

He had been left a message, summoned to a meeting with Moloch himself tonight, the very next after the Blude Guild meeting. The young man was surprised and somewhat apprehensive, but there was no internal warning, no message of dissent from those he served. He knew from prior experience that this meant he was to go, and fear nothing. Now he stood before the address given on Burgundy Street, and stepping up to its gate, he rang the bell.

The gate was solid wood and locked securely, the gray paint that covered it starting to peel, and almost unnoticeable between two residences with concrete steps and average front doors. Unless one looked very carefully, it would be assumed that this was a service entrance, or some other wing of either house to its side. Eduard heard the raspy sound of the lock's rusty bolt sliding, the door swung open and he was admitted.

A nondescript man dressed in simple black clothing locked the gate behind him, and with a roll of his rounded shoulders indicated that Eduard should follow. He was led through a dimly lit room and out into a patio courtyard of surprising size. Many homes in the French Quarter were laid out in this fashion, with an open air court in the center. Eduard took it all in as they pressed on. A small goldfish or koi pond, a glass table and metal chairs surrounded by lush, green vegetation. They proceeded through the patio, entering the house again and down a hallway, to a room obviously located in the extreme rear of the home. The man opened its door, motioning him in, and closed it behind him without a sound. For the moment Eduard had the room to himself.

It was a study of sorts, two of its walls consisting of old, burnished mahogany bookshelves filled with tomes that looked antique to say the least. Dim lighting was provided by an oil lamp that would've been perfectly in place a hundred and fifty years ago. Eduard carefully sat in a high back leather chair opposite a rich oaken desk, and noticed the room had no electrical service that he could see. No outlets, no overhead light or ceiling fan. Realizing with quiet amusement that his surroundings accurately mirrored nineteenth century New Orleans, he relaxed for a moment, closing his eyes and finding his center.

“Servant.”

For a split second, the young man thought the word had been spoken in his mind. Opening his eyes, he saw Moloch, standing directly in front of him, within arm's length.

To be completely accurate, he saw the body, the physical figure that called itself Moloch; but as always, it was jarring. There was a continual sense of unreality around his presence, a voice that screamed into the spirits of those in sight of him that this was not right, it just could not *be*. Moloch's eyes were particularly disturbing. They appeared to be entirely pupil, no white visible. Dark, liquid pools that smoothly opened and contracted, hypnotic and as coldly, clinically vicious as a jungle cat circling prey.

Eduard certainly wondered how this creature had appeared so soundlessly and swiftly before him, but quickly dismissed it as a discussion point for now. He decided to get straight to it.

'Eminence', addressing Moloch as he had been instructed to, with a slight bow of his head. "You sent for me. What do you wish?"

Moloch moved to the far side of the desk and sat before he replied. Actually it would be more accurate to say he glided, his movements alternately jerky then smooth. Like a parody of genuine human movement.

"What I wish", he started, the sibilant drawn out, in a voice crackling and dry as twigs crushed underfoot in winter. "What I wish. I do not *wish*, servant. I *command*."

Moloch turned his head to one side, like a wolf regarding prey that had made a surprising but ultimately ill fated move, and then continued.

"The methods employed in your kill of the young woman draw... attention. From the authorities, from the media." The way he pronounced media gave it a different sound, like the ancient Latin of its origin.

"We want our blood, a proper sacrifice to our Dark Father, and we pay you handsomely for it. Make your kills quietly, with little or no fanfare, and there will be no problem."

Eduard carefully considered his response, and then made it.

"Eminence, I believe you're aware that I have sworn my fealty to other masters. I will make every-"

The sound was like a thunderclap in the small room, the sound of Moloch's hands slamming down on the desk as he furiously gained his feet. Every hair on Eduard's neck stood at the palpable sense of danger present as a suddenly towering, enraged Moloch shouted, "ENOUGH!!"

His voice seemed to gain several registers at once, lower and higher notes sounding simultaneously, and the aural impossibility was stunning. Like twelve creatures speaking at once. He regarded the young man before him with utter contempt and pure malice.

"Boy", he spat out, "you have no idea who, or even *what*, stands before you. I am not your kind, mortal."

Moloch made the word 'mortal' sound roughly equivalent to a type of worm. The creature's lips were peeled back in a snarl, and Eduard could clearly see not one, but a row of three lethal fangs on either side of its mouth. Drawing a slow and expansive breath, he continued to educate the man before him.

"I walked with the Pharaohs, taught them things...*mentored* them. The great king Nebuchanezzar grew prideful with the knowledge I shared, so I gave him the gift of insanity for a season."

"My fathers knew the beginnings of this earth. The mighty men of old, the Nephilim, the 'Sons of God'. *Those* were my forefathers, and I am their seed. My lineage can be traced back to mighty Lucifer himself!"

Moloch bore down on him and seemed to grow before Eduard's eyes as he hissed.

"I come from Hell!"

The young man had never felt an atmosphere so charged, so fraught with complete peril. He was literally speechless, and could not have responded or even moved a single muscle if his life were on the line. As it transparently was. At great length, the tension eased enough that he felt he had control of himself again.

Finally, and to Eduard's great relief, Moloch sat, appearing almost as he had before. This *thing*, whatever it might be, would never appear the same to him as it had initially. Never, ever again.

Thoughts flashed through Eduard's mind, racing down the synapses of his brain. He had just seen what no doubt few humans had ever witnessed, yet still lived and drew breath. He now knew

exactly how a rabbit paralyzed by a powerful beam of light feels. Most of all, for the first time in his young life, he doubted the voices, wondering exactly what he'd been led into.

The Blude Guild's leader observed him with a quiet and regal air of superiority, and spoke.

“You have your order. Obey or suffer my wrath. Go.”

For a moment, Eduard still sat, waiting for some inner prompt, some sign from those that led him. There was none. Only silence. Inwardly confused and strangely humiliated, he rose, and with a bow of his head hurriedly took his leave.