

Prologue.

A Village High in the Carpathian Mountains East of Bistrita, Transylvania, Romania

rip — drip — Blood dripping down into a tub of blood in which he lay.

No, not all blood — that was imagination intruding into his meditation, probably from some deep-seated guilt about his own nature — the blood he depended upon for life — the blood of those he'd killed as part of his job — and his fears for Carrie.

There was some blood welling out from wounds in his side and upper left arm. The wounds in his side were already closing — bites from the wolves' teeth.

Something organic was obstructing the healing of the wound in his arm. He reached his right arm across and placed his palm over the torn triceps muscle. The pain was in the bone. He exerted his *chi* force and pulled, wondering if this was what telekinesis was. Slowly, painfully, the canine tooth emerged from his arm — a wolf fang, broken off when the creature's jaws closed on his upper arm. He set the fang on the seat of the wooden chair by the tub.

Sliding back under the hot water, he relaxed again, sucking energy from the heat of the water, feeling the arm wounds close, and listening to the sound of the drip — water dripping from the hot water tap. Immersing in hot water was like magic most times, letting him soak away pain, stiffness, stress, but nothing could soak this away. He felt dead inside. He felt vicious and angry like the predators he hunted. Tonight he needed the hot water for another reason.

He'd discovered over a month ago — had it been that long? — that immersing in hot water relaxed him to the point that his senses expanded — his vampire senses.

Yes, he was a vampire, like the predators he was assigned to destroy — well, not exactly. He drank blood that had been bottled for him. He didn't terrorize people, taking it from their throats, and he certainly didn't kill for it. He had exchanged blood with Carrie, but that was for a special reason. At first it was because she felt polluted by the accidental imbibing of blood from Count Heinrich Von Strelitz. Then, over time, it had become part of their love-making on occasion. Once she'd been infected by the virus it didn't matter.

Now, as he lay submerged, holding his breath far past human endurance, he reached out with his mind, seeking some sense of her. What he found scared him and gave him hope at the same time.

If it was her, the peasants of some small village thought she was a guardian angel.

The villagers — that was another story. They believed the forested hills about them to be filled with werewolves. With one of the most dangerous vampires in history living practically on their doorstep, all they could talk about was werewolves.

He glanced again at the wolf tooth on the chair. Perhaps the villagers weren't so far from the truth. Perhaps Michael's recent experiences hinted at the origins of the werewolf legends.

He sat up, then exited the tub, drying himself before donning his clothes — black Levi's jeans, a black V-neck cotton-knit sweater, then pulled on the shoulder holster for his Walther PPK.

He drew *Mountain Wind*, his centuries-old *Muramasa* katana, and slid a whet stone along the blade, making sure it had a razor-sharp hone. Satisfied, he sheathed it in the dull black *saya* or scabbard.

Next he picked up his ID folder. Flipping it open,

he looked at the face. Somehow it didn't seem to be him. Michael Cameron, Special Agent Samurai of CSIS, the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service — the face was that of a different Michael Cameron. For one thing, he'd been human then. For another, he and Carrie were just getting to know each other when that ID had been issued. Then they got married and survived countless adventures. Now she was missing.

Now and then there were fleeting visions, sensations, but the strongest image had been one of his last real contacts with her. He'd been in Kyoto, Japan — he'd just killed Sato Satsuo, and was planning to go after Cesare Borgia in Venice. He'd gotten the image of her packing to fly to Europe and had called to talk her out of it. If only she'd listened.

1: Obdurate

Dartmouth, NS

November 5, 2009, 10:05 am

Carrie Cameron was throwing clothes in a suitcase. Her manner was haphazard, not her usual well-planned packing, often done days ahead. She was frustrated, grunting to herself as she realized things she'd missed. On the floor near the doorway sat an airline pet carrier, the door open. In it, Kato, Mike's Blue Point Siamese cat, sat in a crouch, as if making sure he wouldn't be left behind.

Mike saw all of this through Carrie's eyes, felt her emotions, and was privy to her innermost thoughts. Vampirism had created this mental link — mental bond might have been closer to the fact.

Mike hadn't wanted to infect Carrie with his blood — with the vampire virus. This wasn't like Dracula and Mina Harker, where the vampire had forced Mina to drink his blood so that he could control her and read her thoughts from a distance, see what she saw, hear what she heard. For one thing, Mike wasn't a centuries-old vampire trying to establish a new feeding ground. Mike had been a vampire for little more than a year, though his vertical cats-eye pupils and the hint of pointedness to his ears suggested an ancient *nosferatu*.

Carrie had inadvertently swallowed blood from a centuries-old vampire while trying to heal a frightful wound to Mike's throat and spinal cord — she'd sucked blood out of the dead Count to blow into Mike's wound, swallowing it accidentally. She was so

horrified by the thought of that monster's blood being inside her that she'd persuaded Mike to exchange blood with her, taking some of her blood in exchange for a larger amount of his. It was to convince her that there was more of Michael's blood in her than that of the monster.

It worked. Not only did it put Carrie at ease but, according to Dr. Jonathan MacGregor, there was no trace of Count Heinrich Von Strelitz's DNA in her blood. Indeed, for whatever reason, Michael's blood had eradicated all traces of it. Clearly, there was something unique about Mike's blood, a mystery Jonathan had yet to unravel.

The unexpected side-effect of the transfer was that Michael could communicate telepathically with Carrie, even from the other side of the world — in this case, Japan. (He'd thought that was one of Stoker's fictional inventions.) Further more, he could see through her eyes, as he was doing now, and feel her emotions.

Unlike Mina and Dracula, however, she could not be hypnotized to see where Michael was. She could feel some sense of what was happening with him, and share what thoughts he projected, but that was it. Mike was convinced that their deep, committed love for each other was at the heart of this bond, that the vampire virus was merely the mechanism.

What are you doing? he demanded. *You can't come here; we're about to leave. Where are you going?*

It took a moment for him to get through to her. Her emotions were driving her. She'd sensed something of his experiences with the ancient vampire-ninja Sato Satsuo, one of the original Black Dragons. While she hadn't seen Michael's gory act of tearing out Sato's heart, she had sensed something of Michael's rage and horror at walking into what could only be described as a medieval torture chamber, and his subsequent battle with Sato. Now she was determined to rush to him.

Carrie!

She seemed to be in a panic, either blocking him out or unable to sense him through the turmoil inside her. Frustrated, Mike pulled out his iPhone and called her.

Even the phone took several rings before it broke through the cloud of emotions.

“Hello?” It was abrupt.

“Carrie, it's me, Michael.”

“Oh, thank God. Are you okay? I've been going crazy here. I know you just went through something horrifying — I saw flashes of something like a woman being tortured on a table, and blood being systematically drained from her. It was awful. I felt your rage, then a scary kind of cold anger. That scared me. Is Sato dead?”

“Yes, Sato is dead. He can't trouble us or anyone else any further.”

“But you did something that bothers you, something impulsive.”

Mike nodded. “It all just happened. I had him more or less at my mercy, but he kept taunting that he could heal whatever I did. I didn't really think about it. I drove my hand into him and tore out his heart. In theory a human could have done it — it's all about chi strength — though a human might not have been able to penetrate a vampire's tissues like that —. Anyway, it's over.”

“But you're not coming home,” she insisted. “I got that much from you. You don't like it, but you're going to Europe instead of coming home.”

“I want Borgia out of the picture, too,” Mike insisted. “There's no reason to think Torok is the real manipulator pulling the strings of all the puppets in this plot, but he's temporarily on the run from me. Borgia is still there somewhere in the middle of his web, still plotting. I think this is the best time to remove him as a threat. Tony agrees. And I've not only got Sean's team, but an equal force of well-trained ninjas from a White

Ninja school here. I'm well-supported. Nigel is already joking about calling me *Daimyo*, Lord Samurai — a *daimyo* was a samurai lord, rather like a feudal baron with other knights under him. The point is, I don't have to go it alone, not that I'm ever alone with Tony to help out.”

“I'm coming,” Carrie insisted. “Kato agrees. When I got out his travel cage, instead of running from it like he usually does, thinking it means a trip to the dreaded vet, he worked the latch with his paw until he got it open, then went inside. He's still sitting in there, in a crouch, glaring at me as if daring me to try removing him.”

“Look, sweat heart,…”

“Save your breath, Michael; I'm on standby to Venice. I knew that was where you'd be going. Isn't it crazy? Kato's booked and I'm on standby. The taxi'll be here in an hour.”

Mike sighed. Half a world away, he knew there was no way he could talk her out of it. When it became matters of emotion, she could be obdurate.

“We haven't even booked flights yet,” he pointed out. “God only knows when we'll get to Venice. Okay; remember that hotel near the marina? Check in there. Maybe Nigel can book several rooms for the lot of us, including this new army I seem to be stuck with.

He pocketed his phone and turned to Tony — Lord Anthony Dewhurst, cousin to the renowned Sir Percy Blakeney, known in literature as *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Tony was no stranger to swashbuckling adventure and living on the razor's edge.

“She's packed and heading for Venice,” Mike said. He could hear the defeat in his own voice. “I tried talking her out of it, but it was like talking to a wall. I told her I'd have Nigel try to set us all up in that hotel near the marina I used last time.” He glanced hopefully at Nigel.

“I'm right on it, gov'nor, or should I say *Daimyo*,”

the Cockney added, teasing.

“Give it a rest, Nigel.” Mike had found he worked well with Tony, and he liked Nigel — as a hacker and I.T. wizard, he was in a league by himself. However, always the introvert at heart, Mike felt most at home with a team of one.

Ever unflappable, Nigel just smiled and went to work.

“All done,” he said, five minutes later. “We’ve got the ’ole top floor of the ’otel, very covertly, all separate reservations. An’ I got us all booked on flights to Venice late tomorrow. That took a bit — wouldn’t look too covert for the lot of us to be shown’ up to board the same flight, so Mike an’ Sean are connected through Shanghai, Tony an’ I through Singapore, an’ our warriors through Bombay an’ Delhi. The lads wi’ the weapons’ll get there first; Mike n’ Sean get there last — slightly longer stopovers, but we’ll all be in dear ol’ Venice late on Saturday.

“Oi, if Radu were ’ere, it would be like old ’ome week.”

“Our friend, Radu, is busy at the moment,” Tony commented. “He is somewhere in Romania, digging into Count Gregore Dragomir Torok. He watched things in Venice for a while, then, sensing that Torok would be returning to Romania, he went on ahead. He wanted to establish his presence before Torok’s arrival.”

“I hope he's being discreet,” Mike said. “The last thing he needs is to draw too much attention to himself in his own birthplace, in the heart of Torok’s domain.”

“Curious you should word it that way, Michael,” Tony mused; “To the best of my knowledge, Radu is in Transylvania, but a little north of his birthplace of Sighisoara. I'm afraid that's all I know at the moment. He was offered a position at a hotel, though, why he would accept such employment eludes me. I can't imagine why he would even need another source of

income.”

Mike shrugged. “Perhaps as a cover. Sometimes the best way to remain illusive is to hide in plain sight.”

“No doubt, dear boy; no doubt.”

Radu Dracul stood before a full-length mirror, studying his appearance. His hair was quite long and wavy, and he'd grown a bushy moustache that extended across the width of his face. He wore a golden coloured shirt with an abbreviated collar, barely any tabs in front, a large red cravat, and a black waistcoat. Over all this was a black cape with sable fur trim about his shoulders. The difference in his face he achieved by vampire glamour — his fine nose much more aquiline and pronounced, his chin jutting, his lower lip more pronounced. He'd also made himself appear to be several inches taller.

He glanced at the portrait on the wall — a print (every guest room in the hotel displayed one) of an original done after his brother's death — and nodded to himself. His appearance was identical to the man in the print, a portrait of his brother, Vladimir III of Walachia — Vlad Tsepes, the Impaler — Vlad Dracula.

“You will do,” he said to his reflection, thickening his accent to something a bit more pronounced and liquid than Bela Lugosi's. “Welcome. Welcome to Castle Dracula. Enter freely and of your own free will, and leave behind something of the happiness you bring.”

His normally sincere smile had been replaced by one that left a cold, predatory gleam in his eyes.

“Yes; that should entertain the guests and please the management of Hotel Castle Dracula.”

“We have a seat for you, Mrs. Cameron,” the airline clerk assured her. “Your cat can travel in the seat next to you to Ottawa, but the cage will have to be checked for the connecting flight to Frankfurt.”

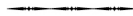
Carrie nodded and smiled in relief. She checked a small bag, then headed for the security check.

She found the flight boring. It frustrated her and added to her impatience — the absurdity of flying west to make a connection that went east. *Stupid*, she insisted to herself. *Why couldn't they fly me to London, then to Venice.*

In Ottawa she had a two-hour wait, Kato in her lap as she read a magazine. Then, hearing the pre-boarding announcement, she held Kato close.

“Sorry, little fluff; but you have to get back in your carrier. And, this time, you can't fly with me. You'll be fine.

By special arrangement, they'd allowed her to gate-check Kato before boarding.



Mike was restless, anxious to get away. Instead, he'd spent the day searching the now-deserted grounds of Sato's school for assassins. The bodies had been removed and discreetly destroyed. One small detail showed up that troubled Michael. Comparing the number of tatami or sleeping mats with the body count showed that two ninjas had been absent.

“Perhaps there were just two extra mats set out,” Tony offered, but Mike shook his head.

“They're not like beds in a spare room, Tony.” He went to a cupboard, opened the door, and gestured to the rolled tatami inside. “They aren't set out unless there is someone to use them.”

“So we still have two ninjas on the loose,” Tony conceded, nodding. “We know they're human; they weren't in the hidden, darkened lair. Perhaps they were

off on a mission, and will now seek either a new profession or a new master.”

Mike frowned. “The police will have to know about all of this, and be warned that there are still two loose and unaccounted-for.”

“Mason can make sure the police are informed,” Tony assured him.



“Raise your seat, ma’am; we’re beginning our descent.” The steward smiled at Carrie.

She widened her eyes, stretched, then yawned. She must have dozed off. It had been a long flight; now it was over. She could get off the plane, clear immigration, get her bag and Kato — he’d be screaming at her after not seeing her for the entire flight — then find a taxi.

Carrie was excited. The city seemed to gleam in the morning sun, the dark water of the canals making the city look a bit like a swamp from the air. The plane had ridden a tailwind from Germany, and had glided onto the runway well ahead of schedule.

Immigration was easy; customs even easier. Everyone grinned and winked, hearing her story of meeting her husband who was away on a lengthy business trip. They seemed to find entertainment in acting as if they were involved in a conspiracy with her that would culminate in her rendezvous with Michael.

The lady Immigration officer smiled, seemingly looking for romance in her tale, then cooed and fussed, peaking through the bars of the cage door at Kato. For his part, Kato just glared at her with sapphire-blue eyes, then gave a low moan that was almost a growl.

“He’s tired and cranky,” Carrie explained. “He’s never flown before and he misses my husband.”

“Ah, he is your husband’s cat. With most of my friends, it is the woman who like cats. The men, they

like the dogs.”

“Actually, Michael likes all animals. He had a dog until a little over a year ago, but — well — he died.” Her voice trailed off.

Kato let out an impatient cry, as if telling her to hurry up.

“He wants you to hurry and take him to his papa,” the lady said, smiling.

The Customs officer didn’t even look at her bag. He just smiled and waved her on.

Are all Italians such romantics? she wondered.

Once outside the airport, Carrie made several failed attempts to get a cab, being beaten out each time by more aggressive Europeans.

Off to one side, she caught a glimpse of someone who seemed to be watching her, speaking into a cellphone. At first she told herself it was nothing. Then, recalling the trauma of being hauled out of a hotel in Rostock, Germany, and spirited to this very city, she reconsidered. However, the man seemed to have disappeared, and she then managed to secure a taxi.

2: Nightmare

arrie smiled at the taxi driver and gave him the address of the hotel.

“I’m meeting my husband,” she explained.

“Ah, *bella signora*, then we must waste no time in getting you there *presto*.”

The driver was quite gregarious as he ushered her into the back seat, set her bag on the floor (instead of in the trunk), and placed Kato on the seat beside her. Moments later, they were off into the insanity of Italian traffic.

“There are so many sights to see, *signora*. I have a card, and would be happy to take you and your husband sight-seeing. And my cousin, Luigi, he does a gondola tour. You cannot visit Venice, *signora*, without experiencing the gondola.”

CRASH!

There was no warning. They were just passing through an intersection. A dark SUV came racing through from the right, slamming into the taxi near the trunk. The force spun the vehicle about, crashing it into an on-coming vehicle. That car swerved just enough that they collided side-by-side, facing opposite directions.

The impact threw Carrie against the door, slamming her head against the side window hard enough to spider-crack the glass.

After that, it was all a blur. Dull pain filled her head, her vision clouded, and there was a ringing in her ears.

She felt the car door open, and strong arms pulled her out. There had been an odd sound next to her — something screaming, almost like a high-pitched snarl, and the sound of something crashing repeatedly against something that rattled. Then, as she was being pulled away from the taxi, something crashed onto the pavement near her.

A brief sense of pain, like a pin-prick in her neck, signaled the onset of an out-of-place sense of euphoria.

She was pushed none-too-gently into the back of another vehicle, which took off immediately. Then sound became a dull rumble, the blur got worse, and everything faded.

Mike was drifting into the oblivion that vampires know as sleep. For the first time, instead of the accelerating onset darkness and unawareness, the darkness was torn by a woman's scream, shrill and filled with terror, and there were images, almost like scenes from a dream.

A fast-moving car sped through an intersection, seeming to steer for the rear corner of a taxi. The impact spun the taxi out of control, causing it to crash into an on-coming vehicle. The offending car screeched to a halt: two tall, burly men tore open the back door of the cab, and pulled the woman out.

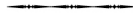
Mike recognized Carrie. Her head hung down as if unconscious or dead. Blood flowed from the left side of her head, mingling with the light brown of her hair. They hustled her into the offending car, then sped off.

Through it all, in a cage in the cab — a pet carrier — the animal within seemed to go berserk, flying at the bars in a fury of screams and snarls. Mike knew the voice. Kato sounded like that when he got inadvertently closed in a room and no one knew he was there.

Every time he threw himself at the cage door, the

cage edged closer to the edge of the seat until it finally tumbled to the road. It struck on one corner with enough force to distort the doorframe, just as the frantic Siamese was launching his body against the door. The door sprung open, the cat leaped free, then, overwhelmed by the sounds of honking horns and the caterwaul of approaching sirens, he tore off in the direction of the nearest alley.

Mike fought to rise, but it was hopeless. He couldn't even open his eyes. He tried to reach out to Carrie's mind and locate her, but could only lie there as oblivion finally took him, the sound of her scream echoing in his mind, then fading.



Mike's eyes snapped open, Carrie's scream still echoing in his ears. Rushing to his clothes, he dressed quickly, pulled on his shoulder holster, grabbed his ID and *sgian dubh*.

Calm yourself, he thought, struggling to get his arms into the sleeves of his drover coat. He pulled *Mountain Wind*, his *Muramasa* katana from the duffel and slid it into the long, narrow holding pocket inside the long black coat. He grabbed his heavy black felt hat and donned it as he headed for the door, pulling dark wrap-around sunglasses from the pocket of his coat.

There was no sign of Sean. He checked Tony's room — no sign of Dewhurst or Nigel. The rest of the teams were in the other suites, but he didn't want to talk to them right now.

He ignored the elevator and dashed for the stairs, pulling out his iPhone as he ran. A well-practiced movement activated the phone and slid the unlock, then he held the home button long enough to get the voice command screen and said, "Call Tony."

"Michael," Tony answered. "It looks like we both awakened a tad earlier than usual. Nigel seems to have

gone off somewhere so I just popped down to the news agent to pick up...”

Mike cut him off. “Someone grabbed Carrie,” he blurted. “She was in a cab. They hit the cab with another car — standard police and military tactic.”

“First, Michael, you must calm yourself. I know this is dire, but you’re no good to her unless you’re in complete control. Have you tried reaching out to her?”

Mike paused at the edge of the lobby. Leaning against the doorway, he used *chi-kung* breathing to calm his thoughts, then reached out — nothing. Even when she was asleep there was usually a hint of her. The icy grip in the pit of his stomach returned.

“She’s missing, Tony — gone. No trace of her. It had to be either Torok...”

“Or Borgia,” Tony finished for him. “It could have been Borgia, old man. After all, Venice is his town, his domain, if you will.”

“I need to find her, Tony; and I’ll kill whoever took her.”

“You sound in control now — a bit icy and dangerous, perhaps; just don’t get worked up to the point of being irrational. And, before you argue the contrary, I know irrationality isn’t a normal part of you, but this is Carrie we’re talking about. God’s blood, man, we can’t even depart Japan for two more hours.”

“I know exactly how you must be feeling; it’s how I’d be feeling if it were you, old man.”

There it was again: Tony’s slip of how unexpectedly emotional his connection to Mike seemed. *Why?* — *No, no time for that.*

“I think I know where the incident took place — near the airport. We need to get out of here. See if you can locate Sean and Nigel. We should have had Sam arrange a US Military transport plane.”

“It would have attracted too much attention, Michael,” Tony reminded him. “This vision: was it through Carrie’s eyes?”

Mike thought. “No; it was as if I was there, watching, possibly through the eyes of one of the abductors.”

“That’s odd, Michael. Have you ever had such visions before now?”

“Not really — flashes of something that time I was approaching the house and found Sam dead and Carrie taken by Chernov, at Soutzos’s order. Why?”

“Hmm — well —” Tony hesitated. “I knew someone a long time ago who had such visions,” he admitted, then fell silent. “It might be nothing, Michael; still, we should lose no time in getting ready. We need to be at the airport in two hours.”

Carrie came-to in a small, dark room; the only light came from under the closed door. Her head was pounding and, reaching to the left side above her ear, she could feel dried blood.

What happened? It took a while. As she fought to reclaim the memory, images began to form: the dark SUV running the light to hit her taxi, two men pulling her from the cab, Kato’s wild cries as he threw himself against the cage door.

So where am I now? The dim light creeping in under the door didn’t give much illumination, but her vision was much more sensitive than it had been just the day before.

So what’s that mean? What assaulted her memory was images of the spring of the previous year, when Michael returned to CSIS. In times of stress, the onset of his new vampire traits seemed to supersede his human traits.

So the stress of this is boosting my vampire traits? she thought. *Does that mean I’m closer to changing? No; not until my heart stops. As long as my heart continues to beat, I remain human. Fair enough.*

She looked about her. It looked like an empty closet or small storage room. Someone had needed to dump her somewhere safe until — it was almost four o'clock — until someone arrived? *No; until someone wakes up — either Torok or Borgia — most likely Borgia, since I'm in Venice.*

She settled herself into a more comfortable position. When Borgia had kidnapped her that other time, she'd been in a plush suite. But then, she'd been taken by vampires and had been delivered to Borgia during his functioning hours. This was different. These had been human flunkies — large men who moved like commandos.

She closed her eyes, leaning back against the wall, her head resting against it. Breathing slow breaths, the way Michael had taught her, helped ease the pain in her head. The wound had closed, leaving dried blood and the uncomfortable matted feeling in her hair.

Sleep off the pain, she thought. I'm locked in; might as well wait.

She had escaped custody before; couldn't she escape this closet?

She reached up and tried the knob — locked. *Well, you expected that, didn't you?* Something about the door felt weird; there was no play in the latch — the door didn't rattle the way a closed door usually did.

She got prone on the floor and peered under the door. She could see something that looked like two chair legs. *Someone wedged the door with a chair, as if expecting me to be able to crash against the door hard enough to splinter the door jam. How much does Cesare Borgia know about me? Is he expecting vampire strength?*

She settled against the wall once more and relaxed until she drifted off.

Hunger. That was the first feeling to assail her when she awoke. The headache was just a dull feeling in her left parietal region. *Definitely a concussion*, she thought. Just as her head had slammed against the side window in the car, her brain had slammed against the inside of her skull.

But there was more than that to the pain — a narcotic? Had they given her something when they took her from the car? More than likely; it wouldn't have helped them any if she'd struggled — more people would have noticed her being taken.

Footsteps. Someone was coming.

The chair was pulled free of the door and the door unlocked and opened. While her eyes struggled to adjust to the glare of light in the hall, two sets of rough hands seized her and dragged her out. As they dragged her past a window, she could see from the darkness outside that it was after sunset. The men who dragged her were frighteningly strong and large. With her strength amplified by the vampire virus, she might have been able to break free, but she wasn't confident.

Bide your time, see what's going on. There may be a better chance to break free later — especially if no one knows I'm capable of near-vampire speed.

They continued along a corridor toward the front of the building. She now recognized the ballroom-sized entry foyer of Cesare Borgia's palace, what was now supposed to be some sort of elite vampire social club. They stopped at large, elaborately carved double doors. Michael had described the decadence of this place to her — the entrance to Borgia's "throne room," where Michael had confronted him more than a year before.

Here another man waited. This one was clearly a vampire — pale complexion, over-sized irises, and the unmistakable aura of a vampire. And, like certain other European vampires Michael had described, he was allowing his fangs to show. *Why do the creepiest of*

these monsters want to flaunt being a vampire, she wondered.

His lips formed a cold, amused smile, and he produced two pairs of handcuffs.

“For the wife of the infamous Michael Cameron, we take extra precautions,” he said. The lilt of the accent was more subtle than the classic Bela Lugosi-style Dracula voice, but the similarity was there.

Romanian? Torok is from Romania.

He gestured for her to be seated in the chair by the door.

From inside the room, voices seemed to be arguing. She had no trouble hearing what was said.

“Why did you bring her here? I thought I made peace with him last year. He came in here and killed Francisco de la Montaigne as if he were a pathetic child — he made it seem effortless. He killed Heinrich Von Strelitz; killed twenty vampires in his own palace, then chased him down like a hound running a boar to earth, and killed him in a church — in a church! I’ve never seen such speed or skill in any vampire. And you treat him as if he were a fledgling!

“I do not care that you took her; I do not care if you kill her. Remove her from here and get her out of the country. I will not have him tracing this crime back to my door.”

“Calm yourself, Cesare; (He pronounced it Chezar’-ay) this is of no consequence to you. You never truly understood me, did you? You thought I was Stanislaus’s puppet or the tool of that fool Francisco. Well, it served my purpose to seem so, just as it has served my purpose to seem to be your vassal. You have been useful, Cesare, and, if you are clever, you will continue to be useful. Just don’t tax my patience with pretending to order me about. I find it annoying and offensive.”

The doors opened and, what came out looked like something from a horror film. The bald head was

framed with pointed ears. The fangs were fully extended. The mottled green eyes had vertical slits for pupils, like Mike and Jonathan's eyes. In this vampire's face, though, they bore a frightening resemblance to a snake's eyes. There were lines in the face as if he had no interest in looking young.

He wore a long, brown, Victorian-style cloak, gathered about him so that the only thing showing from under it was a brown neck scarf, Georgian in style.

He flashed her a cold smile, then glanced at the other European vampire, and the smile disappeared.

"Bring her, Dmitri," he ordered. "I suggest sedating her and using a wheelchair. We depart for the train station in thirty minutes." There was a dramatic swirl of his cape as he stalked off. The dramatic effect was lessened by a pronounced limp.

Carrie was just considering making a break for it when the sharp pain hit her neck. Dullness spread, then darkness closed in.

3: Delays

Tokyo Airport, Japan
Friday, November 6, 2009, 8:50 AM

ike drummed his fingers on the arm of the airplane seat.

“Geeze, Dad,” Sean commented, “You’re not usually this bothered by flying. Anxious to meet up with Mom?”

Mike hadn’t told him of his vision; he still didn’t understand what that was all about. It could have been just a nightmare, but he’d never had one before, and it seemed just too real to ignore.

A man, Japanese, looking furtively from left to right before darting forward and grabbing a ground-crew worker from behind. Two rigid fingers into the spine paralyze the legs, then, with a wrenching motion of the hands, the neck is broken. The assailant drags the body into the shadows, to emerge later wearing the ground-crew coveralls.

Mike snapped out of the daze, then scanned the tarmac — what he could see of it — outside his window. A crew was finishing off putting fuel in the starboard wing. Then the sense of being dazed hit him again.

The man in the stolen coveralls approaches from the south, heading straight for the port wing, driving a small service vehicle. He comes to a stop under the port engine, stands up on the seat, and reaches his hands into the aperture of the jet turbine, placing a small package in place. He resumes his seat, then

drives the vehicle back toward the terminal.

Mike's eyes widened. He unsnapped his seatbelt, stepped to the aisle, and went forward.

"Follow me," he told Sean.

"Excuse me," an attendant said, "but you must return to your seat. The captain is about to start the engines. We'll be departing momentarily."

"Tell him not to start the engines, especially not the port engine," Mike ordered, showing her his CSIS and Interpol credentials. "I just saw someone tampering with the port engine. It wasn't the refueling crew; they were at the starboard wing."

He pushed passed her, leaving her to follow in his wake, as he advanced and knocked on the door to the cockpit.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said from behind him, "but this gentleman says he saw someone tampering with one of the engines. He seems to have police credentials of some kind."

Mike showed his IDs to the pilot. "Someone was tampering with the port engine."

The pilot frowned. "Regulations are very strict these days," he said. "No one but authorized ground-crew can approach the plane."

"So all he had to do was appropriate a set of coveralls and an ID badge from a member of the ground-crew," Mike replied, gesturing again with his ID. "I'm a Special Agent with the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service. More of interest to you, I'm a Special Task Force Liaison with Interpol. My partner is Lord Anthony Dewhurst, a senior supervising agent with Interpol. He's awaiting the boarding of another flight. We should call him. But, whatever you do, don't fire up the port engine until it's been checked. In the meantime, let me off the plane. I think I might recognize the culprit."

The pilot seemed unconvinced, but he contacted the tower.

Meanwhile, the attendant took Mike to the front door.

“You will have to wait a moment until the service corridor is reconnected,” she warned.

Mike ignored her and worked the lever that released the door, opening it to reveal a one-foot gap between the fuselage and the flexible corridor. It was all he needed. He heard her gasp as he dropped through the gap, making a show of grabbing the lip for a moment before dropping.

Sean did the same, landing with enough force to have to drop and roll. Mike had alighted on his feet.

“Showoff,” Sean tried to tease, but his father was gone.

Mike took off at a blur, following the path taken by the man he’d seen. He caught up with him in a maintenance bay. He recognized it as the spot where the other ground-crew employee had been killed, even as he launched himself at the killer’s back.

He caught the man in the shoulders, forcing him face-onto-the-floor.

The man thrashed around with the speed of a snake, his hands striking out in a series of devious strikes.

Mike parried the attempts, then seized the man’s face in a claw grip, driving a finger and thumb up under the cheekbones on each side. As the man’s eyes widened in shock from the pain, he said, “Lie still. I can kill you before you blink. Believe it. I killed your master, Sato, easily enough. I’m the man he fled Canada to escape.”

Sean ran into the maintenance bay at just that moment.

“Call Tony,” Mike said. “Tell him what happened; his plane will have to be checked.”

“I’m still trying to figure out what happened,” Sean argued. “How did you see someone messing with the port engine when we were seated on the right side

of the plane? And you didn't even have the window seat; I did."

"Just make the call," Mike said. "And keep our seating arrangements to yourself. I don't need this to be any harder to explain than it is. I saw what I saw. Just go with that."

He froze, a mild pain in his head.

A voice in his head — partially muffled, as if through a wall or closed door —

"He killed Heinrich Von Strelitz; killed his people in his own palace, then chased him down like a hound running a boar to earth, and killed him in a church — in a church! I've never seen such speed or skill in any vampire. And you treat him as if he were a fledgling!"

"I do not care that you took her; I do not care if you kill her. Remove her from here, and get her out of the country. I will not have him tracing this crime back to me."

The ache in his head expanded, obscuring sound, leaving just a visual of carved mahogany double doors. He recognized them from the night Tony and he, along with Radu, had disrupted Borgia's costume party — the night he'd killed de la Montaigne, the night he could have killed Borgia but didn't.

The doors opened and Torok emerged — bald head, pointed ears, fangs extended, green-flecked eyes like a snake's eyes — Victorian-style cloak, Georgian neck scarf.

He flashed a cold smile —

Once more silence and dullness as the pain in his head flared.

With a dramatic swirl of the cloak he was gone — limping — there was a pronounced limp. Sharp pain in the neck — blackness.

Mike shook his head as the pain faded.

"Good," he murmured. "I thought that shot was a through-and-through, but some of the holly must have stayed in the wound. Serves you right, you bastard."

Something moved above him.

Mike drove a fist into the back of the head of the subdued ninja, rendering him senseless, then leaped to his feet as another Japanese assailant leaped from the top of a stack of crates at him.

Blurring to one side, Mike caught the man by the front of his coveralls, pivoted, and slammed him onto the concrete floor. The impact should have stunned the man, but he managed to roll to one side and lurch onto unsteady feet.

The face was also Japanese. Mike decided that these were the two missing ninjas from Sato's compound.

The man advanced with a series of hand strikes and high kicks. Mike parried and blocked, then seized the man by the throat and slammed him onto the pavement again, this time adding a sharp thrusting motion of his arm. With the impact, the back of the man's head crushed against the concrete and Mike's hand drove forward, collapsing the trachea and esophagus. The man might have choked on his own blood from the crushed throat, but he was already dead from the brain trauma.

"I still don't know how you saw what you saw," the police detective said two hours later, "but we are glad you saw it, Commander Cameron. According to one of our technicians, the device was equipped with a digital barometer."

"Or altimeter," Mike commented.

"I see; you understand the significance of this."

"The bomb was set to explode at a certain altitude, not when the engine fired up," Mike said. "That would have ignited the fuel in the port wing, but it may only have killed those passengers seated near that part of the plane. By setting it to explode at a certain altitude, he

guaranteed that the plane would fall out of the sky, killing everyone.”

The detective was shaking his head. “This is what I don’t understand. We have been free of terrorist action. The man in custody is Japanese, as was the man you killed. He has no known contact to any terrorist groups. In fact, we can learn almost nothing about him.”

“He was a Black Dragon,” Mike explained.

Seeing the look of skeptical incredulity on the detective’s face, Mike went on, “I was here as part of a joint task force operation. By now, MI6 has acquainted your non-existent spy agency with the nature and results of our mission.” He flashed a hint of a smile at the mention of Japan’s as yet still-secret spy organization. “We took out the secret ninja base, eliminating all but two, no doubt those I met today. Their leader, one Sato Satsuo, was a homicidal maniac, who convinced some of his deluded followers that he was the original Sato, the original founder of the Black Dragons. He claimed to be a vampire, going so far as to torture and drink the blood of young lady captives to support this image. He ruled his followers through superstitious fear, as well as his uncanny prowess.”

“And you’re claiming to have bested him in combat?” the detective asked. The raised eyebrows and the amused smile hinted at his disbelief.

Mike just shrugged. “I’m here; he’s not.”

The detective took a call on his cell. As he listened, the smile faded.

“Your story has been confirmed by MI6, as you predicted,” he said, giving Mike a sharp bow. “I regret that there will be a delay in you and your friends’ departures. After this incident, all planes must be inspected before departure, and all ground-crews carefully examined. As you implied, there may be other surviving Black Dragons yet to be accounted for.”

He gave Mike a deeper bow, then offered his hand.

“The airline wishes to thank you for your timely intervention. They have refunded the cost of your ticket to Shanghai. Unfortunately, the next departure is the same time tomorrow. It is the same for the rest of your friends. The rest of their connecting flights will be set up, the same as before, with just the one-day delay”

Mike stormed about his complimentary hotel room, pacing back and forth like a caged lion, barely resisting the urge to hurl the furniture about.

“You must calm yourself,” Tony urged.

“I know,” Mike admitted with a sigh.

He dropped into lotus position on the carpet, altering his breathing. It took much longer than usual for him to find the *zone* and have the pacifying tranquility of meditation pass over him. His sense of Carrie was muffled and uncertain. *Narcotics?* There was a sense of speed and an occasional rattling, jerkiness to the motion — *A train?* — and a sense of heading east.

He held the tenuous connection until dawn, then, settling on his bed, having drawn all shades to darken the room, he reached out into the void, willing it to take him early.

Mike’s apprehension over Carrie kept him on edge long after the flight for Shanghai got off the ground. He’d tried to have Sam arrange a military flight, even tried to charter a plane, all to no avail. There was simply nothing available until after his scheduled connection to Shanghai. He finally drifted into meditation, calming his mind and clearing his thoughts.

The moment the plane touched down, his agitation returned. Shanghai airport was a hive of insanity — a veritable maze of people, all milling about, pushing

and shoving, most going nowhere. The hub-bub of voices was a babble. He detected at least three distinct languages: Cantonese, Hakka, and Mandarin. He knew a certain amount of Cantonese from his days learning Wing Chun and Bak Sil Lum; his instructor, from Hong Kong, naturally spoke Cantonese. He also had a smattering of Mandarin from his time in Henan. The Hakka he assumed, since it was neither Mandarin nor Cantonese.

All in all, the time in the airport played on his nerves. He was unusually anxious, worried about Carrie, and wished he could have convinced her to stay home.

The guard at Immigration seemed unduly suspicious considering that Mike and Sean were just passing through.

Maybe he knows we were here in secret years ago.

It surprised him, being able to pick up the thought from Sean without even trying. The virus was allowing Sean to project thought more readily, making it easy for Mike to sync with him.

Don't think like that; it's absurd. They never knew we were there, so how could they know who we are? Calm your thoughts or your expression and demeanour will make the guard suspicious.

Now, finally in the departure lounge, awaiting the final boarding call, he could use the moment to meditate. He needed a clear head for what he would have to face once they arrived in Venice — *Venezia*, he reminded himself, practicing his limited knowledge of Italian.

He was glad that the timing of flight would allow him to slip into oblivion and reawaken just before the plane touched down.

Before long, they were boarding, taking their seats, and Mike could feel his consciousness beginning to slip away.

His eyes snapped open just as the plane was beginning its descent.

“Good,” Sean teased. “I was afraid I’d have to ask for a wheelchair to get my suddenly catatonic father off the plane.”

“There’s a lot about this existence that lacks glamour,” Mike assured his son. “My days of sunning on the beach are behind me.”

“Gee, dad; that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you sound bitter about it.”

Mike gave a wan smile. “It is what it is. I’m not bitter, Sean; I’m worried about Carrie. She’s in the heart of Borgia’s domain, headstrong and unprotected. Worse yet, if my gut feeling is right, Torok has her on a train, heading east.”

“Come on, Dad; visions? Are vampires psychic? Tony isn’t. Relax. I’m sure she’s fine. We’ll get there, meet Mom at the hotel, and she’ll be safe; you’ll see. Then we can lock her in her room while we go take out this Cesare Borgia creep.”

“He pronounces it *Che zar’ ay*,” Mike corrected. “Yes, he is a bit of a creep, but he’s a very dangerous creep. Five hundred years ago he was responsible for the death of a lot of people. Who knows how many deaths he’s caused since. I don’t think he ever indulged in the excesses of Heinrich Von Strelitz — at least there’s no evidence of it — but he clearly has a dark side. He was ruthless enough to impress Machiavelli.”

“The dastardly plotter from the middle ages?” Sean asked.

“Niccolo Machiavelli was a writer who preferred writing about dastardly plotters. Cesare Borgia was his idol. He manipulates people and he was very good at it before he had the advantage of vampire glamour.”

Within an hour, they’d collected their bags, dealt with the bureaucracy, and were hailing a cab.

“Ah, good; we're all together,” Tony declared once they were all assembled in the living room of his suite.

“And Carrie?” Mike asked, feeling the knot in the pit of his stomach tighten.

Tony shook his head.

“Nigel has confirmed that her flight arrived. She cleared customs and immigration without incident. He's now in contact with taxi companies. Beyond that, we have the hotel manager's assurance that she never checked in. I — er — took the liberty of scanning his thoughts while showing him a picture from my phone. I am confident that he never saw her.”

Mike could feel the cold anger welling in him, like some vicious beast desperate to escape.

“I'm going back to the airport...” Mike started to say.

“Michael, it's almost 2:00 AM,” Tony said in a quiet voice. “There will be no one to question. No matter how frustrating it might be, we are without access to resources until after dawn. Only the police are active at this time and, without further knowledge, we have no case to present to them other than that of a missing person.”

Monday, dawn. Mike thought it would never come.

Nigel glanced up from where he'd been typing in staggered spurts on his laptop.

“I may 'ave someffin', gov'nor,” Nigel said. There was hesitation in his voice. “It could be a lead or it could be nuffin', so don' get yer 'opes up.”

Mike waited for Nigel to continue.

“It seems on Friday there was a traffic accident involving a taxi, not too far from the airport, an' at just the right time after Carrie's flight landed. It coulda

been 'er. Seems the passenger in the taxi went missin'. Also, there was a travel cage for a cat, found empty — kinda broken open, most likely from fallin' outta the cab onto the street."

"Sean," Mike commanded. "You take the airport. Question cabbies, question anyone who might have seen Carrie get into a cab.

"Nigel, give me the address of the accident."

As soon as Nigel gave him the address, he was out the door.

Sean questioned airport porters to no avail. *Come on, Mom; where are you?* Finally, he approached the doorway from which emerged passengers who had cleared Customs and Immigration.

A security guard, no doubt suspicious of his actions, approached.

"Is there a problem, *signore?*" he demanded, giving Sean a glassy smile.

"Yes," Sean replied; "I'm trying to find anyone who might know anything about my mother — actually, she's my stepmother — her flight landed at 10:00 PM on Friday. She never made it to the hotel. Also, I gather there was an accident at about the right time involving a taxi, the passenger reported as missing."

"But, *signore*, that was days ago. The flight arrived early; I believe all the passengers were cleared through by 10:30.

"But I know nothing of this accident you describe. That would be a matter for *polizia*."

But Sean wasn't listening. He exited the front entrance and began questioning porters, showing them a photo on his iPhone.

"Si, *signore*; the lady with the beautiful *gatto* with the *azzurro* eyes. He cry like a baby, *signore*. I think he

did not like being in the cage. She hail a taxi.”

“Thanks,” Sean said, and paid the man a tip. “Great; we know she made it into a taxi.”

He hailed a cab himself and headed back to the hotel. He hadn’t gotten too far before traffic stalled completely.

“Now what?” he complained.

“I see the lights of *Polizia*, possibly an ambulance,” the driver said. “It could be an accident. Pray Our Lady that no one was hurt. So much rushing near the airport, always the cars crash into each other — very bad intersection up ahead.”

“Your English is very good,” Sean complimented. “It there a way around this?”

“*Grazie, signore*. I have a cousin in Brooklyn, in New York — The Big Apple.” There was a hint of mockery in the phrase, but he smiled broadly. “There is an alley we can cut through to the right, here; we just need to be a little patient. It was the impatient people who had the accident.”

Restless, Sean opened the door, stood on the sill, and stretched to see what he could see. It was definitely an accident — a taxi had crashed into another car. He exited the cab and ran forward, feeling like a hand was tightening on his gut.

He continued to run forward until he reached the intersection. A taxi had been struck on the stern quarter. Paramedics were helping the driver out of the car. He was unconscious and bleeding from the head.

“*Signore*, you can not just get out of the car and run like that...”

Sean thrust a handful of Euros into the man’s hand and rushed toward where the police were cordoning off the public.

“Who’s in charge?” he demanded.

“I am,” a young uniformed officer declared. “And just who are you?”

“Sean Cameron, Canadian Special Forces JTF-2. Is

this the same place where another taxi accident took place on Friday?"

"Si; it is a dangerous intersection," said the young cop. He had excellent English, but his smile was condescending. "That taxi struck another other car. He must have been going too fast and lost control. We're not sure about the dent in the rear; it may have been from a previous accident. You are the second one to ask. There was an officer of Interpol just here — I sent him to the impound yard to examine the vehicles."

Okay; Dad's off to the impound yard to examine the cars. The cops think this is just a routine fender-bender and aren't investigating. So, what do I do?

He called Nigel and explained the situation.

"Right, mate; we'll meet you at the police station. 'Is Lordship'll know 'ow to 'andle the local flatfoots."

Once at the Police Station, Sean flashed his ID and asked for the chief detective.

"I want to see whatever photos you have of the scene, and any special effects you may have removed from the scene," Sean demanded.

The detective just smiled.

"And you are?"

"Acting Petty Officer Sean Cameron, Canadian Special Forces, JTF-2, assigned to Commander Cameron of CSIS, who is also a special liaison to Interpol. A man from Interpol will be here shortly," he told the cop. "If there's a room where I can look at what you have, I'll stay out of your way, but I'm not leaving."

"Are you certain the passenger was your mother?" the cop asked, his tone now more sympathetic.

"Stepmother," Sean admitted. "She and my dad have only been married for a year and a bit, but she's like a real mom. My real mom died when I was a kid.

My stepmother was rushing here to meet my dad. He's been — well, he's been kind of hung up with business lately. She even brought Kato, my dad's Siamese cat. That's his cage."

A uniformed officer was just entering carrying a travel cage in his hands.

Sean stepped forward, yanked the address tag off the cage, held it for the cop to see, then rattled off the address without even looking at the tag.

"*Si*; it is the address on the tag. So your father is coming?"

Sean heaved a sigh, then stopped himself from speaking. He'd already said more than he should have in his anxiety to get through to the man.

"Dad and Tony, his partner from Interpol, flew in from Japan. They've been up to their necks in — well — international crime stuff — for weeks. That's why Carrie flew here."

"Your father is with Canadian Intelligence and his wife flies here to meet him in the middle of a case? I never saw that in any James Bond film." The detective's smile broadened.

"Hey; this car got hit and taken out. My stepmother is missing. My guess is it was a deliberate tactic to snatch her."

"You weave a captivating tale, my friend. Are you really in the Canadian Forces, or is that just more of your active imagination?"

Sean drew a slow breath and held it. He gestured to his uniform, a tactical jumpsuit, and snapped, "You think I bought this at Toys-R-Us?" He fixed the cop with a dead-pan stare, allowing the anger to show in his eyes. "Take a second look," he said, thrusting his ID into the man's hand. "Canadian Special Forces, Joint Task Force-Two; our equivalent of the US Navy's SEAL program. Acting Petty Officer Sean Cameron, Acting Commander, Team Alpha-Seven. My team is assigned to CSIS Special Agent Michael Cameron."

“And I suppose you have written orders?”

Sean made his glare as icy as possible. “You’re the James Bond fan. Did M mail him his assignments or give him written orders?”

“*Signore*, I don’t know what is going on here, or what truth there might be to your outlandish claims, but I have —”

It was then that Nigel came puffing up the steps and into the room.

“Oi, make way. Interpol.” He flashed credentials, clearing a path for himself, then doubled over as he reached Sean. “I worked quick as I could, then caught a cab — bloody maniacs on wheels! Would o’ made it all the way in record time, but I ’ad to jog the last hundred yards.”

“And you are?” The Italian cop looked down at Nigel, seemingly amused by both his size and his accent.

“Look closely at the ’ardware, mate; that’s an Interpol badge. Yeah, yeah; I know it says I’m an I.T. specialist, but it also says I’m Special Assistant to one Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Senior Supervising Agent of Interpol.”

He snatched the ID away from the cop rather abruptly, pocketed it, then went around the table to study the spread of photos taken at the site of the impact.

“Yeah, I seen this kind o’ ffin’ before — bloomin’ Ruskie grabbed ffin’ bloke in broad daylight, right in the middle o’ Piccadilly — Russian Mafia buggers. They ’it the car right ’ere, jus’ like ’at, they did.”

He shook his head. “*Bli’me*, your dad don’t need this right now, not that ’ere’s ever a good time. ’E didn’t want her to come, not wiff all whot’s goin’ on, an’ you-know-who ’avin’ grabbed ’er once before.”

“Mom can be stubborn,” Sean agreed.

“Obdurate was the word yer father used,” Nigel pointed out.