

# ALAN BAXTER

## MAGESIGN

... a gritty tale of blood rituals, mystery, and mysticism. MageSign grabs hold of the reader and doesn't let go. If you like your fantasy dark and dirty, this book is for you.

*David Wood, author of QUEST*

MageSign is a fast-paced ride through the depths of darkness a human soul can hold... that leaves you nearly afraid to turn the pages.

*Midwest Book Review*

Alan Baxter takes the reader right to the edge and then pushes us over. And I thank him for it.

*Bitten By Books*

A fast-paced ride through a visceral reality which holds a mirror up to today's apathetic society.

*Horrorscope*

It's three years later: Isiah maintains his unrelenting quest and Alan Baxter maintains the pacing and surprises that are his signature. Not to mention the ever-darkening mood of doom and menace. Don't let fear of Yath-vados stand between you and a great read!

*Van Ikin, Editor 'Science Fiction'*

MageSign and RealmShift are difficult to pin to any particular genre. They both have fantastic qualities, they are horrific at times, they involve mythology and mythical characters, and possible alternate histories; they are hard to put a label to, much like Neil Gaiman's Anansi Boys. MageSign is a great addition by Alan Baxter, and I highly recommend it.

*William Estep, ClubReading.com*

This complex and intriguing sequel to RealmShift ... stands on its own as an exciting tale of the supernatural. Baxter does an excellent job bringing readers up to speed on the back story so that they can follow along without feeling something is missing ... readers are left with a fast-paced supernatural adventure that will leave them rethinking how they view the Cosmos.

*Bards & Sages*

## Acclaim for REALMSHIFT

RealmShift is phenomenal. If it's not already on your bookshelf it should be.

*Midwest Book Review*

An invigorating read that will have thriller fans high fiving each other, and horror fans grooving to the beat.

*Scary Minds*

For lovers of dark fantasies, thrillers or just a bloody good read, this book comes highly recommended

*Book Lover's Club*

...you open this book, and you've punched your one-way ticket aboard a runaway hell train on a raucous ride you'll want never to end.

*Horror Bound Magazine*

... a gripping, thought-provoking tale that evokes a strong response within the reader... a dark fantasy that takes the reader on both an adventure-filled ride, but also a spiritual exploration... Action abounds in this thriller... Baxter's prose is better than many in the genre... consistently solid and well-crafted... a gritty, entertaining read that made me think. If you like your speculative fiction a little on the dark side, RealmShift is for you.

*David Wood, author of Dourado and Cibola*

Twice, ensconced in a tram, reading this tale, I missed my stop... Baxter writes with conviction... Physical and dimensional conflict is one of the best features of the tale. Effortless script makes gullible the reader... Prose flows smoothly, almost poetic. RealmShift is a novel I am loath to put down. A most surprising read. Quite a ride.

*Eugen M Bacon, TCM Reviews*

...fast-paced and engrossing... a book that was thoroughly enjoyable. 4 ½ out of 5

*clubreading.com*

...entertaining and thought-provoking ...I enjoyed it immensely... an interesting blend of speculative fiction and thriller.

*Julie Ann Dawson, Gloomwing*

This is a substantial dark fantasy novel written in clear, effective prose... seamlessly constructed with a plot that picks up speed slowly but then barrels towards its conclusion.

*Ed Kane, POD People*

A fast-paced storyline that holds the reader right from the start ... nifty devices galore, from RealmShift to the Balance ... and a no-nonsense story-telling approach that lets the unfolding action speak for itself.

*Van Ikin, editor 'Science Fiction'*

... always on the move it explores an interesting mix of mythologies... a rich novel.

*Infinitas Books*

# MAGESIGN

**ALAN BAXTER**



Gryphonwood

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This book is dedicated to those people whose support  
makes everything possible

John  
my father, greatly missed

&

Halinka  
my wife, beloved



## Prologue

Screams. Echoing through wood panelled corridors, centuries old, bouncing back and forth through night darkened rooms. Cracked eyes in ancient portraits stare wordlessly through the sounds. Scuffed floorboards, worn and polished, lead to more rooms, more corridors. The screams penetrate them all. Darkened windows reflect candlelight and stillness, black mirrors keeping back the night.

History manifests in the smells of wood and incense, camphor and sandalwood. The silent echoes of generations come and gone, the faded stains of blood spilled in halls and hints of joy known in secret places, the rise and fall of the powerful and the weak. History written, revised, written again.

In a large room on the second floor where the screams are loudest, two nuns bustle around a sweating, panting woman on a small cot. The only light from candles and a roaring fire in a huge marble fireplace, dancing, flickering orange glow.

The Bishop stood behind his heavy mahogany desk, his face fixed in an uncomfortable frown, staring at the nuns and the woman on the cot. A moment of silence as the woman paused, gulping down deep breaths, her hands curled like claws on her swollen abdomen. Between each hitched breath she sobbed, tears streaming down her cheeks. One of the nuns gently wiped her face with a damp cloth, the other leaning in between her raised knees.

‘Try again, dear,’ the nun said. ‘It’s coming.’

‘It hurts! It hurts so much!’

The nun looked up, her face twisted in sorrow and pity. ‘Please, try again. Push!’

The woman clenched her teeth and grimaced. With a strained grunt she pushed again, her breath exploding out in another piercing scream. Again and again she pushed and screamed, pushed, screamed, gasping for breath.

‘Why is it so difficult?’ the Bishop burst out, his voice angry and fearful at the same time.

The nun with the damp cloth looked up, her eyes hard. ‘It is not by choice, I’m sure!’

The Bishop strode out from behind his desk, pacing back and forth as though he was the expectant father. ‘I’ve attended a hundred births or more, but this is different. Is the child breach? Is it dead?’

The other nun spoke loudly over the woman’s screams. ‘The child is not breach and there is no indication that it is dead. This poor woman came to us in her darkest hour and the last thing she needs is criticism. Now be patient and be quiet or begone!’

The Bishop’s face twisted in anger at the nun’s words, but he held his tongue. As he stared in frustration at the scene before him the heavy wooden door of the room swung open and three men walked in. Two were priests, but the third wore the official gown of a Cardinal. He approached the Bishop and spoke quickly in Italian. The Bishop’s eyebrows raised and he put up a hand. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand! Please, can you speak English?’

The Cardinal made a wry face. ‘Very well.’ His voice was heavily accented. ‘His Holiness has sent me to see what is occurring here. I see the child has not yet been born.’

The Bishop shook his head, wringing his hands. ‘No, your Eminence, not yet. The birth is proving to be difficult.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, the woman has been in labour for many hours and the child, well, it just refuses to come.’

The Cardinal looked at his watch and nodded shortly. He walked to the cot and looked down on the woman as she screamed and pushed, her voice broken and hoarse. He laid a palm across her forehead before returning to the Bishop. ‘No one is aware of her presence here or her circumstances?’

‘No.’

‘And it has been confirmed that she has never had sexual intercourse?’

The Bishop nodded. ‘When she came to us several weeks ago she was very scared and at a loss. She begged us to help her as she had been ostracised by her family and had nowhere to go. She assured us that she had never been with a man. The nuns inspected her and, to their minds, she is telling the truth.’

The Cardinal pursed his lips. ‘Does she have any explanation for her condition?’

‘No. She claims to have had terrifying dreams, of being raped by demons and of being led into flaming caverns, but her words are the ramblings of a lunatic. She seems otherwise quite sane, but complains of repeated terrifying dreams. She has been complaining lately of a man in her dreams gloating about the imminent birth of her child, but her accounts make no sense.’

As one of the priests scribbled down every word spoken in a small notebook, the Cardinal took the Bishop’s elbow and led him to the window. Looking out into the night he said quietly, ‘Have you investigated her family? Is it possible that she is suffering delusions due to abuse, perhaps from her father? An uncle?’

‘We have considered the possibility but our investigations do not back up the assumption. And the nun’s findings regarding her physically...’

‘Yes, yes, of course. Well, we had better wait until the child is born. Is there anything that can be done to ease her pain or speed up the process?’

The Bishop shook his head. ‘Not really. The nuns are quite capable, they’ve delivered hundreds of children over the years. It makes no sense.’

The Cardinal smiled softly. ‘Well, perhaps the time is not quite right. Let us be patient.’

It was several hours before much changed for the woman on the cot. The nuns looked pale and drawn, the woman herself debilitated, her hair soaked and lank about her face, as dawn smudged the horizon with a pale yellow glow through the grey.

One of the nuns looked up to the four men seated about the large mahogany desk. ‘It’s coming.’



The woman howled, her voice cracking, almost gone, as she pushed again. The nun was crouched between her legs. ‘That’s it, I can see the head now. Good girl, keep pushing. It’s coming.’

The woman pushed and panted as the men came to stand nearer. She screamed again. ‘Oh my God, it hurts! It’s burning like fire!’

The second nun wiped the woman’s face again and again, letting water run down her cheeks and neck.

‘Here it comes. It’s coming quickly now. You’re nearly there!’

The woman sat half upright, her eyes bulging, her face grey and sweatsoaked. Her mouth fell open as she released a long, piercing scream, staring in seeming disbelief between her legs. The men and the nuns all involuntarily staggered back from the force of the scream, their faces shocked, fearful. The nun delivering the child rallied, crouched back down. ‘It’s here!’ she cried. She moved the child into view, cutting and clipping the umbilical. ‘It’s a boy,’ she said, looking up to the mother. The woman was frozen in place, still half sitting up, her mouth still open. The scream had ended but her breath still hissed as she stared. The nun looked at her, staring into her eyes. ‘Are you..?’ she began, then looked down. ‘Oh Lord! Quickly, she’s bleeding heavily! Get towels and... oh my God, so much blood!’

The woman’s blood washed out of her, flooding across the child and the nun’s lap as the woman’s eyes rolled up, her head tipping back limply. Without a sound she collapsed onto the cot. The Cardinal rushed forward, grimacing at the blood, laying his hand on her forehead. ‘Is she dead? What about the child?’

The nun stood with the blood soaked child, her face ashen. ‘I think the child is dying! It’s yet to breathe!’ As she spoke the baby hitched a large breath and wailed, its cry unseemingly loud, bouncing off the wooden walls of the room, echoing like a howl in a canyon. The gathered people stared in amazement. At that moment the huge lead light window behind the desk burst inward, sending shards of glass flying through the air, glittering in the firelight.

Two men clad in black leapt through the shattered pane and jumped across the desk. The two priests turned to face them, their eyes wide in surprise and fear, and were met with silver flashes of steel. Both fell to the ground, blood spraying from gaping slits in their throats. The black clad men stepped over them and made straight for the nun holding the newborn child. The Cardinal stepped between them, his face ashen, one hand raised as he began to speak. No words came and he stared without a sound at the large blade that sank deep into his abdomen. There was a short, sharp sucking sound as the assailant yanked the blade free and reached for the nun with his other hand as the Cardinal fell. Both nuns were screaming as the Bishop ran for the door.

The man holding the nun took the child from her arms, pushing her away, took a blanket from the cot as the other man turned to face the retreating Bishop. Without taking his eyes from the fleeing figure, he reached out and grabbed hold of the nun standing behind the dead mother. He dragged her to him, gripping her hard against his chest. Still staring at the Bishop he uttered harsh and horrible words and

plunged his blade deep into the nun's body. As he hauled the blade out again, blood fountained and the man continued his guttural chanting. The Bishop froze in mid-step, tumbling to the floor, moans of pain escaping his spittle-flecked lips. The man dropped the corpse of the nun to the floor and strode purposefully to the paralysed Bishop. He bent down as the Bishop stared into his face, eyes wide and desperate. He made short, sharp noises as he tried to speak, but his body was not his to command. The assailant's blade flashed once more through the firelight.

The man with the child advanced on the nun that had delivered the baby. She backed away, her mouth working silently, eyes wide and wild. The man kicked her legs from under her, leaning down as she fell, one arm sweeping through a broad arc. There was a gurgling hiss as the nun clasped at her riven throat, then fell still.

Without pause the men were moving again, back over the desk and out through the shattered window. With the child wrapped and held tightly under the arm of one, both assailants dropped down from the granite ledge to the grounds below and disappeared into the dark.

Isiah crouched among charred ruins, elbows on his knees. His face was concerned, a wry twist to his lips. The shining object that had caught his eye was just glass, glinting in the sun. Scorched and blackened by fire it looked like it was once a heavy vase or jug. He stood up again, looking around, his brows creased. *Why would his place be torched? Did he upset other people too?*

The remains of the house still bore some shape and some items were not completely destroyed, but the fire had done a pretty good job. The ash and charcoal was dark and sticky, still damp from the rain that must have put the fire out, all that had prevented the dwelling from being totally razed. The trees all around glistened and dripped from the downpour of the previous night.

The house had been constructed mostly of wood and the fire had had plenty of fuel. Isiah was standing in what appeared to be the main hallway, a few feet inside the remains of the front door. The porch at the front was scorched, but otherwise untouched. It would seem certain that the fire had started inside the house, nearer the back than the front. The hallway lead straight through the building, two rooms off each side, ending in a doorway, or the hint of one at least, that gave into a single large room at the back. The house was raised on stilts about half a metre high, lifting the whole premises off the forest floor. In several places the fire had burned through the floorboards, leaving piles of charcoal mixed in with the detritus and mulch below.

The whole plan of the place was apparent from where Isiah stood, the internal frames of the walls and doors poking up like dead trees, demarking the borders of each room. The roof had mostly burned away, the roof supports collapsed and littered around, furniture and fittings burned and crushed beneath. Isiah sighed. It was going to take hours to sort through all this looking for clues. At least the rain had left him something to sort through. That in itself was a clue. The place had burned furiously the night before, then the rains had quenched it. So was the fire deliberate or was it accidental? Did this Sorcerer guy get away, or were his bones somewhere among the ruin his house had become, grotesque and blackened themselves? If it was deliberate, was it an attack on the Sorcerer or an act of arson? So many questions.

It had been a long time since Isiah's escapade with Samuel Harrigan. Nearly three years overall, one thing and another delaying his plans. But he had finally got around to tracking down this place, the location plucked from Samuel's mind several years before. Even with that information it had taken him a while to finally locate this dwelling, deep in the heavy forest, miles from any other habitation.

The Sorcerer had taught Samuel the old blood magic, taught him to kill for his power, when it was the killing that was controlling him. Samuel had had enormous innate power and a remarkable ability to learn. This Sorcerer, as Samuel had seemed to call him, had used the blood magic to help Samuel realise his potential. Isiah had

vowed to track this mentor down and, by whatever means necessary, prevent him from creating another like Samuel Harrigan.

So, had someone beaten him to it? Or had the Sorcerer run away, destroying all evidence of himself before he left? If so, who was he running from? There was no way that he could have known Isiah was coming for him. Too many questions.

Isiah took a deep breath and began slowly walking through the burnt shell of the house, testing the floorboards as he went, looking for something, anything, that might prevent his search ending here in the damp ashes.

The front room to the right of the hallway was apparently a bedroom, the twisted remains of burned coils and springs half melted in one corner. There had been other furniture, the frame of a chest of drawers, a collapsed wardrobe. The other front room across the hall seemed pretty much the same, except it appeared that the only furniture in there had been a small single bed. A guest room presumably, with no thought of catering for comforts other than a place to lie down.

The next room on the left was obviously the kitchen, though it didn't appear to be a particularly well equipped one. This house was in the middle of nowhere after all, with no power or water. The kitchen contained shards and slivers of glass and crockery shattered by the heat, what appeared to be the remnants of a table and four chairs, various twisted and molten metal objects and, in the far corner, a huge old iron stove. The stove was virtually untouched by the blaze apart from the covering of ash, soot and pieces of charcoaled wood from the walls and ceiling. It was the type of stove that was powered by the large wood burning furnace in its centre that would also heat water from a reservoir outside or on the roof. The collapsed and skewed shell of a large metal rainwater tank sat on the scorched grass outside, pipes and tubes about it like evisceration in freeze-frame.

The next room to the right appeared to be a store room. It was the smallest of the rooms and blackened among the ashes were metal buckets and mop heads. There was also a large, old copper bathtub, no doubt filled from numerous kettles heated on the big stove. Old style country living. The price for secluded privacy and anonymity. Isiah could remember the days when this sort of house was the norm and all his baths had been in tubs of water heated on the stove, or freezing dips in rivers or lakes. He remembered the pleasure of summertime, when waters outside would be warm enough to enjoy. The world marched on and times changed. Isiah grinned crookedly. Nostalgia for past decades, past centuries, that's all it was. He decided to start searching in more detail in the large room at the back of the house. No doubt it was the main living area and would most likely contain more clues.

The back end of the house was completely gone, the floorboards disappearing in a ragged edge like torn canvas, damp forest beyond. The level of damage in this room was far worse than the rest of the house. There was no doubt that the fire started, or was lit, here. Probably against the back wall. If the fire had been deliberately lit here, then no doubt this was where its consuming heat was most required.

Isiah walked into the room and turned slowly in a circle, scanning the blackened remains with his eyes and mind. He let his will spread gently through the room, searching for the psychic echoes of activities that might help him pinpoint what had happened here. When magic was performed, when matter and energy were manipulated, a kind of residue was left behind, like the invisible grease that even the cleanest of fingers can leave on a surface. As a crime investigator might dust for fingerprints, Isiah mentally scanned for magicprints. In the old days they had called it MageSign.

The whole place reeked of bad MageSign. The residue of manipulation was rife and at the same time blurred and indistinct. So much magic in one place had smudged the fingerprints, and the fire had burned so much of the material things to nothing that the echoes had further reduced. There was no detail other than the overriding knowledge that just about all the magical activity in here had been bad. It had involved pain and suffering, sacrifice and debauchery. This Sorcerer was certainly an evil soul.

Then Isiah's roving eyes caught something, his sight catching a detail like a piece of clothing snagged on a thorny branch. Almost invisible in the monochrome blackness of the charred remains, it looked like a small metal cabinet half buried by the blackened, fallen roof. Two drawers, one above the other. The cabinet was bowed by the heat and the sides and front were rippled and blackened.

He approached the cabinet and crouched before it. He tentatively tugged at the handle of the top drawer, then smiled wryly as the handle came away in his fingers with a metallic pop. He looked around the cabinet, trying to estimate just how jammed the drawers might be. Brushing aside some of the larger lumps of charcoaled wood, he put his hands to either side of the cabinet, near the top, and squeezed.

Isiah's strength was not comparable to that of a normal man. Centuries of training and development, along with a seemingly unsurpassed ability to manipulate matter and thought, made him incomparable to a normal man in just about every respect. His abilities were infinitely more than sufficient to straighten an old office cabinet constructed of thin metal.

As the cabinet straightened, the metal groaning and creaking, blackened paint flaking off, he grasped the top drawer with his mind. He pulled with psychic strength that far outweighed his enormous physical strength. With a tooth curling screech of metal the drawer slid jerkily out, the sound unreal and loud in the still, dripping forest. Isiah let it come all the way and lowered it to the ground. Now he could see everything in the top drawer and the lower drawer was visible in the gap that was left. The cabinet popped back into its twisted shape with a dull clang as he let go.

Disappointing. There were papers in the drawers, but the heat had baked them brown like old parchment and black all around the edges. As Isiah tried to gingerly lift the top sheet it crumbled in his fingers. The writing on it was illegible, burned and smeared. The fire must have raged at an intense heat.

He brushed aside the top sheets, letting them fall apart like the finest ice, to see if the papers below were better preserved. The top papers did seem to have protected the others somewhat, but it still made no difference. There were diagrams and writing, some typewritten text, most handwritten. All of it illegible. Isiah leaned forward to look down into the bottom drawer, still trapped in the deformed cabinet. That drawer contained nothing at all.

'Fuck!' Isiah stood up, hands on his hips, looked around impatiently. Something was wrong here, it was all just too convenient. There was no way the Sorcerer could have known he was coming; he had only decided himself the day before. He knew from Samuel's mind which part of which country to come to and had travelled there, using the unique ability that had become so much a habit for him, letting his body lose molecular cohesion and simply disappearing from one place and reappearing in another. Distance and time were irrelevant to him.

So why did it feel like the place had been deliberately torched the night before he had arrived? Why did it feel like there was no way that he would find anything because all the important stuff had been taken away before the fire was lit? Call it instinct, but Isiah certainly felt like the clown in this circus. It was possible that this Sorcerer had used some kind of divination magic. The guy was powerful, no doubt about that. Was it possible that he had the kind of natural power and ability that Samuel had displayed? This Sorcerer had had the power to teach Samuel an awful lot, that much was certain. But if Isiah himself had not decided to come here until yesterday, how could the Sorcerer have divined his intent so quickly? Could the Sorcerer perform a divination like that every day out of sheer paranoia? The idea seemed preposterous. However Isiah looked at it he knew that he was missing something and he knew that there would be little or no clue to be found. But this place was the only lead he had.

He squatted, looking around the charred room. He pulled an old leather pouch from the inside pocket of his battered leather jacket. With practiced deftness he rolled himself a cigarette and determined to continue looking until something turned up. He put the cigarette between his lips and, with a quick twist of the mind, the end flared alight. He took a deep draw, then blew fragrant bluegrey smoke out in a swirling cloud. If there was any clue to be found, he would find it. He wouldn't be beaten until all the possibilities had been exhausted.

While he smoked he further checked the MageSign, letting his mind roam across the whole plan of the house. With all the walls burned and fallen he could see pretty much all of the place from where he squatted and the places he couldn't see with his eyes he scoured with his mind alone. The whole place was soaked in evil MageSign, all of it blurred, smudged.

Out of curiosity he let his scanning mind drift beyond the edges of the house, his will gently creeping across the grass, among the trees, his eyes following its course. The MageSign was certainly strongest at the house, but it seemed to extend out into the forest in every direction too. It was not unusual for the residue of such large and intense amounts of magic to swell and spread beyond the confines of where the

manipulation took place, but this was different. The MageSign spread too far, at least several hundred yards into the forest in every direction. It even seemed to emanate from the ground and the trees themselves. When he had first arrived and carefully scanned as he approached, the strength of MageSign at the house had been overwhelming and he had not noticed the underlying 'Sign throughout the area. Now, as he concentrated, the evidence was there. This place was hugely charged, soaked in manipulative activity since centuries past.

He stood and wandered to the ragged edge of the house, jumped down to the charred grass below. He walked out into the trees for a few yards before crouching again. He flicked his cigarette away, not bothering to look as it spun end over end a couple of times before it vanished, his mind sending its molecules in a hundred million random directions. Pressing his palms flat against the damp, loamy earth, he let the MageSign drift across his mind, let his consciousness sink down into the earth, into the manipulative residue. Into the past.

It was all imagery and interpretation on his part to make any sense of it, but the overwhelming sensation was one of death and sacrifice. Enormous magics had been worked here, hundreds of years ago, but their legacy remained, staining the land. Isiah's mouth twisted in disgust as he let his consciousness sink deeper, letting the history of the place creep through his thoughts. There had been something here that people feared and revered, something that had required enormous amounts of blood to satiate its evil desires. People had been here for centuries, slaughtering and sacrificing, trying to sate that thirst, using the blood to appease this thing and using its evil benevolence to work the most despicable magics. Isiah stood swiftly with a gasp, his hands coming away from the earth with a sound of damp protest. He gripped his hands into fists and drew in a deep, shuddering breath, letting the fresh, rain-scented air fill his lungs.

It was long over and the details were vague. Details always were when he looked this way, his interpretations based on feelings, emotions, residual magic, the vibrations of the land itself. But he had been around several hundred years and experience was often his greatest ally. He was rarely wrong with his interpretations.

However long ago it was and however vague the details had become, one thing was obvious. This was a place of great power, a place where huge manipulations had been worked and all at the expense of gallons of spilled blood. No wonder the Sorcerer had chosen this place to set up home. Perhaps the blood magic that he practiced was the same blood magic that had been worked here centuries ago. Perhaps he had some ancestral lineage to this place and held ancient, secret knowledge. That would be some very interesting history indeed.

But it was all speculation, academic, unless Isiah could track this Sorcerer down. The more he learned the more determined he was to find this black mage and find out all the detailed truth. And then finish his reign.

As he turned to head back to the ruined house his senses prickled. He dropped into a crouch among the trees and froze, becoming instantly as still and solid as a granite statue, his breath stopped. Someone was coming. Here in the middle of a

forest miles from anywhere, who would come? Hope against hope that it would be the Sorcerer returning, only to find his home destroyed. But Isiah was convinced that the Sorcerer had torched his own house. It was partly intuition that told him this, partly the distinct lack of clues. So most likely this was someone else entirely, but they might know where the Sorcerer could be found.

As these thoughts passed through Isiah's mind he let his consciousness fan out before him, seeking the approaching person. He found the man walking along the rough track that led to the house. Isiah pulled back his probing mind. If this person had any level of ability, even a fraction of Isiah's, he would likely sense a probing mind. Everyday people with no thought of the supernatural at all could usually sense such a thing, but having no idea what it was their rational brains brushed it off. More often than not people's brains simply ignored things that they didn't understand or want to see. But if this person was associated with the Sorcerer then it was quite possible that his mind was more developed than the average Joe.

Isiah could see across the burnt, irregular platform of the house from his position among the trees. He produced a deeper shadow about himself and mentally pulled a couple of branches lower, their droplet covered foliage adding to his camouflage, and waited. After a couple of seconds the man appeared through the trees and approached the burnt dwelling. He didn't seem at all surprised to find the house in the state it was.

The man was a strange looking soul, tall and rangy, long, lank hair, maybe twice as long as Isiah's shaggy, shoulder length hair. The stranger wore all black clothes, jeans and shirt, with a heavy black overcoat and boots, his face and hands grubby and rough. He looked more like a tramp than anything else. As the stranger stepped up onto the broken porch Isiah got a psychic waft of his personality and locked down his mind, smothering himself in magical cloaks to mask his own aura. This person certainly had some ability, his power surrounding him like a bad smell. A person that could manipulate matter and energy had a presence that was undeniable to another person with talent. Ordinary people could sense the power of the magical too, but usually didn't understand it, or put it down to some natural charisma or 'bad vibe'. Isiah was very good at masking himself from all and sundry, his anonymity and privacy extremely important to him. And, in a situation like this, more than important to prevent his being discovered by the black garbed stranger. Isiah would follow him when he left. Perhaps the Sorcerer was not so elusive after all.

Isiah's mask was tested as the stranger walked to the large back room of the house and paused, turning slowly in a full circle, his eyes searching the trees around the ruined house. Isiah felt his mind sweep past, searching. The man's mind was black and oily, its touch not dissimilar to the sensation of a spider scuttling across a naked arm in the dark. Inside and out this stranger was unclean and impure. Isiah grimaced, pulling his psychic cloak tighter as he hunched in artificial shadow.

The man seemed satisfied. He looked at the floor, his eyes scouring for something. After a moment he moved forward and dropped to his knees, began scraping away piles of soot and ash with his hands. He spent a couple of minutes



clearing a space on the floor about two feet square, then sat back on his heels. He pressed his palms together, as if in prayer, closed his eyes. He began to chant, his voice rough and guttural, the words unintelligible. Isiah was fluent in just about every language known to man, ancient and modern, but these were words he couldn't understand. But he recognised them. This was the language of the blood magic that Harrigan had used.

As the man chanted his hands parted and he pulled back the left sleeve of his coat. His forearm was criss-crossed with scars, some old and puckered, some newer, pink, angry. Continuing his chant with his eyes closed, he reached his right hand into his coat pocket and withdrew a long, bright Bowie knife. For all his filth and dereliction, his knife was extremely well maintained. As his voice rose, his incantation becoming faster and more frenzied, he stretched his left arm out, angled slightly downwards, palm facing the floor with his fingers splayed wide. Suddenly his voice barked out three staccato words and the knife gleamed as it arced outwards and down, the blade sweeping its length across the exposed flesh of his forearm.

The man leaned back on his heels, turning his face up to the sky as he hissed in pain and blood flooded his arm, running in fast moving rivulets across his spread fingers, dripping onto the floor. Isiah felt the surge of the man's will as he worked his magic. A dull light pulsed up from the floor as the air shimmered with RealmShift. Under the cover of the intense activity Isiah let his mask drop slightly and sensed around the man, searching for where that portal he had just created might lead. It was a small pocket of non-space, a place where time and matter didn't exist. It was infinitesimally small and infinitely large at the same time, a bubble of pure thought squeezed between worlds. It must have been created by the Sorcerer as a safe hold. It was linked to this spot in this Realm, anchored to the edges of reality like a limpet to a rock. Only able to be opened by those that could manipulate space and energy, it made for one of the most impregnable safes imaginable. It had been decades, possibly centuries, since Isiah had seen one of these.

He watched the man's blood run down into the portal and shook his head. This Sorcerer obviously had more people convinced that blood was required to manipulate matter and energy. It was all a matter of belief and willpower, but these people needed the idea of blood and hate and pain to conceptualise their magic. Weak, despicable sheep. He wondered how many more there might be.

With a gasp the man snapped his fingers closed into a fist and dragged a stained cloth from his pocket. He wrapped the cloth tightly around his gashed forearm and tied a knot in it, pulling it tight with his teeth like a junkie preparing to shoot. He shook the blood off his hand and wiped his fingers on his coat. He leaned forward, looking into the inconceivable depths of the portal. Slowly, deliberately, he reached down into the dull glow, one hand supporting him on the burnt floorboards as he reached in, stretching his arm to its length. As his shoulder neared the light he turned his face away from it, as if the light was too bright or too hot to bear. With a grimace he searched around in the portal, grasping for something. Isiah could see under the house from his position and had the strange vantage point of seeing the

man's arm disappear into the floor of the house to his shoulder but not appear underneath.

After a moment more the man sat back up onto his heels, drawing in a deep breath and pulling something up through the portal. It was a small leather bag, a pouch with a drawstring top. Isiah tried to sense what it might be but the surge of energies from the portal and the magic the stranger had worked swamped any detail.

*Too much damn noise!*

With a sweeping gesture of his arm the stranger made the portal snap closed with a soft thud and a coppery flash of RealmShift. Isiah pulled his mental cloak tight again, hiding in self created nothingness once more. The man stood and turned on his heel, striding across the broken house and back towards the small track that lead away into the trees. As he went he stuffed the leather pouch deep into his coat pocket.

Isiah stood up as the man disappeared between the trees, letting go of the branches and the artificial darkness. With a measured step he headed the way the man had gone, following at a safe distance. Isiah's life had been spent in many forms of training, various studies in magics and energy manipulation, languages, philosophies, religions, but also extensive studies of martial arts, tracking and survival. Slipping away from the path and into the trees he moved silently as a cat, keeping to shadows and heavy foliage. He kept the man in view between tree trunks as he went, always at a safe distance, determined to follow this filthy stranger wherever he might go. He wanted to know where the Sorcerer was and he also wanted to know what was in that pouch. And if the Sorcerer had cleared up so well before leaving, how did he come to forget that? As he slipped through the trees like smoke Isiah smiled to himself. *This is suddenly becoming very interesting!*

A howling gale caused leafless branches of crooked trees to scratch and scrape on the leadlight windows. By flickering orange firelight three men sat, each reclined in a leather wingback chair arranged in a crescent in front of the hearth. The room was a library, every wall covered floor to ceiling with shelves crammed with books, from ancient leather bound volumes to modern paperbacks and magazines. Two of the men leaned toward each other, chatting quietly, while the third stared deep into the dancing flames, his face creased in a worried frown, his hands kneading nervously. There was a slight sneer to his frown, the wavering shadows making his face appear animated, the flesh undulating. It was a gaunt, old face, lined and rough. And it was a mean face, the eyes small, penetrating. The gaunt man shot out one hand, grabbing one of the other men roughly by the shoulder. 'Shut up your inane waffle!'

The man jumped in surprise, his face shocked. 'Sorry. We are just... excited at the prospect.'

The gaunt man turned in his chair, leaning towards the other two. 'Excitement, Braden, is not what we need here now. We need clear thinking, caution, strategy. We don't need grown men acting like children at Christmas.'

Braden's face paled under the harsh stare of the gaunt man. 'Yes, Dominus, of course. But the things you plan! It is no mystery that you are known as the Sorcerer. The magics will be truly awesome.'

The Sorcerer shook his head, his eyes piercing Braden's face. 'A time of great trials is approaching and we may well have our greatest hour, but we will not let anything fall apart due to over-confidence or a misplaced ease of mind. Do you understand?' Braden nodded sullenly. The Sorcerer leaned forward to see the other man in the farthest chair. 'Colley?' Averting his eyes from the Sorcerer's harsh stare, Colley nodded too.

The Sorcerer sat back in his chair once more, steepling his fingers before his face as he stared into the depths of the fire. The fireplace was enormous, gothic swirls of marble and iron. The fire roared and leapt amongst huge logs piled in the grate, yet it only just gave warmth enough to heat the room. The Sorcerer sneered, his top lip curling as he cursed again this terrible, ancient home. Always cold and dank, the thick stone walls almost slimy to the touch. He had had fires like this blazing in every room for weeks and the cold had barely begun to lift from the place. But it was a solid, strong house, well removed from the rest of society, nestled among the forests and fields of this old country estate, isolated on these forsaken Yorkshire Moors of northern England. In the depths of winter it was a harsh and lonely place to be, but that was the point. It was extremely fortunate that the Sorcerer had discovered Braden and subsequently discovered that Braden owned this old manor. With the Sorcerer's added funds to make it liveable once more it had become an ideal base. At least for the time being. He would certainly approve.

As the thought of Him passed through his mind the Sorcerer took a deep, shuddering breath. He would not be well pleased if He got another report that the

child was yet to arrive; they must arrive tonight. Still staring at the leaping flames the Sorcerer said, 'Braden, tell me exactly the message you received today.'

Braden and Colley had been sitting in silence since the Sorcerer's earlier admonition. Braden sat forward. 'It was very brief, Dominus. It was a phone call that simply said, "Arrive England tonight. At base by midnight. Child safe." Then the phone was hung up.'

The Sorcerer nodded. 'Well, how long till midnight?'

'It's just gone eleven now, Sir,' Colley piped up. 'I've been watching the time.'

Again the Sorcerer nodded, wincing at Colley's puppy-like desire to please. He was a typical old English fruit, loved his Noel Coward and his jazz music and he drove the Sorcerer to distraction. But to get the house he had needed Braden, and Colley and Braden were a package.

As he thought this a tingling sensation swept over him and he stood. Braden and Colley looked up, surprised. 'Someone is coming,' the Sorcerer said. 'Get the basement opened up.'

Braden and Colley cast nervous glances at each other. 'Excellent,' Braden said, rubbing his hands together. 'At last the fun begins!'

Colley chuckled. 'So true, my dear chap!'

The Sorcerer whipped up one arm, the sleeve of his heavy coat swinging in an arc, and thrust his open palm towards the two men. With cries of surprise and pain the two of them stumbled backwards, falling over their chairs, felled by a powerful, invisible force. 'Just do it!' the Sorcerer roared. He strode over to the two prone men and leaned over them, holding his palms out, fingers spread. Colley and Braden clutched their heads, groaning and gasping. The Sorcerer's voice was quiet, menacing. 'I am sick of your Scooby Doo antics. This is very real and before long you two are going to find out just how real it is. Now move!' With the last word, he released his psychic grip on the two lovers and turned on his heel, strode from the room. The men, stunned and wide eyed, scrambled to their feet, ran from the library and down the hall.

The Sorcerer walked to the front door, his long coat floating out behind him. The door was heavy oak, banded and studded, set in an arch of red brick. The house itself was relatively small, only four bedrooms along with the library, dining area, lounge, kitchen and bathrooms, though each room was large and high-ceilinged. But the house also had a marvellous, huge old fashioned cellar. While Braden and Colley rushed to unlock the cellar and get candles and lamps lit, the Sorcerer opened the door.

Wind gusted in, a light sleet blowing sideways across the front of the broad porch. A small wooden bench ran down each side, like the entrance to an old church, a steel boot scraper in the shape of a cat arching its back secured into the red tile floor. The Sorcerer winced against the gale as he stared out into the driving sleet. He could feel them out there. It would not be long before he saw and heard them too. The driveway to the house was a long, twisting gravel road that came from the main road some two kilometres through oak and beech trees. There was a

surprising amount of forest throughout the grounds of this estate considering the place was almost totally isolated in the middle of rolling moors. At least, isolated by English standards. The only vehicle access to the house was along the winding drive from the small road. That road led to a small village east about six kilometres and the other way to a main road some eight kilometres away. That main road led eventually to the walled city of York.

Yellow lights cut a watery glow through the rain and trees as a car came into view along the drive. The sound of the engine was lost in the howling wind and the staccato beat of the sleet on the slate tile roof. The car, a small rented hatchback with a company logo on the door, pulled right up to the house. Two men got out, one carrying a large sports holdall, the other carrying a wrapped bundle close to his chest, bending over it to protect it from the weather. The Sorcerer stepped back and let the two men into the hallway.

‘Well done, my boys,’ the Sorcerer said, holding out his hands.

The man with the bundle gingerly unwrapped some of the covering and handed the tiny child over. His rugged, unshaven face showed no small relief at unburdening himself. He nodded at the Sorcerer and shot a quick half-smile at his partner.

The Sorcerer held the child and looked down into its face. ‘So tiny,’ he murmured, ‘just hours from the womb.’ He looked up, his face splitting in a wide grin. ‘Well done, Jake, Chris. You will be rewarded for your efforts.’

‘I’m just glad to have finally handed you that child,’ Jake said smiling. ‘Service to Him is reward enough for both of us.’

Chris nodded agreement, looking at the child with hard eyes.

‘The two pricks that own this place, they still around?’ Jake asked.

The Sorcerer smiled. ‘They are, and they’re serving a purpose. But perhaps it’s time that they served their final purpose. After all, this child looks hungry to me. You haven’t fed it anything?’

Jake shook his head. ‘We followed your instructions to the letter. But it looks very weak and it’s been getting quieter and less active over the last few hours. I was worried that it might die.’

‘It might, Jake, especially if we don’t move quickly. But this is no ordinary child.’ The Sorcerer stopped talking and looked up at the ceiling, eyes glazed, his mouth slightly open. After a moment he took a quick breath, wincing. ‘Yes, yes, of course,’ he said, still looking upwards. His eyes swung back to Jake and Chris. ‘We must hurry. Chris, in the library there is a manila folder. Jake, come with me.’

The Sorcerer turned and strode purposefully along the hallway. Under the stairs, just before the kitchen door, another large wooden door stood ajar. Watery light leaked out around its edges. The Sorcerer pulled it open and started down the worn stone steps into the cellar, Jake close behind him. A moment later Chris followed, carrying a pale beige folder in one large, rough hand.

The cellar had a relatively high ceiling, easily enough for Jake and Chris to stand up to their full height, each of them over six feet tall. The floor was of heavy

flagstones, with brick pillars throughout, supporting the house above. Several sections of the cellar had been partitioned off in one way or another over the years, making small rooms and closets. One area was reserved for a wine collection, dust covered bottles laying like ranks of old soldiers. The Sorcerer led the way through the cellar, until it opened up into one large room. Small oil lamps lit the way, but here huge black candles burned, their wax dropping and coiling into mesmerising shapes and puddles. Along one side of the room was a large wooden cabinet, with an array of objects on top, daggers, old manuscripts, bottles, jars. In the middle of the room lay a large stone sarcophagus, its sides carved with intricate swirling patterns. The lid was removed, stood up against the wall behind. Inside the sarcophagus was lined with a deep red silk. A black cushion was pressed into one end.

Braden and Colley, wrapped in heavy coats, turned as the others entered, candle tapers in their hands. ‘It’s all ready,’ Braden said. ‘It’s cold as Iceland down here, but all the candles are lit. Perhaps we can run some extension cords down from upstairs and plug in some radiators or bar heaters to warm this place up.’

The Sorcerer stood staring at the stone coffin, his mouth twisted in a sneer of disgust. ‘What the fuck is that?’

Braden and Colley exchanged a nervous glance. Behind the Sorcerer, Jake and Chris chuckled. ‘Er...’ Braden stammered. ‘What’s what?’

‘The bedsheets and pillow in the fucking coffin!’ the Sorcerer roared.

Colley stepped forward, his face white, his hands locked together in front of his chest. ‘It was me, sir, I put them there. I made the pillow myself. I thought that some comfort wouldn’t go astray in that cold, stone coffin.’

The Sorcerer handed the child to Jake, then turned to face Colley. ‘You *thought*? Hmm? You see, that’s the problem, Colley. You think a lot, but you don’t listen so well. Did I ask you to line the damn thing with teenage goth silk bedclothes? Colley’s mouth opened and closed, his whole body trembling. The Sorcerer leaned to within an inch of his nose. ‘*Did I?*’ he bellowed.

Colley staggered backwards. ‘No, sir, you didn’t. I’m sorry, I...’ His words cut off with a dull thud as the back of the Sorcerer’s hand whipped across his face. He spun and fell to his hands and knees, whimpering as blood trailed off his already swelling lip.

Braden stepped forward, his eyes wide. ‘I say, Dominus...’ He never finished his sentence as the Sorcerer’s gaze drilled into his eyes.

The Sorcerer dragged Colley up by his collar and pushed him toward the sarcophagus. ‘Take it all away, you idiot. I’m getting so sick of you two and your parlour games. You read some Aleister Crowley and some ancient Wiccan texts and think you know all about dark forces. You think you can become great evil wizards and bend men to your will. What happened the first time you tried to summon a demon? Huh? What happened?’ Braden stared at the floor as Colley kept his back to the Sorcerer. ‘Just as well I happened to be around to bail you out, isn’t it? And still you play your stupid games! You’re an embarrassment to our Order.’

Colley dragged all the silk and the pillow from the stone coffin. He scuttled away with it, still whimpering, the back of one hand pressed against his mouth. The Sorcerer took the child back from Jake and laid it down in the coffin. He pulled aside the blankets that wrapped it and looked down at the tiny, frail form. It was very still, its skin pale, chalky. Its eyes were half open, its mouth working feebly. 'I think he really is hungry,' the Sorcerer said. His focus completely on the baby he muttered softly under his breath, old, powerful words. The child's eyes opened, staring into the Sorcerer's own, its tiny hands clutching at the air between them.

As Colley slunk back into the room the Sorcerer turned to face Braden. Keeping his eyes on Braden he reached toward Chris, who handed him the folder. 'So, Braden,' the Sorcerer said. 'You are well aware of our task. I have educated you in the power of our Lord, educated you in the untold chaos that we will unleash on this world through our efforts?'

Braden nodded vigorously, his face enraptured. 'Oh yes, Dominus. I believe and I will serve!'

The Sorcerer smiled. 'Good. Prove your faith. Sign these.' He handed Braden the folder.

'What's this?'

'The deeds and titles to your house and estates. The papers attached have been prepared by the best lawyers. Once you sign and I sign, and Jake here witnesses the signatures, this whole estate will belong to me.'

Braden's mouth fell open. 'But this is my family estate. It's belonged my family for centuries.'

The Sorcerer's smile was evil. 'Then what better symbol of your undying commitment to our cause?'

Braden stood trembling, his eyes wild. 'I don't know, Dominus. I am here to help you in every way. I have offered my old family home for your use. The meetings we had here were marvellous. But it's my home, Dominus, my family home. I can't just sign it away.'

The Sorcerer remained quiet while Braden rambled. Eventually, taking a step forward, he said quietly, 'You can't?'

Braden shook, his face as white as one of his bone china dinner plates. 'I... I don't want to!'

The Sorcerer laughed out loud, his head tipping backwards. His laughter stopped dead and he spun to face Colley, one hand stretched out. He turned his hand over, his fingers curling in, his lips silently mouthing hideous words. Colley slapped both hands to either side of his head, crying out in pain. 'No! No, stop!'

Braden dropped the folder, ran to his lover's side, tears in his eyes, staring at the Sorcerer. 'What are you doing? Leave him alone!'

'Sign the papers.'

'You bastard, you can't do this!'

The Sorcerer laughed again. ‘Really? Why not? You thought you wanted a life of evil. You wanted a life of chaos and suffering. Well, now you’re right in the middle of it. Sign the papers.’

Colley dropped to his knees, blood trickling from his ears and nose. Braden dropped down beside him. ‘Stop it, for Christ’s sake, stop it! You’re hurting him!’

The Sorcerer grinned. ‘For *Christ’s* sake? Now that’s not who you pray to is it? And I’m not hurting him. I’m killing him.’

Colley fell forward, his voice rising in pitch as he howled in pain, his hands pressing against his head as though he were trying to crush it himself. Braden scrambled on hands and knees to the folder and whipped it open. ‘All right, I’ll sign! Please let him go.’

The Sorcerer dropped his hand and Colley collapsed face forward onto the cold flagstone floor, gasping. ‘That’s better.’ He threw a pen down to Braden, who signed the papers with a shaking hand. With pure malice in his eyes, he handed the folder back. The Sorcerer passed it to Chris. ‘We’ll countersign and witness that later, all right, Jake?’

Jake nodded, throwing a grin at Chris. ‘Sure thing.’

Braden was on his knees beside Colley, cradling his lover’s head in his lap. ‘What have you done to him?’

The Sorcerer strode over and dragged Colley up by his collar. He looked over at Jake. ‘Hold onto Braden, will you?’

Jake took hold of Braden’s arm with one huge, meaty hand. Braden looked at his arm, held in a vice-like grip, then back at the Sorcerer. ‘What are you doing?’

The Sorcerer took a deep breath as he dragged Colley over to the head of the sarcophagus. ‘Quite frankly, you fucking freak, I’m sick and tired of you and your faggot lover here. Plus, you’ve almost served your purpose.’

Braden began to shake violently, clawing at Jake’s hand. Jake cuffed him across the chin, stunning him slightly. ‘What are you going to do?’ Braden wailed.

Colley was uncertain on his feet as the Sorcerer stood him over the end of the coffin. Pressing Colley’s hips against the cold stone, the Sorcerer bent him over, holding onto the back of his collar with one hand. Colley’s head was suspended over the child. A bead of blood from Colley’s nose dripped onto the child’s face and the child’s eyes opened wide for an instant, its mouth gasping. Standing behind Colley, holding him in place, the Sorcerer looked at Braden with a sneer. ‘Is this how you fuck him? Bent over a coffin?’

Braden tried to spit at the Sorcerer, his face a mask of hatred. ‘Fuck you! What are you doing?’

The Sorcerer reached into the pocket of his heavy coat with his free hand. Colley struggled weakly, trying to stand up straight, his hands grasping at the sides of the coffin. The Sorcerer pulled a bright steel knife from his pocket, candle light reflecting silver-yellow off its six inch blade. Braden cried out, incomprehensible. ‘What am I doing?’ the Sorcerer asked. ‘I’m feeding the baby.’



With one swift motion the blade swept around and straight across Colley's thin, pale throat. Blood poured from the broad gash in an arterial flood, showering over the child. The Sorcerer muttered the words of his magic, holding tightly as Colley bucked once, twice, before collapsing limp. As Braden screamed the baby stretched its arms into the waterfall of blood, clutching and grasping at the hot, red fluid. The blood poured over the child and into his mouth and the child gulped and gurgled. Little arms and legs squirmed and writhed, his small body arching up into the flow, drinking deeply, the movement of the newborn unnatural. 'He entered this world in a bath of his virgin mother's lifeblood,' the Sorcerer whispered, 'and his first meal is swallowed from the bloodbath of another. We begin here the creation of untold power.'

After a moment more it was over, the Sorcerer throwing Colley's body off to one side. Braden was sobbing, wringing his hands as he tried in vain to break Jake's grasp to get to his dead lover.

The Sorcerer looked around. 'Chris, take the corpse outside and dispose of it, would you?'

Chris nodded. 'Sure. I'll get something to roll it up in.' He turned and trotted from the room.

'Jake, tie this fuckwit up and gag him. Tie him up tight. The child will need to feed often.' The Sorcerer leaned down and stared into Braden's terrified eyes. 'I told you it was no ordinary child. It was born in blood and it will have a lot more before we're done here. You and your lover should be proud of the service you're providing.'

The Sorcerer turned and strode from the room, leaving Jake to tie and gag Braden. In the stone coffin, the baby boy gurgled happily as it wriggled and squirmed in the puddle of blood soaking the blanket almost to blackness. Slowly, the blood seemed to soak into the child, absorbed through its skin. Its eyes closed and it settled quietly.

Isiah crouched among foliage once more, his aura solidly masked. The filthy stranger stood by a battered old Ford, searching in his voluminous coat pockets. Isiah couldn't help sniggering as he watched the man become more frustrated by the moment. He had spent a few minutes already searching. Isiah could only imagine that it was his car keys that he had lost. The dirt road, dust and gravel with pot holes like small ponds after the rains, led for about five kilometres from the road to this point, then became a walking track for another kilometre before reaching the Sorcerer's house. Isiah had easily and silently followed the man to his car, but following the car once he got it open might prove more difficult, especially when he got out onto the open road. The man let out a growling exhalation, staring in through the driver's door window, fists planted on his hips. Isiah suppressed another laugh. *Looks like Filthy's locked his keys in his car!* It was a wonder that he had bothered to lock the car at all, so far from anywhere. Such were the habits of modern living.

Filthy stood staring in the window for a minute, then turned and began searching the ground. After a moment he bent down and picked up a long, gnarled stick from the wet gravel. It snapped within seconds of being inserted in the gap between the window and door skin. Isiah settled back on his heels comfortably, preparing to enjoy the show.

The ragged stranger stood and stared at the broken end of the stick for several seconds, his gaze accusatory. Once again he patted down his pockets. After a moment he drew the large Bowie knife out and stroked its blade gently. It was obviously something that he held in higher esteem than his own person. He inserted the blade into the gap between window and door, began jiggling the knife, trying to free the lock. For a minute or two he worked away at the door, worrying one side of his bottom lip with his teeth in concentration. His anger began to grow as he got no result. It was quite apparent to Isiah that there was an awful lot of anger in this man, barely suppressed. The suppression of that anger was lost as he gave up. Standing up straight with a growl of fury, he reversed his grip on the knife hilt, the blade pointing towards his body. He drew back his arm and slammed the rounded end of the knife hilt into the window with a strength that seemed disproportional to his wiry frame. The window burst inwards, thousands of tiny, glittering squares showering across the dashboard and driver's seat.

Filthy pulled up the lock inside the door almost hard enough to rip it free and wrenched the door open. He leaned in and brushed the broken glass off the seat and dash, leaving it in a pile like miniature ice cubes on the gravel road. He got in and started the engine, thick black smoke bursting in a roiling cloud from the exhaust pipe. With spinning tyres and a spray of gravel the car slewed in a tight u-turn and roared off along the uneven road, bumping and bouncing crazily as it went.

Isiah waited another few seconds until the car was a couple of hundred yards away, then stood from his hiding place. Keeping his mask in place, though holding it less tightly, he began to run through the trees at a preternatural pace, his feet sure, dodging between trunks and ducking branches. He caught up to within about twenty metres of the car and held his pace, trailing the pluming cloud of dust and spraying water as Filthy roared towards the main road.

It only took a few minutes to reach the asphalt, though it must have taken several years off the life of the already aged Ford. Without even pausing to check for oncoming traffic Filthy skidded the car out onto the road and floored it. Isiah knew that there was a town some thirty miles away in that direction, but his destination could be anywhere. As Isiah cleared the trees at the end of the gravel road he slung out his consciousness, Anchoring a small part of his mind to the vehicle, a mental tracking device. He could have marked Filthy in the same way, but would certainly have been sensed. He just hoped the man would stick with the same car until he reached his destination. All the time the car didn't get too far away Isiah would be able to feel it. If it got beyond his range he would lose it, but the Anchor would remain and he would be able to sense it once he came within range again. However,

it was the person and not the car that was most important and Isiah wanted to keep up if he could.

With a sigh and a slight shake of his head he began to sprint after the car. He had simply Travelled here and had not considered that he might need a car to trail someone. Still, he could sprint at speeds far in excess of normal people with his heightened abilities, though he could only keep up speeds like that for a finite amount of time. Keeping his mind on his Anchor he concentrated on his breath and set himself a pace. Hopefully another car would come by and he could convince the driver to help him, whether the driver really wanted to or not.

He had run for some miles, keeping as close as possible to the Ford, when he got a lucky break. A sign posted a truck stop just ahead. It was not long before he reached it. Filthy had driven straight past, barrelling on towards his destination. Isiah slowed to a normal pace and jogged into the car park, breathing hard.

There were a few large trucks parked across the back of the gravel lot, but only two cars. One was a small family compact with a baby seat strapped in the back. Isiah let his mind wander into the diner and felt a woman and child in there, the woman changing the baby in the bathroom. He couldn't take her vehicle in good conscience. So the decision was made. The other car was a station wagon, quite good condition. As Isiah strolled towards it he probed into the engine and electrics with his mind and triggered the ignition. Popping the lock as he got within a few feet he pulled open the door and jumped in. He saw a man in a suit frantically waving a half eaten sandwich at him through the plate glass window of the diner as he sped away, back out onto the highway. Concentrating on the Anchor he had put on the Ford, he accelerated hard, trying to make up lost ground.

It wasn't long before he eased off on the accelerator as the rusty, dented Ford appeared before him around a long bend. He settled back in the seat and began cruising, keeping a fair distance back while keeping Filthy in sight. As he drove he let his mental Anchor dissipate, no longer needing to take the risk that it might be noticed. It was unlikely that it would be, given its subtle nature, especially on an inanimate object like a car, but safety came from watching all the little details.

Isiah could see Filthy in the driver's seat, his greasy hair whipping back around the headrest from the wind through the broken window. He was smoking a cigarette, his hand occasionally appearing at the window, flicking the ash. This road had another twenty miles or so before it reached a small town. It was unlikely that the town was Filthy's final destination, only having a population of around two thousand people. But the town also lead to Interstate 94. That was about as far as Isiah's research of the area had gone; he had had no reason to think he would be cruising across Montana in his search for the Sorcerer, yet now it seemed he would. And if Filthy was going to be travelling far then this stolen car might become a liability. There was bound to be a police check out on it already. It was hassle Isiah could do without. Still, when they reached the next town maybe Filthy's plans would become a little clearer. Isiah reached for the radio and flicked it on. The cheap speakers crackled and hissed over the sound of rock and roll, Eddie Cochran

lamenting the lack of a cure for the summertime blues. Isiah smiled, tuning the station in a bit more clearly. *You got that right.*

When they reached the small town, Filthy pulled into a diner. As Filthy drove into the car park and pulled to a stop, Isiah cruised by. He flicked out another mental Anchor, again to the old Ford. He pulled up the stolen station wagon at the curb around the corner and hopped out, mentally re-engaging all the locks as he walked away. Other than inconvenience the man with the sandwich should suffer little for the impromptu loan of his car.

Isiah walked around the corner to the diner and strolled in. Guitar music piped through cheap speakers tickled his ears, too quiet to make out properly. He wanted to make sure that Filthy was going to stick around for a while. He was coming out of the bathroom as Isiah entered, tightly locking down his aura, carefully avoiding eye contact. People would rarely remember details of people they saw at the best of times. If no eye contact was made the person might as well have never even been there. There was a stand of newspapers at one end of the counter which Isiah began to casually peruse. As he did so Filthy drew up a stool at the counter and sat down, staring at the countertop. The waitress, her face doing nothing to hide her apathy towards her job, wandered over, notepad in hand. ‘What’ll it be?’ Her nose wrinkled when she was close enough to notice Filthy’s lank hair and dirty coat. Fortunately he had pulled the coat sleeve down over his scarred arm and blood soaked rag of a bandage. His hands were free of blood also, if not completely clean, no doubt the result of his recent visit to the bathroom.

Filthy looked up at the waitress, his eyes lingering unconcernedly over her breasts as he sought her face. ‘Gimme a steak sandwich with the lot, rare. I feel the need for red meat.’ He leered as he spoke, but the waitress just curled up one side of mouth in disgust.

‘Anything to drink?’

‘Coffee.’

The waitress nodded, her pencil scratching at her pad, and walked away. Filthy stared at the countertop again.

Isiah selected a paper at random and walked to the till at the end of the counter. He smiled at the waitress. ‘Just the paper thanks’

Outside the air was fresh. He looked left and right along the road. An old lady passed by, pulling a shopping trolley behind her. Isiah stepped up to her. ‘Excuse me. Do you know if there’s a service station nearby? Perhaps one that sells second hand cars?’

The old lady looked up at him, her eyes suspicious. ‘Old Jed has a station right on the edge of town. He often has some wreck or other there for sale!’ She cackled at her own joke. ‘He’s a good man, mind,’ she added.

Isiah smiled, nodded. ‘Maybe I’ll pay old Jed a visit then. Where exactly would I find his place?’

Fifteen minutes later Isiah pulled up across the street from the diner in a plain Japanese hatchback, in fairly reasonable condition. It was old, but had a good motor,

and was unremarkable. Isiah was still smiling, amused by Jed's confusion and suspicion at a man that would arrive at a service station, choose a new car and pay cash for it all within five minutes. Isiah's mental scan of the chassis, brakes, suspension and engine has reassured him that this car would run without any particular trouble for at least a few months before any work would be needed. There had been a sign in the window asking for two thousand dollars. Isiah had handed old Jed two thousand in cash and asked for the keys and perhaps Jed would be kind enough to throw in a highway map and a tank of gas.

It had taken most of the five minutes to convince Jed that he didn't want a test drive, didn't want to look under the hood, but just wanted to get away as quickly as possible. Jed had shook his balding grey head and wandered into the ramshackle building of his service station. He emerged a minute or two later with a folded road map, a set of keys and papers and a hastily scribbled receipt. As Isiah drove away he saw Jed in the rearview mirror staring at the wad of notes held in his hand. Money was no issue for Isiah. When you've been around for several hundred years investments and financial planning become second nature.

Isiah looked in through the large plate glass window of the diner, *Bottomless Coffee For A Buck*. Filthy was there, eating his steak sandwich like he hadn't eaten anything else for a week. The waitress was surreptitiously watching him, her face a slight grimace of disgust. Isiah settled back in the seat and unfolded his map.

He was indeed right up on Interstate 94, which led more or less east to west across Montana. If Filthy was headed for the highway from here he had two choices. Left would take him to Billings, right to Miles City. There were plenty of opportunities to travel on from either of these cities if Filthy chose to, assuming he was even going that far. Billings even had an airport, Logan International, but there was an airport in Glendive too which was less than a hundred miles from Miles City and also in Circle and Ekalaka. In truth there were a million options and no way to second guess them all. At least Isiah now an idea of the area he was in. He would just have to wait until Filthy moved on and follow.

It wasn't long before Filthy climbed back into his battered Ford and pulled out onto the road. He headed straight to the Interstate and hung a left, towards Billings. Isiah settled back in his seat as he followed and turned the radio on.

'Leave me alone!' Faith held back the tears as she slammed the screen door and stormed up the path to the street. She could hear her mother calling her from the kitchen, her stupid, whining voice cracked with tears of her own. But she would not turn around. Her mother could jump in front of a truck and die for all she cared, she was sick of being treated like a child.

As she turned the street corner, heading towards the bush, she let the tears flood out, safe in the knowledge that her mother could no longer see her. This walk to the head of the valley and the long, natural walk down to the creek beyond had been her sanctuary for years. Whether upset and furious or calm and serene, it was just right. The best escape.

She shook her head as she wiped away tears with the back of one hand. Always fighting. Always shouting and screaming and slamming doors. Why couldn't her mother understand that she was a person too? She had feelings, emotions. She had a mind, for fuck's sake and a strong mind at that. She hated school because the teachers were so condescending to everyone, because the other girls were all such immature boy freaks or clothes horses. The boys themselves were no better, rev heads talking up V8's and powerslides or sex starved perverts. Or both. No one understood her. She couldn't communicate with anyone. The sooner she got out of this shitbox town the better. She loved the Mountains, she loved the bush and the natural vastness of her country, but this little town with its stickybeak residents and stifling Christian values was suffocating her. No one respected her pagan ways. Even her mother often called her a witch for studying Wiccan texts and the like, but her mother knew nothing. Her mother didn't even know what a witch really was. So what if she was dark and brooding sometimes? Weren't all teenagers like that?

She needed to get down to the city, to be stimulated, to be challenged. Sydney was only an hour and half on the train. She could get back to her valleys and bushwalks any time she wanted. She needed something to prove that there was a life worth living out there.

She turned from the street and headed into the bush on a narrow track. Not one of the publicised bushwalks the tourist guides listed but a bushwalk only locals knew about. She followed the track for a couple of hundred yards, then ducked under the blue gums, picked her way carefully across the grass and rock, keeping a casual eye out for snakes, taking heavy, noisy steps just in case.

After a few minutes she came out from under the trees onto a promontory of sandstone overlooking the valley. A blue haze hung in the air, produced by the deep exhalations of the myriad gum trees, giving the mountain range its name. The trees were thick like a heavy, rough, dark green carpet right across the valley floor, then up the sloping sides until the sandstone rose out of the bush like a curtain, striated in colours, orange, brown, red, black. The bush began again on the flat top of the opposite side. These were mountains made in reverse, formed from an enormous land plateau, flat on top, with valleys carved millennia ago by raging rivers chewing slowly through the rock.

Faith jumped down off the promontory and picked her way through the sloping scrub and fallen rocks towards the valley floor. This side you could follow all the way to the creek at the bottom if you knew the way.

As she walked she thought over the latest argument with her mother. Once again it revolved around school. Her father would be furious when he saw her latest results, she didn't care and her mother started yelling. 'You're not a stupid girl, Faith, so why do your results make it look like you are?' What a bitchy, broken thing to say. Of course she wasn't stupid. How did her results in such a ridiculous subject as Home Economics define her intelligence? Her results were fine in the subjects that had some relevance. English, geography, history, these things she enjoyed. Real subjects, applicable to the real world. But Home Economics was only good for

pathetic full time housewives like her mother and there was no way in hell she would ever become like that. She couldn't believe she had been talked into taking the subject in the first place. More to keep the peace at the time than anything else, but now it had come around to haunt her.

And when she had said she might even quit school because it was no use to her in real life her mum had gone ballistic. 'How can you expect to survive in the world without an HSC?' Like a Higher School Certificate was a passport to wealth and security. Her brother and all his friends had HSCs and not one of them had a decent job. Cinema ticket collector in Penrith, a barman in Katoomba, a shop assistant in Leura. And those were the ones with jobs at all.

It was at about that point that Faith had slammed the door behind her, but she had to admit there was one relevant point. Whatever she wanted to do, it was going to take money. And to get money she needed a job, a job that paid more than working part-time at the supermarket as she had been doing. There were dozens of things that she had thought about doing as a proper job but she had no real idea of how to get started. Though she failed to see how having an HSC would make that much difference.

She wanted to get down to the city. Find some real people, live a real life. She'd find something down there. Even if she started off in a café waiting tables, at least it would be in the city and she could keep looking for better work after that, find her way. Her brother's ex, Gabby, had moved down to Sydney. She had a room in a share house somewhere. Faith had the number. She had rung Gabby a couple of times when she had first moved down there and Gabby was always happy to chat. Happy to bitch about the Mountains and the people there. If she turned up in the city and rang Gabby then she'd have a room for at least a night or two. Gabby would let her crash on the floor.

She sat down on a rock under the shade of a gum tree. The bush smelled so good this time of year, even if it was tinder dry. She would miss it, but she realised that she had made a decision. Her heart began to beat a little faster. She was going to drop out. She was going to quit school, quit this shitty town and run away to the city. She would be eighteen in a few months and then there was pretty much nothing her parents or anyone else could do. She could certainly stay hidden for a few months, especially with Gabby's help. Her job at the supermarket on evenings and weekends had helped her put away a few hundred bucks. She didn't buy into all the clothes and things that girls her age were supposed to, she didn't hang out at the mall in Penrith every weekend. She had money to get started. She would leave a note, slip away and catch a late train down to Sydney. She wouldn't let on that she was going to contact Gabby. She would just tell people not to look for her because she wanted to go away and be left alone. She just needed a couple of days to get herself organised.

Faith leaned back on her hands, letting the dappled sunlight through the leaves play across her face. Damn, it was hot today. But she felt good. She laughed, excitement rushing through her veins. *I'm getting the fuck out of Dodge!*

It was getting dark as Filthy pulled up in front of an old building on the outskirts of Billings. The drive had been uneventful, almost boring. The building was old stone with a wood and tile roof. It had the look of an old mill or farm house that had been swallowed by the burgeoning population as Billings had grown from a farmers community into a large city. Isiah drove by and turned the nearest corner. He killed the engine and hopped out, mentally tapping down the locks as he jogged back to the corner. As he paused, looking past a redbrick corner, he saw Filthy disappearing through the front door of the old house. There were no obvious lights in the place. He couldn't tell if Filthy had let himself in or if someone had answered the door. Now it was going to be tricky to keep an eye on proceedings. He needed a disguise.

He went back to his car and drove further along the road, looking for a quiet, dark spot. As night fell the shadows grew quickly. It wasn't long before Isiah was parked in the purple dark shadow of a large tree, the car almost hidden. Seeing inside the car would be difficult, even from close up. He climbed over the driver's seat and laid down in the back, making himself as comfortable as possible in the near blackness, his large frame considerably cramped. Once he was settled, curled almost foetally, he began erecting shields around himself and the car, invisible barriers that would alert him if any one or any thing came near. Once he was sure that he would be safe he relaxed into a state of deep meditation, let his mind slip free from his body. He paused, his astral self floating above the car. The area seemed quiet and secure, his body was completely concealed by shadows. The psychic alarm barriers could do the rest.

He flew the half mile or so back to the building that Filthy had entered. It would be converted now, someone's private residence. He knew that Filthy had some degree of talent with magic, so it was fair to assume that any one else that might be in the house could well have similar abilities. Travelling the astral plane was very convenient, and all but completely undetectable to people that had no connection to the greater energies of the universe, but no real disguise to talented beings. Filthy would spot him immediately that he drew near. Perhaps not in great detail, but Filthy would certainly know that *something* was there and that would be enough to put him on his guard. Isiah wanted to learn as much as possible without Filthy suspecting a thing.

Sinking down through the road surface and floating through the sewers below the house led Isiah to his goal. A rat, dirty and matted, ran along a ledge of stone above the flowing sewerage, whiskers flickering. Isiah mentally pinned the creature to the floor and slipped his consciousness, his astral self, into the rat's mind. *'Scuse me there, fella. Won't be long,*

He pushed the rat's consciousness aside and asserted his own. For the rat it was really no different to falling asleep. Or perhaps slipping into a coma. Either way, it was painless. Isiah, now inhabiting the rat's body, stood and shook himself from



nose to tail. The rat felt old and sick, but strong enough. He made his way up to the house.

It took him a while to find a way in, but he eventually found rat sized access and scurried through the place, searching for people. He could hear voices and feel vibrations from up ahead. Keeping to shadows and keeping his mind well cloaked, hiding behind shelves and curtains, he eventually found his way to a large room. It was a dining room, one large, central table and several chairs. Little else occupied the room other than some old artworks on the walls and three people seated at the table. One of them was Filthy. There was a small unit just outside the door, wooden with a glass front. Some small items were inside, combs, ivory hairclips, tortoiseshell spectacle frames, fragments of several yesterdays. Isiah slipped behind the unit and listened to the voices.

‘It’s easier said than done, mind you.’

‘Of course it is, but nonetheless possible.’ That was Filthy’s voice, Isiah recognised it from the diner.

‘Anyway, you got the pouch that Dominus requested?’

‘Of course. Nothing to worry about. Good of you to put me up on my journey.’

‘When will you deliver it?’

‘Who knows. You have a Gather tonight?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I’ll stay tonight and head off tomorrow. I can take a flight first thing and see how I go from there.’

Isiah was intrigued. *He’s delivering the pouch to someone they call Dominus and needs a flight to find him. Do they call the Sorcerer Dominus? And what’s a Gather? More questions and no answers.*

‘So, where is Dominus now?’

Filthy laughed, a guttural, dirty sound. ‘I can’t tell you that. You know better than to even ask!’

‘Well, I just wonder. You know, all this business seems so surreal. We’ve seen the power, from people like yourself, of course, but...’

Filthy snorted, derisive. ‘You want to be careful, talking like that. You have doubts? That kinda thing can get you killed.’

‘But seriously, are we really that close to the New Ascendance? This change in focus over the last few years is a little strange, don’t you think?’

Isiah’s ears pricked up. *New Ascendance?*

Filthy snorted again. ‘Of course we are. Do you really need any proof after the things you’ve seen? The blood you’ve spilled? Our Dominus is very wise in our ways, yet he’s always re-examining his own focus and that of the rest of us. This isn’t a change of focus. It’s more a refinement of purpose.’

‘I’ll tell you what. I don’t have a fraction of the attention that Dominus does, but I’ll lead your Gather tonight. I’ll talk to your congregation and we’ll have a little practical demonstration. How do you like that idea?’

‘Practical demonstration? You have to be careful, the cops in this town are bastards.’

‘The cops in every town are bastards. It’s a cop’s job to be a bastard, it says so on their contract. Fuck ‘em. Anyway, I’m not going to kill anyone. It seems to me that you’re losing a little faith in our mission here. We can be raised in the dark glory of Yath-vados, washed in the blood of unbelievers and raised above all others in a new world order. I think you need reminding of that. I think you need to see a little direct intervention.’

There was a gasp from the others. ‘You can do that?’ one of them asked.

‘Of course I can. I don’t have the same level of power as Dominus himself, naturally, but I am an Optimates of Eighth Degree. I can make direct communion with Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens. His time will come and our will and our faith will make that happen.’

Isiah frowned. *Their use of Latin is interesting.*

‘Who was your leader before you took over here?’ Filthy asked. ‘Who started this Gather?’

‘It was Lars. Then he moved on and left us in charge. I think he went to Australia. He was powerful, but I’m not sure that he would ever claim to have direct communion.’

Filthy laughed, a short bark. ‘He’s a good man, Lars, and more powerful than you realise. What time is your Gather?’

‘Soon, downstairs. The congregation should start arriving any minute. Perhaps the demonstration you describe will be good for all of us. There are some here that have joined since Lars left and we are... less impressive.’

‘But you’re still recruiting well?’

‘Of course. The disaffected are drawn to our call.’

‘Good. Let’s get ourselves downstairs and get ready then.’

Isiah hunched back into the shadows as the three men tramped from the room and headed off down the hallway. He followed as soon as it was safe. One of the men went to the front of the house, telling the others that he would wait for people to arrive and send them down. Filthy and the other man went down into the cellar through an iron studded, heavy wooden door. Isiah hopped in through the door just as it was closing and scurried back to the shadows, hopping down cold stone steps.

The basement was decked out with rows of wooden benches, like pews. There was a large altar at one end, little more than a table with a black covering. Lots of black hanging cloth, curtains, sputtering candles. The whole place was a dark, black parody of a Christian church, though it lacked any obvious religious icons.

‘Where are your robes?’ Filthy asked.

The other man went to a corner and returned carrying black robes like monk’s habits. The two men slipped them on, leaving the hoods down, piled on their shoulders like deflated balloons. Each robe had a red disc in the middle of the chest, like a stain from a bleeding heart. Isiah, hidden in the shadows, was amused and perturbed at the same time. The black church, the black robes, all the talk of the

New Ascendance, the blood of unbelievers, a new world order. It was all so cheesy, clichéd almost. Yet he knew that this Sorcerer must be a powerful man. He must be the one they were referring to as Dominus. There was something disturbing about this, something unique. The question was, how dangerous was it? How established had it become?

There were numerous cults and societies in the world, some more established than others, some ancient, some new. Not many of them had any real impact on the greater scheme of things. Few of them would ever have any impact of any note on the Balance, yet Isiah had long since learned to treat everything with suspicion. When you had been around as long as he had it was hard to ignore how stupid people could be and how dangerous that made them.

He made his way through the shadows towards the front of the room. He wanted to be in a position where he could see the congregation as well as the service. As he picked a darkened spot the door to the cellar opened and two young men, late teens perhaps, long hair, heavy metal bandnames on their t-shirts, sloped into the room and sat at the back.

Filthy smiled at his friend. 'Nearly showtime, Dan.'

Dan nodded. He walked towards the young men. 'Good evening. Good to see you guys back again.'

One of the teenagers smiled awkwardly. He was obviously the bold one of the two. 'We thought it might be worth another try. Seemed a bit hokey before, but we're prepared to withhold judgment.'

Dan laughed. 'You're honest, at least. Well, after tonight I'm sure you'll be convinced.' As Dan spoke, he lifted his right hand and pointed at his wrist, one eyebrow raised.

The lads looked confused for a moment, then realisation dawned simultaneously for both of them. They dug in their pockets and pulled out black leather wristbands, each with a deep red spot on it, leather laces connecting each end like a belt. They tied them on, the red spot over the inside of their wrists.

'Never forget; nothing worthwhile is born without blood,' Dan said, his face serious. The lads nodded, slightly nervous. As Dan walked back to the front of the room they looked at each other and made faces, then laughed quietly.

Over the next ten minutes or so the room filled. Isiah was surprised at the numbers. He lost count at fifteen, his rat's eye view hindered by the front row, but he could hear and sense many more arriving. There must have been thirty people by the time things looked ready to begin. Filthy had been talking earlier about the leader of this group before the current incumbents and had called him a powerful man. Lars. That meant that Filthy knew Lars, but not these guys. They had just offered him lodgings, presumably based on his status within their society. So the Sorcerer had groups in at least a few places and they weren't all run by people in direct contact with him. Lars had apparently gone to Australia, so the group would seem to be quite global.

Isiah had always considered this Sorcerer character something of a loner that had picked up a protégé in Samuel Harrigan, but this was making things look altogether different. Filthy was obviously well versed in the Sorcerer's blood magic. This Lars character was apparently powerful, more so than these people here realised according to Filthy. It would seem that Isiah's quarry was more of a threat than he had considered. And that didn't even begin to address the point of these so-called Gathers and their talk of Yath-vados and the Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens, Latin for New Eternal Almighty.

The gathered crowd was an unlikely mix. There were a number of people like the first two that Isiah had seen. Young, under thirty, alternative. Isiah always sympathised with the alternative youth. They were often the ones with more developed minds and free will that actually thought about stuff rather than just follow, sheep-like. Not always, but often. The large majority of people got sucked into society's norms without any consideration of what they were actually doing. Over the centuries Isiah had always witnessed the alternatively minded minorities effect the greatest change in ideals while the blinkered will of the majority governed stubbornly.

Others in the room tonight were similar, society's rejects. Bikers, punks, metalheads, Goths. There were a few others too, some even in suits as if they'd come straight from their nine to five grind. One young girl wore a McDonalds uniform that she tried to conceal with a heavy black cardigan. Most of the people were under thirty or so, but not all. There was an old man off to one side, his dark skin blending into his surroundings, while his greying hair stood out against the dark walls. He had to be at least sixty.

There was a soft susurrant of chatter in the room that faded as Dan stepped up to the altar, nodding to his counterpart who now stood at the foot of the stairs at the back of the room. Dan stood tall behind the altar, arms above his head. 'People,' he called, his voice deep, strident. 'Welcome!' He held up his right hand, palm towards the crowd and closed his fist tightly. His black wristband with the deep red spot became visible as his sleeve slid back. Everyone gathered rose their right hands in a similar gesture, fists clenched. Each wore the wristband. 'Praise Yath-vados, by blood!' Dan intoned.

The crowd replied as one. 'Praise Yath-vados, by blood!'

Dan took a deep breath and continued. 'By blood are all things living empowered and by blood is all change effected. Nothing worthwhile is ever born without blood. Through our ministry will Yath-vados rise. Through our efforts will the world be born anew. We will ensure the New Ascendance. We mean no harm to those that don't follow, though we will encourage all to believe. We will go about our Will and oppose any that would oppose us. If it means *their* blood, so be it!'

'So be it!' The power of the crowd's chant was surprising in its force.

Dan raised his other hand high. 'Cruor Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens!'

Hands throughout the room punched the dry air. 'Cruor Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens!'

The furry brows of the rat in the shadows knitted as Isiah frowned. Cruor was Latin for blood or gore. Blood New Eternal Almighty. It didn't make much sense.

Dan lowered his arms and bowed his head, staring at the floor between the altar and the first row, breathing deeply. The energy of the group subsided and he looked up again. 'We have a special guest here tonight. One of our Order is visiting on business and has graced us with his presence. We were fortunate enough to offer him a place to stay on his travels and, in return, he has offered to speak to you tonight. One of our most senior Brothers, he has the personal ear of our leader. You all know that we are led by the wise guidance of the man we know as Dominus, though few of us ever meet him in person. This man, here tonight, may be as close as some of you ever get. Brothers and Sisters, please welcome Optimates Cruor of the Eighth Degree, Brother Frank.'

As Dan gestured to the side, motioning Frank to join him, Isiah smiled to himself. *Filthy Frank. One of the most senior, eh?*

Frank stepped up to the altar, nodding his thanks to Dan. His filthiness and guttural presence seemed to smooth out as he stood there, preparing to perform. He raised his right arm. 'Cruor Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens!' The crowd responded in kind once more. Frank smiled broadly. 'Let us begin with the Rite of Dedication.'

Dan stepped forward again and placed a chalice on the altar before Frank. With practiced ease the gathered members stood and formed a line. Reverently, the first in line approached. Frank dipped his fingers into the chalice and drew them out, scarlet, dripping. He touched his fingertips to the person's forehead and uttered something under his breath. 'By blood,' the acolyte whispered in response.

Isiah could tell without the need of any extra sensory study that magic was at work here. Whatever words Frank was muttering, they were in the language of the foul blood magic of the Sorcerer. Each person received the touch of blood and the words were uttered in some strange parody of the Catholic Communion, and each acolyte was subjected to something there that affected the mind. Isiah ached to break from his disguise and feel exactly what was happening, but he didn't dare. There was too much still to be learned and secrecy was his only ally.

Eventually the whole gathering had received the strange rite and returned to their seats. Frank touched his fingertips together, bowed his head. His voice was deep and surreal when he spoke. 'We believe in the blood.'

The crowd, as one, replied, 'We believe in the blood.'

Frank continued alone. 'There is power in the free mind and our minds are free. There is power in independence and we will always strive for freedom of action. We will oppose those that would curtail our Will and support those so oppressed.'

The voice of the gathered members was soft, but strong in numbers. 'We believe in the blood.'

Frank smiled gently at his steepled fingers. 'By blood are all things living empowered and by blood is all change effected. Nothing worthwhile is ever born without blood. Nothing worth having is ever gained without sacrifice. The sacrifice may be our own or another's, but by sacrifice shall our Will be known.'

‘We believe in the blood.’

‘Our Order is powerful, our magic is real. Our Will be known.’

This time the voice of the crowd was stronger. ‘Our Will be known.’

Frank raised his eyes, drinking in his audience. ‘Cruor Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens!’

The voices bounced back from the walls. ‘Cruor Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens!’

Frank opened his hands, palms up, and smiled. ‘It is indeed pleasing to see so many of you here tonight. The slow but sure expansion of our Order is wonderful evidence of our growth and eventual success. Brother Dan is too kind with his words and paints me as rather more than I really am. Certainly I have been a part of the Ordo Novus Cruor for a long time. I was one of the first fortunate enough to take tutorship from our Dominus. But whether you are Neophyte, First Degree or Optimates Cruor, we are all equal in at least one regard; we all want to see things change. We are all sick of the world we live in, the normality forced upon us, the dictatorship of our governments, our bosses at work, our families.

‘We are people who desire something more. We work towards realising and exercising our own free will. We know that only through blood is anything gained. And that doesn’t mean that we have to spill blood in the streets, though sometimes we just might do that!’ Frank smiled and a quiet chuckle rippled through the crowd. Frank paused long enough to make the silence after the laughter just a little bit uncomfortable. ‘We need to follow our hearts and sow a little social disorder. We need to make waves in the still pond of apathy and dedicate our efforts to Yath-vados Himself. When we manage to shake enough numbness from the bones of society, we will see Yath-vados rise again and take the world to new heights.

‘However, we know that anything worth having comes from sacrifice. That sacrifice might be the loss of our comforts, it might be walking away from a cushy job, it might be disowning parents or partners that would stand in the way of our ideals. Or it might be the spilling of our blood or the blood of others for our magic.’

Frank drew himself up taller and took a deep breath. ‘Our Order is somewhat unique in that we haven’t given up on the old ways. We haven’t lost sight of our power and watered down our rituals. Our power, our magic, is real. It’s not something to be trifled with or taken in vain, but it is something that gives us enormous potential. Tonight I will show you something of that power. For those of you that don’t believe that there really is something beyond and above us that we pray to, let me show you the truth. For those of you that enjoy our anarchy, yet doubt the holy nature of our mission, let me show you a little something of Yath-vados Himself!’

A subtle intake of breath passed through the gathered crowd, people looking at each other, eyebrows raised. Frank paused, letting the people take in what he had said. Eventually he raised a hand and silence settled over the group like a silk sheet. ‘I need someone to help me. Perhaps someone that has doubts?’ He was looking directly towards the back of the room and Isiah would have bet that he was looking

at the two young men that had entered first. Perhaps he intended to make something of an example of them. All this talk of blood and sacrifice had Isiah worried.

Heads in the crowd turned, necks craning to see who was being singled out. There was some muttering and scuffling. Eventually one of the young metal fans stood, the bolder of the two. He looked sheepish. Frank grinned like a wolf. ‘Excellent! Thank you, son, come forward.’

The boy approached the altar nervously. As he did so, Frank asked, ‘What name and rank, Brother?’

‘Er... Scott. Neophyte.’ The boy’s words were barely audible. ‘This is only my second visit,’ he added. ‘I only Initiated last week.’

Frank nodded reassuringly. ‘No problem. You will like this!’

‘You’re not going to hurt me, are you?’

A ripple of laughter passed through the crowd at Scott’s words. Some of the crowd looked nervous for him, others almost predatory in their excitement. Dan smiled softly. Frank held out his hand to Scott and guided him to sit on the altar, then gently laid him back. Scott glanced at the gathered crowd, then back up at Frank’s face, now looming above him. Frank patted Scott’s forehead. ‘I’m going to draw just a little of your blood, Scott, but don’t fear. You know from your Initiation that we always spill blood. I’m going to use you as a channel and you’ll have the best seat in the house for tonight’s demonstration.’

Scott was trembling, yet he took a deep breath. He appeared to have made the sudden decision to suck up whatever was before him. He had pride and was determined not to give in to his fear. Besides, as he had mentioned earlier, he considered all this a little bit hokey. Isiah was afraid that the boy’s views were about to change dramatically.

‘You will all know from your Initiations that our magic is shared slowly. You saw it at your Initiation. Those of you that have gained the First Degree and higher have started to learn to use it. However, rarely, beyond the Initiation, will Neophytes and Prospects see the manifestation of our powers and faith. In many ways, that is one of your first tests, to persevere regardless.’ Frank’s voice was soft, yet it carried through the room with dramatic power. Isiah felt the subtle hint of fresh MageSign. Frank was already manipulating energy, drawing upon his talent.

‘However, sometimes it may be required to remind you all of the kind of strength we command!’ Frank grinned as he spoke this time, his voice rising. With a flourish he grabbed young Scott’s arm and lifted it, jerking him across the altar. Frank’s other hand flashed into view, his shining knifeblade reflecting the candlelight. Scott cried out in surprise and fear. Frank raised his eyes, staring across the crowd as he held his blade and Scott’s hand aloft. His eyes were narrowed, expression mean.

Isiah carefully let his mind creep out from hiding, just a little. With Frank’s activity he could afford to let his consciousness scan briefly through the room. He was already aware, to some degree, of the kind of power that Filthy Frank had. He

could also feel the strength in Dan as this group's leader stood back, smiling slyly. Isiah could also feel what it was that Frank was doing with his mind while he spoke. Every other mind in the room was being rendered just slightly soporific by Frank, his magic raising dopamine levels in their brains and at the same time causing them to feel sleepy. In effect, he was causing a mild euphoric hypnosis over everyone present with the power of his will. It was a simple enough trick to someone with talent. But what was that thing with the blood rite earlier? Something more pervasive was done to each member individually then.

'Let the power of Yath-vados be seen!' Frank cried. He slapped the flat of his broad knife across Scott's palm and shifted his grip on the boy's hand. With his hand wrapping over Scott's he squeezed, causing Scott to close his grip over the knife. 'Be strong, Scott! Believe in the power of the Novus Omnipotens. His knuckles whitened as he squeezed harder. Scott moaned loudly as the blade bit into his palm and blood began to trickle past his thumb, over his wrist, running in quick rivulets down his forearm.

Isiah retracted his mind, cloaking himself once more as the evidence of magic in the room rose exponentially with the release of Scott's blood. *Just like Samuel, you only really believe in your own power when the blood flows, eh, Filthy?*

Frank was breathing heavily, his eyes slightly rolled up as he worked his spell. His mouth was moving as he muttered, incanted. Isiah couldn't hear the words but he had little doubt that it was the same guttural, visceral language that he had heard Samuel Harrigan using whenever he worked this foul blood magic. 'Yath-vados! Frank yelled, his voice echoing off the walls. 'Yath-vados! By your will and mine, visit us.'

The sudden and distinct shimmer of RealmShift appeared in the air above Scott, accompanied by a coppery, sulphurous taste and scent. *Shit, he's really summoning something!* Isiah thought, genuinely surprised.

Through the haze of RealmShift a dark, nebulous cloud began to form. The others in the room were excited and uncomfortable in their seats, some looking terrified, some exultant. All were pinned in place by Frank's earlier ministrations to their minds, combined with their desire to be a part of this. The dark cloud surged and rolled, almost obscuring Frank though not completely opaque. As ripples and swirls ran through it a shape began to coalesce. The shape gained features, indistinct and generic, yet unmistakably a face. People in the room gasped and grinned. The face gained more substance, the air became charged, static, energised. The mouth gaped open, uncannily wide, and a howl vomited forth morphing into maniacal laughter, deafening, palpable. Some people in the crowd tried to lean back or move from their seats, shying away, their eyes wild.

The laughter became a word. 'Cruor! Cruooooor....' The word drew out into a howl like a hurricane, the sound manifesting physically, whipping at the curtains around the room and at people's clothes. Scott's long hair whipped about his head as he lay, terrified, held fast by Frank, beneath the black maelstrom. The wind increased, screeching through the small space then, in an instant, it was gone.



The curtains fell still, Scott's hair dropped across his face and the energy of RealmShift vanished with a subtle pop, air filling a vacuum. Silence, but for Scott's laboured breathing, settled over the room.

Isiah sat back on his haunches in the shadows, truly disturbed. *Who the hell was that?* If only he could have cast his mind out, felt for some clue as to the identity of whatever it was that Frank had just summoned, but that would have given him away completely. His mind would have shone out like a lighthouse on a moonless night to all those in the room with talent, including the creature summoned. There was no way he could have taken that risk. There was something much larger than he had ever anticipated going on here and if he was going to learn about it he needed to move very carefully.

Dan approached Frank and handed him gauze and a bandage. Between them they dressed Scott's palm, a shallow slice from one side to the other. Scott stared, wide-eyed, saying nothing. The gathered crowd watched silently too. Once Scott's hand was bandaged Frank leaned forward and kissed him, almost lovingly, on the forehead. As he stood up straight again he coaxed Scott up into a sitting position. Scott sat, shakily, letting his legs swing over the side of the altar so that he perched on its edge. Frank smiled broadly at the crowd before him.

'Brother Scott, though just a Neophyte at his second Gather, has enabled wonder for all of us tonight!' Frank's hypnotic effect had drained from the room and the gathered people whooped and clapped, their excitement and fear given a route for expression. Scott looked around the crowd, a manic smile playing at the corners of his mouth. 'Do you still think us hokey?' Frank asked him.

'Not really,' Scott replied, laughing nervously. The others laughed too, clapping vigorously once more.

'Go on back to your seat, son,' Frank said. As Scott got up and walked to the back of the room, accepting occasional pats and nods from other members, Frank said, 'It is easy to doubt the reality of what we do sometimes. While we all believe strongly in our ideals, it is sometimes difficult to believe with equal conviction in Yath-vados. He will make everything we desire come about, if we have faith in Him. Remember that.

'Remember also that the people who would tell you to forget your allegiance to the Ordo Novus Cruor are your enemy. They are the kind of people that will remain trapped by society. They are the kind that would hinder your growth. If they won't join in our ways, leave them by the side of the road and continue your journey without them.

'Also leave behind those that you know will never understand what we do. The police and the teachers, the people that think us dangerous. Let not their fear undermine your journey. They don't need to know what it is that makes you whole. Our secrets must be protected so that our destiny can be achieved.'

Frank let his gaze drift back and forth across the crowd. Some were nodding, smiling, others sitting quite still, almost expressionless. 'How many here are Neophytes?' Frank asked. A few hands raised, one heavily bandaged. 'And how

many Prospects?’ Another half a dozen or so hands raised. Frank nodded. ‘Good. For those Neophytes, think hard now what you will do to prove yourself. What will you do to become a Prospect? For those Prospects, never forget that what you have done so far is just the beginning. Stay true, serve your time and your invite to the First Degree will not be long in coming.’

Frank clapped his hands together. He repeated the mantra of the Order. ‘By blood are all things living empowered and by blood is all change effected. Nothing worthwhile is ever born without blood. Through our ministry will Yath-vados rise. Through our efforts will the world be born anew. We will ensure the New Ascendance. We mean no harm to those that don’t follow, though we will encourage all to believe. We will go about our Will and oppose any that would oppose us. If it means their blood, so be it!’

The members were more emphatic in their response than ever. ‘So be it!’

‘Yath-vados empower you.’

‘We believe in the blood.’

Frank grinned, empowered himself by the faith and energy he received back. ‘Cruor Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens!’

The crowd shouted now, their voices raucous. ‘Cruor Novus Sempiterna Omnipotens!’

Frank nodded, looking around the room with glittering eyes. ‘There ends the general Gather.’ He looked to Dan.

Dan nodded, taking his place. ‘Brothers and Sisters, tonight has been a special night indeed. Please, thank Optimates Cruor Frank!’ The gathered crowd clapped and cheered and Frank smiled benignly, lowering his head in a slight bow. Dan called more loudly over the applause. ‘Those First Degree and above, let us move into Sanctum.’

There was a shift in volume as the applause gave way to the massed movement of people and the rise of dozens of varied conversations. Dan’s partner moved to the side of the stairs and guided the Neophytes and Prospects of the group back up, presumably to escort them out. Dan and Frank stepped back and pulled aside the curtain behind the altar to reveal another door, leading further back into the cellar. Isiah didn’t need to expend energy to feel that this door was heavily protected with magical wards of several kinds. As the remaining members of the group made their way into the room beyond Isiah cursed. There was no way that he would be able to pass into that room in any guise without being noticed. Whatever this group was all about, the really serious activity among its more established members would take place in there and he would have to wait to learn more about that.

Resignedly he scurried through the shadows and hopped up the steps, slipping through with the last of those leaving the meeting. Going back the way he had come he slipped his astral self out of the old rat’s body. It was like finally being able to stretch after spending hours locked in a cupboard. The rat awoke and shook itself, then went on about its business, oblivious. Isiah slipped up through the road and into the street in front of the house. It looked so unassuming and irrelevant from

the outside. The last of the group was leaving, the front door closing behind them. Isiah saw Scott and his friend talking animatedly as they walked across the road, looking excitedly at Scott's bandaged hand.

Isiah sighed as he watched. He had come away from there with more questions than answers. As he thought this his eyes drifted up and he caught sight of movement on the roof of the building. Immediately alert, his preternatural vision made out a figure in the shadows near the eaves. Just as his eyes focussed, the figure noticed him too. For a fraction of a second they were both frozen, staring at one another. Isiah was stunned. *I'm astral, how can they see me?* Then, with the speed and agility of a cat, the figure leapt up and over the peak of the roof. Isiah shot up through the air, trying to gain a clearer physical and psychic image of the person. As he reached the air above the roof the person was gone, vanished.

He was intrigued. Someone extremely adept, physically and mentally, it would seem. They had been able to see his astral self and they had been able to physically outrun him in that form. There weren't many that could do such a thing. It certainly hadn't been a vampire or lycanthrope, he was certain of that. Their presence was like a bad odour in a closed room and equally hard to conceal. It seemed to be human, but there was something most unusual about it. And whoever they were, they were also spying on this Ordo Novus Cruor gathering.

Questions stacked upon questions as Isiah made his way back to his physical self concealed in the shadows on the back seat of his car. He smiled crookedly. This was damned frustrating, but it might be fun too.

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