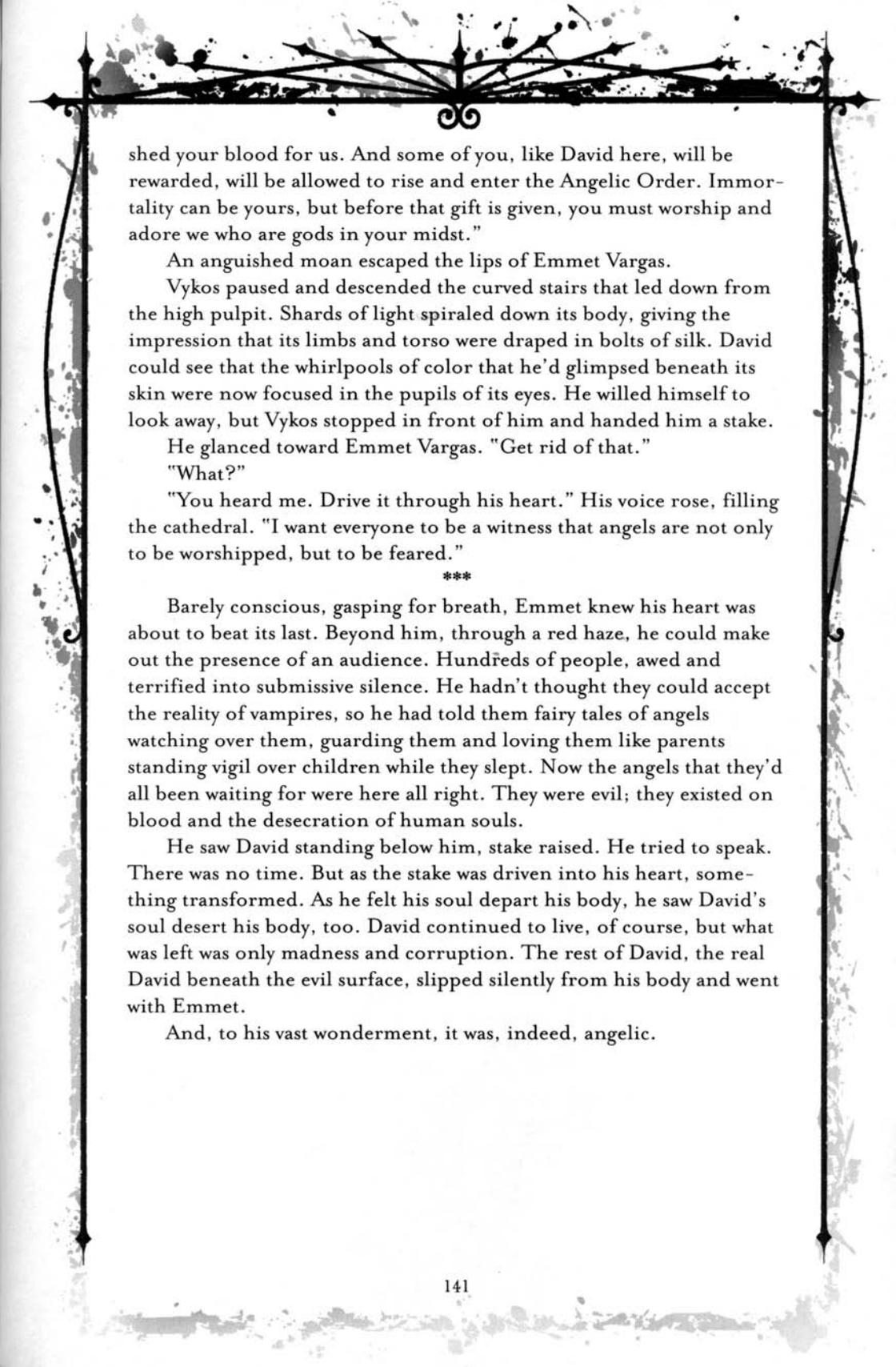
For seconds, utter silence and immobility gripped the congregation. Then the reaction started — the weeping, screaming, galloping for the exits.

"Stay exactly where you are, my friends. You are not free to go yet. I have things to say to you." Vykos's penetratingly seductive whisper came over the PA system. From the pulpit, over David and his father's head, radiated a gleaming yellow light. At the center of that light stood Vykos. So different was his appearance now, however, that David scarcely recognized him. Had he not known the bestial nature of the thing he would, indeed, have wondered if an angel of God had not actually descended in their midst.

For Vykos, in its present form, was radiant, heart-stoppingly beautiful. Not clearly identifiable as either male or female, its pale skin and flowing hair seemed made of some ethereal liquid in a constant state of flow. Colors rippled just below the surface of its translucent skin. David found that, if he focused more than a few seconds on this phenomena, the colors seemed to mesmerize him, draw him in. As though his mind could fall inside Vykos as one plummets down a well and drown in the rank, dark depths of it.

A few people nearest the exits had managed to leave. The rest appeared spellbound, stupefied, by Vykos's preternatural allure. Like docile cattle, they grew calm and quieted. A vast sense of emptiness that mirrored the vacant stares on the faces of the transfixed horde filled the interior of the cathedral like a deadly hush. The unnatural silence thundered.

"Your angels have come," said Vykos. "We may not be angels as you envisioned us, as you were taught to expect us, but we are angels all the same. Powerful, immortal, and all-knowing. It is we whom you will worship, it is we whom you will obey and honor and adore. And as the Christ of your old belief system shed his blood for you, so you will



shed your blood for us. And some of you, like David here, will be rewarded, will be allowed to rise and enter the Angelic Order. Immortality can be yours, but before that gift is given, you must worship and adore we who are gods in your midst."

An anguished moan escaped the lips of Emmet Vargas.

Vykos paused and descended the curved stairs that led down from the high pulpit. Shards of light spiraled down its body, giving the impression that its limbs and torso were draped in bolts of silk. David could see that the whirlpools of color that he'd glimpsed beneath its skin were now focused in the pupils of its eyes. He willed himself to look away, but Vykos stopped in front of him and handed him a stake.

He glanced toward Emmet Vargas. "Get rid of that."

"What?"

"You heard me. Drive it through his heart." His voice rose, filling the cathedral. "I want everyone to be a witness that angels are not only to be worshipped, but to be feared."

Barely conscious, gasping for breath, Emmet knew his heart was about to beat its last. Beyond him, through a red haze, he could make out the presence of an audience. Hundreds of people, awed and terrified into submissive silence. He hadn't thought they could accept the reality of vampires, so he had told them fairy tales of angels watching over them, guarding them and loving them like parents standing vigil over children while they slept. Now the angels that they'd all been waiting for were here all right. They were evil; they existed on blood and the desecration of human souls.

He saw David standing below him, stake raised. He tried to speak. There was no time. But as the stake was driven into his heart, something transformed. As he felt his soul depart his body, he saw David's soul desert his body, too. David continued to live, of course, but what was left was only madness and corruption. The rest of David, the real David beneath the evil surface, slipped silently from his body and went with Emmet.

And, to his vast wonderment, it was, indeed, angelic.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

How far it was to her lord and master, Rapunzel didn't know. Didn't care. If the sunlight caught her before she reached her destination, then so be it. She could not rest. She could not hesitate. The same demented single-mindedness that had guided her in life now pushed her onward.

No matter that some kind of evil sorcery had been worked upon her. She didn't know the arts of flesh- and bonecraft, had never been educated in the skills of her Tzimisce sire. She only knew from what she saw reflected in windows, in the horrified gazes of those few who looked at her, that her body's very shape had been deliberately mutilated and misaligned.

So she kept to the shadows and back alleys, feeding from whomever was too weak or sick or inebriated to fend her off.

A woman with glazed eyes and missing teeth propped herself up next to a shopping cart overflowing with shiny plastic garbage bags. Rapunzel ripped her throat out, slurping blood that was a toxic hellbroth of street drugs. The impact of what she had ingested staggered but didn't stop her.

Nothing would stop her until she threw herself at the feet of Dracon.

Rapunzel hungered.

Rapunzel craved.

Rapunzel loved.

Along the way to her lover, Rapunzel found new victims. A homeless man who'd ingested so much alcohol that, had Rapunzel not finished him off first, he'd have been dead by morning. A hooker sprawled in a doorway, semiconscious after ingesting a cocktail of smack, 'ludes, and Ecstasy. A runaway with so much coke in his system he didn't stop prattling until Rapunzel ripped out his tongue.

With each polluted feeding, what was left of Rapunzel's humanity fell away, and her madness deepened.

She could see the spires now, the ones that she remembered gazing up at as she lay on her back, writhing and trying to fight while Dracon's frenzied cohorts ripped off her clothes and savaged her body. Before her lord and master took her in his arms and sculpted her into her present, maimed form, then kicked her into the open grave and slung the dirt on top of her.

Church spires. Of course. That was where she'd agreed to meet Dracon. Where she'd died. Dracon, her new lord. Dracon, her eternal lover.

"You will serve us, you will give us your blood," Vykos was saying. "And we, in return, will protect you."

David, listening raptly but facing forward, was among the first to see the thing that was dragging itself up the aisle.

"Jesus, what the fuck is that!"

David saw the shambling wreck that was what remained of Jean Locklear as she shuffled up the center aisle of the cathedral. Her garments ripped and bloody, face contorted in a grotesque snarl. Half her skull was caved in, patches of brain matter showing through. An obscene euphoria glittered in her eyes. Oblivious to the reaction of the people in the pews, she made her way up to the altar and prostrated herself at Vykos's feet.

"My lord and master," she intoned. "I've come back to you. Your daughter has come back."

"Get away," hissed Vykos.

David watched in horror as the crazed thing grasped at Vykos's legs. Her crimson tongue snaked out. She licked its feet, reached up to grovel for its penis, clawing at its clothing to try to take it in her mouth.

"No!" Vykos kicked her in the face, but whatever damage it might have inflicted was rendered meaningless by the ungodly mutilations that had already been performed. David was ignorant of the black arts of flesh- and bonecraft, but he did know that only the most malicious sadist could create such a monstrosity and permit it to survive.

Although he knew how dangerous it was to speak, he couldn't stop himself, but blurted out, "This is your childe? This thing is what you sired?"

Rapunzel turned her demented eyes on him, giving David a long look into the hell of her insanity, then crawled back to paw again at Vykos's crotch. David watched with mounting horror and revulsion as Vykos stomped her head until only an oozing porridge of flesh and skull fragments remained.

This is my future, David thought. Even if it doesn't destroy me right away, Vykos will never keep its word. It will make me as hideous as she was.

With Vykos's attention focused on the wretched thing at its feet, David began to back away. Then he ran for the stairwell leading down into the catacombs, thinking about Lucita chained there — thinking it was not yet too late to strike a better deal.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Like a mantis impaled upon a pin, Lucita moved her arms and legs lethargically, but there was no hint of awareness in her face. Her eyes were those of a trophy mounted on a hunting-lodge wall, open and shiny and blank. David didn't know if she was capable of hearing him or not.

"If I let you go, are you willing to promise me something? Well?" He waited a few seconds, got no response. "I'll help you, but you have to make it worth my while."

He grabbed the stake on which she was impaled, twisted it, and yanked it out. Her body shivered, twitched violently, as though in the grip of a seizure. Then she collapsed to the floor.

After a few seconds, her glazed, unblinking eyes began to focus. The twitching subsided. Slowly, like some dark reptile coming out of hibernation, the power came back into her muscles and she stood up. She saw David and directed at him a stare that could flay skin.

He read her mind, or thought he did, held his palms up and took a step backward.

"Wait, don't hurt me. I saved you. I just went along with Vykos because I was scared not to, but I know better now."

"You're telling me you're changing allegiances?"

"What I'm saying is, I saved you, so you owe me, right? You understand?" Apparently she didn't, for she came toward him now, black malice in her glare, fangs visible beneath her upper lip. She seized him, bent him back, pierced his neck and drank. Once again, David gave himself up to a pleasure far beyond his power to describe or comprehend. Orgasmic in its intensity yet rapturously sweet. And lethally addictive. For even as she drank enough to revive herself and then pushed him away like something that even she found impure, he found himself longing, obsessing over the next opportunity to taste that ecstasy.

"When?" he gasped, when she released him. "When will you turn me into what you are? You promised me, remember?"

"I didn't promise anything," Lucita said. "You're lucky I don't kill you."

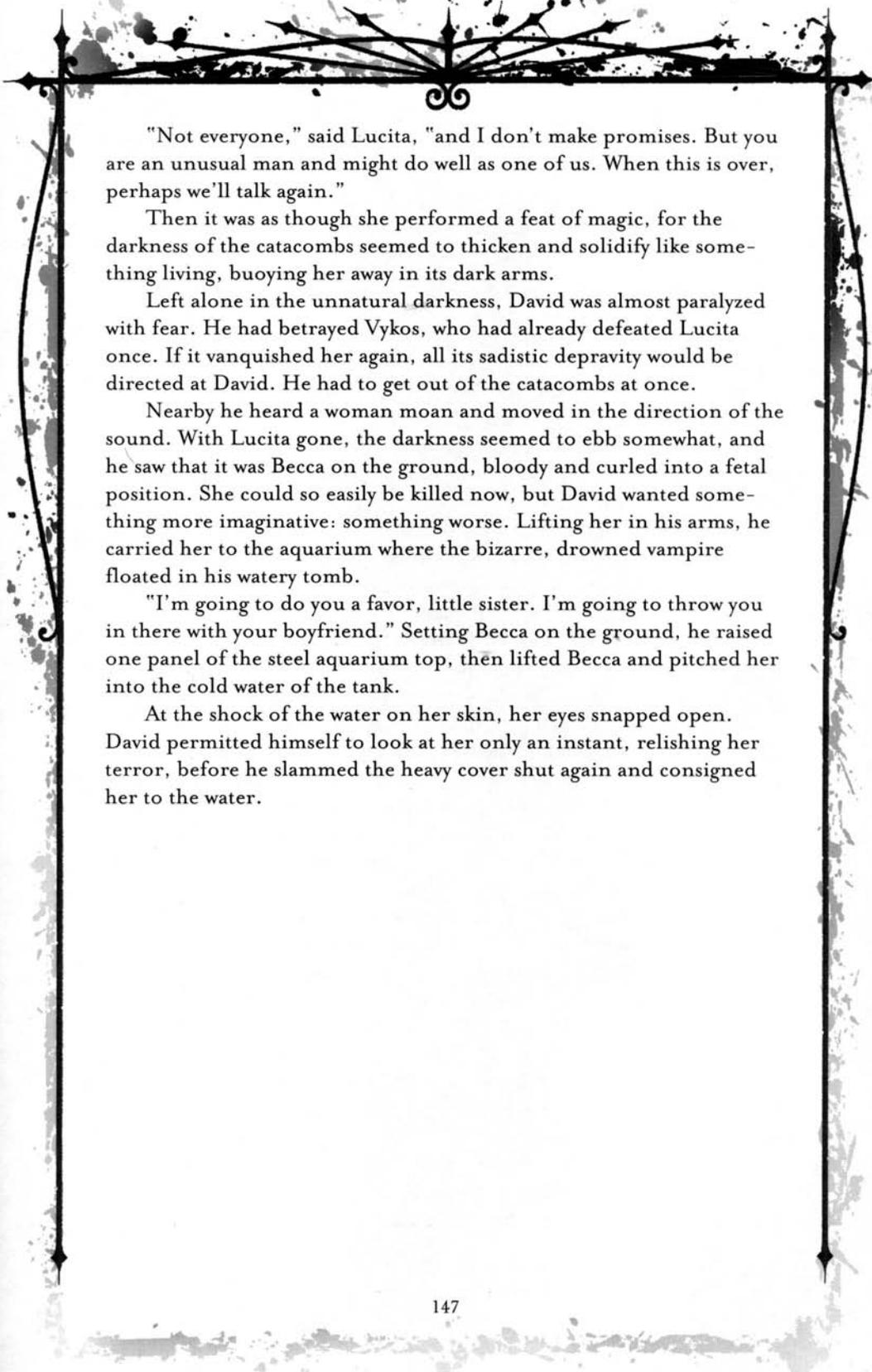
"But I just saved you! Please, do this one thing for me. I want to be one of you."

"And why is that?"

"To be powerful, beautiful, immortal — isn't that what everybody wants?"



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"Not everyone," said Lucita, "and I don't make promises. But you are an unusual man and might do well as one of us. When this is over, perhaps we'll talk again."

Then it was as though she performed a feat of magic, for the darkness of the catacombs seemed to thicken and solidify like something living, buoying her away in its dark arms.

Left alone in the unnatural darkness, David was almost paralyzed with fear. He had betrayed Vykos, who had already defeated Lucita once. If it vanquished her again, all its sadistic depravity would be directed at David. He had to get out of the catacombs at once.

Nearby he heard a woman moan and moved in the direction of the sound. With Lucita gone, the darkness seemed to ebb somewhat, and he saw that it was Becca on the ground, bloody and curled into a fetal position. She could so easily be killed now, but David wanted something more imaginative: something worse. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her to the aquarium where the bizarre, drowned vampire floated in his watery tomb.

"I'm going to do you a favor, little sister. I'm going to throw you in there with your boyfriend." Setting Becca on the ground, he raised one panel of the steel aquarium top, then lifted Becca and pitched her into the cold water of the tank.

At the shock of the water on her skin, her eyes snapped open. David permitted himself to look at her only an instant, relishing her terror, before he slammed the heavy cover shut again and consigned her to the water.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lucita saw the faces of the people as they watched Vykos drink from his first victim: stricken, awed, spellbound. Willing to believe the beautiful monster in their midst was one of the angels they'd been waiting for. Willing to overlook the discarded heap at its feet that had been Rapunzel.

Bovine beasts — Lucita felt only contempt for them. She'd have liked to show them her powers, to twist their malleable minds even further than Vykos already had, but that wasn't her way. Her way was darkness and deception and she relied on that now.

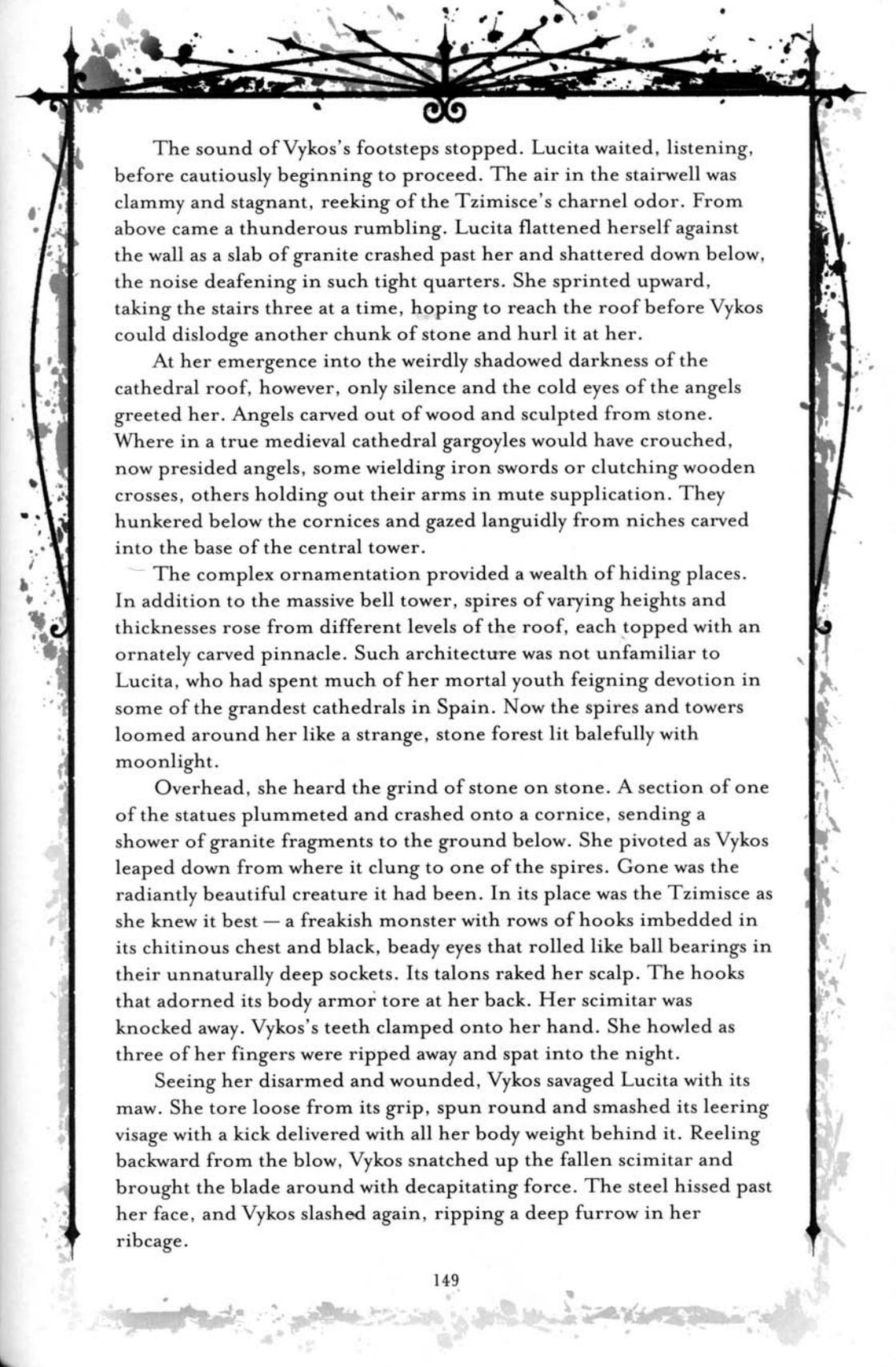
Using all her will, she conjured up the darkness of her heart, the blackness of her soul, and sent it roiling out in thick, curling waves, obscuring everything in the cathedral.

It was as though the doors and windows of an undersea ruin had been flung open, allowing the water to rush in and cover everything. For now darkness spread in vaporous billows throughout the massive structure. It inundated the congregation first, then flowed to the sides and upward, reaching those seated in the balconies. These people, having seen the gauzy night roil over the ones below, were in panicked flight when the blackness reached them, too. It blinded and chilled them, this palpable darkness, reduced them to cowering animals huddled together behind the pews, beyond thought, beyond flight.

The seething darkness blanketed Vykos, too, blinding and maddening it. Lucita knew her advantage was only temporary. Seconds more and Vykos would be able to see again. With skill honed from centuries of practice, she crouched and came at it from the side, the curved blade of the scimitar arcing toward its head. Vykos heard the hiss of the blade's approach and sidestepped. The weapon struck him in the biceps, a deep but not disabling wound. She spun away, dove back into the darkness, waiting for Vykos to attack.

To her surprise, she heard the scuffle of its boots on the circular stairs that led up from the nave of the church to the roof. Whatever was going to happen, Vykos evidently didn't want any witnesses. She guessed it didn't want to run the risk of mortals seeing that it could be wounded. Or perhaps it only wanted to lure her to a place where it could kill her at its leisure.

The darkness filling the cathedral began to disperse. In a few more seconds, the kine would be able to see her. She ducked into the stairwell and started up the dark, ever-narrowing staircase.



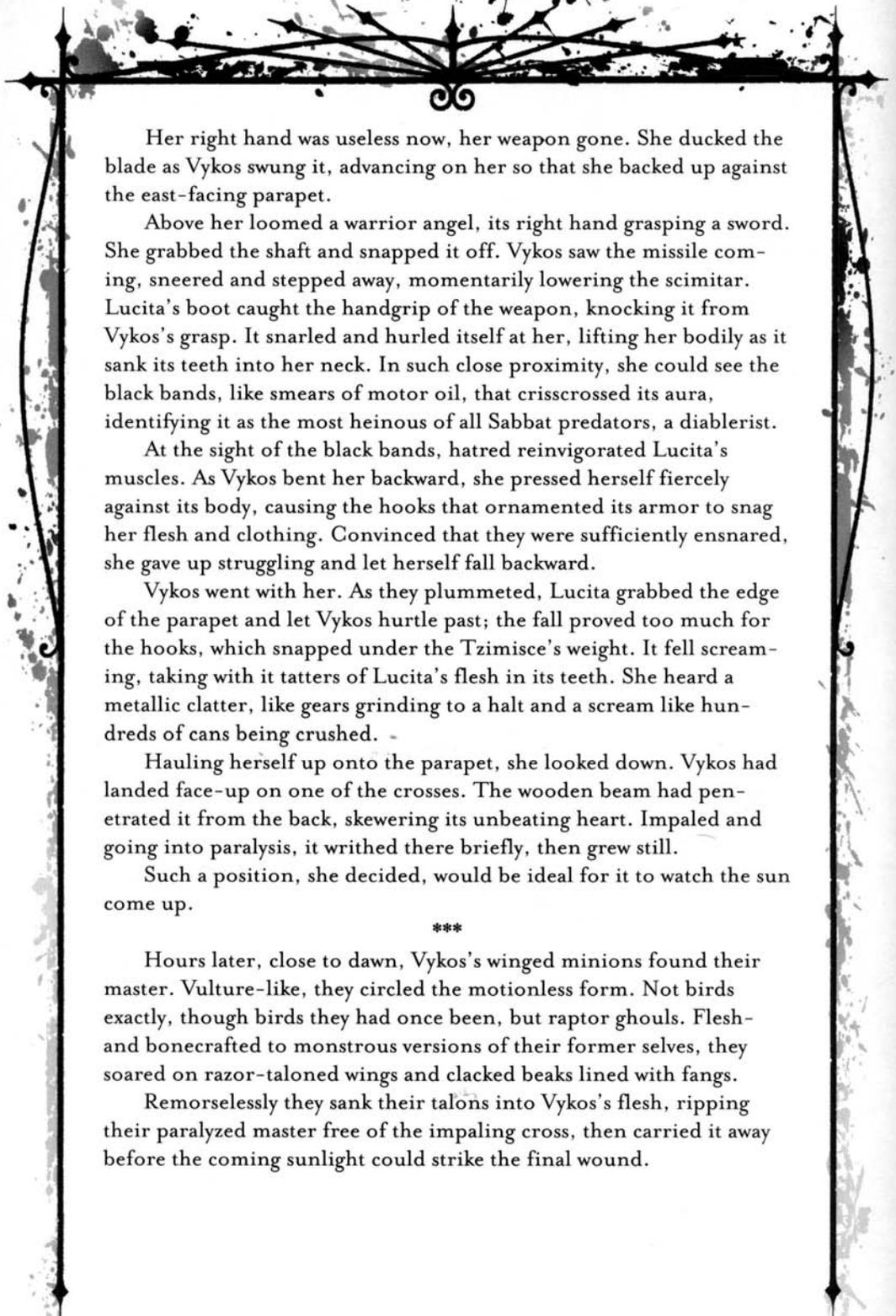
The sound of Vykos's footsteps stopped. Lucita waited, listening, before cautiously beginning to proceed. The air in the stairwell was clammy and stagnant, reeking of the Tzimisce's charnel odor. From above came a thunderous rumbling. Lucita flattened herself against the wall as a slab of granite crashed past her and shattered down below, the noise deafening in such tight quarters. She sprinted upward, taking the stairs three at a time, hoping to reach the roof before Vykos could dislodge another chunk of stone and hurl it at her.

At her emergence into the weirdly shadowed darkness of the cathedral roof, however, only silence and the cold eyes of the angels greeted her. Angels carved out of wood and sculpted from stone. Where in a true medieval cathedral gargoyles would have crouched, now presided angels, some wielding iron swords or clutching wooden crosses, others holding out their arms in mute supplication. They hunkered below the cornices and gazed languidly from niches carved into the base of the central tower.

The complex ornamentation provided a wealth of hiding places. In addition to the massive bell tower, spires of varying heights and thicknesses rose from different levels of the roof, each topped with an ornately carved pinnacle. Such architecture was not unfamiliar to Lucita, who had spent much of her mortal youth feigning devotion in some of the grandest cathedrals in Spain. Now the spires and towers loomed around her like a strange, stone forest lit balefully with moonlight.

Overhead, she heard the grind of stone on stone. A section of one of the statues plummeted and crashed onto a cornice, sending a shower of granite fragments to the ground below. She pivoted as Vykos leaped down from where it clung to one of the spires. Gone was the radiantly beautiful creature it had been. In its place was the Tzimisce as she knew it best — a freakish monster with rows of hooks imbedded in its chitinous chest and black, beady eyes that rolled like ball bearings in their unnaturally deep sockets. Its talons raked her scalp. The hooks that adorned its body armor tore at her back. Her scimitar was knocked away. Vykos's teeth clamped onto her hand. She howled as three of her fingers were ripped away and spat into the night.

Seeing her disarmed and wounded, Vykos savaged Lucita with its maw. She tore loose from its grip, spun round and smashed its leering visage with a kick delivered with all her body weight behind it. Reeling backward from the blow, Vykos snatched up the fallen scimitar and brought the blade around with decapitating force. The steel hissed past her face, and Vykos slashed again, ripping a deep furrow in her ribcage.



Her right hand was useless now, her weapon gone. She ducked the blade as Vykos swung it, advancing on her so that she backed up against the east-facing parapet.

Above her loomed a warrior angel, its right hand grasping a sword. She grabbed the shaft and snapped it off. Vykos saw the missile coming, sneered and stepped away, momentarily lowering the scimitar. Lucita's boot caught the handgrip of the weapon, knocking it from Vykos's grasp. It snarled and hurled itself at her, lifting her bodily as it sank its teeth into her neck. In such close proximity, she could see the black bands, like smears of motor oil, that crisscrossed its aura, identifying it as the most heinous of all Sabbat predators, a diablerist.

At the sight of the black bands, hatred reinvigorated Lucita's muscles. As Vykos bent her backward, she pressed herself fiercely against its body, causing the hooks that ornamented its armor to snag her flesh and clothing. Convinced that they were sufficiently ensnared, she gave up struggling and let herself fall backward.

Vykos went with her. As they plummeted, Lucita grabbed the edge of the parapet and let Vykos hurtle past; the fall proved too much for the hooks, which snapped under the Tzimisce's weight. It fell screaming, taking with it tatters of Lucita's flesh in its teeth. She heard a metallic clatter, like gears grinding to a halt and a scream like hundreds of cans being crushed.

Hauling herself up onto the parapet, she looked down. Vykos had landed face-up on one of the crosses. The wooden beam had penetrated it from the back, skewering its unbeating heart. Impaled and going into paralysis, it writhed there briefly, then grew still.

Such a position, she decided, would be ideal for it to watch the sun come up.

Hours later, close to dawn, Vykos's winged minions found their master. Vulture-like, they circled the motionless form. Not birds exactly, though birds they had once been, but raptor ghouls. Flesh-and-bonecrafted to monstrous versions of their former selves, they soared on razor-taloned wings and clacked beaks lined with fangs.

Remorselessly they sank their talons into Vykos's flesh, ripping their paralyzed master free of the impaling cross, then carried it away before the coming sunlight could strike the final wound.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A huge screen had been set up on the altar of the cathedral. Smaller screens were positioned in the upstairs balconies and at various locations on the first floor. Becca's face, serene and confident, appeared on all of them.

"A demon had been sent to tempt us and to tempt my father. It corrupted his own son, my brother David, and used him to destroy his own father. The demon has been vanquished. A true angel, like the ones whose appearance my father predicted, was sent in darkness to defeat the demon. How can there be any doubt now that angels do protect us, that God watches over and blesses us through their eyes?"

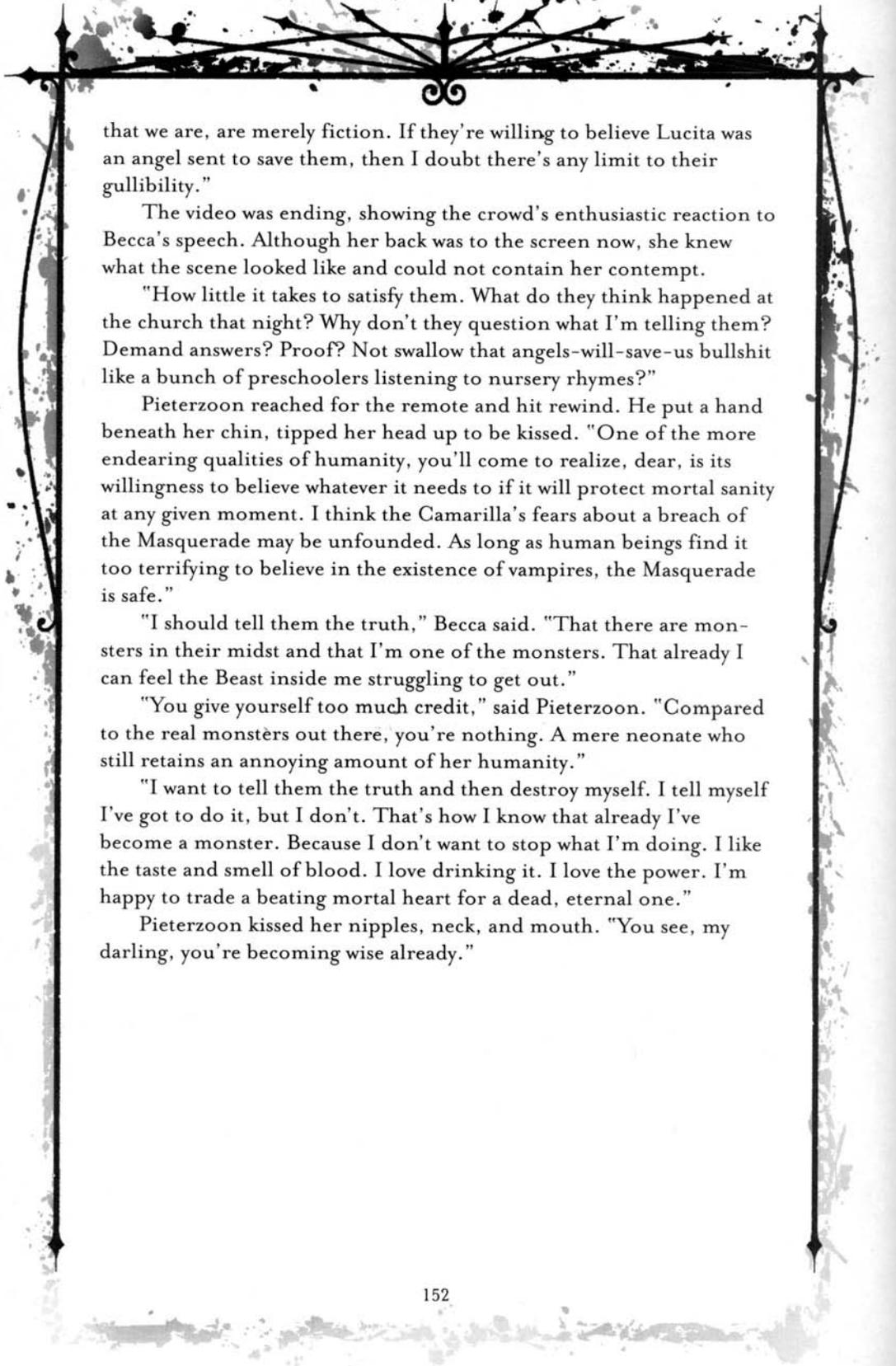
In one of the many bedrooms of his opulent haven, Becca and Jan Pieterzoon moved languidly together on the silk-tented bed, their bodies disengaging, then recombining as her videotaped performance played again and again. Becca sat on her lover's cock, her back turned to him, grinding her hips as she rode. When she looked down, the way their legs emanated from the central point of their fused genitals, reminded her of a giant, nearly hairless spider. She reached down to fondle Pieterzoon's balls and felt a tiny, guilty frisson of joy that sex — be it straight or otherwise — still held its power to enthrall. But then it took a while for interest in the normal pleasures of the flesh to fade away, he'd told her. In some Kindred, they never did.

She still remembered clawing at the top of the tank and finding that she couldn't lift it, her lungs about to burst, then her mouth opening, breathing in the water. That was when Pieterzoon's arms had gone around her, his fangs piercing her neck as he drank and drank, reviving himself and Embracing her before she ever had a chance to drown.

And after that, he'd begun her instruction in how to hunt, how to kill, if necessary, and how to feed. How to make love even when there was no love in her soul to give.

Now, caressing Pieterzoon's cock, she said, "I'm so tired of watching this video."

Pieterzoon moved inside her, slowly turning her around until she was facing him again, legs over his shoulders. "I want you to study it, see how you can do better next time. The people like you and trust you, because you're Emmet's daughter. They're eager to believe that good will always triumph, that angels really do exist while we, beasts



that we are, are merely fiction. If they're willing to believe Lucita was an angel sent to save them, then I doubt there's any limit to their gullibility."

The video was ending, showing the crowd's enthusiastic reaction to Becca's speech. Although her back was to the screen now, she knew what the scene looked like and could not contain her contempt.

"How little it takes to satisfy them. What do they think happened at the church that night? Why don't they question what I'm telling them? Demand answers? Proof? Not swallow that angels-will-save-us bullshit like a bunch of preschoolers listening to nursery rhymes?"

Pieterzoon reached for the remote and hit rewind. He put a hand beneath her chin, tipped her head up to be kissed. "One of the more endearing qualities of humanity, you'll come to realize, dear, is its willingness to believe whatever it needs to if it will protect mortal sanity at any given moment. I think the Camarilla's fears about a breach of the Masquerade may be unfounded. As long as human beings find it too terrifying to believe in the existence of vampires, the Masquerade is safe."

"I should tell them the truth," Becca said. "That there are monsters in their midst and that I'm one of the monsters. That already I can feel the Beast inside me struggling to get out."

"You give yourself too much credit," said Pieterzoon. "Compared to the real monsters out there, you're nothing. A mere neonate who still retains an annoying amount of her humanity."

"I want to tell them the truth and then destroy myself. I tell myself I've got to do it, but I don't. That's how I know that already I've become a monster. Because I don't want to stop what I'm doing. I like the taste and smell of blood. I love drinking it. I love the power. I'm happy to trade a beating mortal heart for a dead, eternal one."

Pieterzoon kissed her nipples, neck, and mouth. "You see, my darling, you're becoming wise already."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

David slugged down another shooter and turned to the blond, boozed-up bitch who sat next to him at the bar.

"You read about the crazy guy who had himself crucified in his own church? Yeah, you must've, it made the headlines, it was on CNN, every fucking cable news show. I was there. Some kind of spiritual psychosis, the shrinks are saying. The guy who crucified himself, that was my old man. You believe that? Hey, you don't believe what I'm saying, then fuck you."

The woman gave him a queer, giggly grin. He wanted to punch her, but a bouncer the size of a Frigidaire was closing in. Better finish his drinking elsewhere.

He turned up his collar, hit the streets. Realized, within just a few blocks of leaving the bar, that he was being followed. So he hung back, pretended to scope out some chicks passing a needle back and forth outside a nudie bar, all the while watching behind him in the smeary window glass of the club. He knew that business about vampires' reflections or lack of them was bullshit. Yet in Lucita's case, maybe not, because he didn't see a thing until suddenly there she was beside him. He stopped breathing. His heart felt like it was caught on a meathook.

"About time," he said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"For what?"

"You promised me, remember?"

Lucita smiled, not bothering to conceal her fangs. There was a starry gleam to them. Her eyes, when he tried to look into them, were so dark he couldn't see the pupils, but he sensed their power to pull him down and down, as though he were caught in an undertow.

She took his hand. "Walk with me."

She led him south, taking him to the part of the city that had burned the night of the riots. Under the unforgiving luster of the streetlamps, he saw the empty hulks of burned-out buildings, boarded-up windows and the broken bottles from looted liquor stores. When they reached one gutted building, she guided him inside, stepping over the sodden ashes of cremated furniture, books, drapes.

At the stairs leading down into a basement, he balked. "Okay, no more. Exactly where the fuck is it we're going?"

"You wanted me to fulfil my promise, didn't you?" She slid her arm through his, long nails pressing into his biceps. "What is it, David? You're scared if you go down here with me, you won't be coming back alive? I thought that was the point?"

"But why down here?"

"Because you're not coming home with me, David. Afterward, you're going to be very, very tired, very hungry. You'll need to be someplace where you can rest in darkness without fear of being disturbed. Not to mention the fact that food's already provided — there're rats down here."

He was surprised that the idea of what his first meal might constitute didn't horrify him. Nothing had the power to touch him now, he thought, not really. Not after what he'd been through. All he felt now was simmering rage and the excitement that came with the anticipation of committing cruelties on as many people as he could.

No, the world hadn't heard the last of David Vargas. No fucking way.

The basement into which they descended smelled moldy, acrid, its walls still damp from the water the firefighters had poured into it. Prior to the riots, the building had been a liquor store. Now looted and gutted, it was already being put to a new use — a semi-dry mattress on the floor, blankets and beer cans scattered around, a crack pipe that rolled out of the way when David accidentally kicked it all bore testament to its new service.

"You're in luck," Lucita said. "You may not have to subsist on rats, after all. It looks like the squatters and crackheads have already moved in."

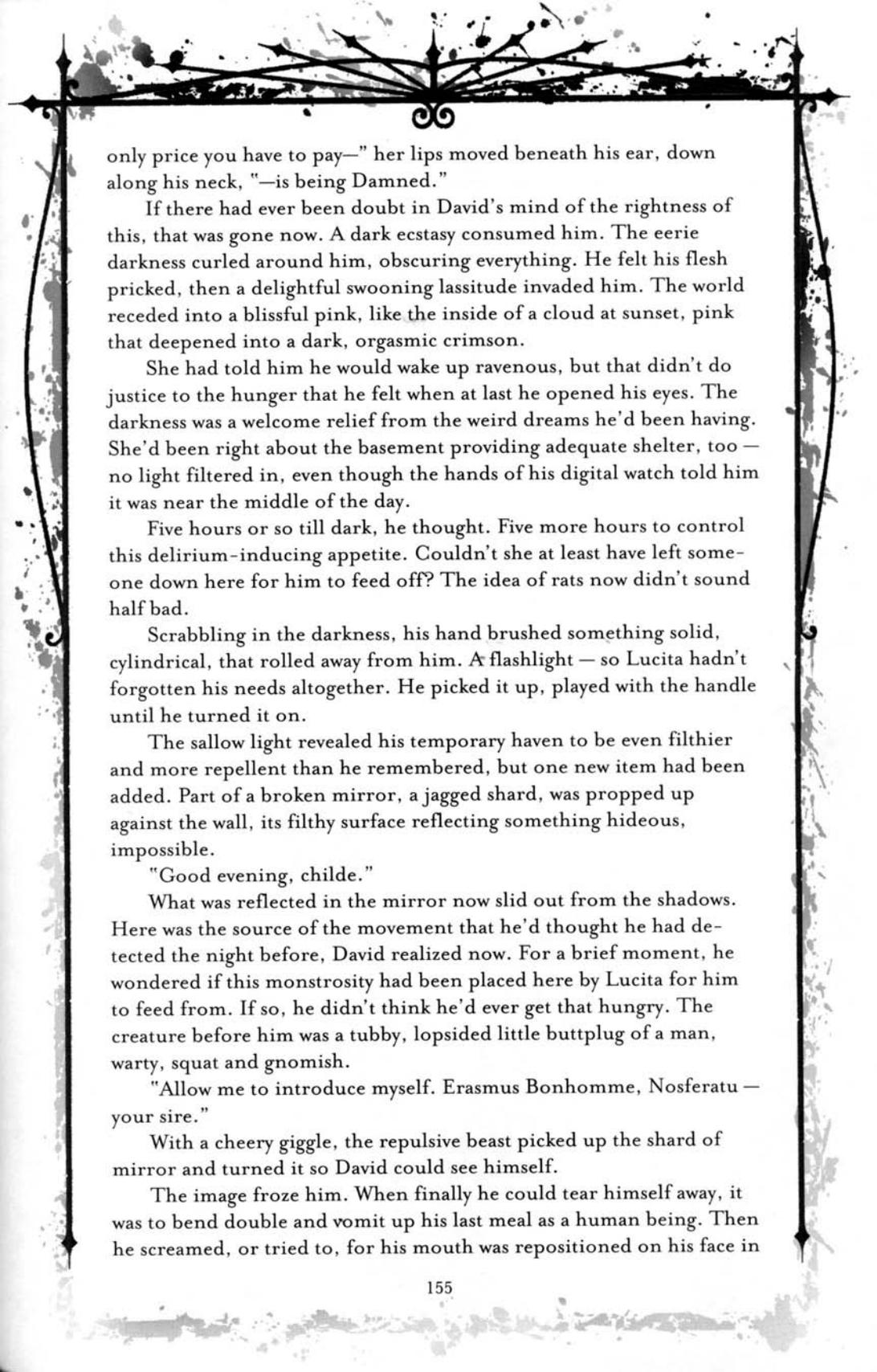
"To hell with fucking diseased lowlifes," David said. "I'm going to drink from rich, beautiful people — models and actors and thousand-dollar-a-night whores. Then I'm going to drain them dry and use their empty skins to wipe my ass."

"Not that you'll be needing to perform that function," Lucita said.

In the shadowy area below the stairs, something seemed to shift, a piling up and rearranging of the darkness like bands of clouds curling together before a storm. David's head jerked to the side.

"It's nothing," said Lucita, pressing herself against him, showing him the glint of her fangs. And, looking over her shoulder, David realized he must have been mistaken. For a deeper darkness settled over the area where he thought he had caught movement. As though the very quality of the air had changed. As though the shadows had solidified into thick obsidian walls.

"Think of what it will be like to be Kindred," Lucita said. Her eyes had taken on the dusky sheen of black opals, her touch thrilled through him like tiny bursts of electricity. "Imagine being alive for all eternity, of wielding power and remaining young forever. And the



only price you have to pay—" her lips moved beneath his ear, down along his neck, "—is being Damned."

If there had ever been doubt in David's mind of the rightness of this, that was gone now. A dark ecstasy consumed him. The eerie darkness curled around him, obscuring everything. He felt his flesh pricked, then a delightful swooning lassitude invaded him. The world receded into a blissful pink, like the inside of a cloud at sunset, pink that deepened into a dark, orgasmic crimson.

She had told him he would wake up ravenous, but that didn't do justice to the hunger that he felt when at last he opened his eyes. The darkness was a welcome relief from the weird dreams he'd been having. She'd been right about the basement providing adequate shelter, too—no light filtered in, even though the hands of his digital watch told him it was near the middle of the day.

Five hours or so till dark, he thought. Five more hours to control this delirium-inducing appetite. Couldn't she at least have left someone down here for him to feed off? The idea of rats now didn't sound half bad.

Scrabbling in the darkness, his hand brushed something solid, cylindrical, that rolled away from him. A flashlight—so Lucita hadn't forgotten his needs altogether. He picked it up, played with the handle until he turned it on.

The sallow light revealed his temporary haven to be even filthier and more repellent than he remembered, but one new item had been added. Part of a broken mirror, a jagged shard, was propped up against the wall, its filthy surface reflecting something hideous, impossible.

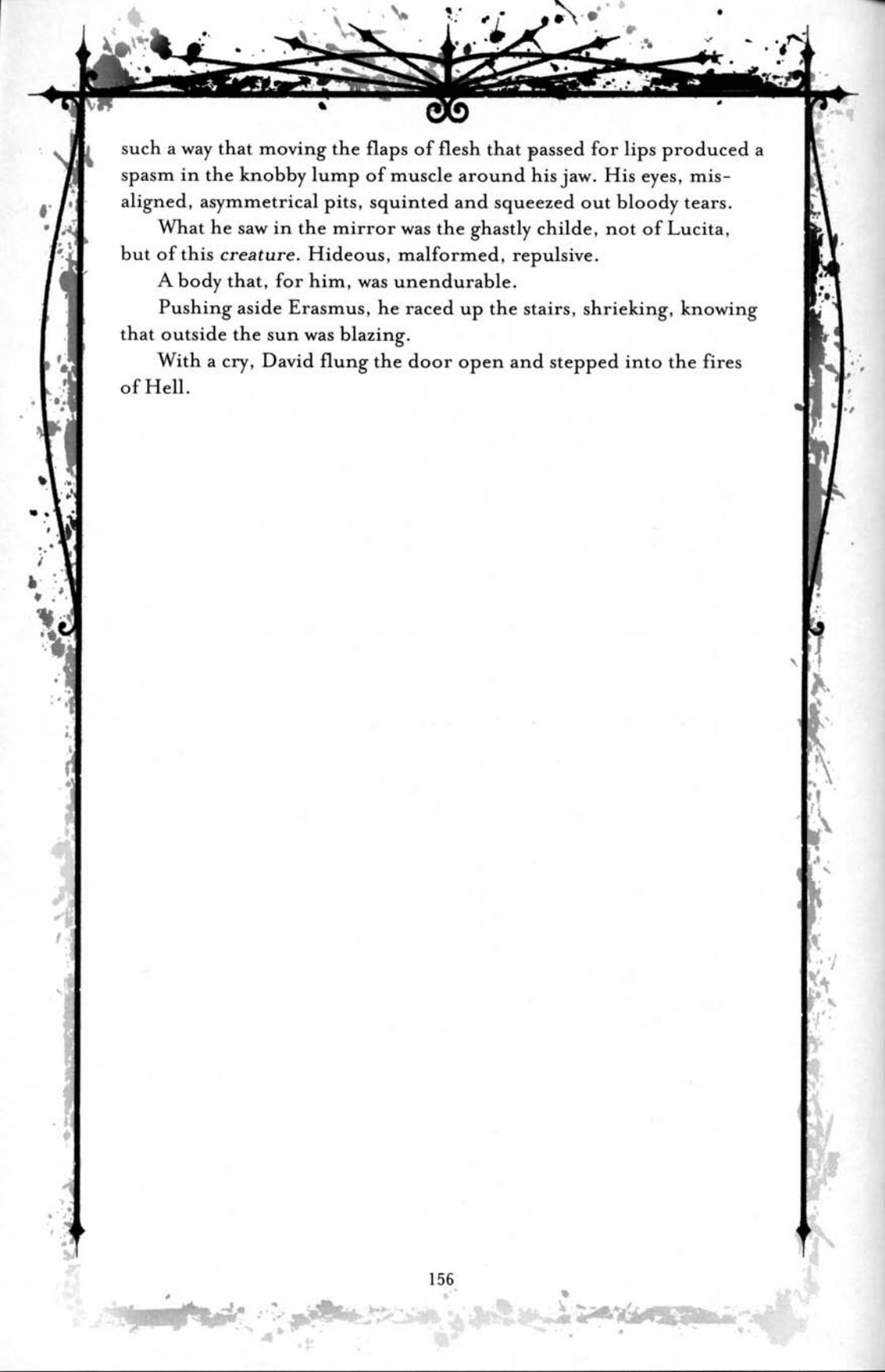
"Good evening, childe."

What was reflected in the mirror now slid out from the shadows. Here was the source of the movement that he'd thought he had detected the night before, David realized now. For a brief moment, he wondered if this monstrosity had been placed here by Lucita for him to feed from. If so, he didn't think he'd ever get that hungry. The creature before him was a tubby, lopsided little buttplug of a man, warty, squat and gnomish.

"Allow me to introduce myself. Erasmus Bonhomme, Nosferatu—your sire."

With a cheery giggle, the repulsive beast picked up the shard of mirror and turned it so David could see himself.

The image froze him. When finally he could tear himself away, it was to bend double and vomit up his last meal as a human being. Then he screamed, or tried to, for his mouth was repositioned on his face in



such a way that moving the flaps of flesh that passed for lips produced a spasm in the knobby lump of muscle around his jaw. His eyes, misaligned, asymmetrical pits, squinted and squeezed out bloody tears.

What he saw in the mirror was the ghastly childe, not of Lucita, but of this *creature*. Hideous, malformed, repulsive.

A body that, for him, was unendurable.

Pushing aside Erasmus, he raced up the stairs, shrieking, knowing that outside the sun was blazing.

With a cry, David flung the door open and stepped into the fires of Hell.

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