

## Visit to the City of the Dead

The moon rose over the darkening skyline, washing the street in a cold blue light. Even at night the street was filled with the bustle of people and the sounds of laughter; the French Quarter never slept. Chris leaned against the corner of an old stone building, watching the self-absorbed crowd make its way down the street, the promise of parties and beer drawing them ever onward. Normally he would scan the crowd, picking out the tourists from the usual inhabitants of the street by their excessive yelling and gaudy clothing. But not tonight. Yesterday night he had received word from Marlin that another one had been found dead, her two front canines ripped out of her mouth and the blood drained from her already dead body.

Frowning, Chris absentmindedly kicked at an empty Red Bull can, watching it settle back into the sludge on the side of the street. She was the fourth in two weeks, the fourth vampire that had been killed, no - hunted, and robbed of her two distinctive teeth. The news of her murder was disturbing in of itself; vampires had ruled the city for hundreds of years, almost since its founding. They controlled the government and the courts underground, running extensive communication lines that crossed the entire city. His people had always been in control, on top of the city, but now the recent string of events sent a shiver down the length of his back. Chris hadn't been one of the undead for long, only about one hundred years, still a baby in many of the elders' eyes. But unlike the others, he remembered what it was like to be mortal, to be vulnerable to any casual prowler on the streets. It felt odd to him to have to feel that again. Hunted.

A lock of blond hair fell in his eyes. Irritated, he threw his head back and let the lock settle back into place. Scanning the crowd once more, he let the sounds of the reveling people and the stench of unwashed bodies carry him across the lines. *Where was she?* It was unusual for Harle to be late, and the news of vampire slayings worried Chris. What if she had been found? What if she was now one of the twice-over dead bodies lying at the back of the morgue, rotting as no one came to claim the body. Chris knew she could take care of herself. He reminded himself that she was older than he, much older than she'd care to admit, and had probably had to deal with this sort of thing before in her native France.

Shaking his head and trying to forget his worry, he settled back against the corner. Harle had often remarked on his hyper-sensitivity, a mortal weakness in their society, a reminder of their all too-human origins. Finally he saw her walking down the street towards him, keeping to the shadows of the alley ways, even the moonlight too bright for her delicate skin. Her tight, black leather pants and jacket caught the glimmer of the moonlight and flashed with every street light. Her long black hair bounced with every stride. Had he still been alive, Chris would have probably found her attractive. He watched her with ice blue eyes as she advanced through the crowd, her long, confident strides carrying her quickly through the crowd, her very confidence proclaiming her as owner of the street. Chris smiled to himself at the thought of her being held helpless by some random cutpurse with a dull knife. Not Harle.

She stopped right in front of him, and looked up at him frowning. "What's that stupid grin for? You look like newbie in a strip club."

Chris realized that he was still grinning and hurriedly attempted to straighten his face. Harle just shrugged her shoulders and sighed, glaring at him. Even though she was much shorter than he, she made him feel like *she* was ten feet tall and staring down at him. “What ever am I going to do with you? You’re a *vampire*, Chris. Act like it. Half the time I think you still believe you’re still a twenty year old college boy out for the weekend.” Her eyes softened as she spoke, making him feel even smaller and stupider, if that was even possible. Chris never remembered having this much trouble with girls when he was alive, and as if to second his feelings, he felt a blush rise on his cheeks. Harle noticed and her eyes widened in surprise. Giving a low whistle, patted him on the shoulder. “Mon ami,” she said softly, “if you can still blush, Heaven help you.”

The moon by now had risen fully above the tops of the trees, casting its cold glow across the empty park. A cold wind blew across the field, rustling the dead leaves and disturbing the few people huddled on benches for warmth. Chris shivered and noticed with a small amount of secret delight that Harle pulled her coat closer around her. He smiled; she wasn’t invincible after all. Harle looked at him out of the corner of her eyes, a slight frown pulling at the corner of her mouth. Not caring if his smiling bothered her, Chris looked across the park, his enhanced vision allowing him to see far better than any normal human. In the distance under a drooping oak, he spotted a lone figure wrapped in rags, trying to sleep in the cold.

He tilted his head toward Harle, not taking his eyes from the man, “How ‘bout that one?” Harle grunted and turned her attention to the man Chris had picked.

“He’ll do,” she said after a brief moment. They had been hunting in the park for almost three hours now and Chris had yet to pick out a target. Harle had already downed two people, an old homeless man and an unsuspecting punk, but Chris hadn’t joined her then. Chris still felt a little queasy about hunting people like animals and drinking their blood, so he set rules for himself. Never take a woman; never take a man with a family; and most importantly to him, never take enough blood to kill. He could tell that Harle didn’t approve of his self-imposed rules, but she abided by them when she was with him. Chris didn’t think that he could handle it if he didn’t limit himself.

Harle’s eyes flashed as she ducked low to the ground. “I want you to do this one by yourself.” She looked up at him with cold black eyes. “I want you to try to take him fast; don’t let him scream even once. I’ll back you up in case he tries to run.” Chris rarely hunted by himself, and for good reason; he still had not completely gotten used to his enhanced strength and speed, or any of the other special abilities that came with his rebirth. Harle usually helped him take the victim or acted as backup for him, taking a role similar to a mentor, something unheard of in vampire society. Chris swallowed and joined her in her crouch. He flexed his leg muscles and dug his fingers into the soft, wet earth. He closed his eyes, feeling the raw strength flow through him, across his tight muscles. *Can’t mess this up. Harle’s right, I have to do this on my own sooner or later. Who knows when she’ll finally have enough of me and leave? Or if she...*

Snapping his eyes open, his blue eyes flashed with the light of the moon, and he leapt across the field, his boots flying, barely touching the ground. The landscape flashed around him, streaking into different shades of black and green. A surge of power and adrenaline rushed through him, filling him with its raw strength. The man never saw him coming. Chris leaped with an almost animal-like snarl upon the man and hit him across

his head, right above the ear. The man dropped to the ground with a low grunt, his rags fluttering around him to settle across the disturbed leaves. *I did it!* Chris felt a wave of pride rush across him, but it was soon followed by a feeling of disgust. Chris looked at the unconscious body. Who knew who he was, where he came from? Did he have a job, friends? Chris shook his long blond locks out of his eyes.

Harle appeared beside him, her hair rippling in the soft wind. She looked down at the motionless form sprawled on the ground. Kicking him gently, she looked up at Chris, her dark eyes hollows in her head. "I said not a sound."

Exasperated, Chris rounded on her. Before he could get out his acid retort, Harle leaped at him, her mouth bared in a snarl. Chris reacted with out thinking and swung out at her, slashing the air where she had just been. Spinning, Chris' eyes widened. Harle crouched with her back to him, facing a semi-circle of men in gang clothing. Behind her lay the body of a young man, its throat slashed, blood pumping onto the ground. Chris stood stupefied looking at the men with their knives pointed at Harle, their faces contorted in concentration and fear. Hissing, she leaped on the nearest man, slashing with both her teeth and her nails. Chris watched as she moved, her actions too fast for the mortal eye. Chris stood in silence as Harle ripped her target's heart out, then moved on to the next man, front flipping over his head to plant a dapper in the back of his neck. She was fast, faster than he'd ever be.

Shaking his head, Chris mentally slapped himself awake. Leaping to the right, he targeted the figure holding a metal chain trying to slip it around Harle's neck. He tried to move like Harle, copying her quick, agile movements as he took the man's head between his hands and twisted. The satisfying sound of crunching bone filled the night, and Chris threw the limp body aside. He would not let the vampire hunters have her. Not her, not Harle! He rounded and found all the rest already on the ground, their bodies thrown in a loose circle, appendages bending in ways other than nature attended. Harle stood in the middle of the circle looking down at her handiwork. She slowly turned to face him, her face masked by the shadow of the oak.

The adrenaline gushed out of his body, leaving him weak and staggering. Turning, he saw the body of the man he had killed, its head twisted around to stare at him with cold, lifeless eyes, a look of surprise etched forever into his face. Chris doubled over heaving, clear liquids sputtering on the ground. He huddled on the ground and hugged his knees to his chest, rocking slowly back and forth. He had never killed a man before. Never. Even worse, he had *enjoyed* it. Shuddering, he felt tears roll down his face, blood red as they dropped onto his light brown jacket. He felt Harle put her arms around him and hold him close to her. He sobbed onto her chest, his tears running down her jacket. She stroked his hair and looked out across the field, her face unreadable in the dim light.

Chris sat in the metal chair, staring at the cup of coffee in his hand, refusing to look at her. He could feel her eyes on him, staring at him. He didn't want to see her disgust or hate for him tonight. See the pity that was also probably etched there. But he'd have to face her sooner or later. Taking a deep breath, he raised his eyes above the brim of the cup to glance at her. She looked back, her eyes unreadable to him in the café's dim light.

He tried to think of something to say, to apologize for his behavior, anything. But he couldn't look away, couldn't think under her stare. Miserable, he hunched his shoulders and tried to disappear. Her lips parted in the beginnings of speech and he flinched involuntarily. But before she could say anything, her eyes darted to stare behind his head, and her full lips tightened into a thin line.

He turned his body to look over the back of the chair. A tall figure stood a respectful distance away from their table, clothed in a floor-length white robe. Its face was hidden under a large cowl, and Chris shivered under its empty stare. Car horns blasted in the distance, followed by the shrill wail of a police car that grew silent.

It spoke, its soft voice gently floating across the night air, and yet strangely powerful enough to fill a stadium. "My master wishes to see you." Its words hit Chris, striking his face like a blow. Behind him, he could hear Harle let out a soft gasp. *My Master*. There was only one person whom any vampire would call "master": the Prince. The leader of the Vampire nation, the oldest known vampire in the world, rumored to be of the original blood from across the ocean. No one alive knew his name or his actual birth place, nor did anyone undead.

The figure didn't wait for an answer, turning to walk back the way it came. Chris got up quickly, knocking the chair over in his haste. Harle was still seated, looking even more pale than usual. He thought he heard her mumble "Mon Dieu" followed by more French that was too complex for him to understand. Blinking her eyes, she stood up and began to follow the figure, its robes glowing in the moonlight. Chris fell into step to the right of her. A ghostly pallor still hung across her face and the corner of her mouth twitched ever so slightly. Chris had never seen Harle so disheveled in his entire unlife.

In any other circumstance, Chris would have been just as frightened, just as worried as Harle, but not now. He had met *him* before; had spent much time with him on a beach in southern Florida, when the water was still clear and the sand clean. He knew the Prince, knew his behavior, knew his habits, his tastes, his mind, almost as well as his own. Unbeknownst to anyone, the Prince was Chris' sire, the vampire who had killed and resurrected Chris into the ranks of the undead. This gave Chris an edge, a slight bargaining power with any of his kind, if they knew. No vampire would dare anger or hurt the Child of the Prince and survive to do it again. It unfortunately would also make Chris a target for the Prince's enemies, and he did have some, among both the undead and living. It was decided between the two that Chris's identity would remain secret, at least until the time when Chris was older and ready to defend himself.

The robed figure led them away from the French Quarter, down alleyways and side streets, finally coming to the Garden District. The large houses loomed black against the tree lines, rising up on either side of the street. They entered a black iron wrought gate, dark ivy climbing through the bars. On the outside, the house was like all the other houses on the street, and Chris scolded himself for thinking that it would be any different. The figure opened the front door and held it aside for them, motioning them through with a raised hand. Chris stepped across the threshold first, followed closely by Harle, who gave a startled gasp when she saw the interior. The house was in shambles; cobwebs hung from the rafters and an inch of dust covered the floor. Chris was baffled. The Prince was rich, he *knew* this. And this house was a wreck, bearing the signs of a century of neglect. Harle spun around to face their guide, small knives flashing in both her hands. Their guide chuckled and closed the door softly behind them before turning to

face them. He folded his arms inside his sleeves and looked casually at Chris and Harle both before chuckling again.

“You think I have brought you to the wrong house, that I meant to lead you to a trap all along, yes?” It laughed again, its merriment echoing hollowly through the house. “I have not erred. This is the right house, and I mean you no harm. Come, you shall see where my Master has chosen to live.” He gestured for them to follow. Looking back over his shoulder, he appeared to shrug. “But perhaps you will find that a trap does indeed wait for you.” His words were soft and barely audible, but they too echoed against the bare walls and sent shivers down Chris’ spine. Harle turned to Chris and shrugged, putting her knives away. Harle would be damned first before showing fear in front of another person.

Chris bowed to her, arms wide. “After you, *ma cherie*.” He thought her heard her mutter “jerk” and other less flattering words as she stalked past him. Smiling, he followed her into the dark hallway.

They walked for ages, turning in all direction in their course through the house. *This house can’t possibly be this big*, Chris thought. *I saw it from the outside; there’s no way this hallway can still be going!* It was then that Chris noticed that as well as continuing onward, it was also gently sloping *downward*. *Of course*, he thought, *that makes sense now*. Then it dawned on him; this was Louisiana, not the plains of Texas or the mountains of Colorado. The ground here was mud, likely to be washed away during a summer rainfall and incapable of supporting any large basement. He shook his head in amazement. How the Prince was managing *this* was beyond him. As they walked forward and down, the soft sound of a piano playing began to float across the still air. Chris could barely hear the melody, but the little he did catch made his throat tight and his eyes shine.

The hallway slowly began to lighten with a soft golden glow and they stepped out into a parlor glowing in red and gold. The floor tiles were a deep gold with red oriental designs of dragons and cherry blossoms racing across them. The walls were red velvet, hung with burgundy and gold tassels and tapestries. It was one of the most beautiful and most intimidating rooms Chris had ever seen. The figure walked over to a set of golden double doors, in front of which stood two more of the white robed figures. Chris glanced at them and then back to Harle. She was turning around in slow circles, her mouth open as she stared at her surrounding. The piano sound was full now, its chords and phrases rippling across the velvet and wood, a whirlwind of life and energy.

Chris frowned slightly. When he had met the Prince earlier, he had never surrounded himself with an obvious display of wealth like this. The nagging feeling of a trap itched at the back of his mind ever so slightly.

The doors were thrown open then and Chris and Harle were led through into the adjacent room, the golden doors closing silently behind them. The room was dimmer than the first, and Chris had to let his eyes adjust to new lighting. The room was simple, dressed in dark mahoganies and soft, quiet hues. The nagging feeling in Chris’ head dissipated. *This* was what he had expected. Across the room was a grand piano, the man seated playing with his back to them. Harle and Chris stood as he continued playing, wrapped in the majesty and command of the piano.

The final chords drifted off into silence and Chris shook himself awake. He had been completely lured in by the song and had completely lost track of time and his

surroundings. He glanced at Harle; she too had the look of being rudely woken up. Chris turned back to the piano. The man had risen from the bench and was facing them, looking at them silently. He was small, Asian, lightly built with soft black hair neatly cut across his brow. His clothes were simple and black, tailored, but Chris knew that the overcoat alone probably cost as much as his apartment. He looked no more than thirty, but his small build could not hold in the feeling of quiet power that radiated from him; Chris knew that feeling too. The man was used to being in control and obeyed, and Chris remembered the same feeling of awe when they first met. Smiling slightly, the Prince walked over to a low couch, seating himself delicately upon it. A small calico cat jumped up and joined him, making a throne out of his lap. She purred loudly as his slender fingers brushed her chin. Looking down at the cat, he smiled broadly before looking back up to them, waiting.

The Prince finally broke the silence. He looked at Chris and softly smiled. "It's been along time." His voice was soft, melodic. Chris remembered how it had captivated him when they had first met. It still did. Now his eyes fell and took on a wistful, sad look. "I wish it could have been arranged for us to meet more, but circumstances what they are..." He trailed off and turned his attention to Harle. "My apologies. I do not believe we have met, Miss Harlequin DeMarlinne." Her reply was mumbled under her hair as she swept an awkward curtsy. Chris' eyes goggled out of his head; he had never seen Harle so respectful, so humble, in his entire time with her.

The Prince's eyes danced amusement. He looked at Chris, "I trust she has been the one to keep you out of trouble. I must thank her for her efforts. I've heard about your antics from the street." Chris blushed, and the Prince laughed softly. *Harle's probably mortified now*, Chris thought. He gulped. *I bet she doesn't talk to me after this.*

The Prince's mood grew somber, and he placed the cat on the ground, much to its annoyance. He gazed after it as it sauntered away. "I found her on my doorstep," he began softly. "Just a tiny kitten, cold and wet and hungry. No one in the world to care for her." He smiled softly again. "Now look at her. Jumping and running without a care in the world." Looking downcast again, he turned to Chris. "I had hoped to meet again in better times, my Son." Harle choked softly at the stress put on "son". Chris' spirits fell; if she hadn't known his parentage before, she definitely did now.

The Prince continued as if the outburst hadn't happened. "I know you've heard of the killings over the last two weeks, and I want you to know that it isn't just coincidence." Now he rose and began to pace across the length of the floor. "All four had their teeth pulled, their blood drained. All four were vampires of high Generation, some of the oldest in this city." Now he stopped in front of Chris. Placing his hands lightly on Chris' shoulders, he looked deep into Chris's eyes. "Now they are after you, not because of your age, but because of who you *are*. Your blood is strong and given time, you could be *my* equal in power. The word is out that I have a Son and unfortunately the wrong ears have heard it."

The Prince stepped back now and a pained expression crossed his face. "I had hoped you could live a little longer in secrecy, but it appears I dreamed in vain. The good news is that my spies have been able to track down the one responsible for the deaths, a man known as Voodoo Night. On the outside he is a new priest of the voodoo order just come to the city. However, his cures and potions do not follow the traditional voodoo group." His eyes turned hard and cold, and his voice rose. "He preaches that vampires

are the ones to blame for the crime in the city, the reason for the outbreak of cancer in French Quarter, and the harbingers of evil and demons to the city.” His fist clenched at his side. “His fetishes use the parts of vampires and he has set loose hundreds of men to try to catch us.”

The Prince now stopped and looked at Harle and Chris. Chris decided it was time to say something. “If you know *who* is behind it, Father, why don’t you just set people after him?” Harle choked again at his straightforwardness.

If the Prince was annoyed he didn’t show it. “It does appear if that is the simplest solution, doesn’t it? However, I fear that there may be an ulterior motive to his actions.” His face lacked all emotion now. “That is why I want you two to find him for me.”

Harle sputtered something incomprehensible and Chris frowned. “With all due respect, what in the Hell are we supposed to do? You’ve said so yourself, I still haven’t gotten control of myself and I’d have to rely on Harle the whole time. Unless of course we’re supposed to be bait. You also said he was after *me*.”

The Prince smiled sadly and shook his head. “That is why I picked you as my son,” he said softly. “Too bright for your own good sometimes, but definitely intelligent enough.” Chris shifted his feet under the praise, not sure how to respond.

“If there were any other way, believe me, I would take it before this.” The Prince pulled Chris’ head down lightly to his own and kissed him lightly on the forehead. They locked eyes. “Find him for me. But don’t get yourself killed.”

Harle and Chris crouched in the shadows of the alley, their backs against the cool stone wall. Harle was still shaken from their meeting the night before but refused to admit it, as usual. As if on cue, they had found a flyer last night inviting the public to a seminar given by the man himself, Mr. “Voodoo Night”. They had followed him from the seminar to his apartment in the Quarter without incident. Now they waited outside his door, contemplating their next move.

Chris could feel Harle’s glare in the darkness. She was still angry at him for not telling her his parentage, angry and afraid. “I say we’re done. He asked us to find him, and we found him. Let’s go back and let him handle it from here.”

Chris shook his head, his blond hair falling in his eyes. “I’m not letting him get away, not now that we’ve found him.” Chris wasn’t sure where his new found courage came from and he didn’t care if his powers weren’t fully developed. He wasn’t going to let the Prince, his Father, down. He could do this. Looking back at Harle, he whispered, “I’m going in. Follow if you like,” and slipped into the darkness. Harle muttered a curse under her breath and ran after him.

The front door was unlocked and Chris slipped in silently, his senses heightened. The room was dark and musty; he could barely make out the outline of a door against the far wall. Creeping to it slowly, he leaned against it and listened, glancing at Harle from the corner of his eye. Her complete attention was on the door, fingers flexed to reach the knives concealed on her person. Chris stepped back and prepared himself to open the door.

He didn’t have to.

The door opened silently, and blinding light flooded out of the frame. Chris threw his arms in front of his face, trying to shield himself. He heard Harle yelp behind him. Spinning, he saw her pinned to the ground by a gray figure, its movements alien yet

vaguely familiar. It looked up at him with golden eyes and hissed. *Zombie* he thought, suddenly frozen with fear. Harle took that moment to slice its head off neatly at the shoulder, spewing black blood and sending the head bouncing off into the corner. Chris turned in time to find two more rushing toward him from the open door. A knife flashed and he jumped back, but not quick enough. A brief flash of pain on his right arm, and a thin red line appeared across his wrist. He roared at the circling gray men, more in fury than pain.

His world began to move in slow motion, the men's movements captured awkwardly against the wall. He saw in a haze Harle jump towards him, her mouth open and screaming. He could almost make out the words, the meanings lost in the motion. He reached for her, but not quickly enough. The world jarred, and she was flung away from him with a bloodcurdling scream, a foot of steel through her chest. She landed against the wall with a thud. She didn't move.

Chris screamed in rage, a red haze covering his eyes. *Harle!! They were after him! Not Harle!!! Not Her!!* Chris felt raw, unbridled power rage through him, more strength than he had never felt in his life. Blood pounded in his head and he lost control of himself completely. He didn't care. Bodies were flung away from him, arms and legs torn from torsos littered the ground. In a matter of minutes it was done. Chris stood panting in the center of the room; the remains of thirteen zombies littered the floor in pieces and pools of blood. Chris felt drained, more tired than he had ever felt in his entire life. Shaking his head to rid himself of the blood-induced fury, he scanned the floor and found her in the corner where she had landed. Stumbling in his fatigue, he made his way to her and picked up her wrist. He couldn't feel a pulse. Slapping his hand across the wall he cursed to himself. Of course she didn't have a pulse; she was dead after all. Putting his hands across her chest he felt for the life within. Not a heartbeat exactly, but something far more subtle. Closing his eyes, he concentrated. Sweat beaded his face and he swayed with exhaustion. *There!* Finally he felt it, a small glimmer of life, under the dead body, the small sign he was looking for. Looking down at her, at the foot long knife stuck through her chest, he frowned. She had lost a lot of blood, and who knew what damage the knife had done. Slowly, he pulled the knife free, careful not to damage anymore of the fragile tissue. He held the length of the blade up, catching the light across its dirty blade. He threw it aside.

Placing her head in his lap, he grabbed his wrist with his canines, ripping the thin flesh across his veins. Blood pooled out of the open wound. Cradling her head, he held his wrist to her mouth, letting the blood pour in. For the first few minutes she didn't respond, and he began to worry that he was too late, that he didn't reach her in time. He closed his eyes and held her head tighter to him, feeling his blood pour into her listless body. He felt lips clamp down on his wrist suddenly, flapping his eyes open. She was alive! Sort of. He let out a strangled sob, not aware that he had been holding it in. She sucked at his wrist for a few minutes more, filling him with ecstasy. He was reminded of the time when the Prince had given him his arm and the emotions it had awoken inside of him. Many vampires had said that drinking another vampires' blood was the most erotic experience ever available to mortal or vampire, and he was now inclined to agree with them. She soon became quiet and rested her head on his lap, her eyes closed. Chris hugged her head to his chest and cried.

Harle lay in corner quietly, regaining her strength. Chris had held her there for what seemed like eternity, but according to his watch it had only been an hour. The door still stood open and nothing had come in or out of it. Standing up, he swayed slightly and groped along the wall for support. He had given more blood than he thought, and the weakness was catching up to him. Chris narrowed his eyes and hardened his mouth into a line. He was not going to let this man live another night, not let him come after him, Harle, or any other vampire again. Chris wasn't sure how he was going to do the job in his present condition, but he didn't care. He had tried to kill Harle, and Chris wasn't going to allow a second attempt.

Chris entered the door and walked down a flight of stairs, forcing himself not to hold onto the railing for support. At the bottom was a small room lined with bookcases with a large table in the middle of the floor. A man was seated on a chair behind the table, his hands folded in front of him on the table. He was an old man, wrinkled and decayed with age. Looking up, he smiled at Chris. Teeth were missing. "So the heir has come at last," he chuckled. "I have waited long for this moment, demon. A very long time." Chris frowned at him. This man didn't look strong enough to harm a fly, much control an entire cult.

The old man went on unhurriedly. "I see that your Father has not joined you. A pity. I had hoped to destroy you all in one night." With the last word, his eyes opened wide and glowed red, lighting the room. He snarled, "Prepare yourself!" and leaped over the table faster than Chris thought was humanly possible. Just in time, he raised his arms to cover his face as the old man leaped on top of him. Chris broke away and threw him across the room, crouching in a defensive stance. The voodoo master circled him like a wolf and growled, darting in and out, trying to find a weakness. Chris was growing tired quickly and realized with a pang of fear that the man was toying with him, playing really, trying to tire him out. It hit him then. *He's not human!!* No human could move the way he did, but he wasn't a vampire either. Chris couldn't figure out what he was.

He soon realized that it didn't matter. The voodoo creature was stronger than he at the moment, and it was only a matter of time before he tired and the creature killed him. *Maybe I can hold out long enough for Harle to run. If only.* As if he had heard, the creature leaped at Chris fully, catching him off guard. Chris tried to resist and felt the last of his strength give out. "Forgive me..." he whispered.

A loud crashing sound came from the stairs and the creature lifted himself off Chris enough to look behind. Six figures flashed down the stairs and circled the room, moving with unnatural speed. The Prince stepped out of the figures, anger flashing in his eyes. The creature snarled and jumped for the Asian's throat, Chris left forgotten on the floor. The other five figures, vampires Chris realized, jumped upon the voodoo creature and brought it to the floor, snarling and thrashing. The Prince walked over to it, glaring down, his anger tangible.

The creature-man bellowed and looked with a blood-shot eye on the Prince's face. His words gurgled forth like a broken fountain. "You demons won't be in control...of this city...for much longer. Master is coming...his plan...already...here..." The Prince's eyes flashed and he held out a hand. The five vampires holding the creature down jumped away, and the man burst into flames. He screamed and thrashed on the floor for five long minutes, reduced to a pile of ash at the end. The Prince watched the

whole spectacle with cold eyes, never once looking away. Chris couldn't watch at all. The man's screams would haunt him forever.

The Prince walked over to where Chris sat and kneeled down next to him. Placing a hand on his shoulder he tried to look in Chris' eyes. Chris turned his face away and looked at the ground, unable to meet his gaze. *I failed him. I almost got myself and Harle killed.* Harle. Chris jumped in remembrance. He had left her upstairs on the ground. He looked at the Prince with wild eyes. What if she had died, what if someone had found her? What if-

"She is fine." The Prince smiled softly at him.

Chris blushed and tried to look away and found that he couldn't. "No help from me though. I...," he struggled to get the words out. "I'm...sorry. I failed you." Chris found he could look away now and stared at the floor, tracing the wood grains across the planks. The Prince gripped his chin with a firm but gentle grasp and turned Chris' head towards him. Chris gasped. Long red tears flowed down the chiseled face, tracing its features. The Prince was crying! His Father kissed him on the forehead again, and held his head to his chest and murmured. "No, no. You didn't. I am very proud of you." Chris felt hot tears well in his eyes and creep down his face. They held each other and cried.

The wind was cool and whipped Harle's hair from her face. It was always cool along the Mississippi. Chris stood next to her on the dock overlooking the river, the water reflecting the full moon. Chris put an arm around Harle's shoulder, not caring what she might think. To his surprise, she hugged him back, and stared at the river with her arms entwined around him. Chris smiled to himself. Harle would never admit to such a human display of emotion, she would be mortified if he brought it up. But he was content to stay like this. How much time either of them had, now, he had no idea. But he was content to stay here like this as long as he could.

They stood by the river until the moon set over the horizon.