

The Magus Chronicles

by Kevin Geiselman and Kelly Muzyczka

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Chapter 1 (Geradi & Mina meeting, Nov 92)

Character Development for 'Vampire'

Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov and Mina Murray meeting

by Kevin Geiselman and Kelly Muzyczka

Written November 1992

Geradi wandered almost aimlessly through Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, drifting generally towards the exit. He had spent several intensive hours there already but as closing time approached his attention became more casual.

In the hall covering Medieval history he came across a woman intent on a Russian illumination (11th Century). Being Russian himself he couldn't resist approaching and making a comment or two.

She noticed his none too stealthy approach but only turned her head enough to see who it was who had come up beside her.

Geradi smiled at her and, directing his attention towards the illumination, began to read the Russian text aloud.

Halfway through the page the woman interrupted his reading by continuing her reading of the text, aloud and translated into English. She had some difficulty with the old Cyrillic script but generally did a fair job. Geradi was pleasantly surprised.

But not so surprised compared to what he saw out of the corner of his eye. The woman's aura. Geradi was used to seeing aura. It was second nature to note the energy field around a person, he had lived with it all his life and it was as normal to him as noting a person's body language, expression or clothing. But this woman's aura was unlike any he had ever seen before. This was something new, something special.

The woman ended her reading in mid sentence as the text reached the bottom of the page. She turned and looked at him, waiting for his reaction. Geradi then watched her eyes widen as he began reciting from the non-existent next page.

"How do you know that!" she interrupted.

Geradi smiled and extended his hand, "Hello, I'm Geradi Ruzhkov."

She snatched his offered hand, "That's nice but where did you see the next page? It's not here! I've asked!"

"In the 13th Century when the Mongols sacked much of the Russias, much of the original was destroyed, the binding broken, the surviving pages scattered. Most of the pages have been collected over the years and are at the State Archives in Moscow. A copy of this page is there, not quite so attractively done as either this page or yourself but still, the text is relatively intact, reconstructed from period copies in Novgorod, which survived the Mongol hordes."

"And you saw this manuscript?"

"I was working on the equivalent of a 'master's thesis'. The State Archives aren't generally available to the...."

"Wait a minute... what did you say?"

"Master's thesis? Is my accent difficult?"

"No. Before that."

"Attractive?"

"Yea, that's it."

"You are an attractive young woman and your passion for history is very appealing but if you are going to continue holding my hand perhaps you should introduce yourself."

She looked down at her hand, nearly crushing his, and quickly let go. "Mina."

Geradi flexed his bruised fingers. At least her nails didn't draw blood, he thought. "Mina is a name which suites you.(*). The museum is closing soon. Perhaps we could go somewhere and get something to eat. We could talk more about history."

"Ahhh. . .", Mina began, suddenly pensive. "I don't think so...now's not a good time."

"Are you sure? Perhaps some other time. You're a teacher, correct? I could hear it in your voice."

"Yes. . . ahhh, no. . . Look, I have to go. It's been swell but . . ." Mina turned to leave.

Geradi did not follow but called after her, "Most nights I am at Stewart's Restaurant on 18th Street. Come by sometime, or even tonight, and I will buy you a drink."

Geradi was left alone in the empty hall. He smiled and walked towards the exit.

As Mina stepped out of the museum the cold wind off lake Michigan wrapped her skirt about her legs. She was unaware of the cold but was chilled by what had just happened.

Mina shook her head clear. Forget him. She needed a drink. She put her hand's in her jacket pockets and started for the Succubus Club. Then she discovered a card in her pocket that wasn't there before. She pulled it out.

It was a formal invitation to a dinner party the following night at the Russian Consulate.

"That bastard!"

Mina was nearing 18th Street with every intention of finding Geradi and following him to find out who he really was. When did he get that note in her pocket and how?

A motorcycle roared by and squealed into an alleyway ahead. It registered in Mina's mind because the rider was controlling the bike with one hand, the other had a gun of some sort. Pop! Pop! Angry young voices. Mina realized it was some sort of gang-bang. Young kids killing other young kids over turf, drugs, or just to kill. Anger welled within her and she sprang into action.

Mina had taken two steps, gearing up to a run when there was a metallic crash. Three more steps and two youths came running out of the alleyway. One more step and she was in the alley entrance, nearly crashing into a third fleeing youth. Mina grabbed him by the collar and the gun in his hand went off, the bullet kicking up asphalt at Mina's ankle.

Mina threw him. Farther than she probably should have but not as far as she wanted to, a good 20 feet into a pile of garbage. The gun clattered at her feet. She turned to face the alleyway and deal with whatever was next.

Geradi was there! Standing over the writhing motorcycle driver who had apparently been thrown from his machine, perhaps cracking a few ribs. Mina noticed something was missing; the motorcycle. She blinked and caught the motion of a free spinning wheel. The motorcycle rested in a twisted section of fire escape two stories up.

Did he do that? Did he just see what I did? Who is this guy? Mina turned and fled the scene. Now she really did need a drink.

"Dobry vyechir, Mina", came Geradi's voice from the tree next to the consulate's entrance. "I am glad that you came. The thought of spending the whole night in that tree was not appealing." He dropped down beside Mina.

Mina wore a flattering black dress that was perhaps too flattering for a diplomatic function. Geradi wore a tuxedo shirt and bow tie but, rather than the proper jacket had a leather flight jacket, perhaps too casual for a diplomatic function. Neither seemed to care.

"You realize I'm only here to find out who the Hell you are." Mina said, offering her arm to be properly escorted inside.

"Remember one thing," Geradi said, taking her arm, "do not behave as if you understand Russian. The Consul gets very nervous around Americans that speak Russian."

Boris Pushkin greeted Geradi in Russian; "Geradi, why do you always arrive late? Couldn't you start your personal entertainment earlier?"

Geradi introduced them, in English; "Boris, this is Mina. Mina... Boris Pushkin, Cultural Attache here at the consulate. He also happens to be my 'boss.'" Boris made the proper motions of kissing Mina's hand.

Boris continued talking to Geradi in Russian. "Do you only know her by her first name? I would expect you to have such a companion"

"We are playing a secrets game. Do you not think that mystery lends excitement."

"The woman is quite mysterious. I wonder if she would tell me any secrets."

"Don't play the letch, Boris. You don't do it very well. You are totally devoted to your wife and you know it. Besides, Mina would probably much rather sleep with your wife."

"Ruzhkov, you are a pig. And where is your jacket? You are looking very 'American'"

"Looking American has nothing to do with it. My roommates went dancing tonight and they have the habit of accessorising their wardrobes with my shirts and jackets. Find yourself fortunate that I did not bring them along with me."

"I'll say it again; Ruzhkov, you're a pig"

"Boris, why don't you go over and practice your English with those gentlemen by the punch bowl, I'll be over shortly to remove your foot from your mouth and save the day"

Boris took his leave and Geradi explained to Mina what had just occurred; "Boris is actually a very good friend of mine. He helped me to leave the Soviet Union when it was still Soviet. As a Cultural Attache, Boris is lacking in only one thing; culture. He also has a terribly thick accent which does not help him to interact with Americans, something he's nervous about to begin with. I help him."

"And are you a pig like he says?" Mina asked.

"See, you are learning diplomacy already. Come on." Geradi guided Mina over to save Boris.

"Ah, Geradi," Boris began, this time in English. "I am glad you came over here." His accent was thick but he muddled through anyway. "This is Dr. James Beyer, Curator of the Chicago Museum." At which point Boris drifted over to the buffet.

"Dr. Ruzhkov", Beyer began, offering his hand, "Consul Pushkin had said you wanted to speak with me."

"Indeed, do you know your own museum well? If I speak of an exhibit will you remember it?"

"Quite probably, which one are you referring to?"

"The Kulikov Manuscript, 11th Century, single page illumination."

"Yes, I know it."

"After seeing it the other day I contacted the State Archives in Moscow. I have them looking into the possibility of loaning the rest of the manuscript to the Chicago Museum or at the very least releasing a copy for research. They will probably want to send someone here to study the page that you have."

That deal was the highlight of the evening. Many other things were discussed, a certain amount of gossip was passed and created. A lot of handshaking and pointless diplomacy and, through it all, Mina watched Geradi. She was unfulfilled.

She had learned many things about the public Geradi, who he was, what he did, who he knew, but there was still the feeling of 'who the hell is this guy'. She wasn't sure she needed to know anymore.

She was leaning on the sill of an open window, absorbing the scents of the late night air and considering escaping into that night when Geradi approached.

"You and I are not so different," he began. "We each have secrets we desperately need to keep hidden, perhaps even from ourselves. We each have a hint of the other's secret, would like to know more, but in so doing do not wish to be ourselves revealed."

"I have lived with secrets all my life, and not just my own. The secrets of my parents, my grandparents, of three generations of my countrymen under Communist rule. A duality of existence, private and public, on that scale is tiresome."

Geradi paused. Mina continued to gaze out the window.

"What I am trying to say is that, in spite of your secrets, I would like to have you as my friend. At the museum you looked like you could use a friend as well."

Mina turned, "And you would be my friend without knowing anything about me? You are taking quite a risk."

"Perhaps it is because I know nothing about you. Call it instinct if you will. And as for risk, what choice is without chance?"

Mina thought a moment and decided that Geradi was right; what choice is without chance?

"Yes. I'll be your friend. But remember, you don't know what you're getting into."

Geradi smiled. "Neither do you. Come, I'll call a taxi to take you home. It is getting quite late."

When Mina arrived home she was still thinking about Geradi and his talk of secrets. Since she was 14 she had kept her love of women secret, open about it with only a very select few. She shared the secret of her vampiric nature only with those of her kind. Even then, she kept the tale of her making to herself.

Geradi kept his secrets casually, without apparent effort, while looking at Mina as if he knew everything about her. It was somehow comforting to know someone else who could keep secrets without lying. Maybe she would see him again sometime.

She reached inside her purse to retrieve her keys and discovered a card. The business card had Boris Pushkin's name and number scratched out with Geradi's name and number hand written in their place.

"That bastard!"

But this time, Mina smiled.

* Geradi does not know the Mina Harker reference from "Dracula" but is instead referring to the Russian translation of mina; air, bearing, or aspect, as showing character, feeling, etc.

Chapter 2 (Game Session One, Oct 92)

From the Chronicles of Garadi Ivanovich Ruzhkov Game Session One, October 1992

Saturday, 6 November 1993

Edith Harker's Bookstore, Early Evening

There was a tremendous drain in the magical field of Chicago. A mystic brownout. To do that on a city-wide basis would require some-one of massive power. A group acting in unison could cause the same effect; a much more likely probability. There was still some time before I needed to be at work so I went to investigate Harker's Bookstore to see if I could find something pertinent. Harker's has an astoundingly good occult selection. Is America great, or what.

Here is a book which seems to have something of what I'm looking for. It is unfortunate that I won't get a chance to read it.

A man comes down the stairs. He is missing his left arm, amateurishly wrapped and dripping blood. Perhaps he has come to find a book on first aid. I think not.

His aura is strange. Obviously magical, otherwise he would be more concerned over his missing appendage, but there is something else. Something familiar.

A silver-haired woman comes down and joins him. She is equally unconcerned with her comrade's missing arm. So far, neither seems to have noticed me. They are discussing something but for now I am too polite to overhear.

A third person comes down the stairs. He is crawling, following the blood trail by scent. I have a very bad feeling about being down here with these people. I think I shall go now.

From upstairs, outside, there is the sound of squealing tires. Someone yells something about 'Anarchs' followed by a crashing sound. Whump! Pracliyatiya! Someone has firebombed the bookstore! The strange people begin a frantic search for an alternate exit. Fool that I am, I rush up the stairs, running into. . . Mina? What is she doing here? Coincidence?

"Dobry vyechir, Mina. Prastitye."

I continue up the stairs. The fire isn't too bad, apparently Americans aren't as proficient at making firebombs as my countrymen. I can control the fire and make it appear that I doused it by mundane means. My jacket isn't damaged too badly.

The proprietress is very happy for my having saved her store. The group comes from downstairs, much relieved that the fire is out. Mina is apparently associated with these people.

Authorities arrive with astonishing quickness. Sheriff Balthesar? That is not natural and did he just say Brujah? Suddenly I remember that strange bend in the aura of the one armed man. It matches the bend in Mina's aura. And the mention of Brujah and Anarchs, that makes them all Vampirim. Suddenly this bookstore is a very dangerous place to be, so while noone is looking. . . "Da svidaniya, Mina."

Enroute to Stewart's Restaurant

Mina is a Vampir. Bozhe Moy! A bloodsucking creature of eternal darkness. It would seem that my grandfather was as wrong about Vampirism as he was about the Lupine. Vampires are real but not all are evil.

Before they are Vampir, they were human. And just as humans are good, evil, and all shades of gray in between, so too must the Vampirism be equally varied.

Mina is unlike any of the creatures my grandfather warned me of. If she were I would be dead already. Perhaps her having a mortal friend keeps her from slipping into the darkness. Suddenly, my nights aren't quite so dark.

Stewart's Restaurant; Evening

Stewart tells me that there was a phone call for me; John Sebastian. Why would Sir John be calling me and, more importantly, how did he find me here? Last year I met Sebastian in New York, did him a favor. Is he in Chicago? Could this have something to do with the magical brownout?

Sunday, 7 November

Stewart's Restaurant, 1:00 am

Apparently, John Sebastian has called back.

"Hello?"

"Are you the one doing the rituals?"

That's not Sebastian's voice. "Nyet."

"Good. Keep it that way." **click**

The many sides of this puzzle are beginning to become more apparent. There are those draining the magical field in some powerful ritual towards some unknown purpose. There are others who are threatened and wish to stop this ritual. These people are powerful enough to find me out. There is John Sebastian whose affiliations I do not yet know. And there is also Mina and her Vampirism comrades.

I would guess that the one missing the arm is somewhat schooled in the mystical arts, a Tremere, and detected the brownout the same as I did. He considered it important enough to seek information at Harker's bookstore even before tending to his recently severed arm.

Come to think of it, I would bet 1000 Rubles that the redheaded Miss Harker is Vampirism as well. What does the firebombing of her bookstore and the apparent complicity of local police authorities, specifically the Vampir sheriff, have to do with all this? Are they related?

Feeling edgy, I call the twins to make sure they are all right. Apparently, all is not well; they had a visitor. Whoever it was walked right through my wards without triggering them. Their description is similar to that of John Sebastian but not quite. I leave work early. Stewart is irritated but this is my last night tending bar anyway. My teaching job at the University is beginning to pay off and I no longer need the extra cash.

Geradi's Apartment, Morning

A phone call from one Vladimir Tashir, he has an offer for me. He and his associates are the cause of the power fluctuations and wish me to join them.

I find that he is a Ukrainian, a lawyer, a local figure of wealth and power. He is also powerful enough to find me and deliver his offer. I've been drawn into some major intrigue; the question being which side should I be on. Tashir's offer is tempting but somehow I do not trust him fully. This is to be expected, considering my only contact with him is a message on an answering machine. I will tentatively accept his offer in so far as I find out more of what is going on.

Geradi's Apartment, Early Evening.

Vlad Tashir is a Chekist! I returned his call and he tells me that he is former KGB. The bastard brags about looking at my file. He must be very sure of himself to reveal such information over the telephone. I need to know more about what is really going on and the only way to do that is from the inside. For better or worse I accept his offer.

I do not have time to call Katya in Kiev. This business is her specialty and I would like to have a look at his file.

I do, however, have time to drop by Miss Harker's bookstore and attempt to obtain the book I was looking at last night. She offered me any book in exchange for my having saved her establishment but I cannot accept her gift without a gift of my own. I know just the book.

SPECIMEN PATHOLOGICO-MEDICUM INAUGURALE
DE
INCENDIS CORPORIS HUMANI SPONTANEIS

QUOD,
FAVENTE SUMMO NUMINE,
Ex Auctoritate MAGNIFICI RECTORIS

D. DAVIDIS van ROYEN,

MEDICINAE DOCTORIS. BOTANICES IN ACAD.
LUGD. BAT. PROFESSORIS ORDINARIII:
NEC MON
Amplissimi SENATUS ACADEMICI Consensu,
& Nobilissimae FACULTATIS MEDICAE Decreto,
PRO GRADU DOCTORATUS,
Summisque in MEDICINA Honoribus & Privilegiis
rite ac legitime confequendis,
Eruditorum Examine submittit
IONAS DUPONT,
AMST. BAT.

Ad diem 16 Decembris M.D.CC.LXIII. H.L.Q.S.

Intima pars homini vero flagravat ad offa:
Flagravat stomacho flamma, ut fornacibus intus.
LUCRET.

LUGDUNI BATAVORUM,
Apud THEODORUM HAAK, Bibliop

Chapter 3 (Game Session Two, Nov 92)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
Game Session Two, November 1992*

Sunday, 7 November 1993

Edith Harker's Bookstore, Evening

"I apologize for having left so precipitously last night.";

I could have bet more than 1000 Rubles, Miss Harker admits to being Vampir. She recognizes me as being Magi and is friendly. She accepts my gift of the book and, without prompting, produces the book I was looking at last night. I am always welcome here. This looks to be another evening full of surprises.

Vladimir Tashir's Mansion, Approaching Midnight

The Chekist invites me in and immediately starts ranting about the Jihad and the One True Path. I take an instant disliking to him but listen politely. Him and his comrades are joined in a great effort to eradicate the world of the dark Vampirism once and forever. I do not remind him that the Magi have traditionally not been involved in the affairs of the Vampir, either in support or against them.

I ask to see this file he claims to have on me but he refuses, questioning if he can trust me. The Chekist bastard could blackmail me into Siberia, he holds all the cards, and he doesn't trust me? He does, however, relent slightly, showing me a single page which carries little information or importance. Worthless.

Nearing midnight it is time for the ritual and I am escorted into an antechamber. I tell Vlad that I don't think I'll be able to help.

There is a man suspended above a cauldron, a wooden stake driven into the vampir's chest. Red cowled acolytes gather around the cauldron. I join them within the circle but have no intention of joining my power to theirs.

Vlad takes up a large knife and castrates the poor creature, the blood pouring freely into the cauldron, adding to the magiks there. My mind's eye envisions dear Mina suspended above that foul cauldron. I am sickened.

The ritual goes badly. My presence disrupts the magical flow, wrecking whatever they had hoped to accomplish this night. Thank you, Grandfather.

Vlad is undeterred and unaware of my complete unwillingness to participate. He bids me to return in two days time, they will have adjusted their ritual to accept my particular flavor of magic. The wait will give me time to formulate how I will wreck the whole thing permanently. I'm going home.

Monday, 8 November 1993

Dockside, 1:00 am

There was a message on the answering machine from Mina. She wanted me to meet her at this dockside warehouse; she promised me a 'good time.' I am not sure what her idea of a 'good time' is in this instance but it must be important for her to call for my help. She must trust me a great deal.

So now I'm in shadow form sneaking past a roadblock. The workmen on the line are suspicious enough without the strange gaps in their aura. It is as if they were missing pieces of themselves, like they were part machine. I avoid them.

The warehouse has bright lights and armed guards. It is like a fortress. It would be nice if Mina were here to tell me why I'm here.

"Grrrrrrr. . ."

Something behind me is growling. I turn slowly and discover a large black panther investigating me. Good kitty, I'm going to move very slowly. Nice pussy, nothing here but a shadow. Please play somewhere else.

What kind of creature is this? A lycanthrope? A shape changing Vampir? It seems that I cannot take two steps in this city without tripping over some preternatural being. I certainly hope I'm not on the menu.

The creature places its paws on me in what I guess is a friendly manner and goes off into the night. At least I haven't made a new enemy.

Thump! Mina has arrived, conveniently tripping over my leg. "Would you like to tell me just what the hell I am doing here?" Just at this time, before she can give me an explanation, a helicopter appears overhead. I start looking for a place to get Mina to cover but the helicopter lands and begins discharging passengers, unaware of our presence.

A large Negro exits the helicopter carrying a box. He is obviously the leader in this event.

"Let me guess; you're here for what's in the box."

The lights go out and from the reactions of the assembled guards such a thing was not planned. I take advantage of the fortuitous distraction and make a dash for the warehouse. Mina is close behind. Suddenly there is a skulking creature running behind Mina. Her unconcerned reaction tells me that she knows him. Vampirism, no doubt.

I reach the warehouse and proceed straight up to a second floor window. Mina and her 'friend' climb up behind me. I open the window and peer inside

The Negro is there and is highly agitated over the lights being out. He still holds the box. Also, he stands beside a heavily armed and armored truck.

From across the yard an engine roars and a truck is hurtling towards the warehouse. The guards hesitate a moment then open fire on the approaching vehicle. I would guess that more of Mina's associates are in that vehicle. Their recklessness provides a welcome distraction.

The box is snatched from the man's hands and sails up to my own. I hand the box to Mina and she leaps down and into the night. I certainly hope she waits for me.

The guardsmen inside begin shooting blindly at the window where I am. My anger gets the better of me and the truck ignites, setting off a chain of explosions a moment later as fuel and ordinance erupt, gutting the warehouse. Now off after Mina to find just what I've gotten myself into.

Mina has a car, she did wait for me, I leap in and we squeal off. She is driving hard but belays none of the strenuous activity she was just engaged in. No sweat, no heavy breathing from exertion. Of course not; the dead don't breathe. I'm still not used to that idea. I, on the other hand, am breathing too fast and shallow. My hands are shaking. I am coming down off the rush of adrenaline and am becoming sick. I've been sedentary and studious for too long.

The box. Now that we have it, what is inside. There is a rune symbol sealing it. Past tense, actually, for the seal has been broken. I pull the rune from its setting and it begins to glow ominously. Simple; out the window with it where it explodes.

Inside, there is a crown, pulsing with magical energy. It is in an ancient Egyptian style, predating the Pharos, perhaps. I think I recognize it. . .

"Hello."

"Someone said 'hello'?"

"I didn't." Mina says. "Nor I" adds the creature in the back seat.

I shut the box quickly with the onrush of realization. The Serpent Crown. Sutekh.

"Astnavityes zdyes. Sichas, pazhalusta"

Mina stops the car and I stumble out, kneeling on the sidewalk. I empty my stomach.

There is no time to be sick, for the Negro bursts out of the bushes, having escaped the exploding warehouse but not without injuries.

Mina yells "get in the car" and I obey her command immediately. The man leaps on the back of the car while we try to escape but he is soon dislodged. The back window of Mina's car is shattered.

I am not having a good time.

Mina's Home, Early Morning

Mina drives to her own home and I finally discover, after many months, her last name. There, on the mailbox, Mina Murray. Somehow this revelation is more important than the discovery of her vampirism.

Many others arrive, the Tremere (his arm regenerated), the silver-haired one, more of Mina's comrades, Vampirism all. They insist on playing with the box despite my warnings. Is it something inherent in immortality that make one a reckless idiot? Do they not realize what they have and what lengths others would go to retrieve it for themselves?

The night's events connect very quickly and an idea forms. Vlad and his red cowed comrades, in their crusade against the Vampirism would very much love to obtain this item to destroy it. Depriving the Vampir of such a powerful artifact would make their goals all the more easy. Conversely, once the covetous Vampir discovered who had the crown, they would descend upon them in their wrath, destroying the threatening Magi. Two birds could be killed with one proverbial stone.

I tell Mina of my thoughts and her eyes gleam at the prospect. "Please don't take this the wrong way," she says, "but that is a totally Russian plan." I did learn a few things from my Bolshevik father.

"Hissss." There is suddenly a red cobra in the room; a mystic protector of the crown. I gesture and the creature is pinned to the ceiling. The assembled Vampirism produce an arsenal of firearms and blast the creature, with much of Mina's ceiling, into oblivion. Idiots.

My wards have just been triggered. I grab the box, grab Mina, "You're driving." The rest of the menagerie follow, a chaotic undead circus precession.

Geradi's apartment, Morning

Before the car is even stopped I am out and bounding up to the fourth floor porch. Two men are there; the nervous one is introduced as a KGB agent. The other, much more confident, is Vampirism. The

bastards want to trade Kerry and Iduna for the box. What can I do? I can't give them the box but I can't let them have the twins.

The Tremere and Silver arrive, kicking in the door. The Vampir draws a machine gun from beneath his coat but the ether snatches it away. The standoff continues but very soon I'm going to take action, I just need a little more information and a moment of time.

The Tremere provides me with both, using his vampiric mind tricks on the weak-willed KGB guardsmen, who says that the girls are in the truck. That is all that I needed, I move quickly towards the porch, grabbing the Chekist by the throat in passing. The Vampir threatens to use the radio in his coat and have the twins killed but he has foolishly shown his hand. I attempt to pull the radio from his coat telekinetically but only succeed in pulling him from his feet. Silver leaps on the now prone Vampir and finishes the task for me. The Vampir escapes, dissolving through the floor, but his message didn't get out.

In the meantime, Mina's comrades, with much shooting, have freed Kerry and Iduna. I cast the Chekist aside to hold my dear twins close. The Vampirism do not let him escape.

Time is short. I call the bastard Tashir and tell him we must talk immediately. I'll have to set up the crown's destruction before the other half of creation realizes who has it. I entrust the box to Mina, I have too much running about to do to protect it properly.

"Mina, protect the crown. Don't open the box. I have things I must attend to." Morning approaches quickly and the Vampir retreat to their daylight resting place. I send Kerry on campus while Iduna gives me a ride on her motorcycle to Tashir's home.

I am still not having a good time.

Vladimir Tashir's Mansion; After Sunrise

The destruction of the crown would require a ritual involving the blood of a Vampir follower of Set. Once such a creature is available, the crown's destruction could begin almost immediately. I suspect that Mina's reckless comrades are ideal for such a hunt.

Tashir resumes his rantings about what we do for humanity, about cleansing the world of the dark infestation of the Vampir. Again, the vision of Mina above his foul cauldron turns my stomach. His Jihad has made him as much a monster those he hunts.

I return home, sending Iduna to her sister on campus. They will stay with their sorority where they will be safe enough. I ascend the stairs, through the broken door and the disheveled room to collapse on the bed. Alone, sleep comes quickly but the dreams are unwelcome.

Mina's house, early evening

Night has come with fierce winds and rain. An unnatural storm has descended upon the city, a harbinger of darker things, I suspect.

I did not bother waiting for Mina's call but went straight to her house, knowing she would not be about before sunset. The Tremere has set wards upon the door but I care not. I go through the door and the Tremere rises quickly, sword in hand. I am dismissive. "Sit down." I have more important matters with which to concern myself.

Another Vampir lays coiled around the box, red cobras forming a protective ring about him. Apparently he has developed some sort of

rapport with the crown. I take it as a bad sign. As the creature awakes the snakes dissipate, their work finished for now.

I speak with Mina, telling her details of the plan to destroy the crown and Tashir's red cowed abomination. There is not much time, she says. The Vampir leadership are having a large important gathering this very evening and her and her comrades must attend. I doubt that the preparations we must make, specifically the hunt, can be accomplished before the gathering so I resign myself to protecting the box alone in the meantime. Mina explains our plans to her kindred.

The strange one protecting the box does not like the idea of the crown's destruction and crashes through a window. I attempt to pursue but am stopped by the idiot Tremere. Delayed but undeterred I get outside into the pouring night, but the creature has escaped. He could not have gotten far in the moments I was delayed; a simple divination should track the crown's powerful magical signature easily.

I am confronted by a vision of Ramses and am physically struck by the apparition. The power of the crown is, by continued tampering, being released from the containment of the box. So far it has been tracked by secondary parties, amateurs. With the crown's might revealed the powerful, the followers of Set, will be on the trail.

That arrogant bastard Tremere explains that the crown corrupts the desire for power, who better than a Malkavian, without any desire for power, to safely hold the crown?

And where did he get this brilliant insight? The crown told the Malkavian! Imbeciles! What would they expect an ancient and powerful artifact to tell them? Of course it will do what ever is within it's power to preserve its own existence.

I have a great desire to strike the fool Tremere with my fists but the pouring rain and that these are Mina's comrades dampens my anger. The level of the Tremere's arrogant stupidity shocks me into inaction.

"So, if we are not to destroy it what do we do with it?"

"I don't know."

Krakoy durak! "You must be Tremere."

"Elric Tremen, at your service." He flourishes a bow.

"Only a Tremere would be so arrogant at such a young age. Mina, contact me as soon as you can, I will see what I can salvage but, as you Americans say, we've been fucked."

Chapter 4 (Game Session Three, Nov 92)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
Game Session Three, November 1992*

Monday, 8 November 1993

Mina's House, Evening

The Vampir troop off to their important gathering, leaving me to stand in the pouring rain. How long I stand there I do not know but eventually I go inside to find the KGB agent from the night before. He's been tied in a chair and the Vampirim have used him as breakfast. I can muster little more sympathy than a shudder and begin searching the Chekist's pockets.

His passport and other identification offers little more information than his name, the small golden figurine of a snake only confirms my suspicions.

"Wake up, Comrade Ivanov. Have you enjoyed your stay in Hell."

I waste too much of my time trying to gather useful information from him. Being in the employ of vampir is one thing, spending the day with them sleeping about your feet, waiting for them to awaken is another thing entirely. His mind is no longer available for use. I get nothing from him.

The rain has stopped. A preternatural mist enters Mina's house. I would stay and confront this intruder except, in looking for potential escape routes (should the need arise) I see the large Negro we stole the box from advancing on the house. Is there no way to stop this guy? I feel there is going to be a fight between these two and I do not wish to be caught in the middle. The back door is a good option.

In passing the stairs I see the mist collect into the form of a man. I am sure he has seen me but I continue out the back. He can deal with the Negro.

Making my way across Mina's lawn I hear a voice cry out from inside the house, "What have you done with her?" Someone is taking this very personally.

Tuesday, 9 November 1993

Geradi's Apartment, Early Morning

I arrive home, the door still broken. There is a message on the answering machine from the Chekist Tashir. He says that if I have some time to drop by he has a ritual to protect me from our common enemies. Noone has made a real effort to kill me since the Malkavian ran off with the crown so I no longer think myself a prime target. Besides, I certainly don't want any 'gifts' from Tashir.

I finally make the long distance phone call I've been wanting to make for days now.

"I would like to speak with Investigator Kataryna Czarkewicz."

I am fortunate to catch her in her office. We exchange pleasantries and I ask her to look in her 'liberated' KGB files for any information she can find on Vladimir Tashir. Katya is concerned but I tell her I'm all right and, when this is all over, I'll tell her all about it. I tell her I'll send her a gift and a long, explicit letter.

After I'm finished I realize how soaked I am. I change out of my wet clothes, take a hot shower and return to the business at hand.

A casual divination. Not focused on finding the crown but, in effect, to follow the mystic wake. Hopefully I can avoid having my skull cracked by another vision from ancient Egypt.

There it is, under Chicago's uptown. Apparently the Malkavian has gone to ground in the sewers. I should go now that morning is approaching, retrieve the crown while the creature is weakest, but I am unprepared to go it alone. I could deal with the vampir, perhaps several vampir, but the crown's unknown power is a different matter entirely.

I hope the Malkavian is at least sane enough not to put the crown on or remove it from the box. I stay home through the day, waiting for Katya's call. I don't expect anything until this time tomorrow but at this stage there is little else I can do. I get some sleep

Mina's House, Late Afternoon

I woke early, wanting to visit Mina's house while it was still daylight. The place is a wreck. It is a good thing that I did not stay to observe. The KGB agent is gone without trace. I can't say I'm sorry to see him go.

Mina's name is written in blood upon the wall. That mystery man must want her in a bad way. Too bad he's not her type.

The source of the blood was a cat, dismembered in a corner. I hadn't noticed Mina having such a pet, perhaps it too was a hapless bystander to last night's events

A silver ball floats in. It is some sort of remote sensing device. It searches around, discounts my presence, and eventually floats out, apparently not finding the object of it's search.

Several possibilities; looking for the crown, looking for Mina or looking for the Negro. The linemen that first night were missing part of their aura, as if they were partially machines. The guardsmen had very high-technology weaponry and armor. This device is likely to be of similar technology.

I cannot believe that after the events of the past several days I have to go teach a class tonight on Myths and Magic. I had an instructor tell me once that 'magic isn't real, it is merely a misguided belief in supernatural forces. Magical divination and healing is only coincidence.' Of course I know better but I can't teach my students that way. I'll have to present it in a unbiased fashion without discussing magic's reality. A historical perspective. What they historically believed, not what we believe. I'll let them do most of the talking, didn't they have a reading assignment?

First, I'll stop by a lumber yard. Soon I must do something I hoped I need never construct.

"Nyevyerayatniy."

University of Chicago Campus, 9:30pm

After class, which didn't go as badly as I had feared, I am thinking of going over to the Field Museum. They have one of the best Egyptology collections in the world and I wish to see if I can find anything more about ancient Egypt and the Serpent Crown.

With this thought, as if on cue, the power goes out on campus. I would be willing to accept a natural power outage except that a cloud of greater darkness advances north towards the city. This could be exceptionally bad.

After a few minutes the darkness retreats and the power returns. Speculation: The Malkavian, after avoiding detection for 24 hours made a mistake. The box was opened and, the crown having been revealed, someone powerful came and took it. Where once we had an opportunity to destroy it before the real trouble began, now we'll have to deal with the havoc that a released crown will wreak.

I attempt to use a divination to track the crown, it is in transition that it is most vulnerable, apart from it's previous owner but not yet acclimated to the next. Again, however, my divination is interrupted by a mystic vision. A warrior woman in Crusader armor stands proudly before me.

"The enemy of the One True God must be smitten."

The vision is gone and so is my chance to track the crown's movement.

Glupiy suca. If you hadn't interrupted me with that worthlessly cryptic message I would have been able to accomplish something.

Chicago Field Museum of Natural History,
Egyptology Archives, Late Night

The museums archives do not provide me with much information on the Serpent Crown. I didn't expect to find much in that respect, magical artifacts being somewhat outside the realm of normal scholarship. However, the visit provided me with valuable information on a period of history generally outside my realm of scholarship.

Circa 5,000 BC was when the Serpent Crown was to have been created. It was associated with a sect which settled the mouth of the Nile.

Although the existence of the Crown is not noted again until the reign of Ramses the Second (19th Dynasty, c. 1300 BC) it undoubtedly played an important, though surreptitious, part in the growth and dominance of Ancient Egypt.

At Karnak, Ramses II had a huge statue of himself portrayed as the god Osiris. Ironic that at the time he was serving Osiris' brother, Sutekh or Set, the bringer of destruction.

In Egyptian myth the serpent Apep the bringer of darkness and enemy of Ra, was defeated by the cat goddess Bast.

Now there's a parallel. It is not a stretch of the imagination to believe that these powerful beings of myth and legend were actually in existence, powerful magi, vampir or other preternatural beings. The mythical serpent Apep was a representation of the Serpent Crown itself. Sutekh an actual personage, perhaps a vampir. The return of the Serpent Crown could be the catalyst for bringing Sutekh from tupor. That theory fits with known vampiric physiology.

Bringing cats into the matter helps to tie it together. Could the dead cat at Mina's be a message? And what of the panther lurking about that night we obtained the crown? Could it be an ally in the fight against darkness, an agent of Ra? I should like to meet that creature again. I am glad we parted on friendly terms.

And the Crusader woman? I know of no historical figure to fit the vision. Eleanor of Aquitaine accompanied Louis VII to the Holy Land on his crusade in 1146 but she was no warrior queen. Jeanne, Countess of Montfort was famed in the Hundred Years War, but though she was a warrior she was no crusader. And, of course, the vision was far too buxom to be Joan of Arc.

The legendary figure of Bradamante fought the Moors in Spain and Southern France during Charlemagne's time but the red cross halberk didn't appear for another 200 years with the First Crusade. Bradamante would be close but is it close enough?

The visions message, although characteristically Crusader, was far too cryptic to be of any practical use. Indeed, all the information I've gathered so far has been of only marginal usefulness. I can no longer have the luxury of contemplative planning, I will have to act quickly when the opportunity arrives. I will go home to prepare the tools of my recklessness.

Boom. Walking around the corner I strike full into Mina.

"Zdratvuyte. What are you doing here?"

Mina tells me she is hiding from someone. I explain the encounter at her home and our descriptions of the man who arrived in mist-form are identical.

"Who is this man?" I ask.

"Dracula."

Dracul. Kaziklu Bey, Vlaad Tepes. Vlaad the Impailer. A vicious petty lord in Wallachia, Rumania during the late 15th Century, He was as brutal with his own subjects as he was with invading Turks. It is no stretch of the imagination for such a creature to be vampir. But that still does not explain this man's interest in Mina. She must be only recently vampir, how could she have raised such interest from an established creature like Vlaad Tepes?

Mina suggests that I read "Dracula" by Bram Stoker (1897)

I've had little time to read these days so her abbreviated explanation involves a character in this book. It would seem that she shares the name of the character who is the object of Tepes' affections.

It's not saying much for Tepes' sanity that he has compulsively tracked Mina across an ocean and two continents only because of her name. Add to that the full measure of his medieval horrors; "I understand why you would wish to avoid this person."

"I don't want to hide for the rest of my unlife."

I walk Mina home. I am pleased to learn that she did not own a cat.

Chapter 5 (Kataryna, Oct 92)

From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov

Kataryna

Written December 1992

I met Kataryna Szarkewicz in an English language class at the Moscow State University. She was a freshman and I was nearing graduation. We literally ran into one another, both late for class. Boom! An explosion of limbs and papers in the doorway. Entwined on the floor with papers falling like leaves I laughed. She was angry at first but was soon laughing also. It's not often you make instant friends.

After class we talked, learning that we had almost nothing in common. I was the son of a Communist Party aparatchik, she was the daughter of a rural Ukrainian. I was from the city and thrived in the urban environs, she was from the forests, more tuned to running naked on the grass. I was contemplative and clear-headed, she was headstrong and hot-blooded. It seemed we were a perfect match.

I had been with quite a few women before but Katya was my first true love although I didn't realize it at the time. All other relationships paled to simple biological interactions. Katya and I talked far into the night, took long walks, snuggled together on cold nights while we studied. We both knew that inevitably we would be lovers.

That night came in the spring, an unusually warm night in Gorky Park. Our kisses were more fierce, every touch was reciprocated with increasing passion. So, there in the park, standing against a tree; we consummated the deepest of friendships.

Katya cresendoed quickly in an orgasmic cry that went beyond that of any human voice and there was suddenly a great tearing pain across my back.

I fell away, nearly blacking out. I shook my head clear and beheld what was no longer Katya. Something between a woman and a great wolf, her eyes as wide as my own, staring at the blood dripping from her claws. She seemed like a coiled spring, ready to run at any moment.

Now, were I to believe what my grandfather had told me about lupines I should have run too. But this was still Katya, a woman I knew and loved, standing with such terror in her eyes that I could not be afraid of her, no matter how she appeared. I did the only thing I could think of and reached out to her, managing a weak smile.

She fell crying into my arms and, soon after, I passed out.

I vaguely remember Katya carrying me to her apartment and my generally futile attempts to help. When I became fully conscious I was laying face down on her couch.

Katya, appearing her normal human self, tear strewn and worried, was tending the wounds on my back with blood soaked cloths. She looked more relieved when I opened my eyes and smiled.

I said, "now I know why wolves mate from behind."

She blushed brightly, trying to stifle a laugh. The laugh escaped and the release of tension allowed another flood of tears. She held my arm tightly and, when she was finished, we talked.

Actually, Katya did most of the talking. It was an education in Garou ways with a focus on what happens under stress, especially when the moon waxes full. My comment about "that time of the month" made her smile.

I did my best to convey to her that this 'accident' did not make me love her any less. She wanted to believe me but was still hesitant, fearful of her own nature.

"Do you trust me?" I asked.

"I can't trust myself."

"Trust your heart and your body will follow." I bid her to sit and relax, to lean back and close her eyes. She sat in a chair across from the couch. She hesitated when I asked her to pleasure herself. I said "please" and she began tentatively. I prompted her, reaching out with my mind and caressing her neck.

Her eyes snapped open with puzzlement but I was still across the room on the couch. I smiled, gestured, and the touch traced down her throat to her belly. Her eyes fluttered closed and she trusted me, even though she didn't understand fully.

We continued. Her pleasure grew slowly and her transformation was equally gradual. It was fascinating and beautiful.

She came down from her climax slowly, remaining in her wolfen form. She came over to me, her movements lithe and fluid like water. I liked her like this. She lay down beside me and I slept, exhaustion finally taking me.

As my back healed and we were able to interact on an increasingly physical level, we became accomplished lovers. Katya always seemed restrained however, fearing to really let herself loose. I suppose I could understand although I would have been willing to take the risk.

I'm very glad we were able to rebuild our special friendship for at the end of the term her grades were slipping. She was uncomfortable in Moscow and longed to be in her homelands. She transferred to school in Kiev.

Over the years we have kept in close contact, continually writing letters, sharing our lives at a distance. Our friendship is perhaps stronger for not being so close. At a distance we can share the good times and the bad times through the filter of retrospective.

Whenever possible I visit her in Kiev to renew our physical bonds. As Katya has matured, so has her control over her lupine form so she no longer fears letting herself go. That is good because we haven't seen each other in over four years. When we do get together next it is sure to be a spectacular event.

Chapter 6 (Game Session Four, Dec 92)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Game Session Four, December 1992*

Wednesday, 10 November 1993

Mina's House, Early Morning

We arrive at Mina's house and the Prince of Wallachia, Vlaad Tepes, is sitting on the doorstep like a schoolboy. I feel Mina tense and, not surprisingly, my stomach also contracts severely.

Tepes stands and greets Mina then turns to me; "Are you sure you want to stay here, mortal?"

His last word drips with disdain. I open my mouth to say something but Mina interrupts, grabbing my arm and threatening to beat the hell out of me if I don't go.

Since she asked so politely, I leave, but only so far as to be out of eye sight. I watch the two of them converse. It all seems very civil. I am glad; the prospect of playing guardian angel on MinaUs behalf does not appeal to me. She might never forgive me.

Tepes bows, hands Mina a rose and dissolves into a green mist.

I arrive at Mina's porch in time to see her happily lick what I assume to be blood from the rose. This glimpse into her vampir nature sends a chill down my spine.

"That seems to have gone well."

"My over-creative imagination got the better of me."

"So, do I have to worry about another person coming to murder me?"

"I think we've exhausted my list of people who might kill you."

"You know, I'm still not having a 'good time'."

Mina laughs, obviously releasing a great deal of tension that had built around this issue. When she is finished she gives me a momentary look that makes me feel at the wrong end of the food chain. I imagine the combination of pain and pleasure that must come from a vampir's bite; from Mina's bite. I don't think I am prepared for our relationship to become that intimate. Apparently Mina agrees, thinking beyond her basic instincts.

"Fine, I owe you. Good night."

I leave Mina quickly and head for home.

I've known Mina for months, known she was vampir for a few days and only now is it really beginning to sink in. Now that I've left she will no doubt go off to hunt someone for her dinner before retiring for the day. That chill again runs down my spine.

I am too aware of the dark, imagined nothings that lurk in the shadows on my way home.

Geradi's Apartment, Morning

Katya calls while I'm finally fixing the front door. It is good to hear her voice.

She tells me that, in searching her KGB files, she could not find any record of Vladimir Tashir being part of that organization. She did, however, find a connection between Tashir and a czarist organization. That seems to match the political leanings of a magus more than the KGB but little else fits the puzzle.

In reading some documents listing czarist associates, Katya mentions a name I recognize; Vadim Baranov He was one of Tashir's red cowled comrades at that gruesome ritual. The information is welcome, though not immediately useful.

I thank Katya extensively and promise to write soon. She asks if there is anything else she can search for me and I respond that she would have to be here to do that.

Damn, I miss her sometimes.

When I am finished with Katya I set about my task; the vampir slayer. An ash stake that, when wounding a vampir, splinters. That splinter begins working it's way towards the vampir's heart, inevitably immobilizing it.

As I work, carving the sharp point, I think of the ingredient I will ultimately need to make the dread tool complete; vampir blood.

Of course, the easiest way to obtain it is to ask Mina for a donation. I suspect that her attitudes are such that she would not mind spilling half a liter but I am unsure whether I could ask. Asking a vampir, especially friend Mina, for a donation of blood towards the construction of a vampir slayer. . . I balk at the thought.

Why am I actually making such a weapon? I am no hunter. I have been dealing with many vampirim recently and such interaction is bound to attract predators who do not appreciate the meddling of mortals. That bastard who threatened Kerry and Iduna is bound to be back even though the object of his search is gone. The Negro that has been showing up with unpleasant frequency is certainly not friendly. This stake is perhaps the most efficient means I have for defending against vampiric attack.

Is that reason enough for creating such a weapon? Were I to put it in the context of self defense and the defense of the twins would then Mina agree? She has yet to meet them but very much wants to. Perhaps too much.

Could I offer up some of my own blood in trade? Like I thought before, I'm not sure I'm prepared to be that intimate with Mina. Maybe there is some other way.

I look in the phone book and call an auto glass establishment. I will get the rear window of Mina's car replaced. I also call several contractors to obtain estimates for the repair of Mina's house. I suspect that she has a difficult time contacting people like that during 'business hours'.

I feel in some small part responsible for the damages to her property. I can afford 100 dollars for the window, the rest she'll have to decide on.

Would this buy me half a liter of her blood?

I continue carving without enthusiasm. Eventually it is as finished as I can make it without the vampir blood. I set it on the table among wood chips and sleep there on the couch.

Geradi's Apartment, Late Afternoon

I am dreaming. An unusually vivid dream; a medieval great hall, a throne upon a dais, the Crusader Woman upon the throne. She rises, noble and imperious; "You have been tasked with a Holy mission." She pauses for dramatic effect.

I say, "And that is?"

"You know that a disease plagues this world. The ones with fangs." She approaches me, sword drawn. "You must remember who you are. You are of the human race and a Holy Warrior."

She raises the sword and taps me upon the shoulders; "I knight thee once. . . twice. . ."

. . . and I wake up.

I open my eyes and the first thing I see is the wooden stake resting on the table.

"I am not your bogatyr!" I yell to the empty room. "I am no Holy warrior and I am certainly not a pawn in your shadow games!" I angrily brush the stake and wood chips onto the floor.

I sit for a while, considering the conspiracies I'm being drawn into. Vladimir Tashir and now this Crusader woman want me to join in their Holy war against the vampirim. There are those vampir who I consider 'enemies' but that is very situational and defensive. I have a vampir as a friend, someone who I trust, which is more than I can say for many of my human associates. I have no reason to join in a genocide against those who are not my enemies.

"Chort vazmi!"

I need some living companionship to restore my perspective so I call the sorority and let Kerry know that it is safe enough for her and her sister to come home. It will be a few hours before they finish with classes, collect their things and return here so I go running to help clear my mind and restore balance to my body.

As I run through Jackson Park and along the lake shore my mind clears and I begin to recall details of my dream.

The Crusader woman was French. She spoke in French but I was able to understand it even though I do not speak French myself. That is not unusual for a dream.

The armor and architecture was 14th Century. The Crusades were over by 1291 so someone wearing the cross tabard would not have been a simple soldier but a member of a military order. The color of the cross would help to identify which particular order; but, I do not dream in color. I suppose it is the price I pay for seeing colors noone else sees during my waking hours.

She had a shield. What was the device on the shield? Think! Pegasus; the Winged Horse. That would make her a Templar! Why didn't I see it before? Because you were looking at the woman in the armor rather than the armor itself. Idiot.

After my run I feel much better. I take a shower and clean up the mess in the living room. I discover the machine pistol taken from the

vampir agent of Sutekh days ago lying in a corner. I place it in a box along with the incomplete stake.

The refrigerator is somewhat sparse. I'll take the twins out to dinner. However, I think I'll go to the store anyway to obtain some things for 'dessert'.

I return from the store and retrieve the mail filling the mailbox, neglected for days. I sort through the pile while putting the groceries away. Bills, advertisements, junk mail and a flier for a new occult store; Lero's. As if I haven't had enough interaction with the preternatural for one week. I toss it on the couch with the rest of the mail I've neglected for days. Chicago is worse than Novgorod.

Chapter 7 (Game Session Five, Dec 92)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Game Session Five, December 1992*

Wednesday, 10 November 1993
Geradi's Apartment, Evening

I am putting groceries away when the phone rings:

"Mina. What can I do for you?"

She mentions the new glass on her car and I admit to being responsible for that. She says, "That's sweet, but. . ."

She asks if I had anything to do with workers coming to fix the rest of the damage to her house. I did call several contractors for rough estimates but I had not given them any commitments. Nor had I given them Mina's name, address or phone number.

I don't have a chance to convey this information when, over the phone, I hear the wind rise and a crack of thunder. Out my own window the night is clear and calm. Mina has visitors! There is the sound of breaking glass and a female voice cries out Mina's name. She does not sound pleased.

I don't remember if I hung up the phone on my way out the door.

Mina's House, Evening

I arrive at Mina's house in what must be a world record time. Again, thank you Grandfather. There is no evidence of the mystical storm I heard over the phone except that the kitchen window is shattered. I move across the lawn cautiously and look through the broken pane.

Mina is sitting by her broken kitchen table, forlornly shaking her head and drawing random patterns in a pile of spilled salt. I lean on the sill and gently announce my presence by tapping on the frame. I certainly don't want to startle her.

"I'm OK," she begins. Apparently Vlad Tepes has a consort who is the jealous type. This vampir paid Mina a visit. It is unfortunate that Dracula's infatuation with Mina is causing so much trouble.

"By the way," Mina asks, "did you do anything about my home?"

"No. I did your car." Didn't we just have this conversation over the phone?

"Someone said you were sending workmen." Mina seems to think that Dracula is fixing her house but I suspect something more sinister. Vlad Tepes probably would not attach my name to a work order and would not have workmen come during the day when he knows his kindred Mina would be sleeping defenseless. It is clearly a set-up but they have shown their hand too soon. We can be ready for them.

I will return in the morning to see who arrives uninvited. When they arrive they will be expecting to deal with a dormant vampir, not a fully awake and capable magus. Or at least that is the plan.

I leave Mina to her night and return home; the twins will be waiting for me. I hope I didn't expend too much energy in running over here, I will need all the energy I can muster.

Geradi's Apartment, Late Night

It is good that I got some sleep so that I can go over and play watch-dog for Mina. It is also still early enough that I can do some meditation and prepare myself. Maybe I will be able to get something to eat; we never did make it to dinner.

I disentangle from the twins sleeping bodies and drag myself out of bed. Ouch. I wonder if I pulled that muscle with the twins or when I ran over to Mina's. I dress and climb out onto the roof so as not to disturb Kerry and Iduna. They've earned their sleep.

The night is clear and cool. The stars are bright, cutting through the urban haze. Something is wrong, however. The stars are not in their proper places.

I am no astrologer but I've spent enough time out at night to notice when things are odd. There is a cluster of stars grouped unnaturally together. The aura of the cluster grows and a vision of a golden-haired man appears.

He wears medieval robes of white, a cross at his left shoulder and a Pegasus pendant about his neck. A Knight Templar.

"The time has come for you to join the Holy Order. You are of the blood. Join us at the appointed place. The call is in your hand."

I glance down and the card from Lero's occult store is in my hand. I look up but the man is gone. The stars are released and return to their normal constellation.

I crumple the card in my hand and cast it aside. All right, let us see what they want of me. I have had more than enough from cryptic messengers.

I leave the roof with one last glance of Orion the Hunter gleaming in the night sky.

Thursday, 11 November 1993
Lero's Occult Store, Early Morning

The store is like many of it's kind; wiccan books, tarot cards, astrological forms, candles, everything one would expect. The exception is the old woman behind the counter who literally glows with the faith of a saint. Very strange, indeed.

The woman asks if she can be of assistance. I am tempted to ask to see the relic glowing in the box behind the counter but I resist, saying that I am just browsing. I am sure the Templars will be along any minute.

The man from my latest vision enters the store with one I assume to be a lieutenant. He is dressed normally in a suit and tie, walking with imperial confidence

"Greetings, my name is Sebastian."

I raise an eyebrow at the name and take his hand. He stands tall, exuding piety. He must have a very large stick up his. . .

"As you know, for many hundreds of years, the Knights Templar have been struggling against the beasts of darkness; Vampires and Werewolves."

He rants on about his cause; another zealot devoted to a jihad against the vampir. His first mistake is mentioning that they know of my 'relationship' with Mina. The implied threat is obvious.

He sees that he is treading on thin ice and attempts to recover by limiting his Holy War to only those vampir that prey on humans. I am less than impressed at the concession.

"I do not believe I can help you in your jihad. I am without the faith." He is undeterred by my atheism and makes his second mistake; questioning whether, when the sides have been chosen and the battle is joined, whether Mina will choose our friendship over the blood-call of her kindred.

Perhaps he sees that he is losing me so he lavishes gifts; a jar of vampir blood for the construction of wards and weapons and a pistol with bullets forged of holy elements. I try to decline them but he insists.

"Think carefully for a few days. I know this is an important decision and should not be made in haste. God go with you."

I escape into empty streets. It is fairly obvious that they want my powers and abilities on their side, no matter that I have no faith in their god or their cause. They are willing to forsake their most holy of beliefs in pursuit of their misguided goals. That should really come as no surprise, the history of the Knights Templar is rife with heresy, culminating in 1314 when the Inquisition had the entire order in France arrested, sentenced and executed. And now, the reborn Knights of the Holy Order of the Temple of Solomon are operating out of an occult store. The hypocrisy defies imagination! Is it any wonder the Holy See has refused to recognize any claimants to the order.

It is getting near morning. Morning! Those 'contractors' will be arriving at Mina's and I'll need to be there before they are. I will have to hurry.

One thought strikes me; could the Templars have the crown sitting on their shelf? Although I seriously doubt the possibility, they might have been the ones who took it the other night and sent me that vision to prevent me from interfering before knowing who's side I was on. Their miscalculation is that, ultimately, I am on my own side.

Chapter 8 (Game Session Six, Jan 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Chapter Eight: Game Session Six, January 1993*

Thursday, 11 November 1993
Mina's House, Morning

I arrive at Mina's house and set up some wards so that no one arrives unannounced. Mina invites me in.

"Do you mind if I make something to eat?" I ask, indicating the shopping bag I've brought with me. "I haven't eaten all night."

"Go ahead. I've eaten."

"I'd guess that, you appear almost lifelike."

She also appears slightly amused. I suspect an older vampir would not be quite so amused. As I begin preparing a quick meal I ask, "What do you know of the Knights Templar?"

"Crusaders, right?"

"Twelfth Century; nine veterans of the First Crusade found a military fellowship, the Order of the Temple of Solomon; the Knights Templar. It so happens that one of the founding members, Roland, is the incestuous progeny of Charlegmain and his sister; not an auspicious start for a Holy Order. Initially, they don't seem to do much in the Holy Land but for whatever reason they are provided extravagant use of a section of the Temple Mount, under which they begin extensive excavations. What they found there was returned to France. Immediately following; the stories of the Holy Grail emerged."

"What the Grail is varies from story to story. Some identify it as the cup used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. Others say it was used at the crucifixion to catch the blood from the spear wound. There is evidence that it is not a cup at all but artifacts and documents that confirm a bloodline between Christ's descendants and the Albigensian Kingdoms in Southern France. Of course, all the mention of blood caught the attentions of the vampirim. Subsequently, it caught the attentions of the Inquisition. In 1314 the Inquisition arrested the entirety of the Templars in France, five thousand knights, accused of heresy, convicted and executed."

"In the intervening six hundred years there have been many claimants to the Holy Order of the Temple of Solomon, but given the history of the Templars, so full of heresy and hypocrisy, the Church has never recognized any of the claims."

I had noticed that during my lecture, Mina had taken on the amused look that teachers often assume when being lectured to by other teachers. At this point, however, she raises an eyebrow. I didn't think I had said anything to illicit that particular reaction. I suddenly realize what it is she's noticed; I am peeling a hard boiled egg. While not remarkable in and of itself, Mina has realized that it wasn't cooked when I picked it up a few minutes ago. I'll just let that go. She probably already knows me better than even she is willing to admit.

"Well. . . now I have been petitioned by vampir hunters claiming the name of the Knights Templar. I thought I should tell you considering that for the past week your associations have been trying to kill me. Now my associations may be trying to kill you. For that, I cannot apologize enough."

Just then, as if on cue, my tripwire went off.

"We have visitors."

Through the peephole in Mina's front door I observe a cluster of workmen. Their aura and manner suggest that they really are here to repair the house.

Only one appears nervous. Though he has some secret task which his aura cannot conceal he lacks the fortitude to be a hunter.

For a few moments I am not sure what to do. I was expecting something much more sinister, kicking in the door, shooting, a valiant defense, a fight at the very least. As Mina said the other day, 'my over creative imagination got the better of me.' I turn to Mina but she offers little more than a shrug. I open the door to deal with the workers.

The work has been bought and paid for but the signature at the bottom is not anywhere close to being mine. I still have the habit of signing my name in Cyrillic. English speakers have a tendency to butcher the pronunciation because it looks like tee-pah-goo pee-w-kob. Even Russian natives have difficulty. The forger has obviously never seen a sample of my handwriting.

What is the American phrase; Time is money? I let them in so they can get to work. Mina retreats to the dark embrace of her basement.

I watch them carefully as the work, especially the nervous one. He is wearing a small pin on his shirt; a Celtic cross. Notable, but little else.

At some point he conceals something inside the wall he is plastering over. I will have to investigate that once they are gone even though I'm pretty sure I know what it is already. The nervous one is not a professional spy.

His comrades are, however, professional craftsmen and they complete their tasks very quickly. By early afternoon all is finished and they are cleaning up. One of them confides in me;

"Oh, and by the way. Next time you want to give us money or whatever. No offense but, like, don't send a black guy into our neighborhood. It generally doesn't go over well."

Interesting. Maybe there is some honor among vampir. Except, of course, for that thing the nervous man put in the wall.

Mina's House, Afternoon

I find a hammer in Mina's kitchen and break through the newly plastered wall. Nestled between the slats is a small silver sphere with a mechanical eye, a smaller version of the floating device that searched the house the morning after the sphere's owner wrecked it.

It makes a musical clanking sound as I flush it down the toilet.

I am tempted to leave but Mina owns a complex electronic alarm system to protect her haven. Since I am in no way prepared to even attempt engaging the alarm I am resigned to playing house-sitter until nightfall. The bookcase in the living room holds many possibilities.

There are many language textbooks. She is, or was, a language teacher. She doesn't live that far from campus, I wonder if she does tutoring at night.

There are also quite a few books with titles like 'Suzie Sexpert's Guide to Lesbian Sex' and 'Macho Sluts.' In the Soviet Union a library such as this would have gotten her institutionalized. Here in America, books such as this have their own section in public bookstores. Fascinating, but not on my list of things I wish to read this afternoon. A few intriguing pictures, though.

Now there is something that catches my attention. Amongst a large section of horror fiction is the book titled 'Dracula.' I remove it from the shelf and sit on the couch to read it.

The parallels are amazing. Both Mina Murrays are teachers courted by the vampir Dracula. But where the fictional Mina avoided the dark descent, the contemporary Mina embraced it. I would bet that she keeps a journal somewhere. That would be fascinating reading.

And what part does Edith Harker have to play in all this. Is she a descendant of Johnathan and Mina Harker? That must be an interesting family genealogy.

I probably could have stayed awake if Bram Stoker was a better writer.

Mina's House, Early Evening

"Geradi?"

I'm awake. Mina is standing in the kitchen doorway calling for me to get up. I explain the days activities, including why there is a hole in the newly repaired wall. When I mention the workman's comments about 'sending a black man' Mina finally gives a name to him; Blade. In her circles she probably knew this man's name but just didn't think to let me in on it. No matter. Knowing his name doesn't add to my already sparse information.

I take my leave and head for home. I wonder if the twins will let me get any sleep.

Chapter 9 (Summer Vacation, Feb 93)

From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov

Summer Vacation

by Kevin A. Geiselman

Written February 1993

It had been a full year since I had seen Kataryna last and I was looking forward to visiting her in Kiev with great excitement. I would have to return to Moscow in a week but even a short vacation with Katya would be well worth it.

I admit, I tossed my father's name around to get an earlier flight but whenever I employ that privilege something goes amiss. In this case, the flight was diverted in mid-flight to accommodate someone with more clout than my father. Rather than arriving a few hours earlier I was nearly two days late. Not surprisingly, Katya wasn't there to meet me at the airport.

The best I was able to gather from her roommate was that she had gone for a walk 'somewhere' out a certain road. So, armed with a map I went off in search.

I hitched a ride on a truck transporting lumber and thus was able to catch up with her in good time. She was glad to see me.

Our kiss and embrace was interrupted after a few minutes by the blaring horn of a passing truck. We were, after all, on a public road.

"I was afraid you weren't coming."

"I wasn't, but you will be soon enough."

Katya puzzled for a moment then realized my implication. "You'll have to catch me first!" I landed in the dirt with my feet swept out from under me.

I scrambled to my feet and began chasing her laughter through a wheat field. I could tell I was on the right track by the trail of clothing

she left behind. There was a part of my mind that realized that night was fast approaching and recovering Katya's clothes after dark was going to be problematic. On top of that it smelled like rain. For the most part, however, I didn't care.

The trail of clothing ended near the edge of the woods and I saw a flash of fur disappearing into the trees. Katya must have been really wound up to want to run off so much energy. All right. I'd give her a chase. As I ran I created an ethereal 'tail-wind', my stride lengthened, I leapt over obstacles like a deer and my level of actual physical exertion leveled off so I would still have some life left in me when the chase was done.

The forest was darkening quickly. I could still follow her mystic trail but I was having more difficulty seeing sticks and branches in my way.

Where the hell was she running? She would usually run circles around me, her path then was uncharacteristically linear. There was a clearing up ahead, maybe then I would get a chance to see where she was going.

I broke into the clearing and stopped, glancing around and hoping to catch a glimpse of Katya bounding through the tall grass. There was no sign of Katya but there was a large building, a chain fence topped with barbed wire, a guard post and several blue-bereted guards with Kalishnikovs. I dropped flat on my face.

After a few seconds of not being shot at I guessed that the guards hadn't seen me. The next question was where did Katya go? The wind was picking up so I risked quietly calling out to her.

My whisper was scattered by the wind but Katya's sharp lupine ears caught the sound and she was suddenly beside me. The fur on the back of her neck was on end as she crouched down next to me.

"Katya." I whispered. "What is this place?"

"I don't know, I've never been here before"

"We should leave now."

"No." Her breathy rumble was normally quite sexy. This time her voice held nothing but menace.

"What do you mean 'no'? If you didn't notice those guys are Spetsnaz. They'd just as soon kill you with their shovels as with their rifles."

"The Wyrms are here." I didn't know much about the Wyrms but Katya had taught me enough to know it was probably going to get worse than a few mere Spetsnaz.

"And you're a single Garou. You should have a pack for this. Hell! You should have an army!"

"It is my Rite of Passage. I've never had one. I can't walk away from this. Besides, you're here to help me."

"Me? I don't remember volunteering."

"Please. You know you have to!" I could never resist when she flashed those soft brown puppy dog eyes.

"I can see it now; Comrade Chairman Andropov, I know this looks bad; the son of a Politburo member breaking into a secret military installation, but you see. . . there was this woman. All right, how do we get in?"

"I don't know. I'm just the muscle. You're the magician."

I couldn't argue with logic like that and began evaluating the situation. There was a largish building at the end of an access road. It was fairly old; a 'tractor' factory abandoned after the Great War. There was

a dish antenna and microwave array hidden under camouflage netting. Definitely not abandoned. The whole site was dark; no lights, no heat. They were going to great lengths to keep American spy satellites from taking an interest.

The wind picking up would confuse sound and motion sensors. The rain that had just started would foil the infra-red. Cameras, although I couldn't see any, would have a difficult time with the raining darkness. Several guards outside the gate, several more inside, perhaps a dozen total patrolling the perimeter. Nature had taken care of the mechanical alarms, we would have to circumvent the humans.

Katya growled in my ear, "There's a truck coming." It wasn't quite a minute before a largish tarp covered flatbed came rumbling up the access road. It pulled up to the gate and halted. The Spetsnaz guard was irate. I couldn't hear the conversation but Katya could. "Something about a satellite pass and a timetable."

"That's why it's so quiet. The guard will let the truck go through. When the gate opens run for the truck. We'll hitch a ride and let it take us in."

We began crawling towards the gate while the guard and driver continued to argue.

The argument ended and the gate was opened. As I had hoped, the guard watched the gate open and we took advantage of his back being turned by rushing to the truck and throwing ourselves under the tarp. The truck proceeded up to the building. While we huddled against drums of fuel I explained to Katya, "An American spy satellite is probably passing overhead and they want the site to appear normal and quiet. This truck should have been here earlier when there wasn't a satellite watching. Fortunately, spies look for unusual activity, an occasional truck won't set off alarms. We are just lucky that we haven't set off all sorts of alarms ourselves."

The truck stopped, the engine was shut off, we heard the driver exit the cab and walk away, his footsteps echoing. We risked looking out from under the tarp.

The truck was parked beside several others on what used to be the factory floor. There were hulking piles of rusting machinery. There were crates, drums and boxes in various piles. There was new construction; a wall partitioning a section of the factory. There was a heavy lift in the factory floor. The way the truck had entered was closed by heavy mechanically operated doors. The rain outside misted in through broken skylights high overhead.

Katya asked, "Now what?"

"You're the Garou out Wyrms hunting. You tell me."

While she gazed and sniffed I looked for guards. There were several on a catwalk overhead, I heard another over by the entrance. I looked for surveillance cameras but couldn't see any.

"We go down." Katya concluded.

"I would guess that door over by the lift. You go for it and wait behind those crates. I'll go to that office and meet you there. Keep under cover as much as possible." I looked around to make sure it was clear. "Go."

We ran. She was to the crates and hidden before I was to the office. My shoes seemed to make a great deal of noise on the concrete floor.

It was apparently a shipping office. While I scanned the hanging clipboards and files on the desk I removed my shoes and dropped them in the garbage. I doubted I would be back for them.

I found what I wanted, grabbed a few more papers and ran softly to where Katya was waiting. She noticed my bare feet.

"Much better. What did you get?"

"This is a weekly timetable of satellite passes and deliveries. There is an American satellite overhead about now and there will be intermittent coverage for most of this night."

"Why is that important?"

"Because, lover, if the American satellites weren't keeping the Spetsnaz under their rocks, this place would be crawling with goons. Look here. . . These trucks left late yesterday with scores of passengers during a period when there was no satellite coverage. With so much going on overhead yesterday and tonight they gave these people a day off. Here. . . They'll be back tomorrow."

"To do what?"

"This doesn't say. We'll have to. . ."

Someone made sounds along a catwalk overhead. We made for the door before the guard decided to come down to the floor. At the door a thought sprang to my mind; 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.'

"What?" Katya asked.

"Nothing." I opened the door.

The fire door opened into a dimly lit stairwell. Katya ran through and I followed, softly closing the door behind us. The stairs went down three levels, each with a door that Katya ignored. The door at the lowest level opened into a garage like area. The heavy lift from the factory floor would off-load here. There was a heavy blast door bearing 'biohazard' warnings.

Katya sniffed the air. "Why are there no guards here?"

"No cameras either. I'd guess no one here in their right mind would want to go through that door. Hence; no guards."

"So, how do we get in?" I knew she would say something like that.

It was actually quite simple. The door was designed to keep whatever it was inside, not to keep people out. Katya made quick work of the padlocks with a crowbar and the latches were thrown. When the seal was broken a strange feeling flowed out. It said 'Keep Out' better than the signs on the door. We ignored it as well.

The inside was unusually bright compared to the dimness of the rest of the complex. There was a long corridor with doorless cells branching off. Each cell contained plastic barrels and canisters with 'biohazard' warnings and coding numbers.

The magical energy that I could normally see flowing around and through everything was dampened near the containers. This was a toxic waste dump of the worst kind.

Then I saw the camera.

I grabbed Katya by the scruff of the neck and dragged her from the room. I threw the door shut.

"What are you doing?" she growled at me. "We have to destroy this!"

"They'd probably like nothing better than to have us dispose of their trash but why are they watching the garbage so intently? Are they making sure it doesn't get up and walk away? And this is where it goes

when it goes wrong, what are they trying to get right?" I jammed the crowbar into the door to the stairwell. "There's a camera in there. The alarms are probably starting to go off. We have to get moving. Our answers aren't here."

This time I took the lead down another corridor. A few more doors and another stairwell going up. We entered labyrinthine new construction; the partitioned half of the factory. There were corridors and doors and more corridors, almost a maze.

It was there we ran into our first guard. We turned the corner and the soldier was there, blue beret, camouflage, assault rifle. His moves were smooth and practiced; he slung the rifle from his shoulder, cycled the action, raised the weapon to fire and fell backwards, his skull making a satisfying 'thud' as it met with the floor.

I had reached out with my mind, caused the ether to curl around his ankles and pulled. He was rendered unconscious because 'elite' troops wear arrogant berets rather than practical helmets.

We ran to the door he had been guarding. Katya snatched the rifle and ammo belt while I searched him for keys. He didn't have a card to match the doors electronic lock. No matter. The door had a simple lever to open from the other side. I caused the ether to move that lever and the door swung open.

"Look, no hands." I whispered to Katya.

"Smart ass."

We dragged the guard through the door. I tied him up with his web gear and shoved him into a corner.

We appeared to be in an outer office: file cabinets, desks, computer terminals. Without any discussion we began ransacking.

Katya took particular glee in smashing computers with the rifle stock but I took a slightly more methodical approach, trying to find what exactly was going on.

I allowed myself a minute or two of search before deciding to move on. The door to the next room was much like the first except that it was heavier. The lever took a little more effort.

We opened the door into a special kind of hell.

There was an outer lab with electronic control panels, like a power station or space flight control. A cabinet with environmental suits hung neatly in a row stood beside an air lock. Large glass panels gave view to the next room. There were lights on movable arms, remote control manipulators, tables with restraints, surgical instruments and, in the center, a large containment cylinder with. . . something.

It moved inside, obscured by a bubbling reddish fluid and a membranous sack. Magical energies swirled among tubes and cables within that infernal womb.

Katya asked, "What the hell is that."

"Exactly." I began to ransack the lab for information. There were clipboards and files, most of which were too technical for me to understand.

"Some sort of genetic engineering, bio-construction something. Evil geniuses building something nasty in the basement. Here. . . 'Test Subject AL-32. . . Dog, German Shepherd Breed. . .' Is that what that is. . . or was?" I looked up.

Katya was standing spellbound, gazing blankly at the 'thing' in the next room.

"Katya?"

She took a step back and raised the rifle to her hip.

"Katya! Wait!"

Too late. She pulled the trigger and the rifle jumped on full auto. The heavy glass withstood the first few rounds but surrendered to the entire magazine, becoming a cascade of broken shards.

Katya was saying something as she stepped through the broken panel but I couldn't hear her, having been deafened by the gunfire in the enclosed room. Alarm lights were flashing, no doubt accompanied by the blare of horns and onrush of security.

The empty magazine dropped from the rifle and she inserted another. She again fired from the hip at the dread canister and it exploded, spilling its contents onto the laboratory floor.

The creature bore little resemblance to a dog. It was much larger, fangs, armor plates, massive muscles, a frightening war machine.

Katya emptied the rifle into the creature. As she fumbled for the last magazine the creature rose up.

I jumped through the broken panel into the lab and shoved an examination table into the wounded monster. I did my best to pin it against a wall but it regained its strength and bearings quickly and began to resist. I wouldn't be able to hold it for long.

Katya leapt onto the table, drove the rifle's barrel into the creature's mouth and pulled the trigger, again emptying the magazine. The creature dropped lifeless to the floor.

Katya dropped the empty rifle onto its body and sat hard upon the table. We held each other.

My hearing started to return, the blaring of the horns beginning to cut through the ringing in my ears. I also began to feel the broken glass that had cut into my bare feet.

"Come on, Katya, we have to get out of here."

She continued to sit there, pondering the fate of her 'cousin'.

I yelled, "Kataryna! Now!"

She shook herself free of her hesitation and we moved back into the outer lab. I opened the door to the outer office and saw the door to the hallway burst open, two Spetsnaz rolled through. I slammed the door shut and threw a file cabinet down across the doorway.

There was another door out of the lab, this one leading to a microbiology lab with two choices of exits. We picked the wrong one and found ourselves in a storage room. A dead end. I heard someone in the room we had just left, too late to go back.

Katya pulled a grate off the wall and leapt into a ventilation duct. I had a little more trouble with my injured feet and larger bipedal form; the door burst open.

A female Spetsnaz officer stood leveling a pistol at me. I don't know why but I froze. Perhaps I wanted to give Katya a chance to escape, maybe I didn't want to get shot trying to squeeze into the ductwork, it's possible I was simply marveled by the way she filled out her uniform. For whatever reason, there I was. She knew she had me and smiled with gloating.

"I've finally caught you, my clever American spy. You just couldn't resist an easy target, could you."

What? I must have had a particularly dazed look on my face. She approached me.

"My superiors thought you were a figment of my over-ambitious imagination but now I have you to show them." This woman read too many spy novels.

She came very close and I remained dazed. This officer imagined a phantom American spy and I just happened along. I'm not sure I believe that coincidence either.

She was still smiling, aiming the gun at my vitals. I looked her straight in the eyes and did the only thing I could think of. . . I kissed her.

"Mrrfgrph" She resisted for a moment and then abandoned herself to the pleasure of a kiss. I sensed her whole body soften. After a few moments I heard her pistol clatter to the floor. The wonders of a magic touch.

I drew away, her lips didn't wish to part with mine. She stood there dreamily, eyes closed, arms loose at her sides.

I felt claws drag me into the vent.

After climbing awhile without apparent pursuit Katya asked over her shoulder, "What the hell was that all about?"

"I can't resist a woman in uniform."

"I'll remember that, but that Chekist bitch? Geradi, you're a pervert."

"Me? You're one to talk, young miss 'tie me down so you won't get hurt."

Katya said "woof, woof" and swiped me in the face with her tail.

Witty banter! The adrenaline must have addled our brains. Katya kicked out a screen and we dropped into an empty room.

There was a cot and a desk; a private room for a resident mad scientist. We pressed ourselves on either side of the door as the sound of military boots ran past.

Katya whispered, "How's your sense of direction?"

"Out the door, turn right, at least one level down."

"I agree. Not bad for a human."

There was someone else in the hallway. By the sound of things they were being a little more systematic in their search. The ductwork wouldn't save us this time.

I placed my hand on the door latch and closed my eyes. I could 'see' the energies flowing on the other side of the door. When the guard came to the door, I would know it.

I pulled the door open a moment before the guard touched the handle. With the door between me and the action I couldn't see the expression on his face when he was confronted by a werewolf. Katya grabbed him and threw him into the room. I slammed the door a second later into the face of his partner, rushing to his comrade's aid.

I quickly opened the door again to confront the soldier, blood pouring from his broken nose. He raised his rifle but the ether grabbed it and continued its upward motion. His shots went into the ceiling.

I drove my fist into what I thought would be the soft part of his abdomen; it was like hitting a wall. I swung again, striking his already shattered nose. That had the desired effect and the soldier dropped to the floor, dazed but still conscious. I kicked the rifle away.

Katya came out of the room, having finished with the guard inside, and we ran down the hallway to a door. It opened onto a catwalk above the factory floor where we came in. We were far too exposed.

There were three Spetsnaz on the ground level guarding the door to the outside. They saw us, took cover and began firing.

Katya and I ran across the catwalk. At the end we leapt over the railing onto some stacked boxes and scrambled to ground level while bullets screamed by. Once we were amongst the vehicles and machinery we stood a better chance. Not good, but at least better. We were outnumbered, outgunned and outflanked.

Katya saw a means to even the odds first. Across an open space, beside some barrels, was an electrical closet. If she could get the lights out we could function better than the Spetsnaz.

Katya ran for it and shots rang out from a catwalk high overhead. There was a splash of red and Katya stumbled and rolled behind some crates.

I stepped from behind a truck and looked up at the soldier who had fired. The ether curled around his body and pulled him over the railing. I didn't even bother to watch him fall the 15 meters to the factory floor.

Bullets slapped into the truck around me and I dove back to cover. I was under the truck when the lights went out. Thankfully, Katya was not injured enough to prevent her from reaching the electrical closet. Her lupine metabolism might be able to handle a bullet or two, I wouldn't be so lucky.

I crawled from under one truck to another, working my way towards Katya and the electrical closet. In the quiet I could hear the soldiers moving stealthily about searching for us. A door opened, admitting more soldiers to join in the hunt. I smelled petrol; a bullet had struck a fuel tank somewhere.

There was a Spetsnaz stalking me. I could 'see' his aura. I waited, not breathing. He would move, wait, listen and move again. He would eventually find me. Do or be done.

I rolled out from under the truck, knocking the soldier from his feet. He had dropped his rifle. I grabbed it, not caring which end was which, and swung it like a bat. The soldier had been rising to attack, knife drawn, but in the darkness he never saw the rifle stock and then never saw anything again.

The first rule of magic: don't waste time waving your arms and hoping when a club will do.

A light flashed behind me and I turned to see two more soldiers. A fury of teeth and claws flew past me. The soldier's flashlight went sliding away, leaving darkness again to absorb their yells. I'm glad I didn't see much of Katya's frenzy.

She came up very close to me. Her breath was heavy. I could smell the sweat and the blood.

She rumbled in my ear, "This place is crawling. There's too many of them."

"I have an idea." I said, and pulled a grenade from my pocket.

"Where the hell did you get that?"

"The Chekist bitch."

"That must have been some kiss."

"Are you afraid of heights?" I asked.

"What?" I pulled the pin. "I . . . I don't know."

"Too late." I dropped the grenade and grabbed Katya. With a yelp from her we left the ground, rising up towards the skylights as fast as the zephyrs could carry us.

There was yelling and a few shots. We were almost to the windows when I heard the 'crump' of the grenade, followed a moment later by the sledgehammer of a ten thousand liter fuel truck exploding. The blast slammed us through the skylight glass and into the raining darkness.

I was dazed and disoriented by the blast. We sailed towards the woods, tumbling down through the branches, to a rough and nearly controlled landing in thick underbrush.

I lay on the ground gathering myself. It hurt to breathe, probably a cracked rib or two. Cuts and bruises all over my body. I was drained; physically, mentally and magically. It hurt to move but I dragged myself out of the brush. Katya was soon there to help me.

"I didn't know you could do that." she said.

I groaned, "I've been practicing."

"You need more practice on landings."

"Next time I'll skip the in-flight movie and refreshments. Let's get out of here."

She helped me up and we stumbled off into the darkness, the red glow of the installation afire lighting the forest behind us.

It was a long, difficult time getting back to Katya's apartment. Thankfully, her roommate had long since gone to sleep. We collapsed in Katya's room. She turned the lights on.

"Goddess, Geradi, you look like hell!"

"So do you." The fur all down her one leg was matted with blood. There was blood on her face and hands. Bruises and scratches were surely hidden beneath the fur. "But tomorrow morning you'll wake up looking your beautiful lupine self. I'll still look like hell." I winced as I pulled a piece of glass out of my foot.

"Did we win, Geradi?"

"I don't know. We hurt the bastards, that's for sure. All the equipment, records, test results, that 'thing', all gone. But the brains, the scientists who put it all together, they're still out there. They might go to work somewhere else. They're superiors might decide to limit their losses and scrap the whole project. Who knows."

We couldn't think of anything else to say. We tended our injuries and, with morning approaching, fell asleep on the floor.

When we did wake up late the next afternoon, Katya looked her normal, beautiful self. I looked like hell.

Chapter 10 (Game Session Seven, Jan 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Game Session Seven, January 1993*

Thursday, 11 November 1993
University of Chicago, Early Evening

As I walk towards home I suddenly realize that I was awakened at nightfall by a vampir in her own home. What was truly surprising was that I was totally unconcerned. Whatever else I may be to Mina, the one thing I am not is 'on the menu.'

What time is it? What day is it? <Bozhe Moy!> I have class tonight! It is a good thing I am already close to campus or else I would be late.

Geradi's Apartment, Late Evening

Class went well considering I pulled the entire lecture out of the ether. I was also able to avoid the advances of a certain female student. Not that I would be adverse to a relationship with her but my life is complicated enough right now. Besides, one of my rules is not to be intimately involved with any of my students. Perhaps after the end of the term.

The twins say that there was a call for me earlier. Apparently Katyrina called about something. Perhaps more information about Vladimir Tashir.

She calls back. "I must see you, Geradi. I am coming to America."

"Here to Chicago? What is the problem?"

"I am being chased and I need your help."

"I know how that is. Can you be more specific?"

She can't. Her flight will be arriving tomorrow at O'Hare International Airport. I will meet her there and then she will be able to tell me all about it.

That certainly puts a new twist on events. Katya has never been one to run from a fight. Her coming to Chicago must be a more active response. Katya is hunting the hunters. The question is; who?

It is possible that her investigations into Vladimir Tashir, at my request, loosed this upon her. That would explain why she's coming here.

Not much later the phone rings again.

"It's nights like these that make me regret my unlife."

"Mina. What can I do for you?"

"Tell me again why do I hang out with these people who call me up in the middle of the night and say 'do you know any werewolves?'"

Werewolves? "Why do they want to know if you know any werewolves and the next question, of course, is you're asking if I know any werewolves."

"Well, I figure they don't, you're my next bet." Good bet.

"Now that you mention it, and by a strange coincidence, a Garou friend of mine will be arriving tomorrow. What is this all about?"

Mina laughs at the coincidence. There isn't much humor in it. "Well, I've been told. . . you're sitting down, right? Silver's told me that the Sabbat have gotten a foothold and are trying to take over the city. My response, of course, was that Capri looked really nice this time of year. My question to her was 'you came to me with this?' She says apparently they have lupines running with them. She says 'bad, evil lupines.' So she figured, Gangrel that I am, that I would know somebody who would know somebody who could get them into trouble. Hi."

Sabbat and Black Spiral Dancers. The KGB and Followers of Sutekh. Templars and Magi. The pieces are coming together and are forming an apocalyptic picture. Again, with a simple telephone call, Mina has man-

aged to embroil me in life-threatening adventures. "It is nice to be needed."

"Oh, and just to really add insult to injury. . . Silver wants you to do something for her."

"Silver?" I can't guess. "Why is she making requests of me?"

"I don't know why. I asked what she needed and she just went, 'Oh, just some of that hocus-pocus stuff.'"

"Hocus-pocus stuff?" She makes it sound like I'll be doing card tricks for a kindergarten class. I suspect it won't be as simple as that.

Mina ends our conversation with, "Sleep well." I am not amused.

Chapter 11 (Game Session Eight, Jan 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Game Session Eight, January 1993*

Friday, 12 November 1993

O'Hare Airport, Late Morning

O'Hare Airport, after a pleasantly uneventful night is like a bucket of ice water. For as much as I enjoy flying it is a shame that airports are so unpleasant.

It is fortunate that I remembered the pistol the Templars gave me before going to the airport, otherwise things could have been much more unpleasant. Airport authorities don't like those things setting off their metal detectors. The pistol and jar of vampir blood are now sitting in the same box as the stake and the submachine gun. I am amassing quite a collection of items I don't want.

Kataryna's flight arrives on schedule, a pleasant surprise. But not half as surprising as the first passenger through the gate.

The man comes running frantically down the ramp, collar up, hat pulled down, smoking. Some unfortunate vampir caught out during the day.

I expect to see Katya come bounding down in pursuit of the foolish vampir but that doesn't happen. I am hesitant to chase after a vampir through the airport without knowing what part Katya is playing in the chase. The vampir escapes into the crowd.

Katya is the last passenger off the plane, carrying a sleeping child. I get an itchy feeling in the small of my back.

I hurry up to them and kiss Katya, though not as passionately as I should like to. The little girl stirs.

"Katya, what is this all about?" I ask.

"Shhhh, I'll tell you later." The girl wakes up fully, rubs her eyes and looks up at me. She has my eyes!

I rent a car care of Ivan Ivanov's liberated ID, he certainly won't be needing it. Let the KGB swallow the bill.

Kataryna drives, I navigate and the little girl, Genya, bounces around in the back seat showing complete disregard for both her mother's pleas and the seat belt laws of the state of Illinois.

I direct Katya to a restaurant I frequent near campus. Its entire menu, breakfast, lunch and dinner, is available all day long, catering to the varied schedules of college students and professors. The waitress doesn't bat an eye when we order two steak dinners and a large salad. She does a double-take when Katya orders both steaks raw.

Over dinner I finally get the whole story. There had been an attempt to kidnap Genya.

"Does this have anything to do with my asking for information about Vladimir Tashir?"

Katya doesn't think so. Her explanation is that the genetic mix of Katya and myself has caused the girl to begin manifesting elements of her lupine nature quite early. I could easily believe this, watching the little one tear into her meat with much enthusiasm and no utensils.

This early manifestation caught someone's attention. Katya guesses that it is her distant tribe wanting to properly introduce the child to Garou life and customs. A Rite of Passage at age four.

"That's insane, Katya! I remember your Passage was difficult enough for young adults! They want to inflict that on a small child?" It is customary for Garou to kidnap their children from the unsuspecting parent when they begin manifesting around puberty. By this they maintain a certain amount of secrecy. Katya was able to avoid such a traumatic event because her mother was lupine as well and raised Katya to be prepared for the changes when they came. The two of them lived outside the tribal structure so, as outcasts, what they did was ignored.

Being the progeny of Garou and Magus, little Genya is special. Special enough for the tribe to want her in spite of her mother's protests. If they would have waited another decade Genya might have joined them of her own will. The idiots are throwing that chance away.

"What about the vampir that arrived on your flight? Does he have any part in this?"

"I don't think so. He boarded the plane in Kiev. When we reached Bonn he rushed to a ticket counter and, as I figure it, caught the first flight bound west. That flight just happened to be ours as well."

Some coincidences are difficult to discount, however, the way Katya described his behavior he was running from something and never seemed to notice the two lupines on the same flight. Racing west he just barely beat the sunrise to Chicago. The question is, was Chicago his ultimate destination or did he just take cover at sunrise? At this stage the question is academic.

Genya interrupts our conversation, "Are we going to live together as a family?"

Kataryna and I both look at her wide-eyed and open-mouthed for a few moments. I don't have an answer. Fortunately, Katya does. "We haven't imposed on Geradi in that way yet. He has his own life. I don't see why we should ask him to give up that life now." Arguing with a four year old is not for the novice so I wisely stay out of it.

Dinner is over and both of them have serious jet lag so I hustle them out to get them to a hotel. They collapse almost immediately.

I do some shopping and stop by the apartment. If Katya will be driving a rental car care of the KGB it would be just as well for her to protect herself with a submachine gun care of the Followers of Set. She will appreciate having a firearm. Personally, I hate the things.

Russian Consulate, Afternoon

After dropping things off at Katya's hotel I have business at the Consulate.

The receptionist is one Tanya Androva, a model of socialist bureaucratic efficiency in a system that wasn't very socialist or efficient. Too bad she never releases her hair from the severe bun she keeps it in.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Ruzhkov. Can I help you?"

"Good afternoon, Miss Androva. Is Boris in?"

"Consul Pushkin is away from his office at the moment."

"Good." I sit on her desk. "It was you I wanted to talk to anyway."

She puts down her pen and folds her hands on the desk. "Oh? And what can I do for you, Doctor Ruzhkov?"

Did I just feel a draft in here? "At some point during the next week or so, some people might arrive here asking about a woman named Kataryna Szarkewicz. I would very much like you to call me at home if and when they do."

"Another mystery woman?" she asks, the temperature dropping another degree.

"Another?"

"The Consul has told me all about you, Doctor Ruzhkov."

"Oh really. Nothing good I hope."

"That depends upon your definition of 'good.'" She raises an inviting eyebrow.

"Comrade Androva," I lean forward, smiling, "might the Siberian Princess be trying to seduce me?"

"Comrade Ruzhkov," she says in a soft, breathy voice, leaning her face close to mine. "To answer your question. . . no." She smiles.

"Ouch! All right, you win this one." I climb off the desk and Miss Androva sits up straight, looking insufferably pleased. "You will call me first thing."

"Yes, first thing." She's a professional again, pen in hand making a note.

"Thank you, Miss Androva. I owe you."

"Yes, Doctor Ruzhkov. You do."

Ouch! And she didn't even look up. She's getting too good at this. I limit my losses and leave the Consulate

Geradi's Apartment, Late Afternoon

I've always seemed to do my best thinking standing on high ledges looking out over the cityscape. The twin's apartment building is only four stories high but affords a view out across Jackson Park towards Lake Michigan. The sun is warm, the air is cool and the vodka is colder still.

I have a daughter! I would not have thought such a thing possible. My body temperature is higher than 'normal,' about 38 degrees Celsius. When I meditate, that temperature may drop by 5 degrees or more. A thermal environment like that makes me virtually sterile. A medical student acquaintance of mine once calculated that the probability of my having children was about one in ten million. So much for probability.

And now, after four years of ignorance, an active and intelligent little girl shows up asking if we're going to be a family. Her mother says she doesn't want to impose but I know her reasons better than that.

Katya has her home in the Ukraine. It is her heart and soul. She couldn't leave that behind for long enough to attend school with me in Moscow, she won't be able to stay long here in Chicago.

The Ukraine is a rich land with a second chance at life. It is a home Kataryna can build for herself and her daughter. Once this kidnapping business is finished and Genya is secure Kataryna will return home.

I, on the other hand, have no real home. I grew up traveling the Soviet Union and its satellites. Moscow, Leningrad, Volgograd, Sverdlovsk, Vladivostok, cities spread over a vast, diverse continent. Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, North Korea, Cuba, lands even further removed from my 'native' Russia. I have never felt truly comfortable in any one place for very long. I have no home, my country lies dying half a world away.

A family? My father did a poor job raising me. No wonder I became the counterrevolutionary son of a hard line communist. His seduction by Bolshevism was, in turn, encouraged by the lack of attention his Czarist father gave him. I am heir to a long line of parental failures.

No, the child is much better under the guidance of her mother in their homeland. Her special nature gives her a chance at greatness and I think I can help without making the same mistakes my forefathers did. I smile at the future.

"Geradi? You up here?" Iduna climbs up the fire escape. "What'cha doin?"

"Thinking about the future for an old friend."

"Kerry and I just aced a chem exam, do you want to join us for dinner?" She hugs me around the waist for emphasis.

"I have a recitation tonight and would like to get some sleep."

Spoilsport. Fine, you can just watch, then." Iduna's hands wander. "Unless you want to skip dinner straight to dessert."

I turn and come down from the ledge. "You two are incorrigible."

"And insatiable. . . come on. Besides, you sleep like a stone when you want to. We won't disturb you too much."

She has a gleam in her eye that explains many mysteries.

Chapter 12 (Game Session Nine, Feb 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Game Session Nine, February 1993*

Friday, 12 November 1993
Geradi's Apartment, Late Evening

After class I return to the empty apartment. Friday night and the twins have gone dancing.

I call Kataryna and check up. Genya is still sleeping off her jet lag. I'm not sure if that makes things easier or more difficult. I was hoping to contact the local Garou community to see if we can gather some allies for Kataryna and Genya. I would like to have Katya along but also wish

to keep Genya out of harm's way. It looks like I'll have to work this one out on my own. With nothing else to add I bid her goodnight.

If I'm going to be asking favors of the Garou I'll need to have something to offer them. Mina mentioned lupines running with Sabbat, I am sure the Garou locals would love to get their claws on some Black Spiral Dancers. I dial Mina's number.

Someone else answers, "Mina's House of Horrors, how can I help you?"

"Ahhh. . . is Mina there?"

"Oh, it's the breather." I didn't recognize the voice but I had a good guess who it was.

"Is this Silver, by chance?"

"Listen, I've got a job for you." I could hear other vampir in the background voicing invitations. I'm not comfortable for being so popular.

"I think I should speak with Mina." The phone changes hands.

"Hi. I hope you don't need to see me tonight." Mina's voice exudes stress. Not surprising, considering she has a house full of vampir. That she is vampir herself doesn't make the situation any better.

I have no desire to impose and my business isn't pressing at the moment, so. . .

The printer hooked up to the twins' computer begins buzzing. Didn't they turn it off when they left? I read the message as the paper scrolls up: "Ramses II requests an audience."

I stare as the words repeat and continue to scroll. I speak into the phone, my voice measured and controlled, "Mina? You have it, don't you."

"Well. . ."

I repeated myself, louder and with less control., adding "I've been invited."

Before I go out the door, again to rush over to Mina's house, I go into the box and retrieve the Pistol the Templars gave me. It weighs cold and heavy in my hand. I also grab my grandfather's obsidian knife from the mantle. It is warm to the touch and rests comfortably in my hand. I hope I don't need either of them but I've also learned not to hold my breath.

Mina's House, nearing Midnight

I arrive at Mina's house and ring the bell. The door is answered by the abominable creature I recognize from the night Mina pulled me into this 'Serpent Crown Nightmare.' I seem to remember his name from that night as Liam.

He smiles with a terrifying mouth full of fangs, "We've been waiting for you!" Charming. I'm sure he'd have a way with Jehovah's Witnesses.

Mina's house is the anticipated level of chaos. The 'regular' troop of vampirim are milling about, as are a few new faces. The vampir that arrived at the airport this morning, looking a bit over done around the edges, is on the couch, flanked by Silver and rough looking vampir in a trench coat. They are watching some horror film on the videotape machine.

There is a woman dressed like a prostitute leaning against a wall, looking vacant. Another, much like her, is snoring softly in a corner. Party snacks?

I check in the kitchen, thankful that noone seems to take a particular interest in me.

Mina is there talking to a haggard young woman with long black hair. The woman's aura is a turbulent mess. I would hazard a guess that she is only recently vampiric, all things considered taking it relatively well. The Tremere is also there, looking rebuffed.

Their conversation is just ending. The woman gets up and leaves the kitchen. Silver gets up from the couch and escorts her outside.

"Mina, why am I here?"

"Well. . . because, the Crown just. . ."

I explode. "The Crown called me!"

"It's sitting in the basement. It's getting tired of being out of the action. It's bothering everybody tonight."

I want to ask what it's doing in Mina's basement. Who put it there? Why is it bothering everybody? Just who 'everybody' happens to be. The best I can muster is "Oh."

Mina is leaving. I don't know why but she must think it pretty serious for her to be so dismissive about having a powerful artifact of evil just sitting in her basement.

She opens the door to leave and gasps, "Silver's taking Venessa!"

I think that, perhaps, Mina might need a little help. I close my eyes for a moment and concentrate on the pistol in my jacket pocket. It ceases to exist in our world for a moment and then returns, this time in the pocket of Mina's jacket. She doesn't notice the added weight as she and the Tremere rush out the door. I wish her luck.

"Oh Mage." The voice of Ramses invades my head and I turn towards Mina's basement door.

There is a mystic ward upon the door being highly unsuccessful in containing the crown's power. There is also a vampir standing before the door. Apparently, I was not the only one invited.

Ramses speaks again, "Greetings to both of you. Now, both of you, I imagine, have some ambitions. Ventrue, I know a Ventrue's ambition is, ultimately, to be Prince. I don't know your ambitions, Mage. Perhaps magical power is an end in and of itself. The Serpent Crown can help each of you to attain what you desire."

The mental voice of the Ventrue says, "I believe I can attain my goals without it."

My mental reply is slightly less elegant, "<"Yeb toveyu matz.">

The Ventrue 'speaks' again, "Now, what have you done with Lodin?"

I would guess that this Lodin is the vampirim's Prince of Chicago and that he's gone missing. That would explain many things, none of them encouraging.

"You believe I've taken Lodin." Ramses laughs, "I haven't. I was received by Lodin as a gift. He was unworthy of my power so I left. I do, however, know what has become of Lodin. Release me from my bonds and we can exchange information."

I realize the mistake we have made. By refusing Ramses' offer we have deemed ourselves 'unworthy' of his power. If we don't act quickly the Crown will move on to yet another owner.

A scraping a squeaking sound rises around us. Rats! Hundreds of rodents descend upon the house, pouring through any entrance and making new ones. The Crown's power is still somewhat contained by the box but it has summoned an accomplice. The rats begin attacking the door and the remnants of the Tremere's ward.

With a thought the ether casts them aside. Unfortunately, if there is not already some other way into the basement the swarming creatures will create one. I kick through the door and run down the stairs. After a moment's hesitation, the Ventrue follows.

As I cross the basement wave of rats are cast away before me, like the Red Sea parting before Moses. The basement contains a largish meat locker with a heavy door. I assume it to be Mina's bedroom. The rat's couldn't possibly gnaw their way through the metal walls of the locker, so why are they here? Diversion? Escort?

A section of the floor collapses revealing a tunnel underneath, yet nothing emerges. The swirling ether holding the rats at bay and attempting to prevent access to the crown confuses my senses. Someone is here that I can't see and it irritates me to no end.

The Crown's power, sensing the arrival of its liberator, begins extending itself. Its power is incredible! I won't be able to hold it for long.

The locker door bursts from its hinges and the box containing the Crown emerges, carried by invisible hands. I try to stop it but am fatigued by my overextension of power, both trying to hold off the rats and contain the Crown. I fail to prevent its escape into the tunnel.

I throw caution to the zephyrs and drop into the hole to give chase.

Sewers beneath Chicago, Late Evening

The light cast from my hand reveals a recently excavated tunnel a meter or so in diameter. The Crown's mystic trail is strong and easy to follow.

I go quickly. The tunnel connects with a larger drainage or utility tunnel. I take a moment to gather my bearings. The Ventrue joins me in the tunnel, his three piece suit looking as out of its element as he does.

Another of Mina's vampir comrades, the rough looking one with the trench coat, joins us. He looks the type that would produce a large gun from beneath his trench coat. I am not disappointed when he does just that.

The Ventrue asks, "You're not going to put it on, are you."

"Not on your life."

The other vampir offers, "We can trust him. He had it before and didn't put it on his head." I am overwhelmed by his minimum requirements to gain his trust. Being Mina's friend must count for a lot.

I rush off after the Crown's trail. I lose track of time. I lose my bearings. The trail is all important. Except, of course, for that very beautiful, very naked woman.

I stand and gape for a few moments at the figure of beauty that has appeared before me. Of all the things I might expect to encounter beneath the streets, this is not one of them.

She smiles. My brain barely registers the two pairs of vampir feet splashing away down the tunnel. What are they running from?

She takes a step forward, swaying her hips seductively. She cocks an eyebrow and says, "You are very attractive."

Her voice cuts through me. She comes closer, the scent of her arousal breaking through the ambient smells and pulling a reaction from my own body. Then I see the bat-like wings extending from her back.

I panic. The ether picks her up and tosses her roughly against the tunnel wall.

"Oh, Mage. . . you've gotten me very angry." Her voice is still breathy and seductive but the claws that emerge from her fingers are anything but inviting. I gesture and she is engulfed in flames.

She smiles. "Where I come from, fire is rather common, Mage."

<Kharasho, suca.> . . The ankle deep water in the tunnel leaps up in a spray, freezing on the creature. The spray continues and the ice thickens until it forms a comfortably thick block encasing the demoness. A temporary solution, at best.

I bolt and run. I don't go far before finding a ladder to the surface. The manhole cover flies off into the night and the zephyrs lift me up and out through the opening, never having touched a rung. I lie panting on the curbside.

Chortevitch! A succubus running loose in the sewers! It just gets better and better.

My heart rate returns to somewhere near normal and I begin to relax. Up on the streets I should be relatively safe so I take a deep breath and return to the business of trailing the Crown.

The Crown has moved far but the trail is still warm. Even though the trail lies underground, the mystic wake extends above to the street. I set off after the Crown, this time staying above ground.

Saturday, 13 November 1993

The Succubus Club, Early Morning

The Crown's trail leads to a night club named 'The Succubus Club.' This must be some sort of cruel joke. I suppose it would be too much to ask that this be just a coincidence, simply a normal night club with normal party goers. I should be so lucky.

On the surface it appears to be a normal, too dark, too loud, too crowded, dancing, drinking and socializing madhouse. Any normal person would see nothing unusual. To me, the aura of the undead stand pale beside the vibrancy of the living. It is fascinating, in a way, seeing hunters and hunted in a complex dance, both figuratively and literally. I must remember to warn Kerry and Iduna away from this place. I don't want them coming home half a liter short.

I keep to the fringes of the crowd, a sort of null space between the masses packed on the dance floor and the masses packed into booths and corners. I work my way towards the bar thinking I could use a drink.

A woman at a table, short black hair, classic lines and attractive meets my gaze. She smiles. Her aura reveals her as not human. Nor is she vampir. I return the smile but continue on towards the bar. Sorry, not twice in one night.

About midway through my second vodka I am beginning to be amused watching the vampir moving about the crowd, believing their true natures to be a secure secret.

I see the Ventrue enter the club. He works his way up to the second level and begins speaking with a largish vampir with a scar on his face. Whether it be in Russia or America, dead or alive, somehow gangsters still look like gangsters.

I also see the Tremere in the crowd talking to the dark haired mystery woman. It seems like half the vampirim in the city are here, scheming about one thing or another but completely oblivious to the artifact hiding in their basement.

My options at this stage are severely limited, but so long as the Crown keeps changing hands like the proverbial hot potato I feel reasonably safe in going home and biding my time.

I am finishing my drink, preparing to leave, when I am grabbed by the arm and pulled towards a door. It's Silver. She is joined by the vampir in the trench coat hustling me from behind. I hope they just want to talk.

The door opens into a stairwell. Down the dimly lit stairs there are a series of doors opening into office-like rooms. We enter one and Silver closes the door behind us.

"I got a job for you," Silver begins. "I need something, I need it fast and you're the only one that can get it for me." If she were any more vague I am afraid she would become transparent.

"Why."

The trench coated one says "Why? Don't you want to know what?"

"Humor me. Why do you need me?"

"It's got invisible walls that the Tremere can't break through. I thought maybe it was human magic."

"All right, now. . . what?"

"God knows what. Some of it might be very interesting and very arcane and I really have no purpose for it as long as the people I'm racing against don't get it. Got my drift?"

I stand blinking for a few moments, hoping beyond hope that this woman would use a noun.

She answers my prayers, "Do snakes mean anything to you?"

"I'm in."

The trench coated vampir, soon introduced as Malcom, mumbles to himself, "That was too easy." I think that if Silver had mentioned the Sabbath first off she could have saved us all a great deal of confusion.

Once all the euphemisms are out of the way I begin to get details. Silver explains that a few days ago she made a power play to take over part of Chicago's criminal underworld. In the process a warehouse was destroyed. The basement, however, survived but could not be entered.

Magical wards afford no passage, a mystic wall. Silver calls it 'serious breather magic' which is about as technical as she gets. Her association with the Tremere has apparently taught her nothing about magic. I do not consider this a bad thing.

Technical information is what I need, however, so I won't be able to gather anything additional information without actually observing the site itself.

We end our conversation with Silver mentioning that she has a few hundred thousand dollars so she can pay me. I raise an eyebrow at the sum but do not begin fee negotiations. Too many people want to buy my services right now.

Silver will call me tomorrow night.

Chapter 13 (Game Session Ten, Feb 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Chapter Thirteen: Game Session Ten, February 1993*

Saturday, 13 November 1993

The Succubus Club, Early Morning

As I work my way out of the club I am approached by a pony-tailed vampir in a suit. He extends his hand in greeting, introducing himself as Simon Jeffries.

I accept his hand and offer my own name. He comments, "I've heard of you, Geradi."

I am irritated by his immediate use of my given name. "Half of the lies they tell about me aren't true."

He smiles. "There are these. . . red cloaked practitioners of the Art, I believe you've had some contact with. We have a mutual acquaintance in Vladimir Tashir. He told me you were quite the wizard."

His mention of Tashir irritates me further, "What can I do for you, Mr. Jeffries?"

"As it is, I too have some interest in the occult. I'm more interested in it from your point of view rather than mine. I thought perhaps we could trade some information." I'm not prepared to discuss the finer points of medieval metaphysics and mystical philosophy with a vampir recommended to me by a fanatical vampir hunter. Something just doesn't connect with that combination.

"In any case," he continues, "let me give you my card. I'm staying at the Hilton, if you wish to trade some information, I'll be in. I have quite a bit of contact with magi in other cities. I'd be very interested in speaking with you. I see some other vampiric friends of mine, excuse me." We shake hands again and he moves away to join the Tremere and the mystery woman in conversation.

Very interesting, indeed. I've lived in Chicago for over six months now and never had any contact with the preternatural locals. Suddenly, in the past week, I have such a reputation that vampir and magi are swarming out of the shadows to solicit my services. Everyone seems to already know who I am and what I do. Do I suddenly have some sort of listing in the 'Who's Who of Preternatural Chicago'? Perhaps I'll start receiving the 'Secret Society Newsletter' detailing all the magical places, mystical biographies and calendar of upcoming preternatural happenings.

The Crown is moving again. I almost missed the ripple of it's passage, having been distracted Mr. Jeffries. I again take up the trail.

It stays below ground making good speed through the tunnels beneath the downtown area. It leads me through a section of town rampant with urban decay and crime. Being alone, on foot and of the wrong ethnic background I am very fortunate to avoid trouble. Perhaps because it is so late the criminals have worn themselves out on earlier targets and gone home to rest themselves for the next night's pickings.

What I do find interesting is a warehouse, damaged by fire but being reconstructed. The magic is gone from this place.

Here, the Garou would say, the insane Weaver has gotten out of control. Entropy has been taken to an extreme and reality, as humans would define it, has been locked in place. The realms of the Umbra, of Magic, of Faerie are banished. A disquieting place that should occupy my attentions were I not currently involved in the pursuit of the Serpent Crown. I will certainly remember this place.

The Crown eventually stops. I am standing in the middle of the street with the crown somewhere directly beneath me. I can find no accesses to the sewers and excavation would require heavy equipment.

So ends another entertaining night. The morning sun finds me standing on the double yellow line as the early morning traffic begins to build.

Standing here I feel very helpless and alone. I think it is time for me to gather some allies of my own.

Jackson Park, Mid-Morning

I've always known there was a Garou cairn in Jackson Park but never had cause to visit it. From the branches of a largish oak tree I can see that construction has begun on a wooden grandstand nearby. I remember reading that the Mayor will be giving some speech here tonight. I haven't had the chance to carefully read the papers as I normally do so I haven't a clue as to what the mayor will be speaking of. I hardly care at this stage.

The cairn in the park is much like many others in urban areas; well tended and pleasant. A hopeful piece of wilderness within the city walls.

I pull a whistle from my pocket, a gift from Kataryna many years ago, and blow a note. It makes no sound, at least, none that a human might hear, but I don't wish to gain the attention of any humans.

There is a growl from the base of the tree but noone presents themselves. I whistle again.

A man in work overalls and carrying a rake appears at the tree's base. "Must you play with that whistle? There are sensitive ears."

"My pardon, sir, but it is with those with sensitive ears that I wish to speak. You are the caretaker, I assume?"

"I am."

"Unfortunate things are happening. . ."

"Indeed they are. The Wyrms are taking over. As a matter of fact, there is something paradoxical about you. I smell both the Blessing of Gaia and the Curse of the Wyrms upon you. I don't know whether I can trust you or not."

"Everything stands between Entropy and Chaos. More so than you think. I have no desire to see the Wyrms take hold but I find myself dealing in the gray areas to ultimately defeat the greater darkness."

It is as if I had said nothing at all. "Every agent of the Wyrms upsets the balance and must be stamped out. If you are a purveyor of the Wyrms you will be stamped out also. There is no middle ground."

"I would disagree but I am not here to discuss philosophy. There are those of the Wyrms known as Sabbat. . ."

"All Wyrms are alike. We've heard rumors of the Sabbat; we don't believe them. All purveyors of the Wyrms are evil. We can't see that

one is more evil than another. Please do not hand us this pack of lies that has been handed to you."

"Well, I can see that you are being completely unreasonable. I will not waste any more of your time. Good day."

The caretaker leaves to go about his business. I mutter, "Ass." and drop from the tree. Every one is a fanatic and the caretaker knows nothing of balance. The Garou of Russia, perhaps because their land has suffered greater damage than their western brethren, take what allies they can find. Allies are few and far between in these times.

I had hoped to obtain some help from the Garou against the Sabbat. That magical dead area I found earlier would also be a gift, of sorts. A new fight suited to their tastes. In return, perhaps I could have had some aid in protecting Genya. I'm sure I'll be speaking with the caretaker again, I'll just need to be a little more apocalyptic to set a proper mood.

Geradi's Apartment, Mid-Day

I return home and begin digging through my boxes of books, the only valuable possessions I took with me when I fled the Soviet Union. I look in a book titled 'Monsters and Their Kynde', a centuries old manuscript of my grandfather's detailing many of the preternatural beings that inhabit the world. Demons and the Infernal realms were much more his field of study and, with a Succubus lurking below the streets, I could use some of my grandfather's wisdom.

Whenever I've encountered someone or something new I've started with my grandfather's book. He had taken notes in the margins when he learned something new, crossing out those things he found to be in error. In my travels I have continued to fill the margins and have crossed out even some of my grandfather's notes.

Unfortunately, there is little useful to me on the topic of Succubi. The book's original comments on Demons are somewhat sparse and my grandfather's additions are either vague or technical beyond my experience. Even so, it was worth the attempt. I make a note or two in the margin and put it away.

I have lunch with the twins before getting some sleep.

Geradi's Apartment, Early Evening

I wake up and Vlad Tepes is standing at the foot of my bed. I shut my eyes again and groan, "Don't you ever knock?"

"Greetings, Geradi. Where is your friend."

I draw off the covers and sit naked on the edge of the bed, again irritated by someone's presumptuous use of my given name. I'm sure Tepes can't help but notice the lines of scars running across my back. I hope it raises an eyebrow.

I run my fingers through my hair and yawn. "You would think five hundred years of existence would teach you some manners."

"I want you to stop your friend from making a rather heinous mistake but I don't have much time to find her."

I begin pulling on some pants, still refusing to look at the vampir. "Assuming you mean Mina, if she's not at home I do not know where she is."

Tepes sighs as if he finds speaking with a mere mortal tiresome. "If you are hiding where she is, I'm not going to force the information from you, but you will be doing her a grave disservice."

"I don't know where she is. Now, if you are done threatening me, you may leave."

"I'm not threatening. If you talk to her before I do tell her to contact me." He dissolves into mist and leaves.

I fall back on the bed in laughter. The absurdity of Tepes behaving like a jealous juvenile almost overcomes my irritation at his being able to circumvent my wards. I certainly hope this is just a behavioral impression and that he his not really jealous. If he was actually unbalanced enough to see me as competition for Mina's affections, it would be really bad. It is a good thing the twins were not here or I might have done something precipitous. Pompous bastard.

I get a shower to wash my irritation away. As luck would have it, my shower is interrupted by the ringing of the phone. It's Silver. "I need you over here, now." She gives me directions and I recognize it as being a block or so away from the magically dead area I found last night. My guess is that the wards Silver wants me to break are within the blighted warehouse. This is likely to prove more difficult than first anticipated.

Silver's Home, Early Evening

Silver lives in a former church; a dilapidated gothic stonework construction that only reinforces the vampir stereotype. I wonder if she sleeps in a coffin in the crypt or hangs from the rafters.

As I approach Silver's church I am, in turn, approached by the Ventrue from the previous night's activities.

"Any luck?" he asks.

"Yes and no." Before I can explain any further, not that I was going to explain anything, the door opens and Silver is there.

"Excuse me, this is my guest."

"Having guests?" Another vampir arrives.

"Hey!" Silver exclaims, "Don't screw with my lunch partners." She grabs me by the arm. "This is lunch. Come on. . . lunch." I am able to shrug at the vampir before Silver closes the door in his face.

Once inside, I raise an eyebrow at Silver, "Lunch?"

She cocks a thumb at the door and whispers "Sabbat." That might explain the odd bend in his aura. We observe him through a window, sitting on the front steps attempting to subtly intimidate the Ventrue.

I ask, almost jokingly, "Do we kill him now or wait until he goes home?"

Silver explains, in all seriousness, that this Sabbat is her 'partner'. She has infiltrated the Sabbat, ultimately planning to bring down the whole thing and make a tidy profit in the bargain. She details her dealings with the city's gangsters, how she controls nearly half the city's underworld.

I am suitably impressed by this woman. She is straightforward, honest, and, in a way, genuine; traits normally lacking among the preternatural. I've decided that I like her. I don't trust her, but I like her.

She mentions someone named Jackson as if he were her arch-nemesis. Perhaps he is within these wards. If so, she wants to kill him, having failed to do so on a previous occasion. If he is Sabbat I would be glad to lend my support.

Chapter 14 (Game Session Eleven, Mar 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman*

Chapter Fourteen: Game Session Eleven, March 1993

Saturday 13 November 1993

Silver's 'Church', Evening

There is activity at the destroyed warehouse. Vampir are congregating for something. The Sabbat speaking with the Ventrue on the church steps takes his leave and joins his brethren amongst the rubble.

A limousine drives up. The Vampir line up, forming a double echelon, a processional corridor. A red cloaked individual exits the limousine and proceeds like popular royalty towards the rubble.

Very interesting, indeed. Vladimir Tashir told me he was KGB, which turned out not to be true. He was supposedly a Czarist, which I somehow doubt. And now it looks like he and his red cowled comrades might be in with the Sabbat. The possibility exists that Tashir is part of a splinter organization which shares the trappings but little else with its parent group. That would put those wearing red cowls at extreme ends of the spectrum. I wonder if any moderates still exist.

This particular red cloaked Vampir descends into the surviving basement and returns a few minutes later. I wish I could see his face to identify him. The assemblage disperses, piling into vehicles and departing on some collective mission. Guards are left behind to guard the site.

Silver says, "I assume you can turn us invisible or something. You know. . ." She crosses her arms and blinks exageratively. The cultural reference would probably be obvious to an American. I, however, am without a clue.

"I think you overestimate my abilities. However, I would want to come back during daylight hours when the Vampirim guards are gone. You would agree that 'breathers' are easier to deal with."

Silver agrees, but she seems disappointed. I think she would have preferred a fight. She quickly resigns herself to the next business. "I'm hungry," she says, "Do you want to order a pizza? You can have the pizza, I'll have the delivery guy."

I stand gaping at her candidness for a few moments before declining. I don't want to be around while a Vampir feeds even though Silver says she'll take the delivery guy into another room. 'Doing it' in front of me would be too 'kinky'. Her shyness in this matter seems highly incongruous considering her behavior up to this point.

I decline her offer again, bid Silver good night and leave the church. Silver is really quite a personality I find myself trusting her.

I have walked a few blocks when a motorcycle roars up. It's Silver, apparently having decided not to eat in. "You want a ride? I promise not to pop wheelies."

I consider for a few moments and decide, "What the hell.." I climb behind her and she squeals away from the curb, having lied about 'popping wheelies.'

Nearing Jackson Park, Evening

I catch a glimpse of someone that looks like little Genya, alone, ducking into an alleyway. What is she doing wandering the city alone at night?

The ether grabs hold, stopping me in mid air while Silver's motorcycle proceeds onward. I drop the quarter meter to the pavement and begin following the little girl. Silver, of course, notices my absence and turns to investigate. Beyond that, I pay no more attention to Silver's actions.

In the alley, Genya has found a companion. The young one has good instincts, having met a tattered looking Garou to speak with. The zephyrs coil, waiting to snatch her to safety but as long as she isn't threatened I'll continue to allow her to speak with this lupine.

If I wasn't expecting it I would have been surprised by Katya's stealthy approach. She comes up beside me and begins shifting back from her more lupine form. <Crasivy.>

"Our daughter has found a new playmate," I offer. "Perhaps you should talk to him."

Katya approaches the two and introduces herself. I am too far back to hear the conversation but the lupine is civil and apparently reasonable. At one point, little Genya attempts to stomp away in a fit, only to be caught by the scruff of the neck. Genya bears her teeth, Katya bears hers, Genya goes limp as a puppy.

Katya and the other lupine end their conversation. Katya, towing Genya behind, leave the disheveled Garou to continue rooting through the garbage.

Katya says, "Now what about that vampire on the motorcycle?"

Before I am forced to answer, a wolfen howl rises from the park. Katya perks her ears, recognizing the call. She picks up Genya. "You think you can handle yourself, little girl? I have something to show you!" Kataryna rushes off towards the park and I follow. Sirens wail somewhere ahead.

Jackson Park, Evening

There is gunfire. I recognize the booming sound of a hunting rifle. The path we are on opens up into a large grassy space. A man is running across the lawn towards the tree line. He stops and turns, bringing the rifle up to his shoulder. I turn to see his target; a lupine breaking from the trees, bounding towards him. He fires and the lupine stumbles, only to get up again and continue his pursuit.

The man cycles the bolt of his rifle and is preparing to fire again when I recognize him; the trench coated vampir Malcolm. In shooting the lupine, Malcolm has only succeeded in making him angry. The question is, should I help!

Two other vampir that I do not recognize burst from the trees near Malcom and begin firing with handguns. The lupine begins howling in pain; they came prepared with silver bullets. Malcom flees into the woods, saving me the difficult decision of helping a vampir escape a lupine while my own lupine lover looks on.

There are more howls in the trees and more shooting, a few bullets sail through the branches over our heads. I have no intention of getting further embroiled in the crossfire so I suggest that Genya has seen enough and that we should leave. My apartment is only a few blocks away. Katya agrees and we leave the park by the most direct route.

Geradi's Apartment, Late Evening

I arrive home and the twins are there. I didn't expect them to be home so early on a Saturday night but, thankfully, they went to bed early as well. Katya gets an eyeful before I close the doors to the bedroom.

"So Geradi," she whispers, "it takes two young American nymphs to measure up to one Ukrainian Garou."

I reply, "And they can cook."

There was a message on the answering machine, but to prevent me from breaking the infernal device a third time one of the twins has transcribed the message, leaving it by the phone.

"Geradi, this is Simon Jeffries. I only now realized that I know your grandfather, Vladimir Andreovich. We have many things to talk about." There is also a phone number for me to return his call.

Given a chance, my grandfather would have hacked Jeffries' head off with a sword, such was his regard for the Vampirim. Jeffries' claim of knowing my grandfather could not have been on friendly terms unless, of course, Jeffries knew him before he became vampir. Either way, I still have no inclination towards talking with him.

My wards are triggered; a visitor. I am ushering Katya and Genya into the back room when someone knocks on the door. Finally! Someone who has the courtesy to knock!

It is the Ventrue, properly introduced as Tiejian St. John. I speak to him in the hallway so as not to disturb the twins or antagonize Kataryna. He hands me a paper with sketches of runic wards, asking if I know what they mean.

"I assume these are from the Sabbat site near Silver's." They are. I admire his drive. Without skills or half a chance at success, he went in harms way to obtain this information. His motives, however, aren't quite so clear. His manner is such that he expects me to tell him how to get by the wards so that he can get in and obtain the contents. To use an American phrase; he has two chances; slim and fat.

He points out a rune he encountered, one that struck him with an electric shock. I point out a few others that he was fortunate to miss, for example, one that would detonate and another that would douse him in flames.

There are others, frameworks for the mystic wall and another that has to do with the 'elsewhere', the teleportation effect that Silver described. Yet another seems to be the keystone, somehow directed against the Vampirim. This particular ward I do not define for the Ventrue, he plays his cards close to his chest, I will do the same.

I thank him for showing me his notes and return them to him, they can serve me no further purpose. I am a bit short with him, considering he went to quite a bit of trouble, but I know that Katya is bristling just on the other side of the door. I send him on his way, take a deep breath and open the door.

Katya is standing in the hall, hands on her cocked hips, with an expression I might best describe as 'miffed.'

"What business do you have with that vampire?" she rumbles. "And in the park. And on the motorcycle."

"You're beautiful when you're protective." I reply. "Come on, this is not the place for this discussion." I gesture towards the occupied bedroom.

She glares at my avoidance but knows me well enough realize that she will eventually get the answers she wants. She collects up Genya and I lock the door behind us, rushing away before another vampir shows up to talk to me.

Kataryna's Hotel Room, Early Morning

Katya and I stand on the porch of the hotel room, Kataryna with her back to the railing so that she can watch through the sliding glass doors at Genya playing inside. Her arms are crossed as she waits for my explanation.

"A powerful magical artifact has come to the city. Every preternatural wants it but noone seems to be able to hold onto it for long. If it settles into the wrong hands it will mean a citywide war."

Katya pipes in, "So you have allied with the Wyrms. . ."

I interrupt, "I have allied with some vampir who wish to prevent this from happening."

"They are all of the Wyrms; a blight upon the Earth! They should all be destroyed!"

"So, are all the Garou then champions of Gaia?"

"No, but. . ."

"And the Magi. Are they all deranged schizophrenic megalomaniacs?"

"No, of course not, but. . ."

"Then why expect all the Vampirim to be purveyors of the Wyrms? Before they were vampir they were living, breathing people. Just like all people in an endless variety of shapes, sizes, motivations, moralities! Wake up and look around, Katya! The world isn't black and white!"

I realize that I am nearly yelling. I take a deep breath and soften my voice. "I am a cynic and an idealist, a traditionalist and a revolutionary, pragmatist and philosopher. These are not contradictions, they are the basics of Magic. The imposition of order on formless chaos, the release of joyous chaos into the gray monotony of order. This is where the magic of everything is."

"The Magi, the Vampirim, Garou, Faerie, everything is in this middle ground. This Middle Kingdom, as the Chinese call it, is the entire Earth and her inhabitants. You can't afford to view the world in terms of right and wrong, good and bad. Everything exists across too broad a spectrum."

I take her hands in my own. "You can look into my heart, Kataryna. Into my soul. What do you see there?"

She gazes into my eyes as if she really can see through to my soul but she is really looking inward into herself. Her expression has calmed considerably. We compliment each other that way, I could always relieve her anger with a calm voice. She could control mine by either being the playful puppy or making me fear for my safety.

"I still don't trust them," she offers, her eyes still filled with concern.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, damn you!" She mocks a punch to my stomach then looks over my shoulder. I turn and see that Genya has managed to tear open a pillow and is playfully making piles of stuffing. The little one is quite a handful. She's gotten out once before, to use another American phrase, Katya will need to keep her on a tight leash.

I reach into my jacket pocket and produce a pair of handcuffs, one of the twins' playthings. I hold them up and ask, "Will you need these?"

Katya presses up to me. "I don't know," her voice husky, "Do you think I'll need them?"

"Damn, I've missed you." I embrace her, dearest friend and lover. We kiss as if we have no need to breathe, a deep rumble growing within Katya's chest.

As always, I kiss her with my eyes open so that I can watch her reactions but I also see Genya inside the room, pouncing on and successfully dismembering the very dangerous and vicious chair cushion.

Katya notices my diversion of attention and turns to see. She takes the handcuffs.

"I really have to go, Katya." She grabs my jacket and attacks my lips with her own, almost changing my mind about leaving.

I step back smiling, turn, and casually step over the fifth floor railing rather than having to argue with the elevator. I pause in mid-air, purely for dramatic effect, just long enough to see Katya stick her tongue out at me before dropping to the ground.

Sunday, 14 November 1993

Sabbat Holding near Silver's 'Church,' Early Morning

The site is now guarded by a pair of humans, the Vampirim having apparently finished their shift early. No doubt to get something to eat before retiring for the day. I had hoped to slip into the basement during the change of shift. Thankfully, the human guards seem inattentive enough to slip by employing a cloak of shadows.

Hidden within the darkness I make my way past the guards, amongst the rubble, to the spot where the red cloaked vampir entered the basement earlier. The excavation descends into the remnants of a stairwell leading down to a door. Anyone else would need a flashlight to see by, but to my senses, the webs of energy between the runic wards on stairs, walls and ceiling provide more than enough illumination.

The Ventrue did a commendable job of noting each rune but didn't have the talent to see how they interacted. These protections were set up by someone who knew what he was doing and had the time to do it properly. The wards are powerful, draining magical energy from an area the size of a city block. Well, I might as well get started. The door might be strong but every lock must have a key.

There are traps set on the stairs so I allow the zephyrs to carry me downward, floating above the steps. Simply avoiding these wards will conserve energy and prevent me from being blindsided.

Not quite to the bottom I encounter the mystic wall. I cannot find the magical keyhole or the mystic combination to open the door, saying "Open Sesame" doesn't work either, so I am forced to attempt brute force.

I begin channeling raw energy directly into a rune. The power builds and successfully overloads the ward but the wall remains. I redirect myself at another ward. And it cracks under the assault. I attempt a third.

A scream calls out! I've triggered an alarm! I continue to pour energy forth, collapsing one ward and then another, hoping to get through before the guards arrive.

The next ward resists. I push and the ward pushes back, feeding back on the energy I dump into it. With a flash I am thrown back onto the

stairs. Lightning strikes me square between the shoulder blades and suddenly I am at the top of the stairs, dazed and disoriented.

One of the guards climbs into the stairwell, casting an inadequate flashlight. My shadow cloak has survived the runic assault and the guard doesn't see me, however the guard decides to remain in the stairwell.

The longer I stay the more likely it is he will find me. I need to leave now but the guard stands between myself and the path to the surface. The distraction is obvious and simple; I set him on fire.

Not a large or enveloping fire, just the sleeve of his coat. He yells, more out of panic than pain, and begins thrashing about. He thrashes a little too much and threatens to bring the damaged ceiling down upon both of us. His cries will also bring his comrade to his rescue. I rush past the flaming guard and barely avoid the notice of the other, escaping to the surface.

This was a productive endeavor.

I arrive back at the apartment as the sky is beginning to lighten. The after effects of the shock bolt has caused all the muscles of my back to tighten. Climbing the stairs is a painful undertaking, getting undressed in nearly impossible, but climbing into a warm bed with the twins is immediately comforting. I am instantly asleep.

Chapter 15 (Game Session Twelve, Mar 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Chapter Fifteen: Game Session Twelve, March 1993*

Sunday, 14 November 1993
Geradi's Apartment, Nightfall

With a decent amount of sleep, the light of day and a stack of writing assignments to evaluate, the previous night's activities are reduced to a slight ache between my shoulder blades. But as the sun sets I feel increasingly that, like the vampirim, nightfall is when my day truly begins.

The phone rings. "Geradi, this is Simon Jeffries, you remember that we spoke last evening.."

I remember being irritated at his use of my given name and make a point of conveying that. "What do you want, Mr. Jeffries?"

"We spoke about my interest in obtaining from you certain artifacts that belonged to your grandfather. I would very much like to continue that conversation."

"Mr. Jeffries, as I recall, we weren't talking about my grandfather, you were talking about my grandfather and made no mention of anything of his."

"Oh. Well I am now. I would really like to speak with you about it."

This Jeffries fellow is really beginning to irritate me. What I fail to understand is why I continue to be polite with the man.

We agree to meet in two hours at some Italian restaurant that he recommends. He makes some joking comment about liking the color red. Smug imbecile. I look on this meeting as an opportunity to tell the man, to use the colloquialism, to get himself fucked.

The phone rings soon after I finish with Jeffries. It is a man who identifies himself as 'O'Malley, a member of Silver's gang.' he tells me to 'get my ass' down to the Sabbat site because something is happening. I ask him to elaborate on what this 'something' is but he just says that Silver told him to call. My initial impressions of Silver would suggest a higher standard in choosing underlings. I suppose that a recession effects all levels of society.

Near the Sabbat Site, Evening

I exit the taxi I called to bring me here as soon as I see signs of activity. The driver is glad to be rid of me and drives off for fares in safer neighborhoods.

Silver sees me almost immediately and rushes over with the Tremere close behind. So much for a stealthy, anonymous approach.

"What is happening?" I ask.

"I don't know," she replies, "that's why you're here."

The excitement at the site reaches a peak as the vampir and their human subjects have apparently found something in the basement. Half a dozen of them carry a large figure from out of the rubble. It is difficult to see this far from the building but it appears to be a suit of armor.

Silver turns to us. "A Mage and a Tremere should cover all the bases, so," she wiggles her fingers, "get to work."

I am pondering the thought of being partnered with the Tremere when he fades from view. The illusions of the vampir rely on a clouding of the mind, a trick by which I am only partially fooled. My eyes no longer actually see the Tremere but his aura is clearly discernible. Not a bad effect, though.

Silver stomps her foot. "Oooh! I hate when he does that!"

I shrug at her and melt into my own shadow form. She apparently hates when I do that as well.

I work my way through the shadows to get a look at the armored figure. He is a large man, nearly two meters tall. His surcoat has the red cross that any crusader might have but, whereas the crusaders wore chainmail hauberts of the period, this knight wears full plate of the kind developed nearly two hundred years later. Instead of a sword this knight has a holster to carry some sort of pistol.

There are too many Sabbat excitedly milling about for me to investigate any closer without risk of being bumped into. Besides, I see the Tremere lurking about. I use the distraction of the knight to investigate the basement again.

Last night, the stairs were brightly illuminated by the power of the wards. Now, the stairs are dark, the power having been dissipated. The runic wards are unbroken but their power has been drained enough for me to walk down the steps to the door. They will recover, but before they do I intend to find what, or rather where exactly is behind that door.

The door at the bottom has no handle so I reach out with my mind. Power begins feeding back upon me, just as it did last night. Before it builds too high, I stop, not wanting to get struck by lightning again.

As I rethink my strategy, the Tremere enters. He looks around for what I assume to be the first time and notes the runic wards. He pulls out a notebook and begins transcribing the runes and their interactions.

I chuckle, "Someone's already beat you to that." He continues, not realizing that he could sketch for months and still not understand all the intricacies. Lacking limitless time the only other option is force and the hope that the passage of the knight has weakened the lock on the portal to the same degree that the runic wards have been depleted.

I re-direct myself from another mystic angle towards cracking the lock. The feedback begins again. I push my luck but soon desist, feeling the power rising to a peak much higher than I am willing to risk. The backlash would strike quite hard.

As I pass the Tremere on my way out I say, "A wise Mage knows his limitations and when to move on." I leave him to continue his doodles.

I make my way to a darkened corner near enough to observe the activity around the knight. He is now conscious and has his helmet off. Strong, Aryan stock. Silver characteristically has a knife to his throat attempting to gather information. He seems unconcerned and unaccommodating.

"You are demon possessed," he says.

Silver replies, "I'm not demon possessed. I like to think of myself as metaphysically challenged."

Having a doctorate in Medieval history I am tempted to step in to help clear up his anachronistic confusion but Silver's interrogation is highly amusing. I cross my arms and lean against a wall.

Silver attempts to convey to the knight that there are 'good' vampir and 'bad' vampir. She is hampered by so many Sabbat being around such that she cannot be open about who's side she is really on. She wants to get him away but needs a distraction.

A fire erupts in another section of the site. Apparently the Tremere has become careless with matches. The Sabbat run about excitedly while their human subjects set about extinguishing the blaze. A fair attempt but not enough of a distraction.

The Tremere appears near me, apparently he can detect my unseen presence just as I can detect his. "We have to get him out of here. I'll cause a distraction while you get Silver and Sir Knight out."

"What sort of distraction do you suggest?" I ask, having seen the quality of his distractions.

"Well, the Sabbat seem to have the fire under control."

"No, they don't." I gesture casually and the fire surges into a full, uncontrollable conflagration.

Silver emits a surprised squeak and prepares for a full fledged panic. The Tremere rushes to her aid and begins to escort her out.

The vampirim have scattered cockroaches exposed to the light. Their human lackeys are quickly overcome and are beginning to abandon the attempt to douse the flames.

I emerge from the shadows to address the confused knight. "M'Lord, would you please come with me."

He recognizes me immediately. "A Mage! God be praised!"

"God has nothing to do with it. Please, let us leave this place."

He postures himself in a classic 'I am about to take magical action' pose. "This fire is getting out of hand. . . "

"I know! I started it! Do you not know a distraction when you see one? We are leaving! Now!" Fore a noble knight schooled in the arts of magic, this one is really quite dense. My fist full of his surcoat dragging him forward finally convinces him that we should leave.

Once outside we find the Tremere standing beside a so-called 'pick up' truck. The driver's side door is open and Silver is bent over, quite attractively I might add, tinkering under the steering column. I don't think she's forgotten her keys.

The engine roars to life and she leaps behind the wheel. "Let's roll!" We all pile into the commandeered vehicle and roar away.

The Tremere tries his hand at interrogating the knight, beginning with the 'you're demon possessed, am not, am too' conversation. I do not pay much attention, first, because I do not expect the Tremere to make much progress, second, the wind and jostling makes it difficult for me to understand the English, and third, because I have already deduced that the knight is from 'elsewhere' and I don't need to hear him actually say it. The Tremere should 'get a clue.'

The universe exists on different levels, different realms. The Garou can travel the Umbra, a realm of spirits, the Faerie hold court in Arcadia, demons exist in infernal places. This knight has passed through a door from one realm into another.

Through overheard fragments of conversation the knight identifies his realm as Avalon. I had always assumed that Arthurian legend used Avalon as another name for the Faerie realm of Arcadia. Where history and mythology meet there are many translation errors, doubly so when English stories are retold in Russian.

The knight directs a question towards me, "Mage, why do you consort with the demon possessed? Where I am from the Magi and demon possessed are bitter enemies."

"In this realm, things are never so simple as black and white. Nor are things ever as they first appear. In this particular case it is an alliance on convenience, we have mutual enemies."

My answer seems to satisfy him,. Thankfully he is not so fanatical as the other 'nobles' I've dealt with recently. I am really growing tired of being the voice of moderation.

We arrive at a clothier's shop. The Tremere's plan is to make the knight less conspicuous by getting him contemporary garb.

"The breastplate does not come off," the knight informs the Tremere, "it is a part of me." Indeed, on closer inspection he seems wired into his armor.

Unlike Blade's semi-mechanical minions, the transition between the knight's living and mechanical parts are smooth, a marvelous melding of magical science and technology. His otherworld mechanicalness explains why I couldn't get excited over finding a medieval knight in the basement

"You are not similarly linked to the tools you use?" the knight asks. "How fascinating."

As the rest of the armor comes off, Silver discovers that the knight is 'fully functional' and has made a new friend. I lean against the door frame and am entertained as they build a suit over his armor.

I've grown up in modern cities, I should be able to relate better to the implements of modern life. Then again, magic is a living thing, rejoicing

in the contradiction that is life. I suppose it's no small wonder that I fell in love with a lupine.

I am shaken from my daydream when Silver and the Tremere escort the now ridiculously dazed knight out to the truck. Silver has taken to calling him 'Tin Man.'

I check my grandfather's pocket watch, about the only mechanical device that tolerates me, and realize that Simon Jefferies is waiting for me. I weigh the importance of that meeting against the entertainment opportunities of tagging along with Silver and company. I climb into the truck.

The Ponytail Club, Late Evening

Why we have come here I do not know. The Ponytail Club is apparently a sort of members-only hotel. Silver drives past the main entrance into an alleyway near a fire escape.

Silver and the Tremere climb out. The knight stands up and gazes at the building for a moment. He says "Ah." as if he has suddenly noticed something and floats up from the truck bed towards an upper floor window. Silver and the Tremere are already scrambling up the fire escape, hoping to get to the window before he does. I decide not to get left too far behind and rise up in pursuit of the 'tin man.'

I reach the window but the knight has already entered. I hover outside the window and behold more amusements. Mina is there yelling, "Just who the hell are you!"

The knight begins with his 'demon-possessed' routine while Silver and the Tremere climb in through another window to attempt an explanation. Mina yells at them as well. I settle for sitting on the window sill.

Mina has a nice room, what Americans call an 'efficiency,' with a bed, living space and the minimum of a kitchen in one room. I suppose Mina is living here temporarily since the safety of her home was rather decimated by the Serpent Crown two nights ago.

Sometime I should really talk to her about what it was doing under her bed.

There is another female vampir there as well, a face I remember from that night. A new roommate, perhaps?

The only real anomaly is the pentagram drawn on the floor. I don't employ them myself but I know enough to tell when one is done incorrectly. The alignment is off axis and the lines aren't straight. It has all the indications of having been constructed by an amateur. Hopefully, the caster was not overly ambitious. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

I would guess that it is none of Mina's doing, I have faith that Mina would be smart enough not to play with such things. Then again, she had the Serpent Crown under her bed.

Mina notices me sitting on the window sill and storms over to me, leaving the babbling troika of Silver, the Tremere and the knight. "Geradi, would you please. . . please tell me just what the hell is going on! Nice, simple terms!"

I present my story of the evening's activities in Russian. One, because I don't want my less than flattering remarks about her comrades to be overheard and, two, her having to go through the extra step of

translation will help to calm her down so I can get a good explanation from her.

"Mina, what is that pentagram doing on your floor?"

"She smiles, more of a grimace, actually. "Well. . ." and is interrupted by the reverberating sound of a helicopter with irritating timing.

The knight perks up, spoiling for a fight, and flies out the window. I barely have time to get out of his way. Not wanting to loose their prize, Silver and the Tremere race after him. As they rush up the fire escape I hear the distinctive sounds of a firefight on the roof above.

I turn towards Mina and her expression communicates the kind of evening she has had. I close the window.

Mina opens her mouth to speak and is interrupted by a knock on the door. It is the vampir I saw that night in Harker's bookstore, following the Tremere's blood trail. His wardrobe frightens me more than his vampirism. He must be one of those 'artists.'

"Mina, dear," he says, "do you know there is a firefight on your roof?"

"No shit, Gaston. Tell me something I don't already know."

"Well, I was just over at the Succubus Club and your Vanessa was attempting to levitate in the middle of the dance floor. I thought you might want to stop her, or something."

My mind puts a few clues together. I say to Mina, "Vanessa. Long dark hair, nearly underage, freshman, studious type?"

"Uh-huh," Mina nods in agreement.

I indicate the pentagram. "And she did this?"

"Uh-huh."

"Wait a minute, 'your Vanessa?' You mean she. . . ?"

"Uh-huh."

". . . and you. . . ?"

"Uh-huh."

The ironies are too much for me to contain and I burst in hysterical laughter. I laugh until I am breathless. I laugh till my sides hurt.

Mina is miffed, standing with her hands on her hips. "I don't think it's funny."

I control myself enough to say, "Wait. . . wait till I introduce you to my. . . daughter."

"Daughter?" Mina says, puzzled. She takes a moment to put the parallel puzzles together and erupts in her own fit of laughter.

Mina's vampirim comrades are treated to the sight of the both of us laughing ourselves into uselessness, embracing each other to keep from collapsing into a heap on the floor.

Mina is able to control herself first, remembering what Gaston had said about dance floor levitation. "I'm gonna kill her."

"Haven't you done that once already?" I offer.

She mockingly shows me the back of her hand, then giggles. "Smart ass Mage. Come on." She grabs me by the collar of my jacket and drags me out the door to introduce me to her 'daughter.' I'm not sure yet whether I am to restrain Mina's temper or help instill discipline.

The Succubus Club, Nearing Midnight

We arrive at the nightclub and things appear their chaotic normal. Having an innate ability to pick any particular woman out of any

crowd. and helped by that woman being undead, I quickly find Vanessa dancing with some large, Slavic looking, ponytailed man. I point her out to Mina and she sets out through the crowd, navigating the dancing maelstrom with greater success than I.

Mina no longer has murder in her eyes, Vanessa hasn't antagonized her by levitating and Mina's friend is mediating so, things relatively under control, I stay out of the family squabble and obtain two glasses of vodka.

The conversation ends with the Slav apparently taking responsibility for Vanessa's evening and Mina throwing up her hands in resignation. I work my way through the crowd and hand her one of the glasses.

We look at each other for a moment then throw back our heads to dump the icy liquid down our throats. We stand and look at each other for a few more moments, sharing the same thoughts.

I speak for both of us, "I'll get a bottle, you find a table."

Monday, 15 November 1993
The Succubus Club, After Midnight

"Well," Mina begins after emptying another glass, "You see it's like this; I was on campus looking for, well, you know. . ."

"Dinner?" I prompt.

"Breakfast, actually. I was at the coffeehouse at some horrible poetry reading and found her studying intently."

"You're a sucker for the young, studious types."

"Ha. Ha. Very puny." Mina mocks. Actually, I thought it was quite good. It is not easy to pun in a foreign language. I'd like to hear Mina attempt to pun in Russian.

"Anyway," Mina continues, "I talk to her and she's studying some old Russian documents. I could care less about Russian at the time but I invited her over to my place to help her with the translation."

"Or rather," I say, "to help yourself to her. What were those Russian documents about?"

"Some magic stuff. It was pretty technical."

"Some magic stuff?' And, I suppose, you didn't even think of calling me."

"I did. Honest. But I was going to call, you know, after. Well, she was getting ready to leave. . ."

"And you hadn't seduced her yet?"

"It's not my fault she was straight. Anyway, I should have just let her go but I was impatient and didn't feel like hunting for another date so I kinda' jumped her. I only meant to take a pint or so, only enough to make her woozy and send her on her way. But she tasted so good, I couldn't help myself.

"I know how that is."

"No you don't! It's stronger than just sex! It's. . ."

I hold up my hand so she doesn't need to go through the explanation. "I believe you, Mina. That was out of line. Please, go on with your tale." I had not intended to illicit so personal a response. It must be difficult to live with such violence inherent in ones existence. With the powers I wield I shudder to think what might occur were I to loose control of myself. I empty another glass of vodka.

"Well, I didn't know what to do next.. I called Presto." Presto must be a nickname for the Tremere, Elric Tremen. Appropriate. "He said to go ahead and embrace her."

To embrace someone must be part of the vampirim lexicon for changing someone into a vampir. A romantic euphemism for killing someone, then dragging them into the realm of the un-living. A pretty name for a nasty business. Mina matches me glass for glass.

"Well, it turns out that Vanessa was a ghoul. Presto says it was the magic from her Tremere sire's blood that made her taste the way she did.

A ghoul is a vampir's slave. A vampir feeds its blood to the living and that mixture causes the human to come under the vampir's control. For Mina to have such a reaction to a Tremere's diluted, second-hand essence. . . <Bozhe moy!> What would happen were she to sample the concentrated energies coursing through my veins? More vodka.

Mina's female friend, who had disappeared into the crowd after the discussion with Vanessa and the Slav, comes to the table. She wants to talk to Mina but hesitates for a moment at the presence of a 'breather.' One look at the empty vodka bottle and another just opened vividly shows what exactly is going on. She sits down.

"I was talking to Dracula," she begins, "about his treatment of you and to give this back to him." She holds up a marble sized ruby, a huge gemstone of exorbitant value. "And he gave me this." She holds up an equally large, equally valuable and gorgeous opal.

This woman has glorious style. To walk up to an egotistical bastard like Tepes, tell him how abysmally mannered he is towards someone who shows him much greater respect than is his due and get hand-somely rewarded for it shows great talent. On top of that, her slight accent is pleasantly familiar, though I cannot place it. I like her.

Mina introduces her 'partner' as Selina.

"Partner?" I say with raised eyebrows.

"Not that kind of partner," Mina chuckles, hitting me in the arm.

"So tell me," I say, turning to Selina, "how is it that you can tell Prince Vladimir just how large an ass he is and have him thank you with gemstones?"

"Drac has a soft spot of gypsies," Mina answers for her friend.

"Gypsies? Ah! No wonder I like you, Selina. My mother is Romanii. <Ochin priyatna.>" I fill a glass of vodka for her, <"Shtonibut vopitya:">

Mina kicks me in the shin to prompt me to speak English. Her kick doesn't hurt as much as it might were I perfectly sober.

Something else connects in my alcohol laden brain. "That big Slav Vanessa was with wouldn't be one of Tepes' vassals, would he?"

Mina exclaims, "His lordship thinks she is a great conversationalist!"

"Tepes' consort wrecked you house because of his attentions towards you, she'll go insane over his liaison with your progeny." We consume more vodka.

Mina rests her forehead on the table for a few moments. When she raises her head her expression has changed as if the previous conversation hadn't happened. "So, Geradi, what's new with you?" she asks cheerfully.

I take a deep breath. "You remember the other day when you called me to ask if I knew any lupines? I told you that I did have a lupine friend."

"Yea?"

"An intimate friend."

"Intimate? You mean in a biblical sense?"

"What we did bears little resemblance to anything that occurred in the bible. I'll show you the scars sometime."

"That would make your daughter. . . a puppy?"

I tell Mina the whole story in detail beginning with Katya's phone call. She is fascinated, as I was with her story, and sympathetically matches me glass for glass. Her partner is also intrigued but doesn't drink anywhere near as much vodka as we do. That is probably just as well.

Eventually, the conversation winds down. The Succubus Club empties just as we are emptying our third bottle.

Mina and I are left staring groggily at each other, sharing the same thought. Mina speaks for the both of us, "Go home."

I wrench myself to my feet and, gallant as ever, offer to see her home. <"Mozhna vas damoy pravadiť?">

"No," she replies, "I'll be fine. Go home."

The morning busses have started running from downtown and I am fortunate to select the bus that will take me to the apartment. In the morning twilight I stagger up the stairs, somehow find the proper key and arrive home. I don't even attempt to undress myself but crawl directly into bed.

Chapter 16 (Homecoming, Apr 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman*

Homecoming

Written April 1993

"Geradi, wake up."

I am awakened by Iduna, shaking my foot and holding the phone to her chest. The morning light makes my head feel like it's going to explode. I close my eyes again.

It has been a very long time since I consumed that much vodka. I will need to remember to never try to out drink a vampir. They have the distinct advantage of being already dead. The way I feel now. . . I might not be dead but it is a close approximation.

I'd be willing to bet that when Mina awakens at nightfall she won't have a hangover. One of the advantages immortals have. <Soblaenyol-neetsa.>

"Geradi, wake up."

I am awakened by Iduna, shaking my foot and holding the phone to her chest. I sit up painfully and groan unintelligibly. I think I tried to ask who it was on the phone.

Iduna recites, "This is the Russian Consulate calling for Doctor Ruzhkov. Is he in, please?" An excellent imitation of Tanya Androva's

accent, I can feel the Siberian winter from here. It helps me to wake up. I accept the phone.

I groan, <"Gaspazha Androva, katory siychas chas?">

<"Dobraye utra, Prafyessar Ruzhkov. Byez dvatsati dyevit.">

I am glad to be speaking Russian, my head hurts too much to even think in English. Iduna, goddess that she is, recognizes my distress and climbs onto the bed to gently massage my back.

Tanya continues, "The people you were expecting checked in at the Consulate this morning. Five men and two women from the Ukraine."

I am surprised, both at how quickly they had followed Katya's trail and that the entire hunting pack had shown themselves at the Consulate. The news wakes me up fully. "Tell me more, Miss Androva."

"All of them were waiting at the front gate when I arrived for work. Rural types, they did not realize that, in America, they do not have to report to the local authorities or to us. Their lack of worldly knowledge allowed me to take advantage of them quite severely. I have copies of all their passports, do you wish to have their names?"

"Not just now. Did they ask about Miss Szarkewicz?"

"<Da.> They indicated that she was a friend of theirs who had arrived several days earlier. I told them that she had not reported in as yet but, if they were to see her, they should ask her to do so."

"Did they indicate where they might be staying or how long they might be in Chicago?"

"The Quality Inn, just off the expressway, and they didn't know how long they would be staying."

"Feliks Dzerzhinsky would be proud." I have been thinking of a plan for days and it wells up from the depths of my vodka soaked brain. "Tanya, I need you to do some things for me. <Pyervoy>, if they return, say that Miss Szarkewicz checked in asking about travel to someplace west. Pick a place. <Staroy>, I need you to book three seats on a plane east, New York or Washington. From there I want whatever connections you can manage to Kiev. <Tryeti>, I'll need all the diplomatic paperwork to clear me through as quickly and quietly as possible." I thought the whole thing sounded fairly coherent.

Tanya's voice is icy, "Oh, is that all? Are you sure there isn't something else you want of me? My wet and ready body on a silver platter, perhaps?"

"Tanya, I'm in no condition to play games. I wouldn't ask if this weren't serious. You saw those Ukrainians, they didn't look friendly, did they? I know this is a lot to ask but if it means that much to you, when I get back you can name your price."

"Name my price?"

"Anything you say. Will you do these things for me?"

<"S udavolstvuyim, Prafyessar Ruzhkov. Paka.">

<"Maladyets, Tatiana. Balshoye spasiba.">

I hang up the phone and Iduna asks, "What's up?"

It takes a few moments for my mind to adjust to explaining to her in English. It gives me a chance to decide just how much I am going to explain.

Certainly, the twins know I have magical talents, creative levitation and telekinetic fondling being the majority of their experience. But

Vampir, Lupines, Faerie, Ghosts and the full extent of a Magus are still on the border of myth.

They are not stupid, by any means, but I've never fully confided in them. For that matter, they have never fully confided in me. Wiccan alchemists, they have their own secrets. We have just never asked each other. It's not a matter of trust and secrets, it's mutual respect for privacy. Sometimes, it seems, respect can be a liability.

"Something important has come up," I begin, "and I'm going to need to go out of town. A few days at least."

"And then you'll be back?"

"Yes, I promise."

"OK," she says, understanding how secrets can be. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes," I say, looking down at myself, "you can explain just how I got undressed."

"Oh, that. Well, Kerry and I undressed you about half an hour ago. You were really smashed. Your skin was like ice and you were. . . hovering."

"I was hovering?"

"Like a balloon," she giggles. "It made it real easy to get your clothes off. It was kind of fun, you should do that more often. The hovering, I mean."

"I. . . I'm going to get a shower." Being relatively stationary was tolerable, standing is like putting my brain in a blender. I succeed in not falling down or emptying my stomach right there. I save it for when I reach bathroom.

I stand in the shower, hands against the wall for support and the water scalding hot. Beyond that, I don't move, don't think, don't anything except hurt. Eventually my body will purge the poisons. It will take time, though.

Kerry comes to my rescue, drawing aside the shower curtain and offering me a mug of a thick, greenish fluid. "Here, drink this."

When an alchemist says 'drink this' you either ask what's in it and then not like the answer or shut up and do as she says. I drink it.

"Kerry," I ask, "why is it that every potion of yours tastes like you do?"

"I like to put myself into my work." She smiles and takes the empty mug back. "No artificial colors, no artificial flavors. All the goodness Nature intended, only better. You should start feeling better in a few minutes. Iduna and I are making breakfast. You should eat something."

She was right, I feel better already.

After breakfast I feel much better and call Katya to start her on the plan. "Katya, some of your neighbors have arrived in the city."

She responds immediately, "I'll pack."

The next loose end to tie up is sitting in a box in the living room. I seclude myself in the back room and get to work. When I finish a few hours later I have an efficient vampir killing tool. The stake is a deep red, almost black, and is warm to the touch. It nearly vibrates with hate. I contain it in a box along with a note written to Silver. I am

sure that, given the opportunity, it will find its way into some poor Sabbat's chest.

I also pack some of my grandfather's books into another box. I will get them out of the apartment so that, if that Jeffries person comes looking, he won't find them.

I pack a travel bag and write another note. I have an appointment in the park before I leave.

Jackson Park seems to have recovered from the chaos of the night before last. It takes me quite a while to find the caretaker but I eventually find him raking fall leaves across a grassy space.

I use the whistle to catch his attention and stride purposefully towards him. He throws down his rake and prepares for a confrontation.

As I approach he begins the conversation, "You have a hell of a lot of nerve coming here after. . ."

"Do not speak," I snap, "just listen. I don't have the time for your self-righteous proselytizing." His eyes narrow and he rumbles in his throat but I know he can feel the forces I've set swirling about him. He listens.

"A war is brewing amongst the Vampirim. You had a taste of it the other night. You say 'good, let them destroy each other.' I mention the Sabbat and you discount them as lies and rumors. If I mention the Black Spiral Dancers, does that get your attention? The Dancers and the Sabbat have joined to destroy the balance that has maintained relative peace in this city."

"There is a saying that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. This may not be true in all cases but if you choose to stand aside, once the vampir have fallen, you and all this, all that you fight for, will be next. Alone, you stand no chance. A warrior needs his allies."

I remove my note from my pocket and throw it at his feet. "Here is a place. The balance here is gone, power is being drained from this area. This, too, shall be your fate if you stand alone."

"You should come to terms with those vampir known as Gangrel. They share this caern and your concerns for its safety. Choose your friends carefully, your enemies will choose you."

I turn my back on him and walk away. I feel his eyes on me but he does not pursue. I've given him something to think about.

Kerry has given me a ride to the Consulate, my last stop before meeting Katya and Genya at the airport. I take my grandfather's things and lock them in a cabinet for safe keeping. I also retrieve my storehouse of cash. Life in the Soviet Union has made me distrustful of the established banking system using my money for its own profit. My nervousness has survived the trip to America.

Next, I leave the package for Silver with Misha, the night guardsman, warning him to keep arms length away from the woman that might come to claim it. I make a phone call and leave a message on Mina's answering machine, apologizing for having to leave town at such a time, informing her that when I return after solving my family problem I'll do what I can towards solving hers and telling her that I've left a package for Silver.

The next call is to my teaching assistant, informing her that I'm leaving a week earlier for Thanksgiving recess and for her to extend the

deadline for the student's next writing assignment until after the holiday. My students will be glad for that.

When I'm done with all that, the final task is conversing with Tatiana Androva. I seem to remember promising her anything she wanted, I wonder if she has anything in mind yet.

Tanya looks up from her desk. I think it's too bad she is a civilian, she would probably be more comfortable in a uniform. Then again, it would not surprise me if she were the military intelligence resident. The GRU would certainly benefit from her peculiar talents.

"Doctor Ruzhkov," she says, presenting a large envelope, "your flight will be leaving Midway Airport in a little over two hours."

I accept the envelope, my hand accidentally brushing hers. I am surprised at how hot her touch is. I comment, "Your hands are hot."

"You know what they say," she replies, "Warm hands, cold heart."

I know now that her touch was not accidental. I'm feeling better than I was earlier so I take the bait. "Tell me, Miss Androva, were you born an ice bitch or do you work at it?"

Her voice becomes breathy. "Every night in front of my mirror. And I work so very. . . very. . . hard."

"You should advertise, there are scores of American men who would pay a great deal for this sort of abuse."

"I am a good socialist, Comrade Ruzhkov," she says, sitting up straight, "and would not prostitute my labor in such an obscenely capitalist manner. Marx taught that we should share all that we have equally."

"That explains why he was always begging Engels to share his money with him. So, if good socialists love to share, why do you never share your love with me?"

"There is nothing a counterrevolutionary hooligan such as yourself could have that I could possibly want a share of."

I place hundreds of dollars, more than the fair market value of the airline tickets, on the desk in front of her. With the practiced motion of a professional bureaucrat, Tanya sweeps the money into a pocket then hands me a locked briefcase. "I'll see you when you return," she says softly.

I am just opening the door to leave when she says, "Be careful." I turn and her face has softened with a look of genuine concern.

Unlike our usual interplay, there is no temptation for a cutting reply. I simply nod and say, "I will."

Kataryna and I are high above the dark North Atlantic with Genya and most of the other passengers asleep, before we have a chance to talk.

"Recognize anyone?" I ask, handing her the copies Tanya gave me.

"Damn," she says. "This one. . . Sonjia Kravchuk. We caught this woman last year smuggling weapons to the Bosnian Serbs."

"Didn't they have enough weapons already?"

"Not chemical ones. She ran with an organized crime underground and was probably the only Garou among them. They raided a Soviet munitions stockpile and were attempting to ship it down the Dnepr, ultimately to Serbia, or if that didn't work, to whoever would pay them the most. The Militia caught them at the docks attempting to load.

Kravchuk thought she could get away from me by changing before a terrified human. I did my own change and broke her arm."

"I'm glad you like me."

"Don't you know it. Anyway, once they were in custody, the State authorities took over the investigation, gave us shit for credit and probably let this one get away from them in the process."

"A Garou smuggling chemical weapons? Something about that isn't right. Do you think she had her own plans beyond those of her employers?"

"None that she told me and I didn't have a chance to ask. She behaved like a mercenary. When the cargo was seized, she cut out to save her own hide."

"What were you able to gather from your own investigation?"

"You know me pretty well, don't you? Not much, except that she had some Soviet military experience. I couldn't access the records unofficially and I didn't want to draw attention to myself officially."

"And her part in all this?"

"Kravchuk is a strong arm, a hired thug or zealous recruit. She wouldn't go to these lengths for revenge. She would just put a silver bullet in me. She just about said as much."

"What about any of these others?"

"I'm not sure. This one, Josyf Karaev, I think I recognize his name but I can't place it. If I can access the police records I'm sure his name will turn up. Hopefully, that will point us to who's behind this." Katya reaches over and tenderly brushes Genya's hair. Genya growls contentedly but remains sleeping.

"Then what?" I ask.

"We convince whoever it is to leave us alone," Her voice drops menacingly, "one way or another."

"We're going to need help. I have a few ideas, some people I might call."

"Who else do you know in Kiev? Magicians, right? Those bastards would probably like to get their hands on Genya, too."

"Don't get excited, Katya. I'm not handing Genya over to a Covenant. I wouldn't want that any more than you do but in the short term we're going to need allies and in the long term, the next ten years, we'll need help protecting and teaching her. She has the Gift and, no offense, but you can't channel that energy. I probably couldn't do it, either."

"I'm sorry, Geradi. I'm just being protective. And after the way they treated you. . ."

"Look. . . let me worry about my brethren. They are the least of our worries. It's your side of the family I'm concerned about. That, and how my body is going to react to these little plastic sandwiches."

Katya laughs at the abrupt change of topics and lessening of seriousness. "And this really atrocious coffee. But, you know what I have come to like about these Western airliners?"

"What's that?"

"The spacious rest rooms. Care to see?"

"The both of us?" I ask, simulating innocence. "I would think it a tight fit."

"Oh, you think so," Katya says with a smile. "I'll show you tight. Come on."

She is right on both counts.

"I'll let you off here," Katya says as I step from her ancient and battered Zhugili. "The house is the next block down, then third on the right."

"I'll meet you at that cafeteria on the Khreshchatyk around dinner time," I say. "If all goes well."

"You mean the one that actually didn't flip over patrons with pets?" Katya asks with eyes bright.

"Absolutely. Otherwise, I'll call the hotel and leave a message at the front desk."

Katya drives off to find someone trustworthy with whom she can leave Genya while we hunt her hunters. She mentioned a cousin and then mentioned that if I made any advances on her cousin Irena she would become 'irritated.' When Katya becomes irritated I end up with bruises.

I am left to walk a few suburban blocks to investigate Katya's home. Partly it is to gather information as to how they were able to follow her, partly to collect a few personal things, but mostly to shake the tree and see who falls out.

Kataryna's house is small but pleasant. Nicer in having seen it than having it described in letters. Letters? Of course. If the hunters had seen the letters I had written to Katya they could have followed them back to Chicago. Then again, there was never any mention of Genya in the letters. Would there be enough for them to connect to me? Probably not. If they thought their quarry had run to Geradi Ruzhkov in Chicago they would have gotten straight off the plane to kick in my door.

I left my leather flight jacket at home in favor of a surplus Soviet great coat. Much less conspicuous and, perhaps, a little more intimidating. I turn up the collar. Time for the show.

I walk up to the front door, resisting the urge to look around for watchdogs, and knock. The latch is broken from the door frame and the door swings open slightly. I trace my hand around the frame as if looking for a hidden key, check under the door mat, then shove the door open with my foot.

The place has all the signs of having been overturned by a professional. That is, it is still relatively neat. Each cupboard, drawer and closet was opened and searched. Anything of moderate interest was removed and placed on the kitchen table. Things of no interest were left in their place so as not to clutter the search. The next question is whether the searcher took the really interesting puzzle pieces with him or left them on the table.

I am pushing through the papers attempting to see what might be missing when the ward I set on the door frame alerts me to someone passing through. My back is to the door but I can sense his presence in the other room. He moves slowly and quietly. I wait until he reaches the kitchen doorway before speaking. "You can stay where you are." I put my hand in my pocket and turn around.

I stand a head taller than the young man, no more than twenty. His aura betrays him as a lupine. The tree didn't take much shaking.

"Who are you?" he starts. "What are you doing here?"

I look him straight in the eyes, "I would ask you the same thing."

He begins to take a step towards me and suddenly finds the sword and shield of the <Kamityet Gasudarstvyennay Byezatsasnasti> in his face. The badge strikes directly into his subconscious and his youthful confidence gives way to his darkest nightmares.

The KGB no longer exists as an official entity so I immediately follow up on my advantage before reason takes hold. "I will not repeat myself, comrade."

"I. . ." he stammers. "I didn't know. I thought. . . thought you might be a burglar."

"Through the front door in full daylight?" I ask rhetorically. "I think not." I pause for reasons more than dramatic effect. "Go home. This is none of your concern." I continue to glare at him.

He hesitates again then, thankfully, chooses to withdraw. I count five then allow myself to breathe again. I have never been a particularly good actor, my success underlies the importance of good props.

I drop the badge on the table and sit down, rubbing the knot that has appeared at the base of my neck. I can tell right now that things are going to happen much faster than I would like.

Katya enters the cafeteria leading Genya by the hand.

I say, "I thought you were going to leave her with a cousin or someone."

They sit down. "She can't take care of her until later tonight. If she had a phone I could have saved myself the trip. I'm afraid we're stuck with her for now." Genya blows up her lips at her mother.

"No matter, we can take her along."

"And where are we going?"

"A party, but not till later. A magus named Aleksandr Savchenko will be there."

"Will he help us?"

"He will talk to us." I don't sound encouraging. "Anyway, your house was being watched by a young lupine." I remove his wallet from my pocket and hand it over to Katya. "Recognize him?"

"No," she responds after a few moments looking at his identification, "but I assume he didn't hand this over cheerfully."

"He never missed it," I respond, producing Katya's own wallet from my pocket.

She snatches it away from me in mock anger. "Damn magician! Oooh, I hate when you do that!"

"So arrest me, Investigator Szarkewicz," I say, offering my hands, "You're just afraid I'll figure out how to. . ." I glance over at an unusually attentive Genya. "Never mind."

I tell Katya what information I gathered from the search of her home; nothing. With Genya in tow she had similar progress. With luck we will have better success with Savchenko.

"So you're telling me that we aren't invited to this party?" Katya chides.

We are standing in the bushes below a second floor window of an attractive, expensive home. I retort, "Remember how you convinced me to crash that wedding in Chernigov? As I recall you were able to con-

vince just about everyone that you were some distant family member and gorged yourself on the buffet."

"But," she counters, "You'll be breaking and entering." Not that long ago I would have been the one to hold her back. The Militia has made her surprisingly respectful of the law.

I gather Katya and Genya into my arms. "No. I'll have my hands full, you'll be doing the breaking."

We rise up off the ground towards the window. Genya laughs with glee while her mother closes her eyes tightly and mutters, "I wish you'd give me a little more warning before you do that."

"It wouldn't help. Here we are. Just open the window and quit your squirming."

She pops a small window pane from its frame, her hand moving so quickly as to be only a blur. Reaching inside, she releases the latch. The zephyrs float us through the open window into the darkened room beyond.

"That was fun!" Genya bubbles. "Let's do it again!"

I chuckle and Katya growls at me, "She is definitely your daughter."

"Oh, so it's my fault you don't like heights. That's the thanks I get for being kind to animals," I tease. "I count easily half a dozen times I had to fly your furry tail out of some jam you had gotten yourself into."

"I got myself. . ." Katya begins, then stops. "Where's Genya?"

Where Genya was going was out the door. She had quickly gotten bored by our banter and had decided to go exploring the house on her own. The zephyrs put a stop to that, carrying her aloft, kicking and writhing, to hover in front of her mother and I. Once I have her, no amount of struggling will allow her to escape. She calms down.

I say in a quiet voice, "Listen carefully, little one. My father helped to despoil an entire continent over decades, so I couldn't avoid learning a thing or two. And, if there is one thing your mother taught me it is how to tie a strong knot. I will not tolerate your running off on your own or misbehavior of any kind. Do I make myself clear?"

Genya says nothing, hovering wide-eyed before me. I smile and tap her playfully on the nose with my finger. "Now, stay with your mother and listen, all right?" She brightens slightly but is still reserved. I scared her a little.

"All right," she says, sheepishly.

I set her down and she latches tightly onto her mother's hand. Before we leave the room to crash the party downstairs, Katya whispers in my ear, "I love it when you assertive. If I misbehave, will you tie me down?"

I turn and look at her smiling eyes. I open my mouth to reply but change my mind. There is important business to attend to. Besides, Genya is listening.

Aleksandr Savchenko looks to be a man in his early fifties, healthy Slavic stock and otherwise unremarkable. I know him to be fifteen years older than he looks and a magus of significant skill. He is talking politics with several men at the end of the buffet table, an attractive young woman, a third his age, hanging on his arm.

I lay our coats across the back of a chair near the door. Katya, with consummate skill and charm, has already placed herself within the socializing crowd. Genya, being well behaved and excessively cute, has apparently inherited her mother's talents. Reminding myself that she is only four years old is not comforting.

I claim a glass from a passing waiter and work my way over to the end of the buffet table.

"Savchenko," I interrupt over his shoulder once I reach him, "You seem to be doing very well for yourself. You always did have excellent taste in women."

"Excellent taste. . . ?" he begins, turning around. "Ruzhkov?"

"I'm pleased you remember," I smile.

"Who the hell let you in here?" He's not pleased to remember.

"That's a fine greeting for an associate you haven't seen in a decade. Aren't you going to introduce me to your lovely companion?" I take her hand, bowing my head to kiss a delicate knuckle. I hope to put Savchenko off balance, knowing that he has been married for well on forty years.

"Don't try to dodge me, Ruzhkov." He turns to his companion and softens his voice. "Excuse us, Stefa. I need to send this 'gentleman' on his way."

Stefa? I nearly swallow my tongue, suddenly realizing that the woman is his youngest daughter! I remember playing 'Border Check Point' with her when we were just children. How old was she? Nine? Younger? And I was. . . old enough to know better. Stefa has grown up.

Savchenko grabs my arm and begins escorting me to the door. "I don't know what you want and I don't want to know."

I stop and prevent him from dragging me off. "I'm here to offer you something. Something that. . ."

"I want nothing of your schemes, Ruzhkov! This Covenant wants nothing you have to offer! The Tribunal ruled. . ."

"I'm not talking to the damn Tribunal! I'm not talking to the Covenant! I'm talking to you!" I break his grip on my arm. "My grandfather once told me 'Sasha may be an ass, but he knows where his boots are.' You might not realize this but even a compliment like that didn't come easily for him."

We're near the door, one step away from the chair where I left the coats. Katya's perfect timing and keen attention has brought her there just as I turn around and collect the coats. I turn back to Savchenko.

"You're ready to throw away an opportunity you know nothing about." I pause. "Perhaps my grandfather was wrong." I hand Katya and Genya their coats and count the steps that Savchenko's mind makes.

He looks at Genya, who smiles coyly up at him. He recognizes something and looks up at me. He looks at Katya, then again at Genya. He takes five full seconds to piece the little one's heritage together.

"We need to talk," he says.

Savchenko owns a nice home and while Katya and Savchenko's family entertain and are entertained by Genya in the living room, Savchenko and I converse in his study.

"The little one is lupine," he says.

"You're a genius, Savchenko," I reply. "Of course she's lupine, and she has the Gift as well."

"So, why do you bring this to me?"

"Well, I tried contacting Ivaniuk but he was dead and Speiko refused to even listen to me."

"I shouldn't be listening to you either."

"When my grandfather died, the Tribunal dropped me like a hot rock. It had nothing to do with the Oath, like they said. I was different, an outsider and it frightened them that I was as accomplished as magi twenty years my senior. I didn't play their political games or prostrate myself to their authority. I was left to the cold."

Savchenko comments, "I wasn't in Novgorod at the time so I didn't have anything to do with the Tribunal's decision. I had my own concerns here in Kiev."

"That is exactly my point. What my grandfather said about knowing where your boots are, here you are on the Tribunal's frontier. If you don't actively cause trouble you are left to your own. Free to do what you want."

"And what is it that you want me to be free to do?" Savchenko doesn't want guess, he wants me to say it.

"An apprentice."

Savchenko sits in silence. The Kiev Covenant hasn't had a new apprentice in over a decade, probably closer to two. There can be no doubt that Genya has the Gift and her lupine heritage offers untold opportunities.

Savchenko is understandably cautious. "What is the catch?"

"What do you know of Garou society?"

"Garou?" He has apparently never heard the term the lupine use for themselves.

"I thought as much. The lupines have a traditional coming of age ceremony, a Rite of Passage. It is usually highly dangerous, often lethal. There are apparently some Garou that have discovered Genya's special gift and want to initiate her now rather than waiting for her to actually come of age. I'm here to deal with that problem specifically but in the long run only a Covenant can provide the kind of stability and security she needs to mature into her talents."

Savchenko has stood and is pacing now, weighing what I have said. He has three daughters of his own and the parallels are not wasted on him. None of his children are magically gifted either and that is also in my favor. The bait is taken, now to set the hook. "This has nothing to do with me, anymore. You know I lack to skills to teach her the Art. An apprenticeship would be between you, Genya and Kataryna. I am merely the nameless petitioner, an anonymous patron of the Art. If you want, I was never even here."

He paces towards the door to the living room. I too go to the doorway and we watch our daughters playing together in the next room. I can think of nothing more to say.

After a time, he takes a deep breath and utters but one word. "Yes."

"The details will be worked out later," I explain to Katya as she drives, "but essentially, a modern apprenticeship is like magic school. Most of the time, parents aren't involved in magical training. They often don't know their child has the Gift, but this is a special case."

"So, this Savchenko isn't going to take over?" Katya asks.

"Absolutely not. In a way, he is apprenticing to you to teach him about lupines. The two of you will have to work together to come up with a program for Genya."

"Well, I at least have a favorable impression of him from his wife."

"As good a referral as anyone might expect. I'm sure she keeps him from developing into a complete and total ass."

Katya glances over at me. "If things are going so well, why do you still look worried?"

"For the most part, Magi are reasonable people. I fear the people we next have to deal with won't be so reasonable."

"I've seen you in action, lover. You can handle yourself"

"That's not it," I sigh after a pause. "Those times I was defending myself. Reacting. Running, mostly. The fight itself was a surprise so I didn't have time to think about it. This time, though, a fight seems inevitable and I don't know how to really prepare myself for it. I'm no warrior."

"We are all born warriors, Geradi. From our first gasps at birth to our last dying breaths we fight and struggle for life. Everything we do in between is tactics and strategy. Love is two warriors, back to back, fighting off the universe."

"You're beginning to sound like a philosopher. Next you'll be quoting Musashi."

"Nah, I was never very good with a sword." She flashes a smiling glance. "Trust me, you'll do just fine." I'm still not convinced so Katya changes the subject. "Tomorrow, we'll go to my office and see what we can turn up. Those passport copies you have should be a good start. The Chekists left some extensive records that we were able to save from the shredder."

"And while we're looking through those files," I lament, "they know someone else is interested. They don't know who I am or what my interest is but it will put them on their guard. And how long before the hunting pack in Chicago follows us back here?"

"Stubborn mage, you're worrying again. You think too much. I'll tell you what," she says with an impish grin, "promise me not to worry until we get to the office tomorrow and I'll promise not to force you to teach me how to play 'Border Check Point.'"

So much for hoping that Stefa didn't remember me.

"So, Katya, after two days of searching files, all we have is a list of names."

Kataryna's office was small to begin with and was now made smaller by stacks of papers, files and leftover meals. Two days of searching Militia and liberated KGB files have revealed a network of potential interested parties but nothing conclusive.

"It's not as bad as all that," Katya says. "A good investigation uses instinct as well as fact. Don't you remember telling me that magic uses instinct as well?" Katya indicates some pictures pinned to the wall. "Look here. . . and here. . . these men have associations with this man and he is an associate of this woman. Aside from their common presence in official files, what do they have in common?"

I look at the pictures and notes for a few moments. "They all have brown eyes," I conclude, successfully dodging the bread crust Katya hurls at my head. I spend another few minutes gazing at the wall. "I surrender, Katya. What aren't I seeing?"

"I'll give you a hint," she says, coming to stand close behind. "Where do they live?"

"Remember, this isn't my city," I berate her while comparing addresses. "You're the one who knows this city like the back of her hand."

"I don't know, you know the back of my hand fairly well."

I glance between the notes on the wall and the map of Kiev behind Katya's desk. Troyeshchyna, Vyguroyshchyna, Voskresenskaya, all neighborhoods to the north of Kiev proper, on the eastern side of the Dnepr. There are marshes there, pockets of undeveloped nature surrounded by factories.

"Eureka," I mutter.

Katya asks, "What does that mean? Is that Latin?"

"It's Greek for 'my bath water is too hot.'" So much for philosophy. "Who owns this property right here?"

Suddenly there is a newspaper photograph in front of my face. "His name is Leonid Karaev."

"Wasn't Josyf Karaev one of the hunters in Chicago? Is this his father?"

"Uncle, actually. Josyf doesn't have any particular record but the Chekists had a political file on Uncle Leonid. Nothing extensive, he wasn't even a minor dissident, kept quiet, but he had a file anyway. It's my guess that he's the caretaker of the caern that's on a forested knoll right around here." She indicates a spot in the marshes. "I've never been there myself."

"But he's not the head of this conspiracy, is he?"

"I don't think so. He doesn't strike me as the kind of person that would instigate such a kidnapping. He plays some part, maybe he can be reasoned with." I laugh, "Parenthood has made you moderate."

"Yeah," she sighs. "Look, it's been a few days. I'm going to visit Genya for a few hours, then we can both pay Mr. Karaev a visit."

"Missing the pitter-patter of tiny paws?"

"Watch it, monkey-boy, she's your daughter too. Just wait until she's flying around the house, setting fire to the cat, then you can take care of her."

I laugh and hand her a coat. "You go on ahead, I have a few things I should discuss with Savchenko. We'll meet back here in, say, three hours and go on from there."

Katya leaves and I remain in her office to collect a few things. Perhaps Savchenko can tell me more about Leonid Karaev or the property the caern is on.

I barely note the distinctive sound of Katya's car starting up outside but when a truck engine starts immediately afterward, something prompts me to look out the window.

Katya has already driven from sight but I do find the truck. I open the dirty window to get a better view.

The driver of the truck is the young lupine that had been watching Katya's house. I should have thought that he place of work might be watched as well. I race out of the office, across desk tops and down the back stairs If that little bastard follows Katya to where Genya is. . .

I burst out of the station's back door, sprawling down the short flight of steps I didn't expect to be there. Too late, the truck is gone. I should have gone out the window.

I quickly begin judging how long it will take me, without a vehicle, to reach Katya. Too long. I begin to run.

I reach Irena's house in good time, but I fear it's not good enough. Katya's car sits out front but the house is dark.

I hit the front door at full speed, blowing it from it's hinges and landing me face down in the living room. Except for my labored breath the house is quiet.

My eyes adjust to the dimness, moonlight filtering in through windows. Everything appears normal and undisturbed but it feels very wrong. I pick myself off the floor, enter the hallway and then the first bedroom.

Kataryna's cousin Irena lies slumped against a dresser. Her face is cut badly, her jaw may be dislocated, her shoulder too. Her breathing is shallow but her heart beats strong. Very wrong.

Almost frantic now, I leave the bedroom. I call out to Katya but there is no reply. The next bedroom is empty. Genya was here but no longer.

I find Katya in the kitchen.

She lies face up behind the table. I throw the kitchen table aside and rush to her. I take her in my arms, my hand comes away from her back sticky wet with blood. A dagger, contrasting bright silver and dark blood, shimmers nearby in a patch of moonlight.

No valiant final words, no requiem, not even a last look into her anguished lover's eyes. Only a shudder, a sigh and death.

An icy emptiness appears in the place that once held my heart. Thoughts, emotions, everything evaporates as I hold Katya's lifeless form. After minutes that fill a lifetime I reach out a trembling hand and grasp the dagger's hilt.

I have an appointment.

The caern's focus is a large, ancient tree on the edge of a clearing. A scant century ago, one might have been able to climb it's high branches to gaze across the Dnepr to see the Great Gates of Kiev and the Cathedral of St. Sophia in the distance. The view now is of factories and industrial haze.

My vantage in lesser trees on the other side of the glade gives me view of a congregation of a dozen lupines, most in human form, collected near the great tree. Lanterns add to the moonlight's illumination. Leonid Karaev, the older caretaker, sits on a fallen tree and leaning on a walking stick. Other, much younger lupines, several of who I recognize from the files, stand in attendance. At least two are armed with hunting shotguns. A pair in wolfen form sit quietly.

The focus of attention is a large, athletic man, the obvious leader. He kneels before a wide eyed and curious Genya, speaking with sweeping gestures and smiles. From here I cannot hear his words but Genya cannot know what has happened.

I am finished spectating. "When are you going to tell her how you murdered her mother?" I ask loudly, punctuating my question by jumping to the ground. "Or were you going to lie to her when she asked where she was?"

The assemblage leap to their guards but do not immediately attack, disturbed that I would walk alone and unarmed past their guard dogs and into their midst but confident in their overwhelming numbers. The leader passes Genya off to two females and speaks, "Who is this and how did he get in here?"

His question wasn't directed at me but I speak anyway. "Will you tell her how you crept like a cowardly thief into her aunt's house and drove a silver dagger into her mother's back?" I am taking slow, measured steps across the glade.

The young lupine that had been following Katya, who lead the murders to her, emerges at the leader's side. "Dmitri, this is the one I told you about. He has a badge but I don't think he's a Chekist."

"Dmitri," I say quietly, pausing in my advance. "I'm here for the little one." My eyes never leave his as I draw the dagger, still dark with blood, from my pocket and toss it across the ten meters of space separating us. The silver glitters in the moonlight for a moment before it lands like a dead thing at his feet.

He looks down at it for a moment, his emotions unreadable, the looks up again. "I don't know who you are but I don't think you realize the danger you are in here. Go home, little man, before you get hurt."

I repeat myself, "I'm here for the girl."

Dmitri laughs, "What is she to you, human?" He gestures and Genya screams. I duck but the lupine's claws graze across my head and shoulder. I am borne to the ground by a largish half-wolf.

My attacker looks down on me in triumph, savoring the victory before tearing out my throat, then his eyes go wide with the realization that he has caught fire.

I cast the lupine's flaming form aside and stand quickly, wiping my blood from my eyes.

The latch of a shotgun closes with a distinctive sound but before the bearer can take aim the zephyrs spin him about and both barrels erupt point blank into his wolfen companion.

I sweep my hands and the lanterns explode, spilling flaming kerosene onto the grass and more lupines. I continue my advance.

Two lupines attempt to attack from either side but are cast back by mystic winds. One quickly recovers and renews his attack but I catch him in mid-air where he erupts into flames. He is dropped only when his struggles end. Another step forward.

Dmitri is removing his coat and transforming to a half-wolf form. "What is she to you, magician?" He assumes a fighting stance, not realizing that, for him, it as far too late.

My advance has taken me past the dagger to stand a mere meter away from his impressive lupine form. "What is she to me?" I ask quietly, my voice seeming to carry deep into the trees.

He cocks his head at the tone of my voice only to be lifted from the ground and thrown heavily against the ancient tree. He rebounds from the force of the blow but remains held aloft. He struggles and writhes, attempting to attack, to retreat, but he finds everything just

out of reach. Once I have him, no amount of struggling will allow him to escape.

I slam him against the tree again. "What is she to me?" I repeat, my voice a hoarse whisper.

He spins around, end over end, and is thrown face first into the trunk. The zephyrs hold him there with the strength of iron chains. Stepping forward, my left hand grasps his ear and hauls his head back. The dagger leaps from the ground to my right hand which drives the blade into Dmitri's back.

The silver bites deep and the lupine roars like a beluga. I pull the blade away, blood spilling freely. "Eugina Ruzhkova Szarkewicz," I growl in his hear, "is my daughter."

The blade slams again into his back and I bear hard on the grip, driving the blade up to the hilt. Dmitri screams in pain and anger, his claws gouging great marks in the tree, but he still cannot move enough to escape.

I haul my leg back and drive my knee into theommel, forcing the blade wrist deep into the wound. The lupine coughs once and with much blood then goes limp.

I hold him a moment then turn from the tree, dropping his body on the grass and leaving the dagger still deep within him. If there is any sound to hear I am deaf to it. There is nothing but the roaring of my pulse and the labor of my breath. The remaining lupines stand as statues.

I turn my head towards the two females standing at either of Genya's shoulders. They immediately step back on uncertain legs. I point my blood covered finger at the remaining lupines. "If I ever see any of your hired jackals, I'll kill them."

The caretaker still sits on the fallen log. I address them all but direct myself at him. "If I hear so much as a rumor that one of you even thought about taking my daughter I will return to this place, wipe it from the face of the Earth and send anyone who stands in my way along with it."

My legs feel like lead as I attempt a step. I close my eyes for a moment that is a nightmare remembered. "Now go home before I change my mind and begin the Apocalypse right now."

Then, I see Genya. She stands shaking like a leaf, her eyes wide and wet with terror, her breath in rapid, quiet whimpers. She looks on me like some great and horrible monster.

The cold, empty place that was in my chest fills with despair as I drop heavily to my knees. Tears streaming from my eyes I look up to see Leonid Karaev, the caern's caretaker and last to leave. The old man stands silent and strong for a moment before turning to fade quietly into the woods, leaving father and daughter together and alone.

What have I done?

The morning of the funeral is cold and raining. A contingency of the Militia is there to see their comrade off. Irena is there, her face bandaged and her arm in a sling. Little Genya holds her other hand tightly.

My vantage is far away, by a lonely tree on the hill above the grave. . From here I cannot hear the eulogy nor can I see the expressions on the faces of the mourners. Even so, I can see Genya standing as tall as she can, imitating the silent bravery of the uniformed Militia.

Savchenko comes up behind me. "She doesn't act like she's only four years old."

"She has a lot of growing up to do," I say.

The silence hangs between us for a few moments while the cold rain finds a way inside my coat to run down my back. "I face the challenges of raising a daughter and run to America to throw myself into the middle of a war." I sigh, "I am a coward."

Savchenko says nothing to dispute me. I continue quietly, "It is for the best, I suppose. Adventure has a way of following me. No place for a young child." My rationalizations are without comfort.

The ceremony is over and the mourners drift away to continue their lives. Once they are gone, the workers move in with shovels to return the earth to its place.

"There have been questions," Savchenko says. "Apparently the Tribunal has caught wind. I have someone who will drive you to Lvov. You'll be able to get a plane from there." He steps closer and places a large, fatherly hand on my shoulder. "She'll be all right. She's young and strong, in time she'll forget the worst of it."

"You weren't there," I whisper, "to see the sheer terror in her eyes. To witness through her eyes what I had become. Her mother is dead and I lay her murderers about me in blood and in fire. She'll never forget that." I pause. "And I have lost her as well."

Savchenko withdraws his hand. "When you're finished here, come by the house and we'll see you on your way home." He turns and walks away, leaving me more alone than I have ever been before.

The cold drizzle turns to a light snow. Katya always loved the snow.

Chapter 17 (Game Session Thirteen, May 93)

From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov

Chapter 17

by Kevin A. Geiselman

Game Session Thirteen, May 1993

Tuesday, 23 November 1993

O'Hare Airport, Evening

There are 13,000 kilometers between Kiev and Chicago and I have watched each one of them pass below. My thoughts are consumed by the events of the past week and by Katya's death. I feel half of what I once was.

The airport is crowded and hectic as it is the week of the American national holiday Thanksgiving. An ironic twist for my return to Chicago. I pick up a newspaper to see what has occurred while I was gone.

The investigation continues into last week's explosion at the Sears Tower. All 110 floors of the skyscraper were damaged when a natural gas main ruptured, flooded the structure and subsequently ignited. Miraculously, no casualties have been found and damage to surrounding structures was nearly nonexistent. Reports of multiple explosions before the main explosion and rumors of a gun battle have been discounted. The explosion is being ruled accidental.

In an unrelated, but similar incident, the cause of an explosion at the Wrigley Building on the same night remains undetermined.

I don't believe a word of it.

Earlier this year, in January I believe, I was boarding a plane leaving New York City for Chicago when I heard a report of the bombing of the World Trade Center. Now, exiting a plane in Chicago, there is word of two mysterious explosions. I'm not sure I believe the coincidence. Something else knaws at the edge of my consciousness, something else connecting these two 'unrelated' events, though I cannot place it. If only I were not so distracted

One thing I am sure of, however, is the war that was brewing a week ago has gotten hotter.

I call Mina but her phone is no longer in service. Any number of things may have happened, especially considering the condition of her home when I last saw it. She may have simply moved but I am concerned, nonetheless.

I find a taxi and direct the driver to take me to the Succubus Club. The odds of my finding Mina there are quite good. Finding her to know that she is all right is important to me, I don't want to let another friend down.

The Succubus Club, Evening

The dance floor is not quite so crowded on a weeknight. It makes finding Mina all that much easier. She is at the bar across the room with her friend Selina. I blow in her ear to gain her attention.

She spins around, apparently intent on assault only to find no one standing near enough to have blown in her ear. Then she notices me across the room. I see her mutter something, probably a curse, obtain a bottle of vodka and then motion for me to join her at a table.

As I near the table I see that Mina has noted my disheveled appearance. Blood stains on my coat, the cut on my forehead, I haven't shaved or showered in days. I see the questioning concern in her eyes.

Selina is the first to speak, "Is this a new look for you?"

While her levity is perhaps appropriate, I am in too foul a mood to appreciate it. I swallow an offered glass of vodka and sit down.

Someone behind me says, "You look like shit, Geradi." It is Simon Jeffries, the next to last person I wish to deal with right now.

"Mr. Jeffries," I growl, "the ladies and I are having a private conversation and a drink."

I am pleasantly surprised that he immediately takes the hint and departs.

Mina says, "Amazing how they come out of the woodwork, isn't it."

I have another drink. "So, Mina, a lot seems to have happened in my absence."

Mina sighs. "What? Here in quiet, old Chicago? What could possibly happen here?"

"Well, there is the matter of Mrs. O'Leary's cow running loose in the Sears Tower."

"That isn't my fault. Honest."

Another voice interrupts from behind me. This time it is Silver. "Breather, how're you doin'? You look like shit. Hey, I've got a big, creepy metal box in the lot next door I want you to check out. It's about six and a half feet tall. Kinda' like that thing from 2001. Re-

member the music was playing? Baaa . . . baaa . . . baaa . . . ba baaa. Did you see that movie?"

I recognize the distinctive opening chords of Also Sprach Zarathustra but otherwise have no clue as to what the hell she is babbling about. I turn to Mina with the expression of one lost. She offers, "Well, you're the one who came home."

Silver changes topics with breakneck speed, thanking me for my 'gift'. She hasn't had a chance to use it, saving it for a 'special occasion'.

We are interrupted yet again by a gentleman in an expensive pinstripe suit. This vampir strikes me as being a gangster from a bad Italian film with all the subtlety of a lead pipe.

My first impressions are realized when he introduces himself. "My name is Gueseppi Giovanni. I understand that you hang out with a Nosferatu."

And I thought the vampir were supposed to be a secret society. I was just leaving, anyway.

Mina was apparently thinking the same thing, standing and saying, "Excuse us, we were just leaving." We escape, leaving Silver to deal with him. She's a gangsteress herself, isn't she?

As we are making our way out I notice Simon Jeffries irritating someone at the bar. John Sebastian. Suddenly that thought at the edge of my consciousness comes to the fore.

Late last year I did a favor for Sebastian, helped him with some magical theory that he had trouble grasping. I didn't think much of it at the time but Sebastian found it very important and he was extremely grateful. It's not often that a hedge magus such as myself can help a strict Hermetic practitioner and rarer still to be appreciated for it.

I left John Sebastian in New York and there was a bombing at the World Trade Center. Now I return to Chicago, to another skyscraper explosion and find John Sebastian. Coincidence?

Mina notices my pause and, perhaps thinking I am about to have words with Jeffries, advises me to 'just walk away'.

Silver catches up with us. "Hey, That was rude. I wanted to ask you a question. So, lunch tomorrow? Nothing personal. I'll eat before, you can bag a lunch."

I pay little attention to her. "I think I need to talk to Sebastian," I mutter.

"Sir John?" Silver exclaims. "Not my favorite person. He did this to me." She wiggles her finger in the air. "You know, that stuff you do." If I didn't know that she meant magic I would be confused by her reference. I am curious to know what exactly Sebastian did to her but the more she talks the more I think that, whatever it was, she probably deserved it.

I turn from Silver in time to see John Sebastian drive his fist into Jeffries' face, sending him crashing into a table. While Jeffries is picking himself up off the floor I quickly step forward to the fighting space that has opened up and say, "John, when you've finished with him, I would like a word with you." I sit at a nearby table to vicariously enjoy the beating Jeffries is about to take.

Jeffries lunges and they grasp hands. To most assembled it appears a test of raw strength but there are magical energies flowing between them.

I notice also the telltale paleness of Sebastian's aura. When I dealt with him in New York he was able to conceal his vampirism. Then again, at the time he wasn't drunk out of his skull. Even so, Sebastian still wields considerable power. Enough to deal with Jeffries.

Silver leaves her spectating station to run off, joyously yelling "Presto!" I glance up to see that Elric Tremere has entered the club, looking as haggard as I do.

He has foregone his usual expensively tailored suit for a black leather jacket and denim pants. He has also gained a serious scar across his right eye. Something very nasty must have happened to leave a scar on a vampir.

He surveys the fight going on and cries "Enough!" His feeble attempt to halt the fight is ignored by all assembled.

Turning back to the fight, Sebastian has split Jeffries' lip and, in turn, has incurred a bloody nose. They break their mystic grapple, exchange a few physical blows and return to grappling.

The Tremere reaches the edge of the fighting circle. He gains the attention of a large employee, colloquially known as a bouncer. Normally, a bouncer's duty is to maintain order and finish fights that others start. In this case, Sebastian and Jeffries' altercation isn't getting out of hand so the bouncer is just spectating.

The Tremere isn't satisfied with just spectating, hands the bouncer a hundred dollar bill and hurls a table at the two. The table strikes an invisible mystic barrier and crashes to the ground.

I attempt to save the Tremere a useless expenditure of energy and money. "Tremere," I say just loud enough to be heard over the crowd, "Do not meddle in things you do not understand."

He ignores my advice, hands the bouncer another bill and hurls another table. This time, the table is arrested in mid-flight and is hurled back at him, knocking the Tremere to the ground.

For some inexplicable reason, Silver does not take the subtle hint and insists on antagonizing the combatants by pouring a bottle of wine on them. They pause just long enough to roughly cast her aside. Tremere takes the hint this time and sits to wait out the fight.

By this point, Sebastian and Jeffries are certainly becoming indiscriminate in their use of magic. I suppose that in a place frequented by many of the vampirism they feel amongst friends. I consider it sloppy.

Grabbing Jeffries by the ears, Sebastian drives Jeffries' head into his knee, twice, then tosses him aside, effectively bringing the fight to an end. He yells, "Get the hell out of my city and never return!"

Jeffries picks himself up off the floor. "Your dream will fall, Sebastian, by the children you've created!" The crowd parts as Jeffries stumbles towards the exit. The assemblage returns to their dancing and socializing. Sebastian ignores him and returns to his drink.

The smell of his drunkenness assaults me as I approach to talk to him. Before I speak he looks up, "Geradi, you look like shit."

"So I've heard. You also look like shit." Sitting on the stool beside his, I continue, "So, John, what has brought you to Chicago or is this just a coincidence.?"

"I believe you know much more now about the situation than you did when I last saw you in New York."

Sabbat, Black Spiral Dancers, Ramses, Templars, "Much more than I care to."

"Let's just say that the enemies of my people attempted to take over the city. I came here to stop them."

"And the Sears Tower took damage in the process?" I prompt.

"Apparently some of my children were a bit overzealous."

"When I last talked to you in New York, the World Trade Center took damage. The two aren't related, are they?"

"No. That was really as the papers said. One thing you can be sure of, though; where my child Elric goes, destruction is pretty sure to follow."

I glance around for the Tremere but don't see him in the crowd. "Another coincidence. I've met Elric Tremere."

"Impetuous lad, isn't he?"

"And your apprentice, I take it."

"Yes, but I have failed to teach him restraint."

I don't mention Sebastian's recent lack of restraint with Jeffries. "I seem to recall your calling me about two weeks ago."

"I'm afraid this is rather difficult to explain. Let's just say I have a twin brother."

"And it was he that called. That concerns me."

"It shouldn't concern you. You can easily tell my brother from me as he is completely evil and I am a useless drunk."

Silver, appearing from nowhere, interrupts, "Sounds like a good distinction to me." I don't think her eavesdropping very polite. Apparently, neither does Sebastian.

"Silver, so glad the burns on your face healed," he says, explaining exactly what 'stuff' he did to her.

"I'm sure you are, you sorry bastard."

"That's me. I'm a sorry bastard." I've noted his drinking pattern, taking another drink with the end of each sentence.

"Oh, buy him another drink, Geradi," Silver chortles, "I'm sure he'll be vomiting blood any minute."

What little money I have is Ukrainian currency. "I'm afraid I've spent all my money, Silver."

"Oh, allow me." She hands me a hundred dollar bill. "It'll be my pleasure. Buy him all the drinks he wants."

I do not share Silver's desire to see Sebastian vomit blood. Standing to leave I set the bill on the bar. Sebastian says, "Take care, Geradi. Things are not as they seem."

"Are things ever as they seem?"

"No, I suppose not." He pauses, staring into his glass and remembers something else. "You had some contact with lupines, didn't you?"

It strikes a raw nerve. "Yes," is all I can say.

"I don't know if you care at all for the lupine community, but one of their strongest enemies is making their presence felt in the city." He sounds like he himself cares little for lupines but is informing me only for my benefit. "Just thought I'd give you the warning."

"Consider me warned. You should sober up." I leave Sebastian to his misery, I have enough of my own without sharing his.

I look for Mina in the crowd but she is gone. I had really needed to talk to her, to talk about the weather, history, women, anything at all, but instead all I found were nonsensical distractions.

Pracliyatiya! I should never have come to this place. Aimless and depressed, I drift onto the night streets.

Downtown Chicago, Late Night

My mind wanders, even as I do, finding no specific thought on which to focus. I am so distracted that I do not notice the person behind me until he speaks.

"Give. . . give me all your money."

I stop and slowly, almost casually, look over my shoulder. The boy holding a gun in small hands can be no more than twelve years old. I turn around fully and he repeats himself, his voice trembling.

An odd sounding laughter breaks from my chest. Would this child shoot me for the handful of Ukrainian coins in my pocket? Do I even care at this point? After a moment I am glad to discover that I do.

The zephyrs snatch the pistol from his hand and deliver it to my own. The child seems to regain his senses and runs off.

Anger! Hate! Violence! Kill! Emotions pour from the pistol, invading my mind. I drop it immediately.

I kneel down to examine the weapon as if it were a vicious little animal. In a way it is. There is an energy permeating the pistol directed towards the baser, reptilian instincts.

I stand and glance around for a place to dispose of this hateful little killing machine. The zephyrs carry the tool to its new resting place in the Chicago River.

The situation has definitely not improved in my absence.

Chapter 18 (Game Session Fourteen, May 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman*

Chapter Eighteen: Game Session Fourteen, May 1993

Wednesday, 24 November 1993
Jackson Park, Late Night

Twenty four hours of aimless wandering finds me standing on the back of a park bench, gazing at the moonlight shimmering on Lake Michigan.

My walk of a night, a day and another night has brought further evidence of manifest hatred. Emanating from televisions on display in storefront windows, exuding from 'fast food' being consumed by the unsuspecting, it is the taint of the Wyrms. The war is beginning to claim the innocent.

And even the shadow of that threat over the city fails to focus my thoughts. I close my eyes and Kataryna is there, again dying in my arms.

"It is you, again." I recognize the Garou caretaker's basso rumble behind me. "You look like shit, magician."

In silence, I continue gazing out over the lake. He moves forward to stand at the end of the bench, at the edge of my vision. He sniffs the air and the scent of death I still carry. "Who's blood is that on your clothes?" His tone notes that he has recognized the scent of lupine blood.

"It is the blood of my mate and the blood of her murderer." I turn my head and look him square in the eyes. "You do not have a problem with that, do you?" It is a statement rather than a question.

He meets my gaze for a moment then turns again to the lake. "No. I suppose not." He pauses again. "So, magician, what can I do for you?"

"Given the state of your city perhaps the question should be what can I do for you?"

"Armageddon is surely coming, magician. Why would you want to help our kind."

"It's my planet, too."

"Fair enough. There is a company by the name of Pentax."

"I've heard of it." If I recall correctly, Pentax is spending a great deal of money repairing the damaged Sears Tower.

"They themselves do not do anything. But they own many companies who, in turn, flaunt environmental concerns. They are the purest servants of the Wyrms. Every day I see more and more people, children, tainted by the Wyrms' forces."

"So, what are we going to do about it," I ask.

"Pentax is a strong international company. But for now my concern is with Chicago. I hope to cause enough destruction that they will no longer consider it cost effective to continue to do business here. Unfortunately, this will mean terroristic methods."

"Terrorism, I will not tolerate."

"What do you suggest, then? If we do not destroy their companies they will grow stronger. Perhaps you have a mystic solution where our brute force has failed."

"There is always a place for the judicious use of force but that is not the same as terrorism. Striking at the leadership and the means of production while sparing the uninvolved workers. . . " I am beginning to sound like my father. "Who is in charge here in Chicago? Who are those at the top?"

"The one we have most recently targeted is James Keiker, a white South African. He started this Omni-Television cable station, broadcasting subliminal messages of hate and violence. He is known to be in Chicago. There is another, Elliot Machee, one we call 'the Pig', will be in the city sometime soon. Many of our kinfolk are lawyers and yet there is nothing we can do for these defilers somehow remain within the law. They are free to rape the earth because they have more powerful lawyers."

"Perhaps Shakespeare was right," I mutter.

The caretaker is becoming more emotional. "Then what shall we do first, Mage, since you don't approve of tearing down the factories."

"It's not that I disapprove of that! You're putting words in my mouth! I have encountered the Wyrms and left destruction in its place, however. . . " I remember a night, years ago, Katya running joyfully through a wheat field, a splash of red on a factory floor, blood and fire. My voice is quiet, "No. I will not tell you your duty. All I ask is that you choose your targets carefully to spare the innocent. What we do we do for them."

He measures my concerns and understands. "I will talk to the others." I give him the apartment phone number so he can contact me and he disappears into the night whispering a quiet prologue, "A warrior needs his allies."

Thursday, 25 November 1993

Geradi's Apartment, Early Morning

Sitting on the couch with a glass of vodka untouched I watch the twins sleeping. I lack to courage to join them in slumber, knowing that my thoughts will allow me no rest of my own and will only succeed in disturbing their dreams.

I watch their dreaming, pleasant emotions washing over them in waves of colour. They seem almost innocent. Innocent of the menace descending on their city, innocent of the forces that struggle and conspire while they sleep, innocent of the part their roommate is playing in the shadows.

'Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night.' I can't remember just now who said that but he was right. My schedule of working at night was, at first, the simple practicality of quiet study while others slept. The life of the nocturnals has now become a matter of survival. Hunters and hunted lurk in the shadows and I have become one of the predators.

And Kerry and Iduna dream; my tenuous link to the normal, daylight world. Is it selfish of me to remain here, putting them at risk for my own mental stability, or does my presence help to protect them from harm? I have lost so much, could I bear to loose them as well?

My life seems nothing but unanswered questions. But is that not what life is? Each question answered brings many new questions. An answer too late can mean death. If only I could escape into the kind of slumber the innocents enjoy, where dreams are only dreams.

All the thinking I've done for the past several days has accomplished nothing. Katya would chide me for thinking too much. "You have good instincts," she once said, "Trust them once in a while." The time has come to take that part of her and make it a part of me. The time has come to be reborn.

Geradi's Apartment, Morning

The clothes I wore, smelling of death and despair, have been cast in the garbage and I stand in the shower washing away layers of the past. The shower curtain is thrown aside and Iduna, wearing one of my shirts as nightclothes, leaps into the shower to greet me home only to leap out again when she realizes the water is scalding hot.

I turn the water off as she calls to her sister, who quickly joins us. In their presence, full of life, I quickly realize what a fool I was. I should have come straight here from the airport, rather than going to the damned Succubus Club and brooding for two days. Here, I feel better. Not good, but better, and for now that is good enough for Thanksgiving.

Chapter 19 (Game Session Fifteen, Jun 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman
Chapter Nineteen: Game Session Fifteen, June 1993*

Friday, 26 November 1993

Geradi's Apartment, 2:00 am

The phone rings.

After a thoroughly delightful holiday with a superb dinner, charming company and an exhausting game of 'where do I taste like cranberries' with Kerry and Iduna, I'm not sleeping. Nightmares lurk beyond the walls of sleep.

Normally, I would allow the answering machine to take care of it but I've been hoping Mina would call after our abortive attempt at conversation the other night. I climb out of bed and lift the handset.

"This is James Phoenix. I know we don't know each other in person but we have an acquaintance in common by the name of Elric Tremere."

At mention of the Tremere, my better judgment cries out to just hang up the phone but my curiosity wins out. What is the harm in listening to what he has to say?

"I've heard you're somewhat of an occult expert and I've got an unusual occult phenomenon."

I don't consider myself an 'occult expert', I consider myself a historian that does magic. I don't answer immediately and Phoenix seems to fear he may lose me so he offers to pay me for my services.

"I have this strange blue thing glowing on my wall. Actually, it's a friend's wall. Well, actually he's not. . . . Anyway, if you could come down and make sure it's not dangerous."

I look at the clock beside the bed, then at the twins sleeping contentedly. My better judgment wins out. "I don't know you and a reference from Elric Tremere is not compelling by any stretch. <Dobrae Utra, Gaspadin Phoenix.>"

The handset has nearly reached the cradle when I hear Phoenix's voice mention Mina's name. The phone returns to my ear. So much for better judgment.

"I can't wait until day to get ahold of you," Phoenix emphasizes. "I can't have daylight hours." I've never heard a hint dropped so insultingly heavy. Does he really believe I don't already know he's vampir? "I don't know how to convince you, all I know is there's a blue hole on the wall and you're the only occult expert I know."

I wasn't sleeping anyway. "What's the address."

Basement Apartment, Early Morning

The walk to the address Phoenix has provided allows me to survey another night of deterioration of Chicago. While I am able to avoid incident, the wailing of sirens in the distance announce that others are not so fortunate.

Many years ago I saw an American movie from the 1940's called 'The Big Sleep.' The man I assume to be Phoenix stands outside an apartment building, dressed and presenting himself like Humphry Bogart but the similarity ends there. I'm not prejudging him because he's vampir, I'm prejudging him because he called me at two in the morning.

"Sorry I couldn't have called you at a more reasonable time," he says, "but I don't have reasonable times. I'm a private investigator." As he escorts me into the basement apartment I think that this vampir has seen The Big Sleep once too often.

The apartment looks to be that of an artist, drawings and sketches adorn the walls and the vampir tenant completes the picture by sitting against the wall with a sketch pad.

The 'blue hole' that Phoenix described is just as he said. He explains, "It's his apartment. I accidentally stumbled on this thing and then felt bad about it. I'm afraid having a high sense of honor gets one in trouble these days."

"Tell me about it," I mutter under my breath.

It's a gate, that much is obvious. I would say it's a lupine moonbridge except that moonbridges connect caerns, using the sites inherent power to maintain the passage. A vampir's basement apartment hardly qualifies.

I begin looking around to see if I can find the energy source that maintains the gate or any reason for the gate to be here in the first place. Nothing.

For a moment I have the sensation that someone is looking close over my shoulder. I turn my head but no one is there. One's vision can often be deceived so I close my eyes and look without seeing. There. A presence without corporeal form. A spirit.

Oddly enough, this spirit does not seem attached to the gate. Spirits aren't usually so independent in the 'real world,' they need a focus. The apartment itself doesn't have the necessary inherent energy. The focus must be here somewhere.

I must look quite silly to Phoenix and the artist, eyes closed in the middle of the room, arms extended as if searching for a draft. In a manner I am; searching for the spirit's focus.

A few moments and I discover the focus to be the resident himself. He has a friend. The presence of the spirit might explain why the gate appeared here and not next door, however the two aren't more connected than that. The energy actually maintaining the gate is on the other side.

Unexpectedly, someone peeks through the gate. A black skinned, slimy near-human creature looks quickly around then whines as I telekinetically prevent him from leaving.

"Let go of ghouls," it gurgles. "What do you want, human thing?"

Phoenix produces a shotgun. The creature can't go anywhere but his apprehension is not without cause. "This happens to be our city," I say, "and your likes are not welcome."

The creature chortles, "But I bring goodies," and produces a bag, rattling its contents for emphasis.

"For who?" I ask.

"For many," he cackles, "for the children. . . and for the adults. I bring goodie goodies."

"Sorry, we're not interested." I shove the offensive creature back through the portal. I'm beginning to doubt that this is a lupine portal, no lupine I have ever been acquainted with would allow such an abhorrent creature access to their passage.

The creature seemed fixated on his 'gifts' and so was unlikely to provide me any information as to what lie at the other end of the bridge. That leaves actually stepping through as the only way of finding out just where it begins and who put it there.

Phoenix, perhaps noticing my posture towards stepping through the gate, offers, "I've been wanting to jump through the thing myself but I didn't want to go without some sort of occult expertise."

I mutter, "And me without my passport. . ."

"On three, then." Phoenix brandishes his shotgun. "One. . . two. . ."

Just as we step through, the artist speaks his first words since my arrival, "Are you sure you want. . ."

Avalon

Phoenix and I are unceremoniously dropped on a grassy knoll. . . somewhere. I've traveled by moonbridge before but this trip was different. In the heartbeat between leaving Chicago and arriving wherever here is I felt as if our travel was diverted. Pulled sideways, as it were, though different from the sideways that lupines refer to when they travel to the Umbra.

That time I didn't arrive dizzy either. Something is wrong. The sky looks to be a hazy twilight but I cannot tell east from west. The sky does not betray the sun. Nor can I tell which way is north. Normally, I sense the energy patterns along the magnetic lines of force between the poles, like an internal compass. In this place there are no lines.

We are further from Chicago than I thought. My passport wouldn't have helped here.

Yet, for the realization that this isn't Earth, it is not so removed as to be alien. The grass is still grass, trees are trees, the air is fresh and clean but no more unusual than that. Even the magical energies are the same, with the exception of the magnetic lines and a different flavor, like that of over sweetened tea.

Through a grove of trees I hear hoofbeats on gravel. Phoenix follows me through the thicket. Beyond is a simple roadway with a medieval knight on horseback.

I had thought, hoped actually, that perhaps we had found our way into some corner of Arcadia, the Realm of the Faerie, but the knight is armored in the same mixing of styles that Silver's 'Tin Man' had. He had called his home Avalon.

The knight hails me, "Another one? Ye Gods!"

As Phoenix extracts himself from the bushes, I say, "Another one of what, might I ask?"

The knight replies "There are two of you! Are either of you demon-plagued?"

I've heard this routine before, however I resist the urge to be flip-pant and say that if he can't tell I certainly won't tell him. It is wise not to irritate a big man with a spear.

Phoenix exclaims, "Demon-plagued? Nope, not me!" Smart vampir.

"Do you also wish to be 'taken to my leader?'" the knight asks. The question has a familiar lilt to it, that of a silver-haired vampir. "The last maiden that arrived was treated as a princess at the castle. Perhaps you too will be afforded royal treatment. Wouldst thou like to try thy luck?" He doesn't sound pleased, which is understandable; Silver's dress and behavior would certainly overwhelm an average medieval knight raised on medieval virtues. Then again, the vision of Silver packed into a 14th Century cotehardie is certainly a sight I would not want to miss. We accept the knight's offer and are escorted away.

The Castle

To a medieval historian like myself, the castle and its environs are a disappointment. This place is not a slice of medieval life but an anachronism, a collection of elements from many regions and periods of medieval Europe and elsewhere.

Upon entering the castle I am aware of something that sets it apart from any other castle I've been in; it's warm. Medieval castles are notoriously damp and drafty, this place feels as if it has central heating.

I am also struck by the sheer size of the castle proper. Medieval castles were military structures, a great hall for feasting and barracks for soldiers but few other comforts for the occupants. Actual living spaces were most often outside the curtain walls in a manor house, a smaller collection of structures, easier to heat and maintain.

This place is immense, like a small city contained within the bastions. There must surely be apartments, storage rooms, chapels, feast halls, armories, kitchens, hallways and more hallways all within the great walls. It probably has indoor plumbing.

I hate it. It's a fairy tale castle that even the Faerie would avoid.

We are met beyond the gates in a great cathedral-like entryway by a man in a silk shirt and smelling of perfume. He assesses my 20th Century attire. "That will never do," he laments. "We must have you properly dressed before presenting you to his Lordship."

I assess myself; American denim, collared cotton dress shirt, a leather flight jacket, a relic of the Great Patriotic War. I cannot imagine myself in the 13th Century furs and robes that the Novgorod magi wear at ceremonies.

"Morris," the perfumed man addresses a large servant-type looming out of the shadows, "attend this gentleman to quarters to find him proper attire and anointing oils to make him presentable."

As Morris escorts me away I hear the man in conversation with Phoenix and the words 'demon-plagued' are heard once again. The perfumed man calls on two guards for escort. <Fsvivo kharoshiva, Gaspadin Phoenix.>

A moment later I hear a piercing whistle and turn to see good fortune in the form of Silver rushing to Phoenix's rescue. She is dressed in a white cotton chemise and a maroon bodice. Her skirt isn't overly long, revealing sensible shoes and pleasant ankles as she strides towards Phoenix and the guards. She steps with an odd balance, missing the stiletto boots she would normally wear. Then again, it could be the knife that she, no doubt, has strapped to her thigh.

As she talks to the guards I smile, crossing my arms and leaning against the wall. In a way, the medieval dress suits her.

Silver succeeds in thoroughly intimidating the guards and turns to see my rapt attention. As she approaches I say, "Why am I not surprised to find you here?"

She notes my attention to her attire and threatens, "Not one word about my dress." Her discomfort is amusing but I was about to compliment her. Sometimes, I take risks I shouldn't.

Morris, waiting patiently and silently, finally says, "M'lord, we must get you dressed."

"I am dressed," I point out to him. Silver sees where this conversation is leading and brightens at the thought of my being humiliated as she has.

"No, no M'lord," Morris says, "you must be anointed and perfumed and. . ."

I interrupt him by leaning forward and presenting an open palm full of flames. "I am dressed."

His reaction is immediate and unexpected, throwing himself prostrate on the floor, crying "Aiiii! A mage! My Lord, I meant no offense! I would never presume. . . ." He trails off into meaningless babbles and shaking.

I extinguish the flame, glance over my shoulder at Silver, who looks disappointed, and tell Morris that he may rise. He stands, but attempts not to stand any taller than I do. He calls out to other attendants, "We have made a great error. Escort him to the Lord of the Mages."

At the mention of 'mage,' the attendants draw themselves up like soldiers being inspected. Silver quickly overcomes her annoyance to hang on my arm and present herself as my very best friend. Phoenix skulks along behind, trying to look inconspicuous.

Mage's Hall

We are brought to the end of a corridor to a door guarded by a red robed man. He says, "Which of you is. . . oh. . . of course." He has recognized my aura and, I am sure, the aura of my vampirim 'companions.' He ignores them completely, "Welcome, follower of the Way." Opening the door, he says, "Enter Milord, you are expected."

I pass the door but Silver and Phoenix are detained. This is a private audience. The door behind me closes over Silver's protests.

The meeting hall is large, dominated by a circular table at its center that could seat twenty or more. Three men in robes sit at the table. The magus in the largest seat is <pervyi srednii ravnykh>, first among equals, and he welcomes me, introducing himself as Nestor.

"The mages rather run things here," he explains, "Our power is recognized and respected. You are welcome here, traveler, but I would ask what brings you here?"

"My own foolishness in helping a friend of a friend, specifically, a random portal."

"The portals of which you speak are indeed appearing randomly or, at least, they are not at our direction. One such portal, seemingly now a permanent feature, has opened into the place the shapeshifters call the Deep Umbra and the Lair of the Wyrms. We know not of this place but have learned not to travel there."

I cannot judge by his mention of shapeshifters whether the Garou are perceived as enemies, allies or neutrals so I don't expand on my knowledge of moonbridges. I know that such an anchorhead into the Deep Umbra, accessible to anyone willing to risk stepping through, is dangerous enough without the Wyrms' influence. It is like an open wound in the fabric of reality.

Nestor continues, "We sent a warrior through one of the lesser, seemingly less dangerous rifts to find what lie beyond. He has not returned."

I describe the 'Tin Man,' "Tall, muscular build, blond, melded of magic and technology. . ."

"Dumb as a post," Nestor completes.

"Exactly. We've met."

"It is the nature of adventurers to continue their adventures ever further, forgetting that their patrons await reports of what they've discovered. Too often they die with all the knowledge they've collected."

"Well," I say, "the passage he came through is now blocked at the other end and the one through which I came is, in all likelihood, closed behind me." I pull up a chair and sit. "Perhaps I can tell you of my world and you can tell me of yours."

We sit for quite some time, discussing politics, mostly. In this place, the magi have risen to the ranks of the aristocracy through political manipulations and the simple raw power to back it up.

"I do not understand," Nestor asks, "with such a lack of order in your world, who controls the numbers of demon-plagued?"

The words 'demon-plagued' are beginning to irritate me, not only because of their use as an epithet but also in their simple inaccuracy. "Mostly, the other vampirim," I answer.

"Oh? And why should they do that? Why do they not exert themselves and take over?"

"They are petty, fighting amongst themselves," I say, neglecting to tell him that, for the most part, the magi are the same. I can only imagine the final war that allowed the magi to solidify their hold over society. Since then they seem to have evolved into a fairly benevolent dictatorship, otherwise I would be much more uncomfortable than I am.

We discuss how I might be able to return to my reality. Nestor is confident that a properly designed and executed ritual could direct me through a portal to my world but he is uncertain that he could return me to Chicago. I'm not overly concerned by that, having resigned myself to that possibility when I stepped through the moonbridge in the first place.

He concludes, "Milord, please avail yourself of our hospitality." He rises to escort me to the chamber door.

I say, "There are some, shall we say 'associates' of mine who arrived earlier. . ."

Nestor begins, almost conspiratorially, "If they are demon-plagued there is little we can do. . ." Nonsense, I think, if the magi are truly in power they can make whatever exceptions they want. His mentioning it indicates that he knows exactly who is who but is taking a neutral stance. The magi are not so pinnacle as he first lead me to believe. He continues, "The woman who was with you appears to be under the protection of the Reagent, in which case she is in good hands, though he is demon-plagued as well. The staff he wields conceals his true nature from most and affords him other protections."

That is most interesting. I wonder why that theological faux pas is allowed to continue. I am curious to know who this Reagent is. My silence does not prompt Nestor to answer.

At the chamber door, two buxom maidens arrive to escort me. Nestor orders, "Take Milord Ruzhkov to the finest of our guest chambers and provide him every hospitality."

Chapter 20 (Game Session Sixteen, Jun 93)

*From the Chronicles of Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov
by Kevin A. Geiselman*

Chapter Twenty: Game Session Sixteen, June 1993

Avalon, Guest Chambers

The 'finest of the guest chambers' are opulent to a nauseating extreme. Tapestries with gold and silver threads, wash basins and chamber pots of precious metals and intricate designs, a huge bed lain with silks and lusty wenches eager to keep it warm.

I send them away. While they are sweet and not without their pedestrian charms their enthusiasm is driven by my political standing as a magus and that prostitution irritates me.

I do not attempt to sleep and am bored and restless very quickly. This place seems trapped in perpetual twilight. I had taken for granted how tuned a magus can be to the grand clockwork of sun, moon, stars and planets.

The large windows of my chambers look down upon a courtyard where martial preparations are being made. Armored knights on horseback and men-at-arms are assembling for some expedition.

My questions are answered by a knock at the door, which I open telekinetically so as not to leave my vantage. It is the magus Nestor.

"Greetings, Milord Ruzhkov," he begins, "I have something of a favor to ask." Even in other universes, people are asking favors of me. "My brethren and I are deadlocked on an issue and, your being an outlander without political stake in our affairs, I was hoping perhaps you could offer some neutral advice."

He continues, "As I've said before, the Reagent and advisor to the Crown is demon-plagued. The King, however, in unaware of this. Oddly, the Reagent has been advising His Majesty towards a campaign to eliminate the demon-plagued."

"And you asked me earlier," I laugh, "why the vampir of my world do not join together to rule."

"Indeed," Nestor admits. "He wants the village wiped out and the blood of the demon-plagued kept for purification." I laugh again, louder this time. Nestor doesn't understand my amusement. He continues, "The mages, thus far, have remained neutral on this issue. It has been my advice that we continue in our neutrality. Naturally, no one wishes to side with the demon-plagued yet the Reagent's actions disturb us. Pray, sir, what advice would you offer?"

I look down at the military assemblage in the courtyard and give Nestor my opinion. "The military there, on advice of the Reagent, will dutifully march off and wipe out the vampirim. You see your choices as either aiding the soldiers or standing by but the question you should be asking yourself is do you want a vampir advising your king and do you want him more powerful than he already is? The blood the soldiers return with will not be purified but will be fed to the power of the Reagent's staff. When next the army marches, it will be against the magi."

Nestor ponders. The thought of opposing the Reagent, and thus his own sovereign, never occurred to him. He is obviously disturbed. "You are a clear thinker," he admits and excuses himself to discuss his enlightenment with his brethren.

'Feeding the Reagent's staff' was a thought which sprang from my subconscious. It seems similar to the Serpent Crown and the interest of the vampirim in both items ties the two together.

I leave my chambers to explore the castle. If Silver is here, others of the troop must also be here; Elric Tremen, Malcom, perhaps Liam and the others. I doubt that Mina is here and, if I can find Phoenix again I will discuss his misdirection.

I don't find any of them but the Reagent finds me. He is about my height with angular, pale features. His ears show a slight pointing making him appear a tall, sinister elf. The staff he carries is adorned with intricately carved serpents and conceals his vampirism behind a shell of magical energy. The stylistic motif surely makes it a companion piece to the crown.

"Greetings, Geradi," he says, smiling like a politician.

"I find it fascinating that I travel to an entirely different universe to find my reputation has preceded me."

"Indeed," he says. "You had quite a reputation in Chicago. I was going to have you killed eventually, but it is irritatingly difficult to kill mages." He continues smiling.

"And you are. . . ?" I prompt.

"Lodin," he says, still smiling and extending his hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

My hands remain in my pockets. "I can't say I'm pleased to make yours."

Lodin's smile breaks and he withdraws his hand. "Shall we go somewhere private to talk, man to beast?" His tone indicates that he thinks me little more than an animal.

This time I smile, accepting his insult as a compliment, "After you."

Lodin's Library

Lodin enters his chambers and sits behind a desk, offering me the lower, subservient chair across from him. I decline and remain standing. He offers wine but I decline that as well, my statement that 'I've had enough' serves two purposes.

"So, Geradi, what brings you to my fair land?"

Three weeks here and already it is 'his fair land,' Lodin works fast. "I went for a walk, made a wrong turn, ended up here." I begin to browse his library, allowing him to continue his questioning of the back of my head.

"Actually, you are not the one I was fishing for. Might you know anything of a Nosferatu?"

That is the second time someone has asked me about a Nosferatu, and that they are asking me would suggest that they are looking for the skulking Liam. Lodin is going so far as to set portal traps to lure the Nosferatu to him. I answer, "no."

I can't help but notice a largish volume embossed with an ornate 'A' sitting upon the shelf. It exudes energy with a bitter taste. I pass it by to leaf through another book while Lodin compliments his own library. The arrogant fool will surely answer my questions if carefully prompted. "I take it Chicago was not to your liking?"

"Oh no," he expounds, "Chicago was very much to my liking. The problem is that I need some information before I return. I heard something about a serpent crown. Have you heard anything about it?"

I laugh inwardly. Lodin had the crown and it got away from him. Now he has the staff and somehow thinks I'll help him get the crown also. No wonder Ramses thought him unworthy. "I've heard something, too," I offer.

"Really? I'd be fascinated to hear what you know."

"I'm sure you would."

The silence hangs for a few moments. Even with my back turned I can nearly hear the politician's smile leave Lodin's face. Have I irritated him? I hope so.

"I heard you had it and lost it," I finally answer, allowing my amusement to show. "Something about 'being unworthy of its power.'"

"As I took hold of the crown a blue hole opened and I was drawn through," he says. "For some reason I was unable to take the crown with me."

I offer, "I can't say I feel for you."

"I was hoping to obtain the crown and the ring before returning to Chicago."

A ring? Each time he opens his mouth a wealth of information spews forth. I return a book to its place on the shelf. I can't resist commenting, "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

He stands, holding the staff. "You know, Geradi, there isn't." He narrows his eyes. "This is a very dangerous place to be and, if I were you, I would take the next available opportunity to leave."

I paraphrase, "This universe isn't big enough for the both of us?" Energies are flowing between Lodin and the staff, preparing some spell. It's taking quite some time to develop because Lodin is only an amateur operating a powerful magical item he has yet to fully understand. I shake my head and smile, "I can't begin to tell you what a pleasure it's been talking to you."

I turn to leave and am suddenly falling through a blue luminescence while Lodin's laughter fades behind.

Chicago

I am able to land on my feet atop a pile of broken concrete. The passage was again marked by a sideways step in mid-flight, followed by another similar distortion.

I was not alone in my travel, Elric Tremen falls through as does Malcom, the flamboyant Gaston, the skulking Liam and half a dozen others I do not recognize, vampirim all except for a young disheveled girl.

I look around. The destruction goes as far as the eye can see. The horizon is just beginning to show the approaching dawn but the sky is still dark enough to see familiar constellations.

The passage through this gate had an odd temporal feeling, as if there were a choice between what is and what will be. Is this devastation the Chicago of the future? What could have happened here?

I am investigating the wreckage, trying to determine how long ago this happened when Tremen fades from sight and begins moving. A moment later I hear the sounds of marching feet and at least one vehicle in the direction the Tremere has gone. I assume my own shadow form and follow.

I approach Tremen cautiously near the crest of a hill. On the damaged road below marches a ragged band of vampirim, forty or fifty, with a single military truck. A serpent banner flies above the spear-wielding soldiers proclaiming what has come to pass.

"Oh, this is bad!" Tremen says.

Liam joins us. Apparently he too can move unseen. Considering his ghastly visage this would be an advantage. Tremen indicates the passenger in the vehicle, the apparent leader and another Nosferatu, asking Liam, "Isn't that one of yours?"

"What the hell happened?" Liam asks. It is unfortunate I can't see the expression on his face as he recognizes one of his own progeny leading a patrol in the armies of Set.

There is activity off to our left. A haggard vampir is being pursued across the rubble by a patrol from the main group. Tremen rushes to his rescue and I follow.

Cresting a pile of debris I see the vampir standing and waving his arms. Rubble begins rising up and pelting his pursuers but this other Tremere lacks the power to succeed in more than delay. Tremen also casts a spell, causing a wind to keep the patrol's calls for assistance from reaching their comrades.

The hell with this! One of the vampir in the patrol is lifted off the ground and bursts into flames. The others try to escape but the zephyrs draw them like moths to their burning comrade where they too catch fire. It is all over very quickly.

Tremen and the other Tremere are left lying face down, averting their eyes from the flailing conflagration. I had forgotten that most vampir have a pyrophobia, fire being one of the few things that can kill them permanently. I am not particularly sympathetic.

The rest of the troops have taken notice of the screams of their patrol and will be fanning out to discover what has happened. I run to the top of another pile of rubble and direct my attention to the truck.

Flames erupt underneath, causing the fuel tanks to explode and sending the vehicle cartwheeling into the air to land among scattering troops. There are easily another dozen casualties with the rest fleeing in absolute panic. Setite bastards, I actually laugh at their disarray.

I go down to inspect the carnage I've created. Apparently Malcom and Tremen, recovered from his panic attack, have similar thoughts and join me to sift through the bodies.

The Setites were, for the most part, armed with primitive spears. Several spears, however, radiate magical energy. A closer inspection reveals them to be inlaid with snake carvings.

"That's magical," Tremen says, "be careful with it."

I believe the colloquialism is 'no shit.' The magic is of a basic form, simple enough that anyone with even the slightest Gift should be able to activate it. The spear doesn't exude any consciousness of its own or inherent darkness so I apply myself and turn it on.

The color leaves my vision as does a good deal of my depth perception. But close up, to a few meters, my vision extends into the infra-red, Tremen glowing with a slight, undead warmth. He seems surprised and exclaims but I don't hear the sound with ears. The sound travels as vibrations in the ground which I feel through the scales of my belly.

Scales? I stop the magical flow and am again looking at the snake spear in my own hand.

"I say we burn them," Tremen offers.

"I think you're right," I concur.

We pile the bodies and snake spears together, the vampirim turn their backs and avert their eyes. Tremen says, "OK, do it!" and I cause the pile to ignite.

A magical item is normally like a glass jar; when the vessel is broken the contents evaporate. In this instance, the spears were somehow mystically linked. The power from the various items leap forth and combine to form a large fire serpent.

"Is there a problem, Geradi?" Tremen asks, his back still turned but sensing a change.

"Not just yet," I reply, tentatively. The creature rears up and spits fire at me, ruining a perfectly good shirt and searing my chest. I hadn't been prepared for that. The zephyrs curl but can find no purchase on the flaming form and the mystic flames resist my pyrokinetic control.

"Geradi?" Tremen asks again, showing his own nervousness.

The serpent spits again, this time at the vampir Gaston, who immediately panics and begins fleeing. I turn and extinguish the flames on his back almost instantly, limiting his injury, but he continues to run. Liam gives chase.

Turning back to the snake I catch another gout of flame full in the face. In spite of my being prepared for the attack this time the heat is still painful. A gesture scatters the spears like twigs. With the power of their proximity broken the snake dissipates, leaving my vampir comrades thoroughly routed.

As they regroup and begin thinking of places to hide from the approaching dawn I finally have a chance to look at those I don't already know.

Most intriguing is the female vampir that appears to be Tremen's associate. Another Tremere.

On the surface she is reasonably attractive. I've gotten used to the aura of the vampir so even that characteristic paleness is not detracting. Her left hand, however, is devoid of even those energies. I am reminded of the succubus lurking beneath Chicago and think, perhaps, this Tremere is truly 'demon-plagued.'

I should keep a careful watch on this one.

Magus Chron/Mage Conversion

Now that MAGE has been released, my Storyteller will certainly be bringing more magic into our vampire game (I won't use the gimmick of spelling it Magick) Anyone who has read my Magus Chronicles will quickly realize that what Geradi Ruzhkov does is not in MAGE.

I have a few ideas on making the crossover without completely ignoring the hundreds of pages of Chronicle that I've already written. I would like your input so that when I present my concept to my ST there is minimal debate.

... be warned, this is really after only one reading of the rules and born fully formed in the 45 minutes it takes to ride my bicycle home from work. No flames, just help me iron things out.

The Novgorod Tribunal

If you know about ARS MAGICA you will easily notice that what Geradi does is heavily influenced by Medieval magic. This should not be surprising because I used ARS MAGICA to create Geradi for VAMPIRE when I made the character last November.

Speaking in MAGE terms: While the Inquisition, the Plague and the Technocracy all but destroyed the Art in Europe, Russia was pretty much spared. (and by the time the Revolution and through Stalin's purges, the Russian Mages were well hidden and quiet.) So while Western magical tradition underwent fundamental change, the Russian concepts of magic remained medieval. The western traditions are present in Russia but the Novgorod Tribunal is so insular that they don't know what's really going on. (This needs some work but the basics are here)

Individual Horizons

There are those occasional individuals who are born into the Art. This goes beyond those who discover the Art at puberty and are then apprenticed. These people come into the world seeing with different perceptions of reality at the outset. They might be diagnosed as autistic or or with some other sort of mental disability. They may be catatonic. These people are blessed (or cursed) with their own individual horizons. These people are very often not discovered by the Traditions because of the misdiagnosis by the mundane medical community or they are snatched up by the Technocracy right from the hospital nursery. If they were allowed to mature into their talents, they would not have to go through much of the rigamarole that other mages have to go through. They are their own private reality so they don't have to worry about paradox backlash. Their horizon links itself to ley lines and nodes so they don't need to actively search them out and can collect the energy they need just by meditation and rest.

Dwellers of the Deep Umbra

Those really nasty things that dwell in the Deep Umbra are nothing more than individuals of alien realities that had personal horizons, were able to survive the attacks of their own bretheren who hated and feared them, and, in so doing, were powerful enough to move far beyond their own realities. They have names like Cthulhu, Azatoth, Nyarlathotep, Yog-Sothoth and Shub-Niggurath. The Wyrms might fall into this category, as might the Pure Ones. They are powerful because they survived, not only everything their home realities could throw at them, but those things from other realities as well.

Enter Geradi Ruzhkov

Geradi is one such person with his own personal horizon. He is fortunate enough to have been missed by the Technocracy (not powerful in Russia) and to have been recognized by someone from the magical community, his grandfather, a magus of substantial magical and political power within the Tribunal.

So, rather than apprenticing at 10 or 14, Geradi was apprenticed within weeks of birth. And, by being taught by, in Western terms, an archaic magical tradition, he never new his full potential. And, since the Novgorod Tribunal was so isolated, noone could tell. He was an oddity, disliked and distrusted for his strangeness.

When his grandfather died in 1984, Geradi was cut loose from the Tribunal and left to his own. Because of the dangers of Soviet life, Geradi being a rebel of sorts, his father being a Politboro member, and the general paranoia of the country, Geradi was careful not to show any of his powers if he could avoid it. Since leaving Russia in 1991 (after leaving his father bound and gagged to prevent his involvement in the August Coup) Geradi has had little or no contact with Western mages, expecting the western arrogance of 'manifest destiny' to be just as bad as the raving traditionalism of those he left.

Geradi has the potential to be extremely powerful if he realizes his potential. In MAGE stats terms, he is a master but the narrowing of focus by his training leaves him a broad base of reality altering yet to be discovered.

He is a full magician that has yet to be Awakened.

Of course, once he starts learning what his potential may be, that is when he learns the theories and meanings of 'Horizon' and 'Dynamic Reality' things will become even more difficult. As he broadens his base, others will begin to notice and seek to oppose or recruit him. Indeed, a really overt display of magic, say in front of a football stadium full of people, could be like yelling "Hastur, Hastur, Ha..." (you get the idea)

Constraints

From everything I've described, you might think that Geradi is very powerful, and you'd be right. However, the primary constraint on his power is myself. I want this to be a vehicle for character development. I have no designs on overpowering the game.

Geradi has a great deal of potential but, in terms of MAGE has yet to broaden his base. He is constrained by his own perceptions of his own personal reality over 30 years. Those restrictions won't happen over night. The key is living that long. And, while I am attached to this character and would like to see him attain the demi-godhood of the Great Old Ones, I don't expect the game to last anywhere near that long. I don't think it would hold my interest, nor do I believe my current ST could make it interesting enough to be worth my while.

I've always felt that I was my own best constraint when I developed my character using ARS MAGICA. I've never had a dispute with the ST over my being too powerful or whined over being not powerful enough (unlike the Tremere in the party). In fact, in one instance I did a divination and the ST told me that I received a vision of a rabid wolf, drop-

ping an extremely heavy clue that the next person I met would be an insane lupine. I told him my magic didn't work that way. For me a 'divination' is much more like an 'etherial sonar,' sending a wave out through the ether and feeling the echos. No visions, just knowledge that someone is there, how magically powerful it might be, and maybe a hint of lupine...like a mystic aftertaste. We argued because, I believe, he really wanted me to know what was coming up so I could warn everyone. I ignored him, told noone and, sure enough, someone got hurt.

The same arguement happened later over another 'divination.' Again I ignored it. This time, I got hurt.

This isn't good game playing in a zero-sum-game, but it is good role-playing.

Conclusions

So, what do you people think? Give me as much as you can. My ST doesn't have MAGE yet, so I would like to have this planned out before he has had a chance to read MAGE so that I may impose my interpretation of reality on him before he has a chance to determine reality on his own. (Wow! Am I identifying with the Technocracy here?)

Anyone who hasn't read my Magus Chronicles and would like to know just what the hell I'm talking about can find them through anonymous FTP at:

soda.berkeley.edu in directory pub/vampire/fiction

Give me your best ideas.

Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov (aka Kevin A. Geiselman, Knight Errant)

More Magus Chron/Mage Conversion

Here are some more thoughts/addenda/revisions to what I posted yesterday about converting Geradi Ruzhkov to the MAGE rules.

Last night, I read the rules again and went through the process of developing a character. I made a note of everything Geradi could do and what magical talents were required to do them. I then adjusted for all the experience he's gained in the game, from previous prelude-type adventures and from starting his magical training 10 years before anyone else.

It worked out very well, almost surprisingly so. I guess WW really did look at ARS MAGICA when they were developing MAGE.

Ok, so here's some more of how Geradi is special.

Rather than being imune to paradox, as I speculated in my previous post, he can do magic as if he were continuously in the Umbra. That is, even for blatant, reality-tearing effects, he rolls paradox stuff as if it were coincidental.

Vampires are able to ignore paradox and have only to worry about the political ramifications.

Werewolves ignore paradox. The Veil makes spectators alter their perception of reality to forget what it was they actually saw. Perhaps it is a result of their having one foot in the Umbra.

In this sense, Geradi is more like werewolves in that he has his own horizon.

No wonder he had a lupine lover.

So, please, respond. I want to know what people think.

Geradi Ivanovich Ruzhkov (aka Kevin A. Geiselman, Knight Errant)