

Darkheart

By Deb Walsh

He set the jade cup on the kitchen counter and frowned at it, as if willing it out of existence. Then he turned to look up expectantly at his companion, a lovely young woman with masses of curly brown hair captured loosely in a hair tie, and luminous, big brown eyes.

"It's beautiful. But I thought —" Dr. Natalie Lambert protested.

Detective Nicholas Knight nodded, turning the cup around to show her the carvings on the other side. "The cup I donated to the museum is still in its display case — I checked when the first one arrived."

"The first one! Nick ..." Natalie admonished. "How many have you gotten?"

He indicated the cupboard over the range, and she paused to glance at him a moment before reaching for the handle. Those youthful but ancient features revealed nothing of his thoughts or feelings. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, with a rugged, squarish face and a fashionable and permanent stubble of beard. Even after almost two years, it still shocked her to realize that his actual age was closer to 800 years, and that he had not aged a single day in nearly 770 of them. She shook herself to bring her attention back to the present. Pursing her lips, she tugged open the cabinet door. All in a row on the bottom shelf sat four intricately carved examples of Mayan art, all beautiful, all identical. She turned back to him questioningly.

"Fakes," he pronounced, a touch of sadness in his voice. It was too much to hope that even one might be genuine. "All of them."

"All? Have you had them examined —"

"Jade — real jade — has a different texture, a different surface temperature. Especially the jade used in sacred Mayan carvings. Someone went to a great deal of trouble to have these manufactured, but they are definitely made of a modern material, some sort of high-quality plastic or composite material. I should have the lab analyze them ..."

"But the workmanship —"

"Talented knockoffs. The art world is full of brilliant copyists. And no, I don't know who's been sending them," he added with a slight smile. "The first one arrived over five months ago, then one a month since. Always from a different postmark. Three from Central America, two from the States. This latest came from Cozumel. None were postmarked Toronto."

She smiled. Of course the detective in him would look for clues as to the source of these "gifts." "Obviously it's someone who knows you — perhaps someone who's known you for a very long time."

His answering smile was tinged with irony. In his particular case, a very long time was measured in lifetimes, centuries, not years. "Not many of ... my kind ... knew about the cups. Most aren't interested in the idea of mortality, so legends of reclaiming it ... No, only LaCroix and Janette knew about the dig. And I've already asked Janette. She doesn't know who's sending them, either."

"Daniel?" she asked tentatively.

A sour expression flitted across his face, his normal reaction to mention of the child vampire LaCroix and Janette had created. He shook his head. "I certainly never mentioned it. I doubt they would have — Janette couldn't remember saying anything to him about it, and her memory is exceptionally clear. Perhaps LaCroix, but I can't think why." Shrugging, he lifted the cup, turned it over, examining it a moment longer, then added it to its four brothers, and closed the cabinet. "If whoever is sending them keeps to schedule, I should have another by next week — I'll have to have a dinner party when I have eight." With that, he crossed the room and flung himself onto the sofa, tossing aside the lab reports Natalie had brought over for him to examine.

Natalie moved to follow him, then turned to reopen the cabinet instead. She lifted the mock-jade cups out of the cabinet, and ranged them in a row on the countertop, staring at them thoughtfully.

"They need blood to be used for divination. Preferably human," he commented wryly.

"Mmm," she replied absently. She picked up one cup, running her fingers over it carefully. Putting that one down, she picked up another, examining it in the same way. A smile slowly spread across her face. "Nick," she called.

Already immersed in a mid-day talk show, he looked up, confused. "What is it, Nat?" he asked.

"Come here. I want to show you something."

Shaking his head, he rose to join her again. She held out one of the cups for his examination. "I've looked these over thoroughly — they're not genuine."

"Feel it. Run your thumb along the base."

Humoring her, he did as he was told. She grinned at him, taking the cup away and replacing it with

another. "Again."

He ran his thumb over the base of the second cup; his brows furrowed in concentration. "A chip ... in both."

"Right," she agreed enthusiastically. "Feel the others — they're all from a mold!"

"Okay, so they were all made from a mold ... my cup doesn't have a chip in the same place —"

"You're sure?"

"I had it for nearly 100 years, Nat — I know what it feels like."

"And the museum's cup, the one LaCroix destroyed?"

"I never had a chance to examine that one —"

"But Alyce had photos, drawings — couldn't you ask to see those?"

A slow smile grew on his face. "Yes. I'm sure I could. You don't think —"

"Someone has a real cup," she announced softly. "Perhaps even another pair."

"It's too much to hope for —"

"So — when did you say the next delivery's due?" she asked, her smile warm and encouraging.

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In order to ensure time together to use Natalie's facilities to further investigate the packages, they had formulated a tale for the benefit of Nick's superior officer, Captain Joseph Stonetree. The story they concocted for Stonetree wasn't an elaborate one, but it did the trick. They convinced him that Nick was receiving mysterious parcels in the mail (true enough), and the contents appeared to be linked to a previous case (also factual), but they claimed the case was one from his days on the Chicago PD (totally fabricated). He grudgingly agreed to allow Nick some time with Natalie to investigate further.

For the past week, they'd met each evening to go over clues and possibilities.

At Nick's request, the museum had turned over facsimiles of Doctor Hunter's notes, sketches and photographs of both the Mayan cup Alyce had excavated, and newly-made notes and photographs

of the cup Nick had donated in her memory. They'd gone over the photographs of each with a magnifying glass and even a jeweler's loop, but could find no hint of the chip present on the five cups in Nick's apartment in either genuine cup. They'd compared the photographs of Alyce's cup with the photographs of Nick's original cup, noting differences in the cups, deviations resulting from hand-carving, possibly by different artisans. They'd studied the photos against one of the new cups, and found several small but telling differences. They were satisfied that the mold used to make the five counterfeit cups had to have been made from a totally different cup. Finally, Natalie sent one of the cups out to a lab for material analysis.

Tonight, Natalie had ordered in Chinese, and Nick had joined her during a lull in his shift.

Nick had saved the packaging only from the last delivery, and that because he'd forgotten to throw it away. He'd found it while organizing his trash for pick-up earlier in the day. Natalie examined the box and plastic packaging carefully, but could find no clues linking it to anyone known to them. In fact, there was nothing to identify the sender in any way.

"What about the return address?" she questioned him around a mouthful of pan-fried noodles.

He shook his head, toying with his own small dish of rice. She gestured with her chopsticks — "C'mon, eat up — it won't hurt you," she added, grinning.

"Easy for you to say," he replied sourly, but gamely brought a forkful of white rice to his mouth. Grimacing, he stuck the fork in his mouth and swallowed the rice quickly. He shuddered slightly, but gave it another try. Having dutifully consumed two forkfuls of rice, he put down the fork and answered her question about return addresses.

"A different origination point, a different name each time. Mexico City. Philadelphia. Tijuana. Guatemala. From 'Frederick Catherwood.' 'John L. Stephens.' 'Manuel Gamio.' This one came from 'Tatiana Proskouriakoff' from Cozumel," he replied.

"Bless you," she grinned. "And do any of those names ring a bell?"

"Whole belfries. They're all archaeologists and scholars who have studied the Maya," he told her, a sly smile spreading across his features. "All are dead. I actually worked with Catherwood and Stephens — Catherwood's the artist who recorded so much of the early Mayan discoveries. Starting in 1839. It's thanks to him that our records are as good as they are today — pollution and weather erosion are quickly destroying the known artifacts." He shook his head sadly. "And who knows what else we haven't discovered yet."

"Oh," Natalie responded, once more struck by the gulf of time between them. And that was

Nick's intention in mentioning the date he'd worked with Catherwood. She punched his arm playfully, "I suppose you knew Howard Carter, too, huh?"

His grin widened, and he let out a bark of laughter. "Only in passing. But I wasn't at Tut's tomb when he opened it."

She giggled. "No, you wouldn't have been — that was during the day, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "Morning, before the desert got too hot. That must have been a sight," he added wistfully, growing momentarily serious once more. "And the pyramids are in as great a danger as the Mayan ruins. Acid rain, fluorocarbons, heavy metals — all are taking their toll." He shook his head. "I've missed a lot over the years."

"You've seen a lot, too. You know — you could become a historical biographer — you could tell their stories with more passion and accuracy than most scholars."

"I'll remember that the next time I have to move on."

She touched his arm gently and nodded toward the plate of rice he was toying with. "We're making progress. That may not be necessary."

"And besides, I have years before I need to make that choice. I know, we've gone over it before." For reassurance, whether for himself or for her he didn't know, he ate another forkful of rice. It still tasted awful, but it made her smile.

"Right. So what about the origination points — you know anyone in any of those cities?" While he considered his answer, she took the opportunity to stuff more Chinese food in her mouth, her cheeks bulging.

He only shook his head at the sight of her doing an impression of a chipmunk. She swallowed quickly, grinning. "Vampires move around a lot —"

"The Dorian Gray Syndrome, I know —"

"But I could ask Janette. She's remarkably well-connected with vampire society."

"*She doesn't do too badly with mortal society, either — did you see the write-up on the Raven in the **Sunday Examiner**?*"

He raised an eyebrow at that, daring her to finish the joke. Janette's club, the Raven, was home to a large segment of Toronto's vampire population, a safe place for them all, as well as being a

popular night club.

"No, really — you never know what's going to be en vogue," she replied flippantly.

"It's Schanke's favorite night spot," he countered with a grin.

"I'm sure Janette is thrilled to death," Natalie commented dryly.

"In a manner of speaking, anyway," Nick said, deadpan. "Well, we seem to be getting nowhere fast with this. Could be anyone, vampire or mortal. Could be someone from my past —"

"The workers on the dig — your dig — might one of them ... well, could one of them ..."

"Have become a vampire? Hardly." His eyes became distant as he dredged up the memory of the last nights in the Central American encampment. "When the deaths started, the workers were terrified — LaCroix didn't go in for subtlety. There was no doubt how they were being killed. The surviving workers cut off the heads of the corpses before burying them. Just to make sure they didn't become vampires themselves. The native workers were a superstitious lot. And very thorough. No, it's not one of them. I'm sure of that."

Natalie put down her chopsticks and stared at her hands, one hand massaging the other. "You know, it's just possible that this has nothing to do with your being a vampire —" she held up a hand to forestall his amused protest. "No, I mean the choice of the cup. The cup Alyce unearthed was well publicized, as was your involvement in that case. And there was some press coverage of your donation to the memorial display. It's just possible that some nutcase has decided to ... reward you? Remind you? I don't know — it may just be the connection to the case that drove the choice of the cup."

He paused, considering. "Possible. It's not as though there's any hint of a threat — no hints at all, really. No note, no return address, nothing, just the cups surrounded by bubble-pack in cardboard boxes," he added, gesturing toward the uncommunicative box sitting on her desk.

"Well, if your secret benefactor sticks to schedule, you'll be getting another package —"

"Tomorrow. We'll know more tomorrow."

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Natalie was at Nick's desk in time for the mail delivery the next day. Nick wasn't expected in for duty for several hours, and to pass the time, Natalie started to straighten up his desk, much to

Schanke's amusement. The relationship between the coroner and his partner remained a mystery to him, although he could guess at a few things. Nat was a lovely young woman, and Nick — permanent five o'clock shadow aside — was a good-looking guy. And he did look good in leather, he had to admit. So what if his habits were a little weird and he couldn't go out in the sun? If there wasn't something going on between them, there should have been. The alternative was another cousin of Myra's and a blind date for Nat ... Schanke still smarted from the tongue-lashing he'd gotten from Natalie for the last one.

*Shuddering with the memory, Schanke decided to stop thinking about matching Nat and Nick up and turned his attention back to the **National Intruder**. He wasn't allowed to read it at home, but anytime he was in charge of buying groceries, he was sure to pick up a copy to stow in the car where Myra wouldn't find it. Since Nick laughed at him whenever he saw him read it, he was always careful to finish it before Nick showed up for night shift. Some days, a guy just couldn't win.*

He flipped through the pages, ignoring the story of aliens abducting Saskatchewan farmers, and found a reasonable-looking piece on miracle hair-growth products. He snorted over the list of ingredients in the latest grow-hair-quick product.

"What's that, Schanke?" Natalie asked, turning innocent-looking eyes on him.

He squirmed in his seat. "Oh, nothing, Nat. Just some light reading —"

"Aw, come on, Schank — lemme see!" she teased, getting up from Nick's desk and coming round behind him.

Schanke slammed the tabloid shut. "Really, Nat — it's nothing. Bird cage liner, really. Nat —" he protested as she snatched the paper from his hands and danced away with it.

Out of his reach, she opened the paper and read aloud, "'Scientists discover that a mixture of maple syrup and arrowroot will retard hair loss and even excite new hair growth.'" She looked pitifully at Schanke, "Oh, come on, Schank — you don't believe this crap, do you?"

"Well, Nat, it's not that I believe it, no, not really," he said, coming around his desk toward her, "it's just that it's important to keep up on the latest innovations."

*"In the **National Intruder**? Really!" She flipped to the next page, giggling, when an item caught her eye. "'Ancient Mayan Goddess Conducts ... Sacrificial Blood Rites in Lost City?'" She fell silent, reading the story in earnest. "Schank — could I borrow this? As a joke on Nick, I mean. He'll get a chuckle out of it, and I promise to return it immediately after he's seen it — you don't mind, do you?" she asked breathlessly, slipping away from him and out of the office. Once in the hall, she increased her speed to a trot, nearly*

running toward the elevator.

* * *

She punched the access code into the security system, and the elevator door opened. With the newspaper securely tucked into her bag, she stepped into the elevator, and ordered her heart to stop racing.

On the second level, she found Nick at the easel, tossing globs of paint at a speckled canvas. The window shutters were secured, and the only light in the loft came from electric lights scattered through the cavernous room.

"Hi, Nat," he greeted her cheerfully, taking a step back from his work and eyeing it critically. "What do you think — a little more yellow?"

She fairly marched into the room, extracting the folded-up newspaper from her bag as she walked. "Read this," she ordered.

*He arched a skeptical eyebrow at her. "The **National Intruder**?" He started to hand it back to her, but she urged it back at him. "You've been hanging around Schanke too much — what'd he do, bring it into the squad room so Myra wouldn't catch him reading it at home again?" he chuckled.*

"Yes, yes, he did. But read the article on page 17. Go on — read it!" She shrugged off her coat and dropped it in a chair, sitting on the arm to watch him.

*Grinning and shaking his head simultaneously, he opened the tabloid to the specified page and started to skim. His grin faded to a frown and his eyes swept up to the beginning as he started to read the article carefully. "Lady Ix-Chel. The moon goddess of the Peten Maya. 'And she pierced her tongue with her teeth, and brought forth blood in honor of the old gods. Then she took of the blood of her followers, conjuring the Vision Serpent in a dance of ecstasy.' Whoever they interviewed knows something about our current understanding of Maya mythology." He turned back to the newspaper's masthead to reassure himself that he was in fact reading the **National Intruder**.*

"Sound like someone you know?" she asked tightly.

"Not someone specific, but possibly someone of my kind," he agreed. "I've got to talk to the reporter who wrote this — damn, they don't list a byline. Whoever this Lady Ix-Chel is, she could be in big trouble." He moved swiftly toward the telephone.

"Big trouble?" she repeated, following him. "Why? I mean, it's possible that this person might be

involved in the cups — but why would that place her in danger?"

He stopped, the telephone receiver poised in his hand. After a moment's thought, he replaced the receiver and led her to the couch. His expression was grave as he gestured for her to sit.

"Nick?"

"No one really knows where they come from, or how they know ... there are codes by which we vampires live. Codes that protect us as a species. The most important of those codes is that no mortal ever be in possession of proof of our existence."

"I have evidence — I have tissue cultures, blood samples —"

"Which you'll never share with another mortal. You must promise me, Nat, that you never will —"

*"No, of course I won't. Who would believe me? And who would believe this article in the **National Intruder**? If I didn't know that vampires exist, I never would have thought twice —"*

"This article, in itself, is meaningless. It may be just a crazy story. It may be just a crazy mortal, acting out fantasies of the Maya blood rites. But it may indicate that somewhere out there there is a vampire who is careless. Perhaps even intentionally reckless. Someone who has brought attention to herself, as a vampire. And if she allows a human to gather incontrovertible evidence of her nature ... the Enforcers will be forced to deal with her, and the mortal."

"Deal with them ... how?" Nat asked in a small voice.

Memories of a raging battlefield, a bloodless corpse, and the hissing of the Enforcers as they stepped forward to stake the photographer so that he would never rise again ... a videotape, steel doors torn from their hinges and crumpled like paper, a woman pleading for her moment in history ... Nick shook himself. "Terminally."

Mouthing an "Oh," Natalie leaned back on the couch, her eyes wide. "Terminally as in dead."

"Terminally as in drained of blood and pierced through the heart with a wooden stake," he elaborated, his voice flat.

"Oh. That kind of terminally."

He nodded. "I've got to talk to the reporter who wrote this. I've got to find out more. Even if it

isn't a vampire involved, it may lead me to the original cup." He patted her hand absently, and got up to use the phone.

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"Detective Knight!" greeted Frank Titus enthusiastically. He withdrew the cigar from his mouth, uncrossed his legs and swung them down from atop his desk and thrust his hand toward Nick. Knight took it, nodding. "What can you do for me?" he asked, waving Nick toward the chair in front of his desk.

"Ah," Nick said, smiling slightly. "I was hoping you could help me," he explained as he sat down.

"I scratch your back, you scratch mine?" The publisher of the **National Intruder** grinned. *"Shoot. And try to make it short — I got a deadline to meet."*

Nick pulled the folded-up newspaper out of his jacket pocket and handed it over to Titus, the article in question on the outer fold. Titus glanced at it a moment, then looked up at Nick. "So? Good stuff, huh? All those fancy terms kinda lend a little class to the paper, don't you think? And the punters love stuff about lost civilizations. Add in a little blood sacrifice — got a winner. So what's it to Toronto PD?" he handed back the newspaper.

"This story ... is it for real?" Nick asked, putting the paper back in his pocket.

"Hey, we got journalistic standards to maintain!" Frank Titus protested with offended pride. "Like I told you last time you were in — the truth will out."

"Hmm. 'Aliens Kidnapped My Cat?'"

"Well, it sells papers. Keeps the bucks comin' in so we can do the real investigative journalism," he shrugged. "What's your interest in the Mayan goddess?"

"There are some similarities with a case I worked on a year or so ago. An unsolved case. Our perp escaped. Woman. Obsessed with ancient Mayan culture. This could be her."

The publisher nodded, his eyes gleaming with avarice. "Murder? You're homicide, right?" Nick nodded. "Could be good. Throw in a little Satan-worshipping, and you got yourself some gold, my man. To the tune of \$25,000 if it's printable. And what do you want from me?"

"The name and phone number of the reporter who wrote this. I'd like to ask him or her some more questions, maybe look over the notes —"

"You thinkin' of goin' down there — 'cos if you are, we might be able to work something out —"

"I think I'd like to see what I could learn from the writer, first," Nick replied mildly.

"Sure. Sure," he answered, scribbling down some words on a pad of paper. He tore the sheet off his pad, started to hand it to Nick, then snatched it back. "I got your word if anything comes of this, we get an exclusive?"

Nick's hand hung poised in the air to take the paper. He looked at the publisher and nodded. "If anything comes of it that you could publish, I'll be in touch."

Frank Titus recognized a qualified reply when he heard it. In all likelihood, he'd get squat from this detective. But he could get his writer to follow-up on the questions Knight asked. One way or another, he'd get something out of the deal. With a satisfied smirk, he gave the slip of paper to Knight and sat back in his office chair.

"Thanks," Nick said, rising. The sheet of paper was carefully folded and stowed in his trousers pocket. He extended his hand to the publisher, who grinned and shook it.

"Keep in touch," warned the publisher good-naturedly.

"Right."

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"So I've got an appointment to talk with Edmund Blaylock, the writer, tomorrow evening. I'm meeting him at Janette's place."

"You think that's wise — what if he notices something funny about Janette's girls?" Nat was asking as she worked on a corpse brought in from a convenience store homicide.

"It was his choice — apparently he's a regular," Nick answered, grinning. "I called Janette. Says he's a little weird, but harmless. He's in there at least once a week. Tomorrow's his regular night."

She nodded, lifting a bullet out of the corpse's chest with a pair of forceps. "And no sign of this month's package?"

"Unless Schanke claimed it and is saving it for my birthday ... no. It's strange. Every month for the past five months, they've arrived on exactly the same date. Now that I'm waiting for it, nothing." He settled down on the edge of her desk, watching her work.

"Well ... hey, there's some protein drink in the thermos over there — I want you to drink it," she ordered, leaning in more closely to guide her scalpel around the area of the entry wound.

Nick grimaced, but did as he was told, pouring out a small amount of the yeasty-smelling concoction into the thermos cap. He sipped gingerly at the fluid, wrinkling his nose and swallowing hard. He shuddered, trying to keep it down. "Where do you come up with this stuff?" he demanded.

"Nutritionist friend. Drink it!" she commanded.

Making another face, he downed the protein mix in one gulp. "Gaah. What's the verdict?"

"Wound's clean. This is what killed him," she announced, holding up the bullet she'd removed. "Although cholesterol probably would have gotten him in the end. Geeze — did this guy live at the local Burger King, or what?" she asked, waving her hand at the corpulent corpse.

"Dunno." He screwed the thermos lid back on and slipped off the desk edge. "Gotta go — Donut Don awaits!"

"Sounds like fun," she said absently, so intent on her examination of the corpse that she barely acknowledged his departure.

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Nick arrived at the Raven the next night two hours after opening. The bouncer let him pass without a second look, focusing his attention instead on the crowd of people clamoring for entrance to Toronto's latest most popular nightspot. Inside the club, the heavy beat of funk music pounded up from the floor, colored lights swirled and flashed in time to the music, and the dance floor was packed with gyrating patrons, mortal and immortal. One in particular, a slender young woman heavily made-up and wearing a skin-tight leather mini-dress and spike heels, watched his entrance with a predatory hunger.

Unaware of the scrutiny of the woman, he moved further into the club and found Janette in her favorite spot, at the bar with a good view of the dance floor. Even he had no idea how old she truly was, not after over 700 years of passion, anger, laughter, and friendship. She still looked as seductive and ethereal as the day he'd met her in 1228. Her dark hair was pulled back in a severe chignon, and her full lips were painted a deep red, as always. She was, as she had always been for him, incredibly beautiful and desirable. She caught sight of him, took a long drag from her cigarette and smiled at him through the smoke. Her eyes twinkled with the knowledge that after so long,

she could still inspire attraction in him. Like him, she was oblivious to the female who maneuvered herself on the dance floor to be just out of human earshot of the pair.

"Ah, Nicholas," Janette purred, as always pronouncing the name in its French variant. He lifted her hand and kissed it. "Ever the gentleman. On duty, no less."

"Afraid so, Janette. Have you seen him?" he asked over the music.

She jerked her head in the direction of a lone man sitting at a table on the edge of the dance floor. He was older than most of the human denizens of the club, and a full ashtray and a near-empty bottle sat on the table before him. Nick stared at him a moment then returned his attention to Janette.

"He looks at the pretty young girls, drinks a little too much, and smokes far too much. But he's harmless. Never bothers anyone, just sits there, drinks, smokes, and looks."

"And the girls don't bother him?" he asked, smiling.

"Never. You know they're not that stupid." She heaved a sigh. "No. The world has changed for us." She lifted her glass, swirling the deep red blood, laced with wine. "Once we were hunters, taking our prey and drinking our fill. Now we live alongside them, pretending to be like them. And the blood comes prepackaged and purchased from the black market. One can't really complain about the vintage, can one?"

"No," he chuckled. He kissed her on the cheek and slipped away, threading his way toward Edmund Blaylock. The dancing woman shifted her location once more to remain within sight of Knight and his companion.

The reporter looked up at Nick's approach. His eyes were dull from too many nights of sitting in bars drinking, and a slight tremor shook the hand extended to Nick in greeting. Nick guessed his age at somewhere approaching 50; his face was lined and craggy, a ruggedly handsome face on a man less inclined to drink heavily.

"Detective Knight. Have a seat. Drink?" he offered, lifting the bottle.

"No thanks — I'm on duty," Knight replied easily.

"You don't mind if I do ...?" Nick shook his head. Blaylock smiled slightly and topped off his glass, pausing to take a swig before directing his attention to the homicide detective. "What can I do for you, Detective?"

"Your article on the Mayan goddess in the **National Intruder**. I wanted to get some more details."

"You don't strike me as the sort who reads the **National Intruder**. Bathroom reading?" Blaylock asked philosophically.

"My partner. He reads it in the squad room because his wife won't let him read it at home."

Blaylock nodded grimly. "Of course. There was a time when people read my work for illumination." He raised his glass in salute. "Now it's just a guilty pleasure." He drank deeply, then poured more whisky into the glass. Nick was struck by a sadness for the man; he had no doubt that it was Blaylock's taste for alcohol that had put a stop to his more legitimate journalistic career.

"Well. What would you like to know?" Blaylock asked, setting his glass down with a clunk. "Best ask me now, while I'm still sober enough to recall the answers."

Nick withdrew a small notebook and pencil from his coat pocket, flipped it open, and began, "Your article had some fairly authentic descriptions of what Mayanists believe to be Classic Mayan practices. Where did you get your information?"

"Ah. I have an old friend in the Antiquities Department in Belize. He was involved in a sting operation to catch some black marketeers dealing in Pre-Columbian art. A native laborer attempted to sell a particularly fine funerary mask to their front man. Lovely thing — jade with inlaid obsidian and shell. He showed me a picture," he explained. "When my friend questioned the laborer on its source, that was the story he told. Repeatedly."

"Hmm. Any idea of where this mythical city might be?"

Nick had attempted to contain the excitement from his voice, but Blaylock noted it just the same. "What's your interest, Detective? You said something about a murderess obsessed with the Maya. I can't recall reading anything about such a lady, and I assure you, I do keep up with the news."

"We kept the details from the press," Nick hedged. "You know how the crazies like to latch onto the weird stuff."

"Yes, that's right — you are the detective who solved the 'Vampire Murders', aren't you?" Blaylock was thoughtful for a moment. "You **did** solve that case, didn't you? This isn't somehow connected — the blood rites? Apparently not all the workers returned from the city. At least, that's how the laborer's story goes. He'd been foreman on earlier digs in the region, and most of his crew has disappeared."

"Dig? Your article said nothing about a dig."

"Hmm. That's why he was out in the jungle. On a dig. Says he can't remember much, not even who the sponsor was. Just that they found a city hidden in the overgrowth, and that's where the goddess came to them."

"And where was this dig?" Nick pursued, no longer attempting to mask the excitement in his voice.

"Altan-something," Blaylock replied, waving his hand vaguely. He took another drink to lubricate his throat.

"Altuncanul?" Nick prompted.

A slow smile spread across Blaylock's haggard features. "Yes. That's it. Altuncanul." His brow furrowed a moment. "Wasn't that the site that archaeologist excavated, the one who was killed when you solved the 'Vampire Murders'?"

"Doctor Alyce Hunter," Nick agreed slowly, his expression distant. "Alyce," he whispered. "It's not possible." He shook his head.

"Not possible?" repeated Blaylock wistfully. "Oh, anything is possible, Detective." To reassure himself of that fact, he filled up his glass and downed it all in one swallow. "I can give you the name of my friend, if you like. You can confirm all this with him. I always like to cooperate with the police. One never knows when one might need a friend among them."

Nick shook himself and asked for the name and phone number. His mind was still clouded with the implications of Blaylock's story. Blaylock scribbled the information down in Nick's notebook and smiled benignly.

Blaylock himself was well on his way to being royally drunk. He was a quiet drunk, melancholy and saddening. He swayed to his feet, bowed slightly to Nick, and bid the detective good night. Picking his path in the careful manner of career drunks, he made his way out of the club. A slender shadow detached itself from the dance floor and followed him silently.

A few moments later, Janette joined Nick at the table, gesturing for her bartender to come over and clear away the debris remaining from Blaylock.

"Did you learn anything useful?" she asked after the bartender had gone, settling herself in the chair vacated by the journalist.

"Useful?" Nick repeated like an expletive. "I don't know," he added, shaking his head again. "It

sounds as though —"

He was cut off by a high-pitched scream and shouts from the entrance to the club. Pulling his service revolver in one smooth motion as he raced toward the door, Janette on his heels, Nick shrugged off the confusion Blaylock had engendered in him. At the door, he ordered the crowd to disperse as Janette commanded her bouncers to move everyone from the street into the club and watch them. Together they rushed out into the night toward the source of the scream.

In the alley by the club, the crumpled figure of a man lay sprawled, half-in and half-out of the pool of light thrown by the street light. They could both smell the scent of fresh blood, and they each struggled to contain the vampire in themselves; now was not the time to reveal their true natures, not with so many mortals about.

Nick knelt by the body, checking for signs of life. Blaylock was dead, his body still warm. Nick turned the man's face to reveal blood still oozing from puncture marks on his neck. Blood was splashed on his face and shirt collar, and a small pool had already collected on the street beneath his head.

"Call the police. And call Nat," Nick ordered.

"I don't suppose this is going to help business," Janette commented ironically.

"No, I don't suppose so. Would one of your girls —"

"Of course not! I told you — they're not that stupid!" She glanced at the blood staining the dead man's face and clothes.

"How can you be sure —"

"I will speak with them, Nicholas, if that makes you feel better. I assure you, if one of them has fed on fresh blood, I will be able to tell. I can still tell the difference," she reminded.

"Nor are they so wasteful or sloppy. Especially not now —"

Nick wheeled on her and caught her arm. She brought it up defensively, glaring at him. "Especially not now ... what?" he demanded.

"You're hurting me," she complained, glancing away.

"I doubt that. What are you afraid of, Janette?" he pursued, pulling her arm so she was pressed against his chest.

"Nicholas —"

"Janette — what is it?"

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. Opening her eyes again, she looked into his. "The Enforcers."

He dropped her arm and took a step back. She massaged her arm and watched him. "The Enforcers?" he repeated weakly, images crowding in on him from the recent and not-so-recent past. "They're here?" She nodded. "How?"

"They watch. No one knows how they know, but they do. There is danger here," she indicated the cooling corpse in the alley. "Danger to us all. You knew that when you started looking for that woman. You've met them already."

"Twice."

"You know why they're here. If this woman has anything to do with you, they may not be so lenient with you this time." Her voice was full of sadness, as though she expected this would be the last time she saw him.

Knight's eyes fell on the corpse again, and he stood there studying it. At length he looked up at her again and said, "It may be someone I know. I'm not sure. But I can't imagine how ... she's dead."

"So are we," Janette reminded gently.

"Natalie would disagree," he countered with a faint smile.

*"Natalie is a rare mortal." She stepped toward him and touched his face. "You must find this threat, eliminate it, before they do." She smiled suddenly, and he looked at her curiously. "You are not merely a policeman to the mortals. You are **our** policeman."*

That seemed to calm him. He shook himself slightly and slid back into his role of detective. "You go in. Have someone call. And keep everyone together. I'm going to have a look around."

"All right," she acquiesced. "You'll explain it to the fire marshall I hope — we're going to exceed code if everyone stays in the club."

The expression he turned on her was not amused. "All right. I'm going."

She moved swiftly and gracefully back into the club, leaving him standing by the cooling corpse.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up; he felt the presence of something in the darkness beyond. Something ominous and implacable. "Damn!" he swore into the night.

* * *

The uniforms arrived shortly thereafter, quickly setting up a police line behind which lay the body. Then they turned to the task of taking names and phone numbers from patrons of the Raven, and questioning the people who had been lined up waiting to get in the club when the murder took place. Natalie drove up at the scene just behind the police detail. She flashed her ID for the officer on duty, and hurried over to meet Nick and Janette by the body.

When Nick showed her the throat wounds, her eyes darted immediately to Janette.

"Why does everyone insist on thinking we are so stupid? No, this was not done by any of my regulars!" she retorted angrily.

"Sorry," Nat apologized. "Anyone you might know?" she asked, straightening.

"No." She pulled a cigarette out of her case and lit it thoughtfully. She blew the smoke away from them. "No. None of the old crowd would make a kill so close to the club. Too likely to draw attention to us. We do look out for each other, you know."

"None of the old crowd," repeated Natalie. "Someone new, perhaps?"

"I know of no one. But then, it's not possible to know everyone. Some of us have been foolish enough to think we could bring others over," she explained with a pointed look at Nick. "It rarely works out. It takes a very special type of mortal to become immortal."

Natalie's face clouded at the reminder of her brother's change when Nick had brought him over to the dark. It had been a short stay indeed, since Richard had been unable to handle the power that had suddenly been his. She shook herself. "Obviously I'll handle this one myself."

"What'll you put as cause of death, Nat?" Nick asked, his own expression troubled.

"Knife wound — a slice to the jugular would explain at least some of the bloodloss the mortician is sure to notice. I can't really start another scare in the city over 'vampire killers' — but you're going to have to find whoever did this. One I can contain — more than that, and it may be out of

my hands."

"I like your mortal friend, Nick," Janette said, smiling. "She knows her priorities." With that, she turned but paused, facing them again, her eyes on Nick. "You know, it could be someone with a grudge."

"Against you, Janette? Do you have any enemies?" Natalie questioned her.

She shrugged. "Who doesn't? But none of my enemies are stupid." With that, she pivoted on her heel and headed back to the club.

"I'm flattered ... I think," Natalie commented wryly, watching the proprietor of the Raven weave her way around the policemen at the scene.

"You should be," Nick replied with a grin. "Janette doesn't usually bother to get to know mortals enough to like or dislike them."

She turned back to Nick, her expression serious. "What do you think?"

"I think we've got a problem," he answered grimly. "I believe Janette — none of the vampires who frequent her club would be foolish enough to endanger the club — it's a haven for us all."

"Then it must be someone from out of town — an outsider?" she asked, closing up her medical bag. He didn't answer, and she shrugged. "I'll take the victim — Blaylock? — back to the office, do the post mortem on him. Although I have no doubt as to the cause of death." She glanced down at the sad-faced corpse, caught in his last terror-filled moment of life and shook her head. "I'll never get used to this kind of death."

Nick's hand shot out and grabbed her arm. She winced at the strength of the grip and he lessened his hold. "Be careful, Nat."

"Why — you know who did this, don't you?"

"I have an idea. It's a crazy idea," he added, shaking his head. "It can't possibly be right. But be careful — Blaylock was killed after he left me. Whoever did this could be —"

"Could be whoever's sending the cups. Could be after you," she finished.

*"Could be after the people I know. The **mortals** I know."*

She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "I'll be safe at Headquarters. Who's going to try something in a building full of police?" She put on a brave smile for his benefit, but he could tell he'd frightened her.

"Be careful," he repeated forcefully.

"All right, all right — I'll be careful. You find who did this," she ordered him. She gestured to the attendants waiting by the ambulance, and they moved forward to bag the body. She sketched a mock salute at Nick, got into her car, and left the scene.

* * *

After Natalie had left to return to Headquarters with the ambulance carrying Blaylock's corpse following behind, Nick joined the uniformed policeman taking statements from the people from the line outside the Raven. "Anybody see anything?"

The blue, a patrolman by the name of Joe Grange, shook his head. "Nothing, Nick. One woman said she saw a woman leave the bar right behind Blaylock, but she said the woman headed in the opposite direction. Unlikely she's our perp."

"Description?" Nick demanded.

*"Uh ... slender, late twenties, maybe early thirties — who can tell these days? Dark hair, kinda punked, leather mini-dress, those mega-high heels. Lotta make-up. You know — kind of like every other woman who comes to this joint. This is the place the **Examiner** said was the trendiest club in Toronto? Heck, I'll stick with the local."*

"You do that, Joe," Nick answered, clapping him on the back. "It might be safer."

"Nick!" called out a familiar voice. "Hey, partner — what's happenin'?"

"Schanke. What brings you here?" Rolling his eyes theatrically at Grange, he walked over to join his partner.

"Want some?" Schanke offered, lifting his coffee cup to Nick. Knight shook his head, as Schanke had expected. "So what's the drill?"

*"Nat just left with the victim, a 50-ish reporter for the **National Intruder** who was killed just after leaving the club. Knife to the throat, slashed the jugular," Nick explained. "No one seems to have seen the murderer, no murder weapon, no visible clues, just a dead man and a lot of blood on the pavement."*

"Messy. Guy have any enemies?"

"We'll have to ask his publisher. You want to take care of that tomorrow?"

Schanke shrugged. "Sure. How's Janette holding up — a murder on her doorstep isn't going to be good for business."

"It's hard to tell — a place like this, the sensation might actually attract people. She's holding up as she always does — beautifully."

That last comment caught Schanke's attention. "Hey — there something goin' on between you and her? Come on — you can tell me — I'm your partner."

"It's ancient history." Nick chuckled. "Very ancient. We're just good friends now."

"Oh. Well, I'll go pay my respects. What about you?"

"I'm going to question her staff."

* * *

Back in her lab, Natalie began her examination of the body of Edmund Blaylock, carefully studying the puncture marks on his neck. Painstakingly, she took samples for analysis, sure that she would find human — or at least close to human — saliva in the wounds. These were definitely teeth marks, made with particularly sharp and pointed teeth. Fangs. She shuddered involuntarily. A nasty way to die — conscious and terrified. Was there any good way to die, she reminded herself. She carefully cut away tissue to mask the puncture wounds, making the wound appear to have been inflicted by a sharp, nondescript knife.

The lab was quiet around her; Grace, her assistant, was on vacation for the week, enjoying the sun and margaritas in Cancun. She couldn't remember the last time she'd really taken a vacation — a real vacation. That week off after her encounter with that crazy date rapist hadn't been very restful — nightmares had wakened her every night, and finally, she'd returned to work no less rested than she'd been before she'd gone.

The coroner's office night shift was really just a skeleton crew, although they probably got more business after dark than during the daylight hours. The outer office to her lab was dark; Fred had called in sick earlier in the evening, apologetic but clearly too sick to come to work. Elsewhere in the building, police officers, computer technicians, and other civil servants on the night shift were

at work, but in her own little world, she was alone. She remembered Nick's admonition and shivered a little.

"Oh, come on!" she chided herself. "You're acting like a baby." To settle her nerves, she set down her instruments and went to pour herself a cup of tea. She turned back to her examination of the corpse of Edmund Blaylock and found herself face to face with the amber glowing eyes of a female vampire.

* * *

Nick's interrogation of Janette's staff and the vampires who lived in the lower basement of the Raven revealed nothing. No one had noticed anything untoward; it had been a night of business as usual at the Raven. Questioning of the patrons of the club lasted most of the night, and when the police detail was wrapping up, the first hints of dawn were appearing in the sky.

"Schanke, I've got to go," Nick announced to his partner.

Schanke looked up at the sky and smiled. "I keep tellin' you — y'gotta invest in nuclear force sun screen."

"Yeah, well, none of that really works for me. Look — watch your back, okay, Schank?"

"Hey, you know me — always on the alert!"

Nick chuckled and slapped Schanke on the shoulder, then made his way to his car. If he floored it, he'd make it to his place before the sun was up.

"Hey, can I get another cup of coffee?" he heard Schanke call out as he drove away.

* * *

*Pulling the Caddy up to the curb, Nick had the recurring sense of something watching. Whatever that something was, he could feel anger ... and death. Still sitting behind the steering wheel, he took a deep breath to steady his nerves and glanced up at his building. He did a doubletake; on the second floor where his apartment was located, one of the tall windows was smashed. He rushed out of his car, did a cursory check of the pavement — no shattered glass littered the walkway — and raced into the building. His senses were all screaming **danger!**, no longer focussed purely on the watcher. He rapidly punched in his access code, hurried into the apartment, leaving the door open, and slammed the controls for the window shutters just as the first rays of sunlight began to filter through the panes.*

"Very impressive," came a soft, feminine voice from somewhere above him. He looked up at the upper floor walkway, and saw a dark, slender shape separate itself from the shadows, a white-coated form in its grasp. Natalie!

"Hello, Nick," the figure purred. "Aren't you glad to see me?" She lifted into the air, Natalie still held fast, her mouth covered by the figure's hand. "Don't you recognize me? Let me come down into the light." Levitating over the guardrail, she gracefully pirouetted down to the main level of the apartment.

She stood before Knight, slim, dark-haired, face made up to resemble the clientele of the Raven. The strap of a large leather bag was slung across her chest, the bag hanging at her side. She smiled, revealing sharp, white fangs. Natalie darted fear-filled eyes at Nick, imploring him to do something.

"Alyce," Nick whispered, his eyes wide. "LaCroix killed you —"

"LaCroix gave me life," she corrected smoothly. "Something you refused to do."

"But your funeral — your cremation —"

She chuckled. "Even your coroner friend here couldn't tell that I wasn't truly dead. I simply waited until I could get out of the body drawer, found a suitable replacement, and went my merry way. Surely you, as a vampire of ... advanced age ... can figure out how."

Nick nodded. "Let Natalie go," he said softly.

"Why would I want to do that, Nick? I went to so much trouble to get her. Didn't I, Natalie?" she asked, stroking Natalie's exposed neck with her forefinger. Natalie tensed at the touch, closing her eyes tightly.

"What do you want, Alyce?"

"I have unfinished business here in Toronto."

"You killed Blaylock." Alyce nodded, smiling. "Why?"

"I followed you to that club again, overheard your conversation. No one noticed me — how could a vampire be discovered among so many?" She smiled again, revealing delicate, sharp fangs. "I didn't know who'd written that article, but he got some of the details of my biography wrong. He had to be corrected. And he was so delicious," she added, grinning wickedly. "Although I could wish he'd drunk a better grade of whiskey — it does leave a strange aftertaste."

"What else?"

"Why, you, of course," she replied silkily. "You denied me all this," she pointed out, lifting into the air again, still holding Natalie tight. "You preferred to let me die than compromise your precious ethics." She rose higher and higher, spiralling slowly toward the upper walkway. "You consigned me to death, Nick. LaCroix gave me the gift of life — you tell me, to whom should I be grateful?"

She alighted on the walkway and stared down at him. "Whom should I love? And whom should I hate? A decision to be made, Nick. And here's a decision for you —" she put her hand in the leather bag, extracted a Mayan cup, and held it up over the emptiness beyond the railing. "Do you truly wish to be human, Nick? I know you still have your original cup. I found another, not far from Altuncanul. Oh yes, I returned there. And what I found — this cup is only the beginning!"

"What do you want, Alyce?" he demanded angrily.

*"No, Nick — what do **you** want? The cup ... or the girl?" She laughed. "Such symmetry, don't you think? LaCroix asked you the same question, and you chose the girl. And then you let the girl die. I don't think you truly want to be human again, Nick. I think it's just a romantic fantasy that prevents you from enjoying what you truly are. Perhaps Natalie would enjoy it more than you do — shall we find out?"*

Her fingers around the Mayan cup opened, the cup falling as she bared her fangs again and bent her head toward Natalie's neck. Natalie let out a shriek and began to struggle in earnest; she'd remained still all this time to avoid just this and she wasn't going to let Alyce take her life. Nick launched himself from the first level to the second. As the cup crashed to the floor, shattering into fragments, he wrenched Alyce's arms away from Nat just as her fangs grazed Nat's neck. "Run, Nat!" he commanded, his own fangs bared, his eyes blazing yellow. "Run!"

Nick held Alyce's arms at her sides while Natalie escaped, but the female vampire merely smiled at him. "Things haven't changed, have they, Nick? Still gallantly choosing the girl over your own humanity. You still don't know what you really want."

"I won't let you hurt her — this is between you and me, Alyce. Can't you understand — I didn't want to curse you like I've been cursed — I loved you too much for that —"

*"Love! Was it love that made you decide to **let** me die? I told you — I wanted this! I wanted to watch civilization grow and change. I wanted this power!" To illustrate, she suddenly thrust her arms upward, breaking Nick's hold. She rose above him, hatred contorting her features.*

"You're still weak, too. I fed only a few hours ago. When was the last time you fed? On **human** blood —"

not that cow's swill you have in the refrigerator." Her smile broadened. "Oh, when we let ourselves in, I took the liberty of poking about a bit. You know as well as I do that an archaeologist can learn a great deal from domestic arrangements."

While Nick and Alyce were grappling on the upper level, Natalie hadn't wasted time, racing down the stairs two at a time. She'd hurried to the case where Nick kept Joan d'Arc's cross, flipping back the lid and lifting out the cross. "Alyce!" she bellowed now, holding the cross up toward the two vampires.

Alyce hissed and flattened herself against the wall. She shimmied upward onto the ceiling, her eyes intent on the cross in Natalie's hands. Just as she dropped down from the ceiling, Nick catapulted himself from the walkway, catching her in mid-air. They wrestled, Alyce twisting to throw off Knight. Finally, she succeeded, sending him careening into the wall where he impacted into a framed print with a crash of glass and a curse.

Alyce righted herself in the air, snarling at Natalie. Natalie stood her ground, holding the cross up defiantly. "I know you can't come any closer," Natalie announced. "I know what this will do to your kind."

"Put down the cross," Alyce ordered, her voice laden with vampire glamour.

Natalie's hand faltered, her eyes growing distant, but she took command of herself and shook off the influence. "You forget — my best friend is a vampire. I know all the tricks," she pointed out. She glanced over at the wall where Nick had fallen; he was getting up slowly, his attention focused on Alyce. He had reverted to human appearance and gestured for Natalie to keep her talking.

"Best friend!" Alyce snorted, dropping gracefully to the floor across the room from Natalie. "I've watched the way you look at each other. You're the reason he refused to make me a vampire. You're the reason he wanted me dead!"

"No, Alyce," Nick said calmly. He dusted broken glass from his shoulder and took a step forward to stand beside her. "Why can't you understand — I hate what I am. I loved you — I couldn't turn you into something I hate."

She turned toward him, her face full of pain, the vampire suddenly gone. "How could you love me and let me die? How? How could you deny me this?"

"Deny you what? A life in the shadows? A life of killing, of pain? To never see the sun again —"

"I told you — I love the night! The sun means nothing to me —"

"To never truly love another? To be a shadow of what you were —"

*"A shadow! I returned to Altuncanul, I organized a team, we excavated the site —" she dug into her bag, pulling out another Mayan cup. Nick's face betrayed his belief that **this** cup was genuine. His hand reached out for it, but she snatched it back, dropping it back in the bag. "I found another cup. I found another city, Nick. An unknown site — the find of a lifetime! The century! Undisturbed, intact — and Nick, there was a library there, a library of Mayan bark-paper books! Sealed in a stone sarcophagus — in amazing condition! The Spaniards hadn't made it that deep into the jungle! Nick, it will totally change our understanding of the Maya! When I publish —"*

"You can't publish, Alyce. You're dead," he reminded gently. "You can never publish."

With a flare of rage, Alyce resumed her vampire appearance for a moment. "You denied me life! You'd deny me this, too? The finest achievement of my professional career?"

"Your career is over. Your death was too highly publicized, your life too closely connected to the Maya. You can never go public with this find, Alyce. It's more than your life is worth," he added sadly.

"It is my life, Nick! You, of all people, should understand that!"

He closed his eyes and inclined his head. He opened his eyes again, and reached out for her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I do understand, Alyce. Believe me, I do. But you must understand — there are rules. There is a code — you can never let the mortals know what you are."

Again, the vampire in Alyce faded. She stood close to Nick, her face tilted up at him, her expression entreating. "You can tell them ... you can tell them that I went into hiding," she suggested urgently, her hands reaching out for him in supplication. "Witness protection program, threats to my life — something — this is too important to bury again, Nick! You can have the cup — only you must help me —"

He took her in his arms, closing his eyes tightly as he pressed his face against her hair. "I can't, Alyce. Not to go public. That life is over — you have to start a new one," he whispered gently.

She flung him from her. "No! That is my life, my only life — I'm an archaeologist, a scientist! What good is it if I can't publish?"

"You can't. Doctor Alyce Hunter is dead."

"I can have plastic surgery, become someone else —"

He touched her face gently. "Look at how the burns you suffered have healed, Alyce. Your skin is flawless. You'd heal from the surgery in a matter of days. This is who you are. You can't look like anyone else —"

Natalie observed this exchange silently, still holding the cross. But while Alyce's attention was focused on Nick, she'd moved in a semi-circle around them, out of Alyce's line of sight, toward Nick's work table by his easel. Over Alyce's head, her eyes met Nick's; he shook his head slightly, and she closed her eyes to indicate her understanding. The cross of Joan D'Arc was still held tightly in one hand; her other hand closed over the handle of a large brush.

Alyce caught the exchange and shoved Nick aside, whirling to face Natalie again, her fangs once more bared to rend human flesh.

"I can be her death!" Alyce swore. She launched herself at the pathologist.

"Alyce, no!" Nick yelled.

Natalie dropped to the floor, rolling. As Alyce lunged for her, she dropped the cross and snapped the paint brush handle, exposing a sharp point of jagged wood. She thrust it up into Alyce's chest as the vampire attempted to tear open her throat.

Alyce lurched backward, hands scrabbling at the makeshift stake protruding from her bleeding chest. Her face was contorted in horror and pain as she pivoted back toward Nick. "Help me ..." she whispered, a thin trickle of dark blood — her own blood — oozing down her chin. "Nick ..." She fell to her knees, her hands raised in supplication. Natalie snatched the leather satchel and pulled it off the writhing vampire, scuttling backward under the work table. She watched in horror as smoke rose from Alyce as she seemed to fold in on herself. Natalie closed her eyes to the sight, memories of Richard's death still too recent to set aside. "All I wanted ..." Alyce fell silent as the smoke thickened and she faded in a brilliant white light.

Nick stumbled to his knees, hands touching the spot where Alyce had been. "Alyce ..." He lifted his tear-stained face up to Natalie, who still clutched the satchel protectively. "I failed, Nat. I failed again," he whispered hoarsely. She gathered him in her arms and held him, rocking, as the two of them indulged their respective griefs. She looked up over his head and saw two figures standing in the open doorway. Male, impeccably dressed, with skin the color of palest alabaster, eyes golden and feral, and glistening, brutal-looking fangs, they watched. They held Natalie's gaze for a moment, their expressions unreadable. She had the feeling that they were examining her, deep into her cell structure. One held a stake poised in his upraised hand. The other shook his head, and touched

the first one's shoulder. With a glance at Nick, they turned and left without uttering a single word.

* * *

"Let me see that," Nick said, turning Natalie's face to the side. "She got you, but you're okay. A little alcohol or hydrogen peroxide should clean that up," he added, examining the wound left by Alyce's fangs.

He moved slowly, like an old man, toward the bathroom to collect the necessary supplies. Natalie busied herself with a dustpan and brush to sweep up the remains of the Mayan cup Alyce had smashed. She was still shaking, as much from her encounter with Alyce as from the sight of the two enigmatic vampires who had disappeared only minutes before.

"That one's fake, too," Nick told her, reentering the room. "She was too much of an archaeologist to damage a rare antiquity."

Natalie held up a shard of the cup, the lighter color of its shattered face betraying its modern construction. "Which means what — the other one she had in her bag is the real McCoy?"

Nick shrugged. His hopes had been raised so many times, he daren't hope again. And the confrontation with Alyce — and experiencing her death a second time — had left him drained. Much like Natalie.

Nick hadn't the heart to rifle through Alyce's bag, but Natalie had no such compunctions. She needed to keep busy while she worked through the conflicting thoughts and emotions that battled within her. While he watched, she went through the satchel, placing each of the items on Nick's coffee table. She found a return airline ticket to Belize City, a passport in the name of "Anna Duval," newly-purchased make-up and a receipt for it from a drugstore chain, another receipt from a trendy clothing store, and a binder full of notes, diagrams, photographs, and rubbings. And the cup. This she handed to Nick for his examination.

"Well?"

He nodded, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "It's real," he breathed. "Genuine."

"And will it work with the one in the museum?"

The face he turned to her was a riot of emotions: fear, elation, grief, dread. But above all, hope. "Only one way to find out."

She nodded, smiling, and squeezed his hand enthusiastically. "Tomorrow. We'll go to the museum and talk with the new curator then." He smiled in agreement.

Now that Natalie had actually arranged the contents of Alyce's bag, Nick picked over them curiously. With the evidence arrayed before them, they could begin to piece together what had happened in the last year. They decided that Alyce had obviously taken over the life of the woman who had taken her place in her coffin, a woman who had probably been just visiting Toronto from Montreal. They agreed that if they checked the missing persons reports, if not here, then in Montreal, Anna Duval would show up on them, case unsolved.

In fact, Nick was fairly sure she had not been reported missing in Toronto. He normally kept half-an-ear open regarding missing persons, since in days past, missing persons often meant his kind preying on the lost and the alone. He told Natalie that he couldn't recall hearing the name "Anna Duval" before, so he doubted anyone in Toronto had even noticed the woman had disappeared. Alyce had stolen her life, and then her identity. Any morality Alyce had possessed as a mortal had been jettisoned as soon as she'd crossed over.

Natalie shook her head, remembering Richard, remembering Janette's comment about the rare mortal being able to become immortal. She doubted she had what it took, either. She looked at Nick with a renewed respect, and leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked, surprised.

"For being you. For being one of the rare ones."

* * *

*The funeral for Edmund Blaylock was a tribute to his life as a journalist, heavily peopled by friends and associates from his life before the **National Intruder**. Natalie and Nick had gone to the viewing the night before, and Natalie had agreed to attend the funeral services on Nick's behalf. The eulogy, presented by one of Canada's leading telejournalists, would have made Blaylock proud; apparently his professional associates preferred to remember the man he'd been, rather than the lost soul he had become.*

At the station, Schanke delivered his report to Stonetree, much to the Captain's displeasure. No clues relating to the identity of the murderer had been found at the scene; the perpetrator had been unusually careful to leave no evidence whatsoever. Natalie's coroner's report was no help either; the knife wound was clean, bloodless rapid and voluminous, nothing special to identify the blade. Examination of Blaylock's effects indicated that he'd had no wallet, which pointed to a robbery, but little else could be learned. Although the investigation continued for a few more days, finally even Stonetree had to agree that it would remain unsolved. The crime was catalogued as robbery and murder by person or persons unknown. The admission put him in a bad mood for

more than a week.

* * *

After the funeral, Natalie had returned to Nick's apartment, and finally told Nick about the visitation of the Enforcers. The news cheered him, much to her surprise. He explained to her that the fact that they had acknowledged her and still turned away was a good sign; they didn't see her knowledge of vampires as a threat to the species as a whole. By the time she had arrived, Nick had already called the museum about the Mayan cup, promising that if they would loan the cup to him for a short period, he would return it with a companion cup that had somehow found its way to him. He had refused to explain the origin of the second cup, but the new curator was curious — and excited — enough to agree. Feeling better than she had for days, Natalie went to the museum to pick up the cup before closing time, returning to Nick's apartment shortly before sundown.

That evening, Natalie and Nick visited Janette at the Raven to let her know what had really happened. It was hours before the club would open for the night and they could talk privately. The murder on her doorstep had not hurt business, although she voiced complaints at the type of clientele the notoriety had attracted to the place in recent nights.

Janette was clearly relieved, although not surprised, to hear that the Enforcers had gone away satisfied. When Natalie brought out the two Mayan cups from her bag and placed them on the bar, Janette had gone silent, staring at the cups for a long time before speaking.

"So. They exist," she said at last, her voice barely above a whisper.

"They exist," Nick repeated, nodding solemnly.

"And this ceremony — this ritual to regain your mortality — you will do it?" Her voice was flat, but Natalie thought she could detect a tremor of sadness behind the words. Once again she was struck by the great age of these two, and the many years they had spent together.

Nick had no answer to the question. It was a question he had asked himself again and again since they had first discovered that Alyce's cup was genuine.

"The ritual requires human blood to be effective," Natalie explained quietly. "Not the blood of a sacrificed victim, I hope," she added with a smile.

"No?" Janette asked.

"No," Natalie replied. "I've told Nick I'll be happy to play donor. All he has to tell me is when he

wants to try it."

Janette listened to this in silence, but there was a farewell in her dark eyes, almost mourning, when she turned back to Nick.

"I've waited so long ..." he whispered finally. He leaned his mouth against his fist, arm propped against the bar. His brows furrowed and he shook his head. Janette drew a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling. Natalie could have sworn that her eyes glittered with tears.

* * *

Review of Alyce's notes had revealed the location of the hitherto unknown Classic Maya city. The emblem glyph of the city was still unreadable, and if rediscovered by mortal archaeologists, would probably provide them with years of controversy until a definitive name could be agreed upon. The notes also indicated that the prize find of the dig — the cache of Mayan bark-paper books — was safely shut away, back in the stone sarcophagus that had kept them safe for centuries. Nick's mouth watered at the idea — to date, only four Mayan books were known to exist, the vast majority of them having been destroyed by the Spaniards in their conquest of Central America. Their philosophy had been simple and effective — destroy a people's culture, and you destroy a people.

She had written, too, of her usage of her dig crew, of how she'd convinced them of her godhood, of how she'd played out snippets of Mayan mythology to feed off them, leaving only the crew chief — a special favorite from previous digs — still alive, his mind clouded and confused. Those future archaeologists would find yet another mystery in that lost city when they came upon the skeletons of that native crew.

As he read the notes, the picture of what Alyce had become grew clearer. Convinced that Nick had deliberately refused her immortality, her hatred for him had grown daily, fueling her determination to find another sacrificial cup to lure him to his destruction. She had even written that she might have allowed him to carry out the ceremony, and then killed him once he became mortal again.

She'd started sending the facsimile cups as a tease, a way of calling him out. She had decided to deliver the last — the sixth — in person. That was the last entry in her journal. He could guess from there what had happened. She had shadowed him, for who knows how many days, and had followed him to his rendezvous with Blaylock. He hadn't sensed her presence any more than any of the other vampires at the Raven had — she had blended into that crowd, just one more of their kind. Killing Blaylock had most likely been her way of calling him out. Killing Natalie would have been punishment, and making her a vampire an even greater torture. He felt cold at the thought

that he might have had to destroy Natalie; he hadn't realized just how much he'd come to depend on her until he came so close to losing her. And he had no doubt that had Alyce succeeded, the Enforcers had been prepared to destroy all three of them. They had been very lucky, indeed.

He shook his head. Nothing of Alyce, the woman he had known and loved, had survived, except in those last few moments before she'd died once more. The archaeologist, the scientist, had survived, but not the woman. He wondered just how much of the Crusader, the man, remained in him.

He glanced at the pair of jade cups, one retrieved from Alyce's sack, the other borrowed back from the museum, sitting side by side on his kitchen counter. Such a mundane backdrop to artifacts so arcane.

How much of the man remained after all these centuries? There was, he knew, only one way to find out.