

MEMNOCH THE DEVIL

THE VAMPIRE CHRONICLES

ANNE RICE



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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The Vampire Chronicles

Anne Rice

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For

Stan Rice, Christopher Rice

and

Michele Rice

For

John Preston

For

Howard and Katherine Allen O'Brien

For

Katherine's brother John Allen,

Uncle Mickey

and for

Uncle Mickey's son, Jack Allen,

and all the descendants

of Jack

And for

Uncle Marian Leslie,

who was in Corona's Bar on that night

With love for you

and for

all our kith and kin

this book

is

dedicated

Sleep well,
Weep well,
Go to the deep well
As often as possible.
Bring back the water,
Jostling and gleaming.
God did not plan on consciousness
Developing so
Well. Well,
Tell Him our
Pail is full
And He can
Go to Hell.

Stan Rice
24 June 93

THE OFFERING

To the somethingness
Which prevents the nothingness
Like Homer's wild boar
From thrashing this way and that
Its white tusks
Through human beings
Like crackling stalks
And to nothing less
I offer this suffering of my father

Stan Rice
16 Oct 93

DUET ON IBERVILLE STREET

The man in black leather
Buying a rat to feed his python
Does not dwell on particulars.
Any rat will do.
While walking back from the pet store
I see a man in a hotel garage
Carving a swan in a block of ice
With a chain saw.

Stan Rice
30 Jan 94

PROLOGUE

LESTAT HERE. YOU KNOW who I am? Then skip the next few paragraphs. For those whom I have not met before, I want this to be love at first sight.

Behold: your hero for the duration, a perfect imitation of a blond, blue-eyed, six-foot Anglo-Saxon male. A vampire, and one of the strongest you'll ever encounter. My fangs are too small to be noticed unless I want them to be; but they're very sharp, and I cannot go for more than a few hours without wanting human blood.

Of course, I don't need it that often. And just how often I do need it, I don't know because I've never put it to the test.

I'm monstrously strong. I can take to the air. I can hear people talking on the other side of the city or even the globe. I can read minds; I can bind with spells.

I'm immortal. I've been virtually ageless since 1789.

Am I unique? By no means. There are some twenty other vampires in the world of whom I know. Half of these I know intimately; one half of those I love.

Add to this twenty a good two hundred vagabonds and strangers of whom I know nothing but now and then hear something; and for good measure another thousand secretive immortals, roaming about in human guise.

Men, women, children—any human being can become a vampire. All it takes is a vampire willing to bring you into it, to suck out most of your blood, and then let you take it back, mixed with his or her own. It's not all that simple; but if you survive, you'll live forever. While you're young, you'll thirst unbearably, probably have to kill each night. By the time you're a thousand years old, you'll look and sound wise, even if you were a kid when you started, and you will drink and kill because you cannot resist it, whether you need it anymore or not.

If you live longer than that, and some do, who knows? You'll get tougher, whiter, even more monstrous. You'll know so much about suffering that you will go through rapid cycles of cruelty and kindness, insight and maniacal blindness. You'll probably go mad. Then you'll be sane again. Then you may forget who you are.

I myself combine the best of vampiric youth and old age. Only two hundred years old, I have been for various reasons granted the strength of the ancients. I have a modern sensibility but a dead aristocrat's impeccable taste. I know exactly who I am. I am rich. I am beautiful. I can see my reflection in mirrors. And in shopwindows. I love to sing and to dance.

What do I do? Anything that I please.

Think about it. Is it enough to make you want to read my story? Have you perhaps read my stories of the vampires before?

Here's the catch: it doesn't matter here that I'm a vampire. It is not central to the tale. It's just a given, like my innocent smile and soft, purring French-accented voice and graceful way of sauntering down the street. It comes with the package. But what *happened* here could have happened to a human being; indeed, it surely has happened to humans, and it will happen to them again.

We have souls, you and I. We want to know things; we share the same earth, rich and verdant and fraught with perils. We don't—either of us—know what it means to die, no matter what we might say to the contrary. It's a cinch that if we did, I wouldn't be writing and you wouldn't be reading this book.

What does matter very much, as we go into this story together, is that I have set for myself the task of being a hero in this world. I maintain myself as morally complex, spiritually tough, and aesthetically relevant—a being of blazing insight and impact, a guy with things to say to you.

So if you read this, read it for that reason—that Lestat is talking again, that he is frightened, that he is searching desperately for the lesson and for the song and for the *raison d'être*, that he wants to understand his own story and he wants you to understand it and that it is the very best story he has right now to tell.

If that's not enough, read something else.

If it is, then read on. In chains, to my friend and my scribe, I dictated these words. Come with me. Just listen to me. Don't leave me alone.

I SAW HIM when he came through the front doors. Tall, solidly built, dark brown hair and eyes, skin still fairly dark because it had been dark when I'd made him a vampire. Walking a little too fast, but basically passing for a human being. My beloved David.

I was on the stairway. The grand stairway, one might say. It was one of those very opulent old hotels, divinely overdone, full of crimson and gold, and rather pleasant. My victim had picked it. I hadn't. My victim was dining with his daughter. And I'd picked up from my victim's mind that this was where he always met his daughter in New York, for the simple reason that St. Patrick's Cathedral was across the street.

David saw me at once—a slouching, blond, long-haired youth, bronze face and hands, the usual deep violet sunglasses over my eyes, hair presentably combed for once, body tricked out in a dark-blue, double-breasted Brooks Brothers suit.

I saw him smile before he could stop himself. He knew my vanity, and he probably knew that in the early nineties of the twentieth century, Italian fashion had flooded the market with so much shapeless, hangy, bulky, formless attire that one of the most erotic and flattering garments a man could choose was the well-tailored navy-blue Brooks Brothers suit.

Besides, a mop of flowing hair and expert tailoring are always a potent combination. Who knows that better than I?

I didn't mean to harp on the clothes! To hell with the clothes. It's just I was so proud of myself for being spiffed up and full of gorgeous contradictions—a picture of long locks, the impeccable tailoring, and a regal manner of slumping against the railing and sort of blocking the stairs.

He came up to me at once. He smelled like the deep winter outside, where people were slipping in the frozen streets, and snow had turned to filth in the gutters. His face had that subtle preternatural gleam which only I could detect, and love, and properly appreciate, and eventually kiss.

We walked together onto the carpeted mezzanine.

Momentarily, I hated it that he was two inches taller than me. But I was so glad to see him, so glad to be near him. And it was warm in here, and shadowy and vast, one of the places where people do not stare at others.

“You've come,” I said. “I didn't think you would.”

“Of course,” he scolded, the gracious British accent breaking softly from the young man's face, giving me the usual shock. This was an old man in a young man's body, recently made a vampire, and by me, one of the most powerful of our remaining kind.

“What did you expect?” he said, tête-à-tête. “Armand told me you were calling me. Maharet told me.”

“Ah, that answers my first question.” I wanted to kiss him, and suddenly I did put out my arms, rather tentatively and politely so that he could get away if he wanted, and when he l

me hug him, when he returned the warmth, I felt a happiness I hadn't experienced in months.

Perhaps I hadn't experienced it since I had left him, with Louis. We had been in some nameless jungle place, the three of us, when we agreed to part, and that had been a year ago.

"Your first question?" he asked, peering at me very closely, sizing me up perhaps, doing everything a vampire can do to measure the mood and mind of his maker, because a vampire cannot read his maker's mind, any more than the maker can read the mind of the fledgling.

And there we stood divided, laden with preternatural gifts, both fit and rather full of emotion, and unable to communicate except in the simplest and best way, perhaps—without words.

"My first question," I began to explain, to answer, "was simply going to be: Where have you been, and have you found the others, and did they try to hurt you? All that rot, you know—how I broke the rules when I made you, et cetera."

"All that rot," he mocked me, the French accent I still possessed, now coupled with something definitely American. "What rot."

"Come on," I said. "Let's go into the bar there and talk. Obviously no one has done anything to you. I didn't think they could or they would, or that they'd dare. I wouldn't have let you slip off into the world if I'd thought you were in danger."

He smiled, his brown eyes full of gold light for just an instant.

"Didn't you tell me this twenty-five times, more or less, before we parted company?"

We found a small table, cleaving to the wall. The place was half crowded, the perfect proportion exactly. What did we look like? A couple of young men on the make for mortals, men or women? I don't care.

"No one has harmed me," he said, "and no one has shown the slightest interest in it."

Someone was playing a piano, very tenderly for a hotel bar, I thought. And it was something by Erik Satie. What luck.

"The tie," he said, leaning forward, white teeth flashing, fangs completely hidden, of course. "This, this big mass of silk around your neck! This is not Brooks Brothers!" He gave a soft teasing laugh. "Look at you, and the wing-tip shoes! My, my. What's going on in your mind? And what is this all about?"

The bartender threw a hefty shadow over the small table, and murmured predictable phrases that were lost to me in my excitement and in the noise.

"Something hot," David said. It didn't surprise me. "You know, rum punch or some such whatever you can heat up."

I nodded and made a little gesture to the indifferent fellow that I would take the same thing.

Vampires always order hot drinks. They aren't going to drink them; but they can feel the warmth and smell them if they're hot, and that is so good.

David looked at me again. Or rather this familiar body with David inside looked at me. Because for me, David would always be the elderly human I'd known and treasured, as well as this magnificent burnished shell of stolen flesh that was slowly being shaped by his expressions and manner and mood.

Dear Reader, he switched human bodies before I made him a vampire, worry no more. He has nothing to do with this story.

"Something's following you again?" he asked. "This is what Armand told me. So did Jesse."

"Where did you see them?"

"Armand?" he asked. "A complete accident. In Paris. He was just walking on the street. He was the first one I saw."

"He didn't make any move to hurt you?"

"Why would he? Why were you calling to me? Who's stalking you? What is all this?"

"And you've been with Maharet."

He sat back. He shook his head. "Lestat, I have pored over manuscripts such as no living human has seen in centuries; I have laid my hands on clay tablets that..."

"David, the scholar," I said. "Educated by the Talamasca to be the perfect vampire, though they never had an inkling that that is what you'd become."

"Oh, but you must understand. Maharet took me to these places where she keeps her treasures. You have to know what it means to hold in your hands a tablet covered in symbols that predate cuneiform. And Maharet herself, I might have lived how many centuries without ever glimpsing her."

Maharet was really the only one he had ever had to fear. I suppose we both knew it. My memories of Maharet held no menace, only the mystery of a survivor of Millennia, a living being so ancient that each gesture seemed marble made liquid, and her soft voice had become the distillation of all human eloquence.

"If she gave you her blessing, nothing else much matters," I said with a little sigh. I wondered if I myself would ever lay eyes upon her again. I had not hoped for it nor wanted it.

"I've also seen my beloved Jesse," said David.

"Ah, I should have thought of that, of course."

"I went searching for my beloved Jesse. I went crying out from place to place, just the way you sent out the wordless cry for me."

Jesse. Pale, bird-boned, red-haired. Twentieth-century born. Highly educated and psychically gifted as a human. Jesse he had known as a human; Jesse he knew now as an immortal. Jesse had been his human pupil in the order called the Talamasca. Now he was the equal of Jesse in beauty and vampiric power, or very near to it. I really did not know.

Jesse had been brought over by Maharet of the First Brood, born as a human before

humans had begun to write their history at all or barely knew that they had one. The Elders now, if there was one, the Queen of the Damned was Maharet and her mute sister, Mekare, of whom no one spoke anymore much at all.

I had never seen a fledgling brought over by one as old as Maharet. Jesse had seemed a transparent vessel of immense strength when last I saw her. Jesse must have had her own tales to tell now, her own chronicles and adventures.

I had passed onto David my own vintage blood mixed with a strain even older than Maharet's. Yes, blood from Akasha, and blood from the ancient Marius, and of course my own strength was in my blood, and my own strength, as we all knew, was quite beyond measure.

So he and Jesse must have been grand companions, and what had it meant to her to see her aged mentor clothed in the fleshly raiment of a young human male?

I was immediately envious and suddenly full of despair. I'd drawn David away from those willowy white creatures who had drawn him into their sanctuary somewhere far across the sea, deep in a land where their treasures might be hidden from crisis and war for generations. Exotic names came to mind, but I could not for the moment think where they had gone, the two red-haired ones, the one ancient, the one young. And to their hearth, they had admitted David.

A little sound startled me and I looked over my shoulder. I settled back, embarrassed to have appeared so anxious, and I focused silently for a moment on my Victim.

My Victim was still in the restaurant very near us in this hotel, sitting with his beautiful daughter. I wouldn't lose him tonight. I was sure enough of that.

I sighed. Enough of him. I'd been following him for months. He was interesting, but he had nothing to do with all this. Or did he? I might kill him tonight, but I doubted it. Having spoiled the daughter, and knowing full well how much the Victim loved her, I had decided to wait until she returned home. I mean, why be so mean to a young girl like that? And how he loved her. Right now, he was pleading with her to accept a gift, something newly discovered by him and very splendid in his eyes. However, I couldn't quite see the image of the gift in her mind or his.

He was a good victim to follow—flashy, greedy, at times good, and always amusing.

Back to David. And how this strapping immortal opposite me must have loved the vampire Jesse, and become the pupil of Maharet. Why didn't I have any respect for the old one anymore? What did I want, for the love of heaven? No, that was not the question. The question was...did something want me right now? Was I running from it?

He was politely waiting for me to look at him again. I did. But I didn't speak. I didn't begin. And so he did what polite people often do, he talked slowly on as if I were not staring at him through the violet glasses like one with an ominous secret.

"No one has tried to hurt me," he said again in the lovely calm British manner, "no one has questioned that you made me, all have treated me with respect and kindness, though everyone of course wanted to know all the details firsthand of how you survived the Book

Thief. And I don't think you know quite how you alarmed them, and how much they love you."

This was a kindly reference to the last adventure which had brought us together, and driven me to make him one of us. At the time, he had not sung my praises to Heaven for any part of it.

"They love me, do they?" I said of the others, the remnants of our revenant species around the world. "I know they didn't try to help me." I thought of the defeated Body Thief.

Without David's help, I might never have won that battle. I could not think of something that terrible. But I certainly didn't want to think of all my brilliant and gifted vampiric cohorts and how they'd watched from afar and done nothing.

The Body Thief himself was in Hell. And the body in question was opposite me with David inside it.

"All right, I'm glad to hear I had them a little worried," I said. "But the point is, I'm being followed again, and this time it's no scheming mortal who knows the trick of astral projection and how to take possession of someone else's body. I'm being *stalked*."

He studied me, not so much incredulous as striving perhaps to grasp the implications.

"Being stalked," he repeated thoughtfully.

"Absolutely." I nodded. "David, I'm frightened. I'm actually frightened. If I told you what I think this thing is, this thing that's stalking me, you'd laugh."

"Would I?"

The waiter had set down the hot drinks, and the steam did feel glorious. The piano played Satie ever so softly. Life was almost worth living, even for a son of a bitch of a monster like myself. Something crossed my mind.

In this very bar, I'd heard my victim say to his daughter two nights ago, "You know I sold my soul for places just like this."

I'd been yards away, quite beyond mortal hearing, yet hearing every word that fell from my Victim's lips, and I was enthralled with the daughter. Dora, that was her name. Dora. She was the one thing this strange and succulently alluring Victim truly loved, his only child, his daughter.

I realized David was watching me.

"Just thinking about the victim who brought me here," I said. "And his daughter. They're not going out tonight. The snow's too deep and the wind too cruel. He'll take her back up to their suite, and she'll look down on the towers of St. Patrick's. I want to keep my victim in my sights, you know."

"Good heavens, have you fallen in love with a couple of mortals?"

"No. Not at all. Just a new way of hunting. The man's unique, a blaze of individual traits. I adore him. I was going to feed on him the first time I saw him, but he continues to surprise me. I've been following him around for half a year."

I flashed back on them. Yes, they were going upstairs, just as I thought. They had just left their table in the restaurant. The night was too wretched even for Dora, though she wanted to go to the church and to pray for her father, and beg him to stay there and pray too. Some memory played between them, in their thoughts and fragmentary words. Dora had been a little girl when my Victim had first brought her to that cathedral.

He didn't believe in anything. She was some sort of religious leader. Theodora. She preached to television audiences on the seriousness of values and nourishment of the soul. And her father? Ah, well, I'd kill him before I learnt too much more, or end up losing this big trophy buck just for Dora's sake.

I looked back at David, who was watching me eagerly, shoulder resting against the dark satin-covered wall. In this light, no one could have known he wasn't human. Even one of us might have missed it. As for me, I probably looked like a mad rock star who wanted all the world's attention to crush him slowly to death.

"The victim's got nothing to do with it," I said. "I'll tell you all that another time. It's just we're in this hotel because I followed him here. You know my games, my hunts. I don't need blood any more than Maharet does, but I can't stand the thought of not having it!"

"And so what is this new sort of game?" he said politely in British.

"I don't look so much for simple, evil people, murderers, you know, so much as a more sophisticated kind of criminal, someone with the mentality of an Iago. This one's a drug dealer. Highly eccentric. Brilliant. An art collector. He loves to have people shot, loves to make billions in a week off cocaine through one gateway and heroin through another. And then he loves his daughter. And she, she has a televangelist church."

"You're really enthralled with these mortals."

"Look right now, past me, over my shoulder. See the two people in the lobby moving towards the elevators?" I asked.

"Yes." He stared at them fixedly. Perhaps they'd paused in just the right spot. I could feel hear, and smell both of them, but I couldn't know precisely where they were unless I turned around. But they were there, the dark smiling man with his pale-faced eager and innocent little girl, who was a woman-child of twenty-five if I had reckoned correctly.

"I know that man's face," said David. "He's big time. International. They keep trying to bring him up on some charges. He pulled off an extraordinary assassination, where was it?"

"The Bahamas."

"My God, how did you happen on him? Did you really see him in person somewhere, you know, like a shell you found on the beach, or did you see him in the papers and the magazines?"

"Do you recognize the girl? Nobody knows they're connected."

"No, I don't recognize her, but should I? She's so pretty, and so sweet. You're not going to feed on her, are you?"

I laughed at his gentlemanly outrage at such a suggestion. I wondered if David asked

permission before sucking the blood of his victims, or at least insisted that both parties be properly introduced. I had no idea what his killing habits were, or how often he fed. I'd made him plenty strong. That meant it didn't have to be every night. He was blessed in that.

"The girl sings for Jesus on a television station," I said. "Her church will someday have its headquarters in an old, old convent building in New Orleans. Right now she lives there alone and tapes her programs out of a studio in the French Quarter. I think her show goes through some ecumenical cable channel out of Alabama."

"You're in love with her."

"Not at all, just very eager to kill her father. Her television appeal is peculiar. She talks theology with gripping common sense, you know, the kind of televangelist that just might make it all work. Don't we all fear that someone like that will come along? She dances like a nymph or a temple virgin, I suppose I should say, sings like a seraph, invites the entire studio audience to join with her. Theology and ecstasy, perfectly blended. And all the requisite good works are recommended."

"I see," he said. "And this makes it more exciting for you, to feast on the father? By the way, the father is hardly an unobtrusive man. Neither seem disguised. Are you sure no one knows they're connected?"

The elevator door had opened. My Victim and his daughter were rising floor after floor into the sky.

"He slips in and out of here when he wants. He's got bodyguards galore. She meets him on her own. I think they set it up by cellular phone. He's a computer cocaine giant, and she's one of his best-protected secret operations. His men are all over the lobby. If there'd been anyone nosing around, she would have left the restaurant alone first. But he's a wizard at things like that. There'll be warrants out for him in five states and he'll show up ringside for a heavyweight match in Atlantic City, right in front of the cameras. They'll never catch him. I'll catch him, the vampire who's just waiting to kill him. And isn't he beautiful?"

"Now, let me get this clear," David said. "You're being stalked by something, and it's got nothing to do with this victim, this, er, drug dealer, or whatever, or this televangelist girl. But something is following you, something frightening you, but not enough to make you stop tracking this dark-skinned man who just got into the elevator?"

I nodded, but then I caught myself in a little doubt. No, there couldn't be any connection.

Besides, this thing that had me rattled to the bone had started before I saw the Victim. It had "happened" first in Rio, the stalker, not long after I'd left Louis and David and gone back to Rio to hunt.

I hadn't picked up this Victim until he'd walked across my path in my own city of New Orleans. He'd come down there on a whim to see Dora for twenty minutes; they'd met in a little French Quarter bar, and I had been walking past and seen him, sparkling like a fire, and her white face and large compassionate eyes, and wham! It was fatal hunger.

"No, it's got nothing to do with him," I said. "What's stalking me started months before. He doesn't know I'm following him. I didn't catch on right away myself that I was being

followed by this thing, this....”

“This what?”

“Watching him and his daughter, it’s like my miniseries, you know. He’s so intricate evil.”

“So you said, and what is stalking you? Is this a thing or a person or...?”

“I’ll get to that. This Victim, he has killed so many people. Drugs. Such people wallow numbers. Kilos, kills, coded accounts. And the girl, the girl of course turned out not to be some dim-witted little miracle worker telling diabetics she can cure them with the laying of hands.”

“Lestat, your mind’s wandering. What’s the matter with you? Why are you afraid? And why don’t you kill this victim and get that part over?”

“You want to go back to Jesse and Maharet, don’t you?” I asked suddenly, a feeling of hopelessness descending on me. “You want to study for the next hundred years, among all those tablets and scrolls, and look into Maharet’s aching blue eyes, and hear her voice, know you do. Does she still always choose blue eyes?”

Maharet had been blind—eyes torn out—when she was made a vampire queen. She took eyes from her victims and wore them until they could see no more, no matter how thick the vampiric blood tried to preserve them. That was her shocking feature—the marble queen with the bleeding eyes. Why had she never wrung the neck of some vampire fledgling and stolen his or her eyes? It had never occurred to me before. Loyalty to our own kind? Maybe it wouldn’t work. But she had her scruples, and they were as hard as she was. A woman the world old remembers when there was no Moses and no Hammurabi’s Code. When only the Pharaohs got to walk through the Valley of Death....

“Lestat,” David said. “Pay attention. You must tell me what you are talking about. I’ve never heard you admit so readily that you were afraid. You did say afraid. Forget about me for the moment. Forget that victim and the girl. What’s up, my friend? Who’s after you?”

“I want to ask you some more questions first.”

“No. Just tell me what’s happened. You’re in danger, aren’t you? Or you think you are. You sent out the call for me to come to you here. It was an unabashed plea.”

“Are those the words Armand used, ‘unabashed plea’? I hate Armand.”

David only smiled and made a quick impatient gesture with both hands. “You don’t hate Armand and you know you don’t.”

“Wanna bet?”

He looked at me sternly and reprimandingly. English schoolboy stuff probably.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll tell you. Now, first, I have to remind you of something. In our conversation we had. It was when you were alive still, when we last talked together in your place in the Cotswolds, you know, when you were just a charming old gentleman, dying in despair—”

“I remember,” he said patiently. “Before you went into the desert.”

“No, right after, when we knew I couldn’t die as easily as I thought I could, when I’d come back burnt. You cared for me. Then you started talking about yourself, your life. You said something about an experience you’d had before the war, you said, in a Paris café. You remember? You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yes. I do. I told you that when I was a young man I thought I’d seen a vision.”

“Yes, something about the fabric of life ripping for a moment so you glimpsed things you shouldn’t have seen.”

He smiled. “You’re the one who suggested that, that the fabric had ripped somehow and I’d seen through the rip accidentally. I thought then and I still think now that it was a vision that was meant to see. But fifty years have passed since then. And my memory, my memory is surprisingly dim of the whole affair.”

“Well, that’s to be expected. As a vampire, you will remember everything that happens to you from now on vividly, but the details of mortal life will slip rather fast, especially anything that had to do with the senses, you’ll find yourself chasing after it—what did wine taste like?”

He motioned for me to be quiet. I was making him unhappy. I hadn’t meant to do this.

I picked up my drink, savored the fragrance. It was some sort of hot Christmas punch. I think they called it wassail in England. I set down the glass. My hands and face were still dark from that excursion into the desert, that little attempt to fly into the face of the sun. That helped me pass for human. What an irony. And it made my hand a little more sensitive to the warmth.

A ripple of pleasure ran through me. Warmth! Sometimes I think I get my money out of everything! There’s no way to cheat a sensualist like me, somebody who can die laughing for hours over the pattern of the carpet in a hotel lobby.

I became aware again of his watching me.

He seemed to have collected himself somewhat or forgiven me for the one thousandth time for having put his soul into a vampire’s body without his permission, indeed against his will. He looked at me, almost lovingly suddenly, as if I needed that reassurance.

I took it. I did.

“In this Paris café, you heard two beings talking to each other,” I said, going back to his vision of years before. “You were a young man. It all happened gradually. But you realized they weren’t ‘really’ there, the two, in a material sense, and the language they were speaking was understandable to you even though you didn’t know what it was.”

He nodded. “That’s correct. And it sounded precisely like God and the Devil talking to each other.”

I nodded. “And when I left you in the jungles last year, you said I wasn’t to worry, that you weren’t going off on any religious quest to find God and the Devil in a Paris café. You said you’d spent your mortal life looking for such things in the Talamasca. And now you would

take a different turn.”

“Yes, that’s what I said,” he admitted agreeably. “The vision’s dimmer now than it was when I told you. But I remember it. I still remember it, and I still believe I saw and heard something, and I’m as resigned as ever that I’ll never know what it was.”

“You’re leaving God and the Devil to the Talamasca, then, as you promised.”

“I’m leaving the Devil to the Talamasca,” he said. “I don’t think the Talamasca as a psych order was ever that interested in God.”

All this was familiar verbal territory. I acknowledged it. We both kept our eye on the Talamasca, so to speak. But only one member of that devout order of scholars had ever known the true fate of David Talbot, the former Superior General, and now that human being was dead. His name had been Aaron Lightner. This had been a great sadness to David, the loss of the one human who knew what he was now, the human who had been his knowing mortal friend, as David had been mine.

He wanted to pick up the thread.

“You’ve seen a vision?” he asked. “That’s what’s frightening you?”

I shook my head. “Nothing as clear as that. But the Thing is stalking me, and now and then it lets me see something in the blink of an eye. I hear it mostly. I hear it sometimes talking in a normal conversational voice to another, or I hear its steps behind me on the street, and it spins around. It’s true. I’m terrified of it. And then when it shows itself, well, I usually end up so disoriented, I’m sprawled in the gutter like a common drunk. A week will pass. Nothing. Then I’ll catch that fragment of conversation again....”

“And what are the words?”

“Can’t give the fragments to you in order. I’d been hearing them before I realized what they were. On some level, I knew I was hearing a voice from some other locale, so to speak. You knew it wasn’t a mere mortal in the next room. But for all I knew, it could have had a natural explanation, an electronic explanation.”

“I understand.”

“But the fragments are things like two people talking, and one says—*the one*, that is—says ‘Oh, no, he’s perfect, it has nothing to do with vengeance, how could you think I wanted mere vengeance?’ ” I broke off, shrugged. “It’s, you know, the middle of a conversation.”

“Yes,” he said, “and you feel this Thing is letting you hear a little of it...just the way I thought the vision in the café was meant for me.”

“You’ve got it exactly right. It’s tormenting me. Another time, this was only two days ago, I was in New Orleans; I was sort of spying on the Victim’s daughter, Dora. She lives there in the convent building I mentioned. It’s an old 1880s convent, unoccupied for years, and gutted, so that it’s like a brick castle, and this little sparrow of a girl, this lovely little woman lives there fearlessly, completely alone. She walks about the house as if she were invincible.”

“Well, anyway, I was down there, and I had come into the courtyard of this building—it’s, you know, a shape as old as architecture, main building, two long wings, inner courtyard.”

“The rather typical late-nineteenth-century brick institution.”

“Exactly, and I was watching through the windows, the progress of that little girl walking by herself through the pitch-black corridor. She was carrying a flashlight. And she was singing to herself, one of her hymns. They’re all sort of medieval and modern at the same time.”

“I believe the phrase is ‘New Age,’ ” David suggested.

“Yes, it’s somewhat like that, but this girl is on an ecumenical religious network. I told you. Her program is very conventional. Believe in Jesus, be saved. She’s going to sing and dance people into Heaven, especially the women, apparently, or at least they’ll lead the way.”

“Go on with the story, you were watching her....”

“Yes, and thinking how brave she was. She finally reached her own quarters; she lives in one of the four towers of the building; and I listened as she threw all the locks. And I thought, not many mortals would like to go prowling about this dark building, and the place wasn’t entirely spiritually clean.”

“What do you mean?”

“Little spirits, elementals, whatever, what did you call them in the Talamasca?”

“Elementals,” he said.

“Well, there are some gathered about this building, but they’re no threat to this girl. She is simply too brave and strong.

“But not the Vampire Lestat, who was spying her. He was out in the courtyard, and I heard the voice right next to his ear, as if Two Men were talking at his right shoulder and the other one, the one who is not following me, says quite plainly, ‘No, I don’t see him in the same light.’ I turned round and round trying to find this Thing, close in on it mentally and spiritually, confront it, bait it, and then I realized I was shaking all over, and you know, the elementals, David, the little pesky spirits...the ones I could feel hanging about the convent. I don’t think they even realized this person, or whoever he was, had been talking in my ear.”

“Lestat, you do sound as if you’ve lost your immortal mind,” he said. “No, no, don’t get angry. I believe you. But let’s backtrack. Why were you following the girl?”

“I just wanted to see her. My Victim, he’s worried—about who he is, what’s he done, what the officials know about him. He’s afraid he’ll blemish her when the final indictment comes and all the newspaper stories. But the point is, he’ll never be indicted. I’m going to kill him first.”

“You are. And then it actually might save her church, is that not right? Your killing him speedily, so to speak. Or am I mistaken?”

“I wouldn’t hurt her for anything on this earth. Nothing could persuade me to do that.” He sat silent for a moment.

“Are you sure you are not in love? You seem spellbound by her.”

I was remembering. I had fallen in love only a short time ago with a mortal woman, a nun. Gretchen had been her name. And I had driven her mad. David knew the whole story. I

written it; written all about David, too, and he and Gretchen had passed into the world of fictional form. He knew that.

“I would never reveal myself to Dora as I did with Gretchen,” I said. “No. I won’t hurt Dora. I learnt my lesson. My only concern is to kill her father in such a way that she experiences the least suffering and the maximum benefit. She knows what her father is, but I’m not sure she’s prepared for all the bad things that could happen on account of him.”

“My, but you are playing games.”

“Well, I have to do something to keep my mind off this Thing that’s following me or I’ll go mad!”

“Shhhh...what’s the matter with you? My God, but you’re rattled.”

“Of course I am,” I whispered.

“Explain more about the Thing. Give me more fragments.”

“They’re not worth repeating. It’s an argument. It’s about me, I tell you. David, it’s like God and the Devil are arguing about *me*.”

I caught my breath. My heart was hurting me, it was beating so fast, no mean feat for a vampiric heart. I rested back against the wall, let my eyes range over the bar—middle-aged mortals mostly, ladies in old-style fur coats, balding men just drunk enough to be loud and careless and almost young.

The pianist had moved on into something popular, from the Broadway stage, I think. It was sad and sweet, and one of the old women in the bar was rocking slowly to the music, and mouthing the words with her rouged lips as she puffed on a cigarette. She was from the generation that had smoked so much that stopping now was out of the question. She had skin like a lizard. But she was a harmless and beautiful being. All of them were harmless and beautiful beings.

My victim? I could hear him upstairs. He was still talking with his daughter. Would she not take just one more of his gifts? It was a picture, a painting perhaps.

He would move mountains for his daughter, this victim, but she didn’t want his gift, and she wasn’t going to save his soul.

I found myself wondering how late St. Patrick’s stayed open. She wanted so badly to go there. She was, as always, refusing his money. It’s “unclean,” she said to him now. “Rogee, I want your soul. I can’t take the money for the church! It comes from crime. It’s filthy.”

The snow fell outside. The piano music grew more rapid and urgent. Andrew Lloyd Webber at his best, I thought. Something from *Phantom of the Opera*.

There was that noise again out in the lobby, and I turned abruptly in my chair and looked over my shoulder, and then back at David. I listened. I thought I heard it again, like a footstep, an echoing footstep, a deliberately terrifying footstep. I did hear it. I knew I was trembling. But then it was gone, over. There came no voice in my ear.

I looked at David.

“Lestat, you’re petrified, aren’t you?” he asked, very sympathetically.

“David, I think the Devil’s come for me. I think I’m going to Hell.”

He was speechless. After all, what could he say? What does a vampire say to another vampire on such subjects? What would I have said if Armand, three hundred years older than me, and far more wicked, had said the Devil was coming for him? I would have laughed at him. I would have made some cruel joke about his fully deserving it and how he’d meet so many of our kind down there, subject to a special sort of vampiric torment, far worse than mere damned mortals ever experienced. I shuddered.

“Good God,” I said under my breath.

“You said you’ve seen it?”

“Not quite. I was...somewhere, it’s not important. I think New York again, yes, back here with him—”

“The victim.”

“Yes, following him. He had some transaction at an art gallery. Midtown. He’s quite a smuggler. It’s all part of his peculiar personality, that he loves beautiful and ancient objects of the sort of things you love, David. I mean, when I finally do make a meal of him, I might bring you one of his treasures.”

David said nothing, but I could see this was distasteful to him, the idea of purloining something precious from someone whom I had not yet killed but was surely to kill.

“Medieval books, crosses, jewelry, relics, that’s the sort of thing he deals in. It’s what got him into the dope, ransoming church art that had been lost during the Second World War in Europe, you know, priceless statues of angels and saints that had been pillaged. He’s got his most valued treasures stashed in a flat on the Upper East Side. His big secret. I think the dope money started as a means to an end. Somebody had something he wanted. I don’t know. I tried to read his mind and then I tire of it. And he’s evil, and all those relics have no magic, and I’m going to Hell.”

“Not so fast,” he said. “The Stalker. You said you saw something. What did you see?”

I fell silent. I had dreaded this moment. I had not tried to describe these experiences even to myself. But I had to continue. I had called David here for help. I had to explain.

“We were outside, out there on Fifth Avenue; he—the Victim—was traveling in a cab uptown, and I knew the general direction, the secret flat where he keeps his treasures.

“I was merely walking, human style. I stopped at a hotel. I went inside to see the flowers. You know, in these hotels you can always find flowers. When you think you’re losing your mind on account of winter, you can go into these hotels and find lavish bouquets of the most overwhelming lilies.”

“Yes,” he said with a little soft, halfhearted sigh. “I know.”

“I was in the lobby. I was looking at this huge bouquet. I wanted to...to, ah...leave some sort of offering, as if it were a church...to those who’d made this bouquet, something like

that, and I was thinking to myself, Maybe I should kill the Victim, and then...I swear this the way it was, David—

“—the ground was gone. The hotel was gone. I wasn't anywhere or anchored to anything and yet I was surrounded by people, people howling and chattering and screaming and crying, and laughing, yes, actually laughing, and all this was happening simultaneously, and the light, David, the light was blinding. This wasn't darkness, this wasn't the clichéd flames of the inferno, and I reached out. I didn't do this with my arms. I couldn't find my arms. I reached out with everything, every limb, every fiber, just trying to touch something, to regain equilibrium, and then I realized I was standing on terra firma, and this Being was in front of me, its shadow was falling over me. Look, I don't have any words for this. It was horrific. It was very certainly the worst thing I've ever seen! The light was shining behind it and it stood between me and this light and it had a face, and the face was dark, extremely dark, and as I looked at it I lost all control. I must have roared. Yet I have no idea if in the real world I made a sound.

“When I came to my senses, I was still there, in the lobby. Everything looked ordinary, and it was as if I'd been in that other place for years and years, and all sorts of fragments of memory were slipping away from me, flying away from me, so fast that I couldn't catch any one thought or finished proposition or suggestion.

“All I could remember with any certainty is what I just told you. I stood there. I looked at the flowers. Nobody in the lobby noticed me. I pretended everything was normal. But I kept trying to remember, kept chasing these fragments, beset by bits and pieces of talk, or three or description, and I kept seeing very clearly this truly ugly dark Being before me, exactly the sort of demon you'd create if you wanted to drive someone right out of his reason. I kept seeing this face and....”

“Yes?”

“...I've seen him twice again.”

I realized I was mopping my forehead with the little napkin the waiter had given me. He came again. David placed an order. Then he leant close to me.

“You think you've seen the Devil.”

“There's not much else that could frighten me, David,” I said. “We both know that. There isn't a vampire in existence who could really frighten me. Not the very oldest, not the wisest, not the cruelest. Not even Maharet. And what do I know of the supernatural other than us? The elementals, the poltergeists, the little addlebrained spirits, we all know and see...the things you called up with Candomble witchcraft.”

“Yes,” he said.

“This was *The Man Himself*, David.”

He smiled, but it was by no means unkind or unsympathetic. “For you, Lestat,” he teased softly, seductively, “for you, it would have to be the Devil Himself.”

We both laughed. Though I think it was what writers call a mirthless laugh. I went on.

“The second time it was in New Orleans. I was near home, our flat in the Rue Royale. Just walking. And I started to hear those steps behind me, like something deliberately following me and letting me know it. Damn it, I’ve done this to mortals myself and it’s so vicious. God! Why was I ever created! And then the third time, the Thing was even closer. Same scenario. Huge, towering over me. Wings, David. Either it has wings or I in my fear am endowing myself with wings. It is a Winged Being, and it is hideous, and this last time, I kept hold of the image long enough to run from it, to flee, David, like a coward. And then I woke up, as I always do, in some familiar place, where I started actually, and everything’s just the way it was. Nobody has a hair out of place.”

“And it doesn’t talk to you when it appears like this?”

“No, not at all. It’s trying to drive me crazy. It’s trying to...to make me do something perhaps. Remember what you said, David, that you didn’t know why God and the Devil had let you see them.”

“Hasn’t it occurred to you that it is connected with this victim you’re tracking? That perhaps something or someone does not want you to kill this man?”

“That’s absurd, David. Think of the suffering in the world tonight. Think of those dying in Eastern Europe, think of the wars in the Holy Land, think of what’s happening in this very city. You think God or the Devil gives a damn about one man? And our kind, our kind preying for centuries on the weak and the attractive and the unlucky. When has the Devil ever interfered with Louis, or Armand, or Marius, or any of us? Oh, would that it were so easy to summon his august presence and know once and for all!”

“Do you want to know?” he asked earnestly.

I waited, thought about it. Shook my head. “Could be something explainable. I detest being afraid of it! Maybe this is madness. Maybe that’s what Hell is. You go mad. And all your demons come and get you just as fast as you can think them up.”

“Lestat, it is evil, you are saying that?”

I started to answer and then stopped. Evil.

“You said it was hideous; you described intolerable noise, and a light. Was it evil? Did you feel evil?”

“Well, actually, no. I didn’t. I felt the same thing I feel when I hear those bits of conversation, some sort of sincerity, I suppose is the word for it, sincerity and purpose, and I’ll tell you something, David, about this Being, this Being who’s stalking me—he has a sleepless mind in his heart and an insatiable personality.”

“What?”

“A sleepless mind in his heart,” I insisted, “and an insatiable personality,” I had blurted out. But I knew it was a quote. I was quoting it from something, but what I had no idea, some bit of poetry?

“What do you mean?” he asked patiently.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know why I said it. I don’t even know why those words came

into my mind. But it's true. He does have a sleepless mind in His heart, and He has an insatiable personality. He's not mortal. He's not human!"

" 'A sleepless mind in his heart,' " David quoted the words. " 'Insatiable personality.' "

"Yes. That's The Man, all right, the Being, the male Thing. No, wait, stop, I don't know it's male; I mean...why, I don't know what gender it is...it's not distinctly female, let's put that way, and not being distinctly female, it seems therefore...to be male."

"I understand."

"You think I've gone mad, don't you? You hope so, don't you?"

"Of course I don't."

"You ought to," I said. "Because if this being doesn't exist inside my head, if he exists outside, then he can get you too."

This made him very obviously thoughtful and distant and then he said strange words to me I didn't expect.

"But he doesn't want me, does he? And he doesn't want the others, either. He wants you."

I was crestfallen. I am proud, I am an egomaniac of a being; I do love attention; I want glory; I want to be wanted by God and the Devil. I want, I want, I want, I want.

"I'm not upbraiding you," he said. "I'm merely suggesting that this thing has not threatened the others. That in all of these hundreds of years, none of the others...none that we know have ever spoken of such a thing. Indeed, in your writing, in your books, you've been most explicit that no vampire had ever seen the Devil, have you not?"

I admitted it with a shrug. Louis, my beloved pupil and fledgling, had once crossed the world to find the "eldest" of the vampires, and Armand had stepped forward with open arms to tell him that there was no God or Devil. And I, half a century before that, had made my own journey for the "eldest" and it had been Marius, made in the days of Rome, who had said the very same thing to me. No God. No Devil.

I sat still, conscious of stupid discomforts, that the place was stuffy, that the perfume was not really perfume, that there were no lilies in these rooms, that it was going to be very cold outside, and I couldn't think of rest until dawn forced me to it, and the night was long, and was not making sense to David, and I might lose him...and that Thing might come, that Thing might come again.

"Will you stay near me?" I hated my own words.

"I'll stand at your side, and I'll try to hold on to you if it tries to take you."

"You will?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why?"

"Don't be foolish," he said. "Look, I don't know what I saw in the café. Never again in my life did I ever see anything like that or hear it. You know, I told you my story once. I went t

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