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About 19,000 words

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MORTAL KOMBAT: DRACULA KILLER

By Scott Bishop

Lily leaned against the wall, waiting for customers.

She adjusted her leather jacket, trying to show as much of her chest as she could while still remaining warm, and then ran a hand through her auburn hair. She looked up and down the street, looking for any potential johns. People walked by, but mostly in groups, and never alone. She sighed.

Lily wasn't her real name, of course. She reserved that only for friends, not for work. She didn't care for her customers to know who she was outside of work, as that was dangerous for her. Things were especially dangerous now, with this "Dracula Killer" out on the streets. So far three other working girls had been found with their throats torn out, and it had done as much to frighten away the johns as it did to frighten away her "competition". As a result, even

though she seemed to be the only girl out, business wasn't doing too well.

What kind of stupid name is "Dracula Killer" anyway? she thought to herself. Damn media always having to name things... Still, she couldn't pretend the murders didn't unnerve her too. She could just as easily become a victim herself. However, the bills needed to be paid...

She saw a movement out of the corner of her eye, and looked down the street. Approaching her was a man walking alone. She smiled to herself; this man practically defined "tall, dark, and handsome". He was about six foot, thin, with shoulder length black hair, green eyes, and a noble nose. He dressed well, too, with black slacks and a long leather trenchcoat over a white shirt.

As he got close, she turned to him, gave him her best smile, and said, "Hey honey. Looking for a date?"

The man had been looking around while walking, but now he stopped, turned to her, and gave her a dazzling smile in return. "Normally I would say not, but how could I resist one as beautiful as you?"

Despite herself, Lily melted. There was something about him... something safe. She walked up to him, still smiling, and purred, "Well, then, why don't we go back to my place?"

He nodded, and offered her his arm. Taking it, she couldn't help but giggle as they walked. She might be a whore and he her john, but it just seemed so romantic...

#

"You about ready to roll?" Stryker asked his partner. Beside him, Hunt nodded, fastening her seat belt. Satisfied, Stryker shifted the cruiser into drive and pulled out of the police lot.

As the car drove down the street, Stryker tapped the steering wheel, looking around for potential problems. Routine patrol bored him. He was part of the force's SWAT detail but unless there was a hostage situation or a drug bust, he wasn't needed for it. Most of the time, then, he spent it on routine patrol.

He noted Hunt was looking at him, giving furtive glances between stretches of watching the road. He expected it; he knew he had something of a reputation amongst others in the force. It had nothing to do with his job performance. It was more the people he knew, and what little his fellow officers knew about them.

A couple of years earlier, a large interdimensional portal had appeared in the skies over the city. He had been working riot control that day, as he and his fellow officers tried to

maintain some semblance of order while panic reigned. He had also heard similar portals had appeared above other major cities all over the world.

If that hadn't been strange enough, within a half-hour everyone else had vanished. As he had watched, people all around him had glowed green and faded into balls of energy that floated into the portal. He was ignorant of what had happened, wondering what was going on, until a god named Raiden appeared to him, telling him to go west. He would later learn he was chosen to fight for Earth against the invaders, who came from another realm called Outworld. He fought alongside the other chosen warriors, and eventually they won. Outworld's emperor, Shao Kahn, had been defeated in combat, and he and his forces fled back to Outworld, restoring Earth and its inhabitants to their normal state.

To this day, he never understood why he was spared. He tried not to dwell too much about it, and tried to tolerate his coworkers' curiosity. Hunt had been with the force, but this was only her second day working alongside him. He wondered idly what she was going to ask. They always had at least one question.

"Uh, Kurtis?" she finally asked. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

Here we go, Stryker thought. Aloud, he answered, "Sure. Shoot."

She took a deep breath, and said, "Well... I heard you took a leave of absence for a few weeks last year."

Stryker raised an eyebrow. This was a new one. "What about it?"

Hunt hesitated, and then gingerly said, "I heard you were off doing some training."

Stryker laughed. "Pretty much," he replied. "I was training with the Seidan Guard."

Hunt gave Stryker a blank look. "Seidan Guard?" she asked in confusion. "Are they... are they some top secret government group?"

"Nope," Stryker said, turning the car down a street. "They're... well, they're difficult to describe. I was hoping to get some pointers on how to be a better police officer."

"And...?" Hunt asked.

Stryker grunted. "Let's just say they were far too hardcore for my liking. Got the hell out and didn't look back."

Hunt blinked, and Stryker grinned. At that moment, the cruiser's computer beeped. Stryker looked at it, and grimaced. "Looks like we got someone calling in a possible solicitation."

"Solicitation?" Hunt said. "Isn't this something for

vice?"

"Maybe they're hoping we'll catch the Dracula Killer. Damn stupid name," Stryker grumbled, as he switched the car's lights and sirens on. "Who knows. Maybe we'll get lucky."

#

She didn't know why, but she really liked this john.

Lily walked with him down the street, heading to the motel where she normally entertained her customers. Unlike others of late, this one didn't seem at all nervous, walking with a calm sense of purpose.

"So, what's your name, honey?" Lily purred.

The man looked at her, and smiled. "Vitarn," he replied.

"Oh, are you European?" Lily asked. She looked at his face again, closely... and thought to herself that yes, he could very well be.

"Something like that," Vitarn said, with a soft hint of irony in his voice.

At that moment, Vitarn turned, and started leading Lily down a dark alley. Lily stopped, and looked at him with a somewhat stern look.

"Where are you going? My place is right over here."

Vitarn gave a soft smile, and turned to Lily, gazing at her intently. "I think it will be much more private here, don't you

think?" he asked softly.

Lily looked back, into his soft green eyes. His soft... trustworthy... gorgeous eyes...

"Of course," she breathed, sliding herself alongside him.

She accompanied him down the alley, resting her head against his shoulder. After about twenty feet, he stopped, and turned to her. She smiled up at him, lost in his green eyes.

Vitarn leaned down, and kissed Lily. She gave in to the kiss almost immediately with a soft sigh. After what seemed like an eternity, he stood up, and smiled at her. Lily smiled back, unable to tear her gaze away from his.

He nodded, leaned down, and placed his lips on her throat. She sighed, enjoying the feel of his lips, and his tounge... expecting the pleasure... feeling... PAIN...

Lily screamed.

#

The police cruiser came to a stop by the curb, a few feet from an empty bus stop. Killing the lights and sirens, Stryker stepped out of the vehicle, followed by Hunt. Looking around, he sighed. Other than a couple of homeless people sitting by barricaded storefronts, the street seemed deserted.

Hunt looked over at him. "Think it was a prank call?"

Stryker shrugged. "Even if it was, we need to check it

out.”

With that, Stryker closed the cruiser’s door and walked over to the sidewalk, stepping alongside Hunt as they walked. He looked at her briefly and chuckled slightly to himself. They made quite a pair, with his tall, large frame contrasting with her short, wiry one. On the other hand, he knew from previous incidents that Hunt’s thin form belied the fact she was mostly muscle and quite adept at using it, as suspects wanting to fight her quickly found out.

They continued to walk, looking around for anything suspicious, but still seeing nothing other than closed business fronts. Ahead, they saw a sign for the Taran Motel, which was familiar to Stryker from drug and prostitution stings.

Almost as if anticipating his thoughts, Hunt spoke up. “Think we should try the motel?”

Stryker nodded. “Yeah, probably our best bet...”

His train of thought was interrupted by a woman’s scream coming from the next alley. Stryker and Hunt looked at each other quickly, and raced down to the alley entrance. Drawing their sidearms, they turned the corner, stopped, and Stryker shouted, “Police!”

He had meant to command whoever it was to put his or her hands up, but was surprised into silence. Next to him, Hunt was

similarly frozen. They saw the figure of a tall man holding a young woman in his arms, as if kissing her neck. The man lifted his head, and in the moonlight Stryker saw his lips were covered in blood. He stood up, tossing the woman aside; Stryker noticed her throat was torn open and her eyes were staring vacantly. The suspect growled, and Stryker could see two elongated canines.

"... what the *fuck?*" Hunt breathed.

The suspect stepped back, and they could see his trenchcoat changing... as if a fog had lifted, they saw the trenchcoat become a pair of large bat wings. The suspect grunted, turned, and ran down the alley.

Stryker blinked, and took off running after... whatever it was. His thoughts were racing; he had met gods and demons before, but whatever this was was new to him. *Apparently the "Dracula Killer" is an actual vampire*, he thought to himself. *Who knew?*

He could hear Hunt running behind him, catching up, breathlessly calling in backup on her radio. They reached the alley's other end, opening up to another street. Stryker quickly looked around, and saw movement in the opposite alley.

"There!" he shouted, and began running again. Hunt continued to run behind him as they skidded into the alley.

They looked around. It was a dead end, but there was no

sign of the vampire. Hunt looked around, almost panicked.

"What the hell is that thing?" she said nervously.

"A vampire, I guess," Stryker replied, looking around. He had a bad feeling about this.

"A... you're kidding, right?" Hunt kept swinging around, looking in corners and shadows.

"Nope," Stryker replied. "Makes sense, though."

"It... makes... what?" Hunt gave him a quick look, before looking around again.

Stryker grunted. "It's still a suspect, and it obviously thinks we can hurt it or else it wouldn't have run."

Hunt nodded, calming down. She turned, and at that moment a dark shape landed right in front of her. She tried to step back and bring her firearm to bear, but the vampire swung his arm, knocking her aside and into a wall.

Stryker spun around. He quickly flipped his pistol around in his hand, grabbing the barrel, and smashed the handle into the side of the vampire's skull. He staggered in surprise, but quickly recovered, bringing a booted leg up and kicking Stryker in the chest. Stryker staggered back a couple of feet, wind knocked out of him, but raised his arms in a block. He did so in the nick of time, as the vampire followed up with three punches, none connecting due to the arms.

Stryker stepped back and then lunged forward throwing two punches. The first punch hit the vampire's chest, but the vampire caught Stryker's wrist on the second one. The vampire twisted, and Stryker found himself spinning in the air and landing on his stomach with a thud.

The vampire stepped forward, and brought his boot up, ready to crush Stryker's neck beneath it. Before he could do so, he staggered. Hunt had recovered and had tackled the vampire from behind in a last ditch effort. The vampire pivoted on his heel, spinning around, and Hunt lost her grip, crashing to the ground. As she tried to stand up, the vampire grabbed her arm, and squeezed, breaking the bones underneath. Hunt shrieked in agony.

Stryker shook his head, looked up, saw what was happening, and raised his weapon. "FREEZE!" he shouted. The vampire looked back, grimaced, and pulled Hunt to him, holding her against him as a shield.

"I would not use your weapon," the vampire sneered. "You may hit your compatriot."

And I probably would, Stryker thought to himself. He wasn't about to lower his weapon, though. "Let her go," he said. "No one else needs to be hurt."

"I do not think you're in any position to be giving

demands," the vampire chuckled. "I have your friend here. If you move against me, she will die."

"And soon you'll be outnumbered," Stryker pointed out. "She already called for backup. More officers will soon be here, and there's nowhere for you to go."

The vampire smiled. "I will be long gone before that happens. You will be all alone, and I will be back in my home realm."

Home realm? Stryker thought. He had a bad feeling about this.

"What the hell is going on...?" Hunt whispered, clearly baffled.

"It's all right, Caitlin," Stryker said softly to Hunt. To the vampire, he said, "I don't know where you plan on going, but there's no way out of here. Let her go, or you are going to regret it."

The vampire snorted. "You are no threat to me, mortal." He reached up, and pulled a necklace out from under his shirt. He touched the pearl-like gem on the necklace, and it began to glow. "I will take your partner with me as my next meal."

Behind them, a blue vortex of energy began to appear. *Shit, he's creating a portal,* Stryker thought to himself. He had seen portals before during the Outworld invasion, of course,

but hadn't expected to see one now. As he watched, the vampire pulled Hunt with him back to the portal, grinning. Hunt couldn't see the portal itself, but saw the glow of it reflected on the alley walls.

"I SAID FREEZE!" Stryker shouted, getting to his feet quickly, keeping his weapon aimed at them. Hunt, seeing the look on his face, nodded. She then raised her foot, and brought it down on the vampire's boot. The vampire yelped in surprise, and loosened his hold on her. She then kicked back, forcing him to let go. She staggered away, leaving Stryker free and clear.

The vampire hissed, and stepped into the portal. At that moment, Stryker fired two shots, aiming for center mass. The first bullet hit the vampire's shoulder. The second struck the glowing gemstone. It shattered in a flash of light. There was a quick scream from the vampire as the portal quickly vanished, and he fell to the ground with a wet thud.

Stryker blinked his eyes, letting them adjust to the dark alleyway now that the light of the portal was gone, and approached the vampire. What he saw appalled him. The vampire had been halfway through the portal when he shattered the gem, and the portal's closing had sliced him in half lengthwise.

Sickened, Stryker stepped away from the gory ruin and walked over to Hunt. He found her sitting against the far wall,

eyes glazed over in shock. Kneeling beside her, he pulled out his radio.

"Did... did you get him?" Hunt asked.

"Yep, he's down," Stryker replied. He pressed the talk button on the radio, and clearly said, "Code 30, officer needs assistance at Cortes and Himmerick..."

#

Soon, the alley was a hive of activity. Several police cruisers had arrived, along with several unmarked vehicles. Yellow wooden barriers had been placed at the entrance to the alley. Around him, several crime scene techs were taking measurements. What remained of the vampire had been loaded into a body bag and was being wheeled into the back of a waiting hearse. Uniformed officers were keeping the public back, while also giving Stryker some strange looks.

This ain't going to do much for my standing with them, Stryker mused, as he stepped over to the only vehicle in the alley. Hunt was being loaded into the back of the ambulance in a stretcher, a morphine drip on her arm. He stepped by her as she was being loaded.

She looked at him weakly. "So much for being your partner for a while, huh?"

He smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry about it. As soon as

you're back on your feet we'll be working together again."

She nodded, as she was pushed into the ambulance and the doors closed. As Stryker watched the ambulance pull away, he heard a man's voice behind him say, "She'll be fine. Once her arm's set and she checks out, we'll talk to her about what happened."

Stryker turned around, to see a tall, broad-shouldered man standing there. He wore a crisp grey suit and silk tie, and his short dark hair and mustache were impeccably trimmed. Stryker was glad to see him; Ed Ramirez was the detective in charge of the Dracula Killer case.

"Hey, Ed," Stryker said, leaning against the wall. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

He nodded. "We were already in the area. We were doing random sweeps to see if we could catch the Dracula Killer. Guess you got lucky."

"I'm not sure you can call it that lucky," Stryker sighed. "Hunt's out for a while and another victim is dead."

Ramirez gave a little shrug. "Still you nailed him... or it. Ever seen anything like it before?"

Stryker would normally feel a little miffed at being thought of as an expert, but given the circumstances, it didn't bother him. "Nope, but then, for all I know it could be from

any one of a hundred different realms. It tried to escape home before we stopped it."

"Right," Ramirez said. "I'm going to talk to the brass, but we'll probably end up calling the feds on this. Stick around for a bit... I may need to talk to you a bit more."

"No problem," he replied, as Ramirez turned and walked away, approaching some of the crime techs. He pushed off the wall, and looked out the alley, and then around him. He knew the feds would end up calling the Outerworld Investigation Agency, the multinational military force formed after the Outworld invasion to deal with these kinds of incursions. Two of its founders, Sonya Blade and Jackson Briggs, had been fellow chosen warriors during the invasion. He didn't look forward to dealing with the feds, but at least he'd be helping friends.

He then smiled to himself. Despite the surprises, they had actually caught the Dracula Killer. He leaned back against the wall, content that at least they had done some good.

#

"A last fire will rise behind those eyes..."

Epiphany slowly stepped out onto the club's main stage, as her chosen second song started. Giving her audience a dazzling smile, she slipped her dress off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. Clad in only a thong, she took hold of the pole

at the center of the stage and swung around it.

The stage lights gave her a clear view of herself and the stage, but everything else was shadow. Still, she could see enough where she knew the club was less busy than usual. She sighed inwardly, even as she straightened up and threw her head back, then ran her fingers through her long curly brown hair.

"Cry, little sister... come to your brother..."

She gave a sultry walk to the stage edge, her lithe pale frame almost glowing in the stage light. Unfortunately, she couldn't see anyone standing at the edge, which meant no tips. She stepped back, and begun dancing slowly, moving her body to the rhythm of the song. She smiled to herself; she knew this would probably get her some guys interested in lap dances. Unlike the other girls who would just stand on the stage and maybe walk around a little, she had actual experience in dance from a young age and enjoyed doing it on stage. The other girls tended to be catty about it, but she didn't care. It was money in her pocket, so to speak.

"Cryyyyyyyyy..... little sister....."

Knowing the song was over, she gave the audience a final smile. She turned, and walked back to the stage entrance, stopping to pick up her dress. As she kneeled to pick it up, she heard the DJ over the loudspeaker. "That was Epiphany,

coming down to give you guys some private attention! Next on the main stage is Jasmine!" As she walked off the stage, she passed Jasmine, who gave her a scowl before stepping into the limelight.

A few minutes later, Epiphany stepped through the door into the main floor, and looked around. The prospects were worse than she had thought when she was first on stage. Only a third to half of the tables were occupied, and many of them already had girls sitting at them. She sighed to herself, and walked over to the bar. As she slid into a barstool, she turned to Jack, the bartender.

"Can I get a mojito?" she asked.

Jack turned to her, and smiled. "Sure thing, Piff," he replied. Epiphany felt better; while things looked bad out there and the other girls hated her (which meant no joining their tables), at least she got along well with the bartenders.

Jack sat a drink down in front of her, and said, "Here you go, Piff... it's on me."

She looked up, and smiled, "Thanks, Jack. It's really bad out there, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Just about all the tables have been hit. Although..."

She perked up, "Hm?"

He smiled, and pointed to a table in the far corner. "That guy over there is by himself, and he seemed to be watching you pretty intently when you were up on stage."

She turned, and looked at the table. Sitting there was a handsome young man about her age, with a drink in front of him. He was sitting alone, and not looking at anyone in particular. Worth a try, she thought to herself.

"I owe you one," she smiled at Jack, as she slid off the barstool. Behind her, Jack just chuckled and said, "Don't mention it. Go get him."

She walked across the club floor, as she smoothed down her black dress with her free hand. She slowed as she reached the man's table, and leaned up against one of the free chairs. As the man looked up, she turned, smiled, and said, "Hi there. Would you like some company?"

The man looked up at her, and she was momentarily taken with his blue eyes. He gave a small smile, and said, "I believe I would, thank you."

She felt a thrill run through her at his words, though in the back of her mind she didn't understand why. Still, she smiled wide, pulled back the chair, and slid into it. Setting her drink down on the table, she extended her hand to his. "My name's Epiphany."

He took the hand. "I'm Taris."

"It's nice to meet you," she replied. The name sounded foreign to her, so she decided to look him over closely to see if she could figure out where he was from. He was tall, had short blond hair, with a medium build. He wore black slacks, a blue shirt, and a black leather jacket. His face was even more handsome than she had first thought, and his eyes were a soft blue. He could have stepped out of any American home.

She smiled, "So, Taris, where are you from? Are you visiting from out of town?"

He nodded. "I don't think you would have heard of my home. I'm just here on... vacation."

She smiled again, taking another sip of her drink. "Are you here long?"

He leaned back, and gave another little smile. "No," he replied. "I'll be leaving soon."

She nodded, setting her drink back down.

Taris leaned forward, looking at her intently. "I must say, I liked watching you dance up there, and your second song was quite nice."

She smiled widely. "Thank you!" she beamed. "That's one of my favorite songs."

"What is it about?" he asked, still watching her.

She looked at him, into his eyes. Those eyes were so beautiful, she realized, even as a small part of her thought it was an odd question. "It's from a movie called The Lost Boys," she replied.

"What is it about?" he repeated.

She continued to look at him, lost in his eyes. This time the question didn't even seem odd. She just knew she wanted to answer him. "It's a movie about vampires," she said. She paused, and as if admitting a dark secret, added, "I love vampires."

He nodded, smiling. She felt another thrill course through her as he did. She blinked, smiled, and said, "Would you like to go back for some private dances?"

He smiled at her, and stood. Offering her his hand, he said, "I thought you would never ask."

She took his hand, and stood, leaving her drink on the table. She walked around him, and led him to a back hallway, with open doorways down it on either side. She walked down to the last set of doorways, and looked in the left one. Seeing a girl and guy in there already, she looked at the right one, and saw it empty. She walked in, and gestured for him to sit on the comfortable chair in the corner.

"Make yourself comfy," she smiled. As he sat, she turned

to him, listening to the outside music. She nodded to herself; a new song had just started. She gave him a dazzling smile, and reached down to her dress. With both hands, she pulled it off, and tossed it to the table in the opposite corner. She then approached him, and lowered herself onto him, her body slowly sliding down his. She got up, turned around, and sat in his lap, gyrating to the beat of the music. After a few beats of that, she turned around to face him, and froze.

He was smiling at her, she could tell. More importantly, he was watching her. His soft blue eyes were on hers, looking at her, almost... knowing her. She felt lost in them. She couldn't tear herself away from them. More importantly, she didn't want to.

He looked at her. "Epiphany is a beautiful name, but I do not think it is your real one. What is your name?"

She stared. She normally would never tell a customer, but him... she wanted him to know. He had to know.

"Eileen," she whispered.

He smiled. She felt a deep sensation run through her. In response, she leaned down, and kissed him firmly. She slid her tongue between his lips, and enjoyed sliding it against his. Soon, she felt him push gently, and she let go, rising up, but still lost in his eyes.

Taris watched her, and he smiled widely. As he did, she saw his incisors sharpen and grow longer.

At that moment, she understood. She understood what he was, and more importantly, she understood what she was. She shivered in anticipation, lost in his power, and not willing to fight it. She raised a hand, and pushed her hair aside, exposing her throat.

"Please," she whispered.

She lowered herself to him, and she felt his lips upon her neck. When the pain came, she surrendered to it joyfully.

#

Stryker opened his apartment door, grateful to be home.

He walked in, closing and latching the door behind him, and made his way over to a counter. He shrugged off his shoulder holster, and put it and his firearm on the counter. He then walked over to his easy chair, and sank into it slowly, closing his eyes.

He was exhausted. Even after it was decided to call the feds about the thing they encountered, he still had to go over every detail of what happened with Ramirez. Worse, as soon as he finished talking to Ramirez the captain had asked him to go back to the office and write up a quick report detailing what happened. As soon as that was done, he had called the hospital

and made sure Hunt was okay. Then he came home.

He looked over at the digital clock, which was reading 2:30 AM. He grimaced. He really wanted nothing more than a good night's sleep, but on the other hand his thoughts were racing. That vampire thing was not from Earth, he was sure, because it had tried to escape using a portal. He wanted to suspect Shao Kahn, but he was also pragmatic enough to know that if Earthrealm, Edenia, and Outworld all existed, other realms had to exist as well. He made a mental note to call Sonya Blade or Jackson Briggs about it.

Suddenly, the phone rang on the table next to him. He groaned, and turned to it, looking at the Caller ID screen. While he hoped it would be a number he didn't recognize so he could ignore it, he knew it was likely the station calling. Sure enough, the number was from the station. He sighed, and picked up the phone.

"Whoever this is, it'd better be good," he grumbled. "I still haven't slept."

"Hey, Kurtis, it's Ed," Ramirez's voice came over the line. "Listen... are you SURE that thing you nailed earlier was the one who killed the hooker?"

Stryker raised an eyebrow. "Of course I'm sure. I told you, it was holding her dead body. Why?"

Stryker heard Ramirez take a deep breath. *This can't be good*, he thought.

"You'd better come to the Black Orchid, Kurtis. There's been another murder."

#

About half an hour later, Stryker pulled his car into the parking lot of the Black Orchid. He parked his car next to a couple of police cruisers, and stepped out, stretching. He looked up at the club, with its two yellow signs on each side saying "HOT!", and started walking to the entrance, which was guarded by two uniformed officers. To one side, he noticed two more officers interviewing the security guards.

As he approached the entrance, the two officers nodded and let him pass. He knew them by sight but not by name, but they obviously knew to expect him as he wasn't wearing his uniform.

As soon as he entered, he looked around. All of the house lights were up, and there were no customers around. He noticed a couple of crime scene techs come out of the back hallway where he knew the private dance rooms were located, and started walking that way. As he did, he glanced towards the bar and saw Ramirez talking to the bartender. Ramirez looked up, saw Stryker, and closed his notebook, thanking the bartender. The bartender lowered himself to a drink, and Stryker could see his

face was wet.

"Thanks for coming, Kurtis," Ramirez said, hurrying over to Stryker's side. "Come take a look..."

Ramirez led him to the back right room, where a white sheet lay on the floor. Underneath the sheet, Stryker could make the shape of a woman, splayed across wantonly. He stepped over, and raised the sheet. The body underneath was of a beautiful woman, eyes closed. Stryker noted that she was smiling, even though her neck had two large bite marks in it.

"Her name's Eileen Price, age 27," Ramirez noted. "The bartender said she went back here with a customer, and neither she nor the customer came out. The manager came back here at closing time, and that's when he found her."

"You sure the customer never came out?" Stryker asked, standing up to face Ramirez.

"Pretty sure," Ramirez replied. "The bartender had been keeping an eye on the hallway. Apparently he had a thing for her. Security guards didn't see him leave either."

"Please tell me he paid for cover and drinks with a credit card," Stryker sighed.

"No such luck," Ramirez replied.

Stryker grunted. "Well, she does have the exact same kind of wound the other victim tonight had. Maybe he came here

before we nailed him?"

Ramirez shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Not only did this murder happen *after* you killed your perp, the physical description is different. Looks like we've got two Dracula Killers. That's why I wanted you to take a look."

"Great," Stryker muttered. He looked around the room, and then stepped out into the hallway. A thought occurred to him.

"There aren't any other doors here. How did he get out?"

Ramirez shrugged. "My thought was that he slipped out the side door when the bartender wasn't looking. Although..."

"Although...?" Stryker pressed.

Ramirez looked uncomfortable. "Well... you say the other perp tried to create a..."

"A portal," Stryker replied. "Yeah. They're used for travelling between realms."

Ramirez coughed. "Portals are normally reddish-orange, right?"

Stryker nodded. "The ones I saw during the Outworld invasion were, yeah. The one I saw the perp create tonight was blue. Why?"

Ramirez paused, and leaned against the wall. "That's the other reason I called. The bartender reported seeing a blue glow from this room, but figured it was a cell phone or some

other light."

Stryker shook his head. "So, whoever did this has already escaped to some other realm. Great."

He turned and stepped out onto the main club floor. He noted the bartender still sitting stunned by the bar. From the entrance, two men entered with a gurney, obviously to take the victim back to the morgue.

"We're going to have a big meeting about this in a few hours, Kurtis," Ramirez said behind him. "The captain says he wants a task force put together. The press hasn't learned that the Dracula Killer isn't human but you know that won't stick for long. Would you mind joining in?"

Stryker turned and stared. "Ed, I'm just a beat cop that sometimes does riot control. I'm not a detective. Why me?"

Ramirez chuckled. "Man, considering you already took one of these things down and you can identify these 'portals', you're the best guy for it. I don't buy into all of that invasion stuff, but you're our local expert."

Stryker sighed. "All right, then. Just let me get some shut eye, first."

Ramirez nodded, and said, "Sure thing. Just be back at the station by nine. All hell's going to come loose then."

As Ramirez turned back to one of the uniformed officers,

Stryker made his way out of the club. *I didn't ask for this...*
he thought to himself.

#

By nine AM, Stryker only felt more like he never asked for it.

He had managed to get a few hours of sleep, and had woken up feeling refreshed. When he walked into the squad room, however, he realized he still was not ready for what Ramirez asked. The room was packed wall-to-wall, with several plainclothes officers he recognized from homicide and vice, uniformed officers from the affected districts, and two or three captains and deputy chiefs. He looked up at the front of the room, and saw Ramirez standing by the podium, speaking to one of the deputy chiefs. He looked as if he hadn't slept since Stryker had last saw him; he needed a shave and his normally crisp and pressed suit was rumpled.

Stryker looked around, shrugged, and took the only available seat he saw, somewhere towards the back.

As he watched, Ramirez straightened up, and stood up at the podium. He adjusted the microphone, and cleared his throat. The quiet chatter in the room died down at the Ramirez's amplified voice.

"All right, everyone, let's get this started," he said.

A few seconds later, the officers had gone silent, giving Ramirez their full attention. He nodded, and continued. "As you all know, before last night, we had four murders attributed to the 'Dracula Killer'. We had two additional murders last night, and we have learned new information.

"Now, before I go on, it's critical you know that some of this information is news that the press does *not* have, and the top brass have decided that it's best that we sit on this information as long as possible, to avoid a public panic." As Ramirez picked up a remote, a couple of the deputy chiefs nodded in approval.

Ramirez pressed a button, and the projector on the ceiling flared to life. On the screen, two pictures appeared; Stryker recognized them as post-mortem pictures of the victims from the previous night.

"On the left is Dorothy Simmons, a known prostitute. On the right, we have Eileen Price, a stripper who worked at the Black Orchid. Both were killed by the 'Dracula Killer' last night, as you can see by the wounds to the neck. However, we now have evidence that we're dealing with more than one killer."

"Wait, more than one?" one of the officers in the second row asked. A low murmur had developed among the assembled officers.

"Yes, more than one," Ramirez answered. He pressed the remote again, and the projector changed images. This time, a police sketch appeared, showing a young man with short blond hair and a handsome face. "This sketch was taken from descriptions given by a bartender and two managers at the Black Orchid. We believe him to be the one who killed Ms. Price. However, we have a much bigger problem, and this is why we want to keep the press out of the loop for now."

Ramirez took a deep breath. "The suspect who killed Ms. Simmons was caught in the act by officers Stryker and Hunt, who were following up on a tip. They confronted the suspect and fought him, and he was killed attempting to escape. Officer Hunt is still in the hospital with a shattered forearm. As for the suspect..."

Ramirez clicked the remote again, and another post-mortem shot came up. Stryker winced as he saw the image of the vampire-thing he killed the night before come up. In the glare of the morgue, it was obvious the flesh had been cauterized where the portal had bisected him. The assembled officers reacted in revulsion at seeing the body, and then a couple yelled in surprise when they noticed the large bat-like wing on the back.

"As you can tell, the body suffered from some damage,"

Ramirez said over the din. *Now that's an understatement,* Stryker thought wryly. "However, as you can tell by the wing, the suspect is not human. Officer Stryker stopped him as he was fleeing into a portal."

"Wait, hold on," another officer piped up. He turned around to stare at Stryker. "You mean like from the invasion?"

"Exactly like that," Ramirez replied. He then looked over at Stryker. "I've asked Stryker to join us to give us the benefit of his expertise. Officer, would you mind explaining what you saw?"

All eyes turned to Stryker at that point. Feeling a little self-conscious, Stryker stood and spoke up. "Yeah, what Ramirez said is true. The vampire-thing had a jewel around its neck that it used to generate a portal. One of my shots hit the jewel and caused the portal to close, leaving... that."

"Do you think it came from... what was it called..." one of the deputy chiefs, McGurk, asked.

"Outworld." Stryker shrugged. "No idea. From what I saw Outworld's forces were made up of more than one race, but we never saw anything like those during the invasion."

"We've asked the Federal government for assistance," Ramirez said. "The military has a department dedicated solely to invaders from other worlds, and we should be hearing from

them soon. In the meantime, we need to catch the other Dracula Killer as soon as we can.

"We're going to be dividing into groups doing sweeps of the known locations the Dracula Killers have hit. SWAT will be standing by in case one of you do make a hit. Keep this in mind," Ramirez spoke louder at this point. "If what we think is right, the perp will be able to escape even if you have him in a corner. Do not rush in without backup unless a life is on the line."

"One other thing," Stryker said loudly. The officers turned to him again, and he felt another twinge of self-consciousness. "The one Hunt and I stopped looked normal until he decided to flee. Somehow he can disguise the wings. Don't go assuming he'll be walking around like a gargoyle."

Ramirez nodded in agreement. "Listen to the man. Now, you have your assignments. Meet with your shift captains and get to it."

Everyone stood up, gathering into groups, talking amongst themselves as they began to file out of the squad room. Stryker walked around them, making his way to the front of the room, where Ramirez was putting some papers into his briefcase.

"Nice briefing," Stryker said. "You think we can nail this guy?"

"I hope so," Ramirez replied, closing the briefcase and picking it up. "Last thing we need is more deaths."

"I know," Stryker sighed. "Did the feds say when OIA would get back with you?"

Ramirez shook his head. Stryker grunted, as he and Ramirez stepped out of the squad room. "Hope it's soon," Stryker muttered. It was a large city, with a lot of ground to cover, and Stryker knew that the more assistance the OIA could give, the better.

#

Gabe poured another vodka and water, and handed it to the man in front of him.

"Thanks, Gabe," the man said, smiling. Gabe nodded, and went back to his work.

Gabe had been working at the Dragon's Fire pub for a couple of years, and had gotten to know the regulars. The man he had just passed a drink to was one such person; he came in every day hoping to get lucky. Gabe didn't blame him; considering his wife had left him six months earlier and took the kids with her, Chris needed something to go right.

As he dried a glass with a towel, he noticed the pub's door open, and a young woman walked in. She was tall, with dark auburn hair, green eyes, a noble nose, and curvy, wearing a

white shirt, black leather skirt, and black boots. She stepped over to the bar, and slid onto a bar stool in front of Gabe. He smiled.

"What'll you have?" he asked.

She smiled, and spoke in a faintly accented voice, "I would like a... bloody mary, please."

"You got it," Gabe replied. As he turned to the wall of bottles to pick out a vodka, he saw Chris slide over next to the young woman, and begin a conversation. He grinned to himself, hoping that maybe this time the woman would show interest. Normally the girls at the pub didn't show much interest in a 45 year old man, especially if he was slightly out of shape and balding.

Gabe finished putting the tomato juice and Tabasco sauce in, popped a hunk of celery on top, and turned back to the two. He placed the drink on the bar in front of the woman. Chris raised his hand slightly. "Put it on my tab."

"Sure thing," Gabe replied, and turned away to step over to the register. He snuck a peek through the mirror in front of him, noting that the young woman was laughing softly and hanging onto Chris's words. He turned back to speak to another customer.

A minute later, though, he realized Chris was trying to

flag him down. Gabe turned, and saw Chris was motioning for the tab. He nodded, and went over to the register. Quickly totaling up the bill, he handed it over to Chris. Chris signed it; as he did, Gabe couldn't help but notice the young woman was leaning against him.

"I'll catch you later, Gabe," Chris said with a smile. The woman slid off the bar stool, placing her arm around Chris's waist.

"Enjoy yourself," Gabe grinned. He watched the two walk out of the pub, his arm around her shoulder. Chuckling to himself, he turned to another customer, asking if he needed anything else. The man shook his head, and Gabe nodded, turning to go clean another couple of glasses.

The relative quiet of the pub was suddenly broken by a man's scream outside. Gabe swung around instantly; everyone else had stopped talking and were looking around. Rufus, the bouncer, had already run outside to check it out. Gabe stood frozen, then started walking to the door, thinking he might need to give Rufus a little backup.

"What the..." he heard Rufus shout. Gabe broke into a run, reaching the doors and slamming through them. He didn't know what was wrong, but it sounded like Rufus needed help. He reached into his back pocket, getting hold of the switchblade he

normally kept on him. He stepped onto the sidewalk, and then turned into the alley next to the pub where the scream originated from.

He skidded to a stop. Rufus stood there, staring. Gabe stepped around Rufus's considerable bulk, to see what he was looking at. A man lay crumpled on the floor, unmoving. Gabe quickly knelt down by the man, to see if he could help. The first thing Gabe noticed was that the man's throat was torn out. Only then did Gabe see the man's face. It was Chris, with a look of terror frozen in death.

Gabe quickly stood up, and looked around. The woman he was with was nowhere to be seen. He turned to Rufus, and said, "I don't believe this shit..."

Rufus looked back at him. "You think that chick did it?"

Gabe didn't respond. Instead, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911.

#

Stryker stepped under the yellow police tape and into the alleyway. In front of him, he saw the body of the latest victim being loaded onto the gurney, to be taken to the morgue. To one side, he saw Ramirez speaking to a tall man wearing jeans and a t-shirt. The man looked pale and shaken. He sighed, and stepped to one side so the gurney could come by.

Ramirez stepped away from the man, turned, and saw Stryker. He walked over to Stryker, shaking his head.

"This is the second murder since we had our meeting, and what do we have?" Ramirez grumbled. "Nothing. A big fat zero."

Stryker nodded. "So I heard. I was checking on Hunt after I finished my shift when I heard about this."

Ramirez sighed. "Things are just getting worse, Kurtis. Get this. According to the bartender, the victim left in the company of a young woman. Assuming she wasn't a victim too, that means we have a third Dracula Killer."

"A third?" Stryker raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah, and whoever these are are two steps ahead of us," Ramirez replied. He grumbled, kicking at a can. "By the time we get to the crime scene they're long gone, and we don't even know how they're escaping us. We can't even track down their base of operations."

"Their what?" Stryker looked up. "I told you. They're using portals."

Ramirez looked at him, and sighed. He walked away slowly, then leaned against the alley wall opposite. Stryker knew this look; it was the look that meant Ramirez had something he needed to say but didn't want to say it.

"All right, out with it," Stryker said. "What's going on?"

Ramirez took a deep breath. "I was going to tell you tomorrow, but I guess now's a good a time as any. We heard from the OIA. According to them, whatever it is we're facing has to be local. They say there hasn't been any portal activity at all."

"WHAT?" Stryker was livid. "What the hell? I saw that one vampire create a damn portal! How else did they think it died?!"

Ramirez shrugged. "They're saying that it was probably some other spell that you interrupted. They claim that their sensors can detect any portal activity across the globe, so whatever you saw couldn't have been a portal."

Stryker snorted. "Damn it, I know what I saw. Did you tell them I was the one who saw it?"

"Yeah," Ramirez nodded. "Problem is, to those guys we cops don't know our asses from a hole in the ground. The top brass are going with them on it, so the portal angle's being dropped."

I don't believe this shit, Stryker thought to himself. Aloud, he said, "So, what happens now?"

Ramirez shrugged. "Well, top brass may want the main taskforce to continue searching, but they probably won't notice me giving you a special assignment."

"Special assignment?" Stryker was confused.

"Yeah," Ramirez said. "I believe you, and your portal

theory makes the most sense. See if you can convince them otherwise."

#

"What do you mean they're on assignment?" Stryker growled into the phone. "Listen, just tell them Kurtis Stryker needs to talk to them. Surely you've got a way to reach them."

He leaned back in the desk chair, looking around the busy squad room. He looked at Ramirez, who sat opposite him, giving him a mild look. Stryker had been trying to reach Sonya Blade and Jackson Briggs at the OIA for a couple of hours now, with no luck.

He listened to the reply from the other end of the line. "Fine, then," he growled. "Tell them when they get back that Kurtis Stryker called, needing their help. If they don't remember, tell them they met me during the Outworld invasion."

He slammed the phone down on the receiver. "No luck?" Ramirez asked.

"Nope," Stryker replied. "According to that paperpusher Sonya and Jax are on assignment and can't be reached."

Ramirez nodded. "Think they would have helped?"

"Considering they founded the damn OIA, they probably would have gotten us a more helpful ear than whoever it was McGurk called," Stryker muttered. He leaned forward on the desk,

tapping his pencil, lost in thought.

"So, where do we go from here?" Ramirez asked.

Stryker sighed. "Well, from what I know, there are only three kinds of people who have experience with portals: the military, magicians, and gods. We can strike off the military."

Ramirez raised an eyebrow. "This isn't the time for jokes, Kurtis."

"I'm not joking," Stryker replied. He raised up, and looked at Ramirez expressionlessly. "Getting a magician will be a big problem. The only one I know who's friendly is Nightwolf."

"Nightwolf," Ramirez repeated. "Isn't he the shaman over at the big reservation near here?"

Stryker nodded. "Yeah. You know him?"

"Yeah, had to speak to him once or twice because of cases over there, where I had to coordinate with the reservation police," Ramirez said. "Nice guy. You seriously think he's a magician?"

"Yeah, seen it myself during the invasion," Stryker replied. "I've kept in contact with him afterwards. Problem is that when we last spoke a week ago he said he was going on a vision quest and would be gone for a month or so. I've got no way to reach him."

"Damn," Ramirez swore softly. "What about the unfriendly

ones? We could pull one in."

Stryker looked up at Ramirez. "You're taking me seriously now?"

Ramirez sighed and leaned back. "We've got a dead vampire, two more committing murders, and they're all vanishing into thin air. It's not any weirder than anything else."

"Yeah," Stryker said. "Well, the answer to that is no. The only other magician I know is Shang Tsung, and if he's still alive, he's back in Outworld."

"So... gods?" Ramirez asked. "You were serious about that too, right?"

Stryker nodded. "I've met one. His name is Raiden, and he's the protector of our realm. Problem is, I don't know how to reach him. I mean, I know he's close to a couple of guys, but they're in China and I have no way of getting hold of them."

"Shit," Ramirez said. "So, we're back to square one?"

"I guess," Stryker said softly. He had hoped that he could have gotten hold of Sonya or Jax, because they represented his best chance of getting the advice of an expert who would actually listen to him. Now he was stuck with hoping to actually catch the vampires in the act.

As he thought, his eyes scanned the desk, and came to rest on a newspaper. The woman who normally sat at this desk liked

to read the celebrity section of the paper, and a face jumped out at Stryker on the front. He grinned.

"Maybe not," he said. "I think I found ourselves someone else close to Raiden."

Ramirez looked at Stryker with a puzzled look on his face. In response, Stryker lifted up the paper to show him. The majority of the page showed a picture of a man in a nice suit wearing sunglasses. The headline above read, "JOHNNY CAGE TO ATTEND LOCAL GALA."

#

"Will you look at that crowd?" Ramirez breathed, as Stryker pulled towards the Barrentine Hotel. Stryker couldn't blame him for being surprised; their car was in a line of limos, and ahead he could see the valets helping men and women in formalwear out of their cars. Security lines held back people cheering and watching for their favorite celebrities, cameras flashing as they did.

Stryker chuckled to himself. The unmarked police car he and Ramirez were in stood out like a sore thumb compared to the limos. The only way he had gotten into the line was because the officers directing traffic had recognized them and let them in. He was thankful for that; he didn't want to try and have to push through the crowds to get to the entrances any other way.

He pulled the car into the hotel driveway, in front of the lobby entrance. As he stepped out, he noticed the valets looking a bit confused, not knowing what to make of the black Crown Vic they had pulled up in, nor the fact that neither Stryker nor Ramirez were in formal dress. Stryker grinned, and tossed the keys to the nearest valet. "We won't be long," he said, as he joined Ramirez on the carpet.

As they walked up the carpet to the hotel entrance, Ramirez muttered, "Not exactly dressed for this."

Stryker looked at him. Ramirez was wearing a grey suit with white shirt and black tie. By contrast, Stryker was wearing his blue tshirt, cargo pants, combat boots, and black cap worn backwards. Both men had their badges clipped to their belts.

"You look better than me," Stryker replied. "Besides, this isn't a social event for us."

They stepped through the lobby doors, and strode through the lobby following the line of men and women attending the event. Ahead of them, they saw the entrance to a ballroom, where a burly man in a tuxedo was checking names against a list. *At least the line's moving quickly,* Stryker thought.

After a couple of minutes of waiting, they stepped up in front of the man before the door. The man looked up from his

list, and raised an eyebrow. *Probably because we're not in tuxes*, Stryker mused. The man's expression became amused, and he asked, "Names?"

"Eduardo Ramirez and Kurtis Stryker," Ramirez replied smoothly. "We need to speak to Johnny Cage."

The man snorted. "Your names aren't on the list. Sure you have an invite?"

Ramirez scowled. He reached down, and pulled the shield from his belt, holding it up front of the man. "Yeah. Right here."

The man was unfazed. "You could be the chief of police for all I care. You're not on the invite list, so you're not going in."

Stryker looked at Ramirez. For his part, Ramirez looked back at Stryker, with an expression that said, *He's all yours*. Ramirez was an large man and knew it, but he also knew Stryker was the more intimidating and combat-proficient of the two.

Stryker growled, and stepped close to the man. "Listen, buddy, we're not some star-struck fans. We're here on official police business. So, either stand aside, go send someone to tell Cage Stryker needs to talk to him, or try and get in my way. If you want to get in my way, that's fine by me. You can sit down and bleed all over yourself while my friend here

arrests you for interfering in police business."

The man stared at Stryker menacingly. Stryker met his gaze unflinchingly.

"Hey, what's going on here?" a voice said from next to them. Stryker turned, and saw a short, thin man in a black suit approaching from another ballroom entrance. From his demeanor, Stryker guessed that he was a manager.

Ramirez turned to the manager, and held up his badge. "I'm Detective Ramirez, mister...?"

"Steve Johansen," the manager replied. "I'm with Matrix Events. We're the hosts for this event. Is there a problem?"

"No problem, Mr. Johansen," Ramirez said. "Officer Stryker and I just need a few minutes of Johnny Cage's time. It's involving a current case."

"Oh, dear," Johansen said nervously. He looked around, and stepped closer. In a softer voice, he asked, "Mr. Cage isn't in any trouble, is he?"

"None at all," Ramirez smiled. "Officer Stryker and he are acquaintances, and Stryker feels he might have some information that may help us."

Johansen nodded. "I'll bring him right out. Always happy to help the police." He smiled to Ramirez, and walked past them into the ballroom.

Stryker stepped back, and turned away from the security guard. "That was fortunate," he muttered. "I wasn't looking forward to causing a real scene."

"Yeah," Ramirez said softly.

A couple of minutes later, Stryker noticed the guests in line were pointing past him, whispering to themselves. An instant later, Stryker heard a familiar voice say, "Hey Stryker! How's it going?" Stryker turned, to see Johansen standing next to a tall, well built man, wearing a black tux, white wing collared shirt, black bow tie, and dark expensive sunglasses. The man was smiling widely.

"Hey Johnny," Stryker said. He stepped forward and shook Johnny's outstretched hand. He then indicated next to him. "Johnny, this is Ed Ramirez, with homicide. We'd like to talk to you, if we could."

Ramirez stepped forward, and Johnny shook his hand too. Smiling, Johnny said, "What's up? Got a case you think would be a good movie for me?"

Stryker shook his head. "Nothing like that." He looked around. "Mind if we talk privately?"

"Sure," Johnny answered. He turned to Johansen, who nodded, and moved away. Johnny followed him, with Stryker and Ramirez bringing up the rear. They turned a corner, and came to

the business office, which Johansen opened with a keycard. The three others walked in, and Johansen closed the door behind them.

Stryker looked around; other than the three of them, the business office was deserted. Johnny leaned up against the wall, grinned, and asked, "So, what's up?"

"You heard of the Dracula Killer case?" Ramirez asked.

"Well, yeah," Johnny replied. "Heard my agent talking about it to one of my friends. She wanted to option a movie out of the story. You think I know someone involved?"

"Well, we know who the killers are," Ramirez said. "It's just that they're, well..."

Ramirez clearly looked uncomfortable, so Stryker decided to get right to the point. "Listen, Johnny," he said, "we need your help. We need to talk to Raiden."

"Raiden?" Johnny's smile vanished. "What? Why him?"

Stryker sat down on the edge of a computer desk. "The killers aren't human. I killed one as he was escaping through a portal. Problem is, the feds don't believe me and I can't reach Sonya or Jax. Raiden's my best bet for proving it."

"Oh," Johnny said. He took a deep breath. "Well... you weren't involved with the Shinnok thing, so I guess you wouldn't know..."

"Know what?" Stryker asked. He didn't like this one bit.

"Well... Raiden's not the protector of Earthrealm anymore," Johnny said. "After the business with Shinnok, the Elder Gods made him one of them. The guy who took his place is named Fujin. God of wind, or something like that."

"Okay, so, because he's an... 'elder god'... he can't help us?" Stryker asked.

"Dunno," Johnny replied. "I didn't quite get what they are, except for some non-interference thing and policing the realms. Fujin's the main man, now."

"Great," Stryker grumbled. He looked over at Ramirez, who was watching them with a lost look. Stryker didn't blame him. "Any idea how we can contact him?"

"Nope," Johnny shrugged. "Hell, I never contacted Raiden. He always came to me. Maybe try a prayer or something?"

Stryker shook his head. "Damn," he said. "Ah, well. I won't keep you, Johnny. Thanks for the info."

"No problem," Johnny grinned. He shook Stryker's and Ramirez's hands, and stepped towards the door. "Let me know if you come across any cases that might make a good film."

Johnny opened the door, and stepped out. As he did, Ramirez turned to Stryker. "So, no good? What do we do now?"

"I'll think of something," Stryker replied. *I'd better*, he thought to himself.

As he stood up and strode to the door, Ramirez quipped, "By the way, does he ever take those sunglasses off?"

"Nope," Stryker replied sourly.

#

"You have got to be kidding me," Ramirez commented as they walked up the steps to the Shinto shrine.

"Nope," Stryker replied. At this time of the evening, the shrine was fairly empty, so they passed no one as they reached the main hall's entrance. He had known there was a Shinto shrine in the city, but had never thought about using it until that night. He opened the door, and entered, with Ramirez close behind. He took in the surroundings, noting a couple of elderly Japanese turning and staring at them. He smiled, nodded to them, and looked around.

"So, what are we doing here?" Ramirez whispered, coming to a stop next to Stryker.

"Johnny gave me an idea," Stryker whispered back. His eyes came to rest on a gong and offering box. He stepped up to the gong, and thought to himself, *I hope I get this right. Oh, well, here goes nothing...*

He took hold of the small mallet by the gong, and struck it against the gong softly. He then placed the mallet down, and stepped over to the offering box. He reached into his pocket,

pulled out a quarter, and tossed it in. He then bowed deeply to the box twice, clapped his hands twice, and then bowed again. He held the bow, and prayed silently.

Fujin, if you're listening, I need to speak with you.

He then stood up, and turned back to Ramirez, who was watching with a grin on his face. "What was *that*?" he asked amusedly.

Stryker walked past him to the door, and Ramirez turned to walk beside him. "That's why I did that internet search at your desk before we left," he replied. "It's a traditional prayer to the gods. You have a better idea?"

"I guess not," Ramirez conceded as they exited the main hall. "So what now?"

"No idea," Stryker said, as they walked down the steps. "I guess go back to the station and go back to what we were doing."

"I guess," Ramirez said. They crossed the yard, heading to the car. "Hate to think we did all that for nothing." He chuckled. "Drive's going to be fun, with this storm coming in."

"Storm?" Stryker said, stopping. "The weather report said it'd be clear tonight." He looked around; the skies were clear, though the breeze that had greeted them when they walked out of the shrine was getting stronger.

"Well, where do you think this wind is coming from?"

Ramirez asked. As he spoke, the air began buffeting them.

Ramirez put his hand against the car to steady himself.

"Wind..." Stryker looked around. He realized what was going on. "Hey there!" he shouted into the gale, as he braced himself against the strong winds.

Suddenly, the forces against them eased off. As they watched, the strong winds focused themselves into a small cyclone in front of them, and then began to shrink and take a human form. Less than a few seconds later, they coalesced into a man standing before them. He towered above them, slender and muscular. He was shirtless, and wore teal pants. His hair was long and white, tied in a ponytail. Stryker was drawn to his eyes; like Raiden's, the man's eyes were pure white.

"Fujin?" Stryker asked.

"Yes, Kurtis Stryker," the man responded tonelessly. "For what reason have you asked to speak with me?"

By this time, Ramirez had regained his composure. Stryker felt a pang of sympathy for him; men appearing out of nowhere would of course be new to him. "Well, thanks for coming," Ramirez said. "Never heard of prayer actually being heard by someone before now."

Fujin turned to Ramirez, and narrowed his eyes. "Kurtis Stryker is one of Earthrealm's chosen warriors, Eduardo Ramirez.

As such, he has special preference amongst us." Fujin then turned back to Stryker. "What is it you need?"

Stryker nodded. "We need your help. There are murders being committed here by beings that aren't human. We know they're invading from another realm, but the military won't believe us. Can you help us track them down and stop them?"

Fujin regarded Stryker with an utter lack of expression. *Hell of a poker face*, Stryker thought.

"I am afraid you are mistaken, Stryker," Fujin finally said. "There have been no incursions to Earthrealm that I have been aware of. If there had been portals, I would know about it."

"What?" Stryker said in disbelief. "I saw a portal with my own eyes!"

Fujin shook his head. "You are mistaken. If it had been a portal, I would have sensed it. I am sorry, but I cannot help you."

Ramirez swore softly. Stryker sighed, and finally nodded. "All right, then," he said. "Thank you for your time." He bowed, and turned back to Ramirez.

Ramirez placed a hand on Stryker's shoulder. "It was worth a try, Kurtis."

"I know," Stryker said. He was disappointed; he was sure

he was right about the portals. *Maybe I did misjudge the spell...* He shook his head, and walked to the car's driver's door. "Well, let's go see if we can find where the vampires are hiding, then..."

"Wait," Fujin said. Stryker and Ramirez turned back to him; Stryker had expected him to have disappeared by then. Fujin walked up to Stryker, and stood in front of him. "Did you say 'vampires'?"

"Yeah," Stryker said. He met the god's gaze.

"That is not possible," Fujin stated. "There are no vampires in Earthrealm."

Ramirez spoke up. "He's telling the truth. Stryker killed one of them a few days ago."

Fujin turned to Ramirez. "Describe this vampire."

Stryker blinked. "He was tall, dark haired, and looked human, other than the fangs and the large bat-like wings."

Fujin turned back to Stryker, and stared at him. Stryker cursed his inability to read the god's expression. Finally, he said, "I believe you, Stryker, but this means we have a much bigger problem. I must consult with the others. Where is this vampire's body?"

"City morgue," Stryker answered.

Fujin nodded. "Go there, then. I will meet you there as

soon as I can." He bowed, stepped back, and suddenly disincorporated in a blast of air.

Stryker turned to Ramirez, and grinned. "Think it was a waste of time now?"

Ramirez stared at where Fujin had been, and whistled softly. "No way. At least you got us a better lead than any of the stakeouts had. Let's not keep your friend waiting."

#

A half hour later, Stryker and Ramirez stood in front of the entrance to the city morgue. It was after hours, so the parking lot was bare of cars save a set of black sedans with government plates. Stryker wasn't surprised; even though they believed there were no portals, the OIA still wanted to study the vampire's body to learn more about it. *Hopefully they won't give us any trouble if Fujin decides he wants to see the body.*

Next to him, Ramirez sneezed. He pulled a handkerchief out of his jacket inside pocket, and wiped his nose. "How long do you think he'll be?" he asked.

Stryker shrugged. "Couldn't tell you. I don't think he'll stand us up, though."

Ramirez nodded, and looked up at the sky. Above them, clouds had begun blocking the night skies. As he watched, he started to see flashes of light in them.

"I thought you said it was supposed to be clear tonight," he growled. "I don't want to get rained on."

"It was," Stryker replied. He looked up at the storm clouds overhead. "You know weathermen, though. Don't know their--"

Stryker was interrupted as a bright flash of light erupted in front of them. His ears filled with a deafening roar, and he turned away. *Holy shit, we almost got hit by lightning*, his mind raced. A second later, as the light faded, Stryker rubbed his eyes and looked at where the lightning had hit. It took him a second to realize they were no longer alone.

The man standing before them was immediately familiar to him. He was tall and well-built, clad head-to-toe in white, with a blue baldric over his chest. White hair was visible inside his hood, and his head was topped by a conical hat. His stern face had the same lack of expression Fujin's did, except where Fujin's eyes were pure white, this man's were white with an occasional pulse of blue electricity. Despite himself, Stryker smiled.

"Raiden," he said, stepping forward and extending his hand. "It's good to see you."

Raiden nodded, and took Stryker's hand, shaking it. "It is good to see you as well, Kurtis Stryker. I wish it was not

under these circumstances.”

Stryker nodded. “I wasn’t expecting you, to be honest. We were expecting Fujin.”

“Yeah, where is he, if I may ask?” Ramirez asked, stepping forward to stand alongside Stryker.

Raiden turned to Ramirez. “You may, Eduardo Ramirez. He has explained to me the reason you contacted him. He and I agree that this has become a matter where we Elder Gods may need to become involved. Where is the vampire you killed?”

“Inside,” Ramirez said. He turned, and walked to the door, opening it. Stryker followed, with Raiden bringing up the rear. As they walked down the main hallway, he slowed to let Stryker catch up. “I hope the feds don’t give us too much grief,” he muttered.

Stryker chuckled. “We’ve got an Elder God with us,” he reminded Ramirez. “Even if they decide to fight it won’t be a long one.”

Ramirez and Stryker turned a corner, and approached a doorway on the left marked “EXAMINATION ROOM #4”. In front of it, a man in a black suit sat in a chair reading a magazine. *Well, at least there’s only one fed,* Stryker thought. At the sound of footsteps, the agent looked up.

“Hold it right there,” the agent said. Stryker and Ramirez

stopped. "This area is restricted to OIA agents only."

Stryker was about to open his mouth to say something, when Raiden stepped past him. "They may enter," he said to the agent.

The agent looked up at Raiden, his jaw dropping for a second. He then blinked, closed his mouth, and regained his composure. "Of course," he replied, standing up and opening the door. Raiden strode in.

Stryker and Ramirez looked at one another, and then back at the agent. "Wait," Stryker said, a tone of amazement in his voice. "You're taking his word we can enter?"

"Yeah," the agent replied. "OIA Directive 22 Alpha. If the gods Raiden or Fujin are involved, we're to give them any possible assistance."

Stryker blinked. He turned to Ramirez, and said, "This is why it's good to have friends in high places." He then nodded to the agent, and stepped into the room. Behind him, Ramirez just looked at the agent, and then quickly hurried after Stryker.

Stryker looked around. The fluorescent lights were on, giving the green tiled room a sterile air. In the middle of the room stood a metal examination table, upon which a form lay under a white sheet. Raiden looked at the form without any expression. Stryker stepped over to the table, and pulled the sheet back. The vampire's dead body lay there, grey in death.

In the harsh light, the cauterized wound looked even more sickening. The body had been turned onto its stomach, exposing the remaining wing.

Raiden gave a small start, and then turned to Stryker. "Did this vampire have any jewelry with a blue gemstone?" he asked.

"Yeah," Stryker replied. "He tried to make a portal using it. I shot it while he was stepping through the portal." He pointed to a box sitting next to the vampire's body. "What's left of it is probably in there."

Raiden nodded, then began pacing, looking lost in thought. Stryker and Ramirez looked at one another, and then at Raiden. Finally, Raiden stopped pacing, and turned to them.

"This presents a grave problem," he said. "Your theory is correct. This vampire did come to Earthrealm through a portal. There have been no vampires on Earthrealm in nearly a century. For them to come here is a violation of the Elder Gods' law."

"A violation of their law?" Stryker asked. "Why is that?"

"It is because they attempted a clandestine invasion of Earthrealm," Raiden replied. He paused, again appearing lost in thought. Finally, he spoke again. "Many millenia ago, the home realm of the vampires was conquered by Shao Kahn and merged with Outworld. They have refused to follow Kahn, and stay apart from

the rest of Outworld. A hundred years ago, they decided to take Earthrealm as their new home."

"Wait, what?" Stryker said, confused. "I thought it was impossible to invade realms outside of the rules of Mortal Kombat."

"In theory, yes," Raiden agreed. "However, Shao Kahn's own invasion of Earthrealm shows that there are... loopholes. While the Elder Gods and Shao Kahn were preoccupied with the eighth Mortal Kombat tournament, the vampires' leader crossed over with the intention of taking over the dominant world power at the time."

Ramirez coughed. "What do you mean, the dominant world power?"

"I am referring to the British Empire," Raiden responded coolly. "At that time the British Empire had holdings throughout the world. By conquering the British Empire, Dracula would have been able to lay a claim to the entire realm and allow his people to come across."

"Whoa whoa WHOA!" Stryker said, holding up his hands. "Wait just a goddamn minute! Are you trying to tell me that Dracula was *real*? Are you saying the book wasn't fiction?!"

Raiden gave a small smile. "That is exactly what I am saying, Stryker. Surely you do not think Johnny Cage is the

only one who fictionalizes his personal experiences?"

Stryker blinked. "You have a point," he admitted.

Raiden nodded, and began pacing once more. "The book, as far as they knew, was not fiction. However, they did not realize that Dracula came from another world. Once they defeated him in London, he fled back to Transylvania, where his original beachhead had been established. He used an artifact known as the Inseleciune Stone to make a double of himself, which the hunters destroyed. With his brides also destroyed, he fled back to Outworld.

"However, his arrival back in Outworld had not gone unnoticed. The Elder Gods saw him returning, and came to realize what he had attempted. They then appeared before him, and pronounced their judgement: the vampires were forever barred from Earthrealm. If they attempted to cross over again, their entire race would be destroyed."

"So that's why there hasn't been any real vampire attacks since then," Stryker said. "They couldn't cross over without being noticed."

"Until now," Raiden acknowledged. "This is most troubling. All travel between realms is monitored by the gods of those realms. If the vampires have figured out how to come here unnoticed, then it does not bode well."

Stryker grunted. While he was feeling a small measure of satisfaction at having been proven right, what Raiden was saying was that the problem was a lot bigger than they had first imagined. *The guy's admitting that he's almost as much in the dark as we are,* he thought sourly. "So, what do we do?" he finally asked.

Raiden again looked lost in thought for a second, and then turned to Stryker. "We must find out what is going on. We Elder Gods cannot interfere directly. However, we do permit others to intercede on our behalf. Would you be willing to do so, Stryker?"

"How so?" Stryker asked. He wasn't liking the sound of this.

"I can create a portal to Outworld for you," Raiden said. At Stryker's shocked reaction, he added, "It will place you close to Dracula's castle, far from Shao Kahn's sphere of influence. As it stands, Kahn will not be concerned. His attention is currently occupied by a military campaign being waged against him. Once there, make your way to Dracula's castle and speak with him. As an emissary of the Elder Gods, he would attack you on pain of his own demise, especially considering the circumstances."

"And then what?" Stryker asked. "You don't seriously

expect that he'll admit to everything right off the bat?"

Raiden smiled. "Of course not," he said. "That is why I am asking you to be our emissary. As a police officer, you have experience with interrogating suspects. I am hoping you will be able to ascertain the truth."

Ramirez coughed. "Excuse me," he said.

Raiden turned to Ramirez, and gazed at him intently. "Yes, Eduardo Ramirez, I know what you are about to say. I know you are a detective and rank higher than Stryker. However, Stryker has had experience dealing with the denizens of Outworld, and has more training in combat than you. I'm afraid it's safer if Stryker goes, especially as I cannot protect you directly."

Ramirez didn't look happy, and Stryker didn't blame him. He would have definitely been the better person to do questioning, but Raiden did have a point: Outworld was generally not a safe place, especially for humans. He took a deep breath, and said, "All right, let's do this. When do I go?"

Raiden walked over to the examination table, and opened the box sitting next to the body. Reaching in, he pulled a small neckchain out that Stryker recognized as being the one around the vampire's neck. The setting for the jewel was still attached, with small pieces of crystal remaining.

"Take this with you," Raiden said, holding the chain out to

Stryker. "Each portal crystal is unique to each vampire, and will help strengthen your claim against Dracula."

Stryker took the chain, and put it in a pouch in his tactical belt. He then performed a quick inventory. He had his service pistol and nightstick, and also a pair of handcuffs. He sighed; he would have liked to have gotten a couple of stun grenades like he used during the invasion, but even if Ramirez signed off on it, chances were pretty slim he would get authorization to use them anytime soon, if at all. *These are really all I need, though.* "Do it."

Raiden took a step back, turned away from them, and tensed up. He began waving his arms, and speaking an incantation. As his arms circled back and forth, an orange energy began flowing over his hands. Finally, Raiden brought his hands up with effort, and the energy rose up, swirling of its own volition. He stepped back as the energy circled and flowed, almost becoming like a horizontal tornado. The room shook, and the swirling vortex stabilized into an active portal.

Stryker stepped towards the portal. At that moment, the door opened, and the agent that had been standing outside the door stepped in. Stryker stopped, and turned to the agent. "Listen," he said. "This thing came from Outworld. Raiden's sending me there to investigate for him. Make sure Sonya and

Jax know."

The agent nodded. Stryker turned back to the portal, braced himself, and stepped into it. He barely had enough time to hear Ramirez shout, "Good luck!" He felt himself pulled in, buffeted by the portal's power. He grimaced, and jumped in to the vortex.

#

After a few seconds, Stryker felt himself land on cold dirt. He blinked, letting his eyes adjust to the lack of light now that the portal had vanished. He grunted, and got to his knees, and then slowly stood up, looking around.

He was surrounded by tall grey mountains. Above, the nighttime sky had a purple tinge, as a moon peeked out over a mountaintop. He realized he was standing on a mountain pass that branched out before him. The path to his right led down the mountain, twisting down out of sight. The path to his left led upwards, to a castle about half a mile away. *That's gotta be Dracula's castle*, he thought. He took a step towards the left hand path, and stopped. There was something coming up the path behind him.

He quickly looked behind him. The path snaked downwards and around a large rock formation. Whatever was coming up the path was behind the rocks and hadn't seen him. He frantically

looked around, seeking cover. Noticing a large boulder to the left, he sprinted towards it and slipped behind it. As he waited, he heard the sound of large animals breathing hard and what sounded like a large carriage. The sounds passed by the boulder, and Stryker decided to risk looking. He peeked around the boulder, and saw a large carriage being pulled by two beasts of burden, making its way down the right hand path. He noticed a banner waving off the top of the carriage, adorned with the outline of a helmet with a skull face and two wing-like blades at the top. Stryker instantly recognized it as Shao Kahn's standard.

So much for Kahn not having any influence here, he thought grimly. The carriage slowly moved down the path, and went around another rock formation, disappearing from sight. Stryker sighed, and walked back onto the path. He grimaced, and started making his way up the path to his left.

As he approached the castle, he noticed that along the path, on either side, large wooden staves had been placed, spaced several feet apart. The staves were tall, probably ten feet in height, and the tops were sharpened to a point. He idly wondered as to their purpose.

Before long, he had reached the outer gates of the castle. He stepped up to the large portcullis, and grumbled. The heavy

ironwork was shut, and he saw no way to lift it, nor were there any means of notifying anyone that he was there. In desperation, he even looked at the stone walls, hoping there might even be a ladder or handholds to climb with. There were none; a second later he chided himself for such ridiculousness. *What's the point of having a large barrier if it's going to be easy to bypass, huh?*

He stood there for a minute, thinking. Finally, he shrugged, and called out, "Anybody in there?"

He didn't expect a response. In fact, he felt slightly foolish for having done so. *It's not like anyone is listening,* he thought glumly. To his surprise, about twenty seconds later, the portcullis began raising slowly, apparently of its own volition. As soon as it was raised high enough for him to enter, he quickly ducked under it and made his way into the courtyard.

He was in for another surprise. He had expected someone to meet him or at least be visible to him when he entered the castle's courtyard. Instead, there wasn't a soul in sight. He caught sight of a black carriage nearby, but from the dust and dirt it appeared to have been in disuse for some time. In addition, there were no lights coming from the castle itself. If he didn't know better, he would say the castle had been

abandoned for some time.

He shrugged, and made his way to the main doors. The doors were large and wooden, with ornate carvings of dragons along the sides. He experimentally tried the ornate metal door handle, and found it turned easily. He pulled the door open, and stepped inside.

He had expected to enter into darkness. Instead, the large main hall was lit by moonlight shining in from the large glass windows above. Ahead of him, a large carpeted staircase rose to a balcony overlooking the main hall. He took a step forward, and stopped as the main doors closed with a loud bang behind him. He turned in surprise.

"It seems I have an uninvited guest," a deep voice sounded from behind Stryker. Stryker groaned inwardly. *Is this going to be any more cliché?* he thought sourly. He turned back around.

He had halfway expected someone who looked like he should be from the old Dracula films: average age, short slicked-back black hair, average height, pale skin, and an old tuxedo with a cape. Instead, the person standing at the top of the stairs looked like an old man, with thick white hair, thick eyebrows, and a long white mustache. He was thin but tall. His clothing was black, with a high collared tunic, slacks, and a pair of boots. A pair of large bat-like wings rose up off the man's

back. His eyes regarded Stryker with a baleful expression. Despite himself, Stryker took a step back; the man's force presence was undeniable.

"Dracula?" Stryker asked tentatively.

"I am he," the man replied evenly. He started slowly descending the staircase. "I had told your master that I would kill any further envoys to me."

Stryker blinked. "My master?" he asked. His hand dropped to his gun, placing it against the hilt.

Dracula sneered. "You are not the first human to have come here. Do you honestly plan on playing dumb about your 'emperor'?"

Stryker raised an eyebrow. *This might explain a great deal.* "Hold on," he said, fishing his badge out and holding it up for Dracula to see. "My name is Kurtis Stryker. I'm with the Central City Police Department in Earthrealm, and I'm here as an emissary from the Elder Gods."

Dracula stopped, his eyes wide in surprise. "The Elder Gods?" he asked.

"Yeah," Stryker said. "I don't know about any other humans you might have met here, especially any working for Shao Kahn, but Raiden sent me to have a word with you."

Dracula stared at Stryker, as if looking into his soul.

For his part, Stryker met his gaze evenly. He supposed it might be dangerous, given the legends about vampires and their powers of hypnotism, but he was damned if he was going to let this guy intimidate him.

Finally, Dracula grudgingly said, "Very well, Kurtis Stryker. I believe you. More, your status as an emissary protects you from my wrath. What is it the Elder Gods wish of me?"

Stryker took a deep breath. "Well, we want to know what you're thinking sending vampires to Earthrealm in violation of the Elder Gods' law."

Dracula looked at him in shock. A moment later, his face contorted into a fury like which Stryker had not seen since the invasion, when he happened to see a band of Tarkatans on the loose. "HOW DARE YOU!" he thundered. He leaped into the air, and came landing right in front of Stryker. He raised to his full height, and quickly closed the distance between himself and Stryker.

"How dare you accuse me of breaking the Elder Gods' decree!" Dracula shouted. Stryker didn't flinch. "I have no desire to see my people wiped out. I will not stand for your dishonorable deceit!"

Stryker met the rage with a stone-like expression.

Finally, he dug into his pocket, and pulled out the neckchain from the vampire he had killed. "How do you explain this, then?" he asked coolly.

Dracula's eyes moved to the chain. He stared at it for a second, and his expression changed to one of recognition. He then looked back at Stryker, and doubtfully asked, "Where did you get this from?"

"Earthrealm," Stryker answered. "The owner of this crystal was attempting to flee with my partner. I shot the crystal, and its shattering closed the portal on its owner, killing him. Since then, we've had two other vampires crossing over and killing people."

Dracula stepped back, a look of contemplation on his face. Stryker watched him, and thought, *I bet he's not the one behind this. But if not him... who?*

Dracula finally sighed. "Once again, I believe you, Stryker," he said. "However, you must understand. I have not sent these vampires to Earthrealm."

"I believe you," Stryker said. He took his hand off his gun, and crossed his arms. "Problem is, how are they crossing over undetected?"

Dracula's face darkened. "I believe I can answer that. As stated before, an emissary of Shao Kahn came here before. He

promised us a method of crossing over to Earthrealm to feed to our hearts' content without the Elder Gods' knowledge. In return, he wanted an artifact of mine."

"And you said no?" Stryker asked.

"Of course," Dracula stated. "I am no fool, Stryker. I know from first-hand experience after my last trip to your realm that no matter how hard we try to cover our tracks, something will happen to reveal our presence. Your being here is proof of that. More, I had no intention of giving Kahn the Inselaciune Stone."

"The Inselaciune Stone," Stryker repeated. "Isn't that what you used to fake your death at Van Helsing's hands?"

"Yes," Dracula said. "I see the Elder Gods told you of my last visit. With the use of a quantity of blood, it creates a clone of the bearer. That way, my enemies were convinced of my death, unaware that I still lived, out of their reach."

Stryker nodded, and then a nasty thought occurred to him. "Uh, Dracula," he said, "if vampires are crossing over, and the price was the stone, doesn't that mean...?"

Dracula's eyes widened, and then he swiftly spun and ran down a hallway to the left of the staircase. Stryker hurried after him, following him down the dusty stone hall, until he reached a set of double doors. Stryker entered, to see Dracula

on the other side of the room. The room was an obvious armory, with swords and spears hung on the walls. Dracula was kneeling in front of an open chest, pulling out a wooden box. He opened the box, gazed inside it for a moment, and then tossed it aside, with an angry howl.

"It's gone!" Dracula hissed furiously. "Those traitors have stolen it!"

Great, Stryker thought to himself. "I don't suppose you know who those traitors are?" he asked.

Dracula spun around, his face a mask of anger. "I do," he growled. "The crystal you possess was owned by Vitarn. While my kind are solitary beings, he associated with two others named Taris and Selica. They will pay for their insolence!"

Stryker nodded. "Hopefully you can catch them before the next time they go to Earthrealm," he stated.

Dracula gave a small grunt. "If they have defied my rule, then they will not go quietly. I will need to call my subjects to aid me. This will take a short while. In the meantime, they will be free to escape to Earthrealm, provided Kahn allows them safe passage again tonight."

Stryker remembered the carriage he had seen earlier. "Is their home base near here?" he asked.

Dracula raised an eyebrow. "Just down the mountain path,

in a cave," he replied. "Why?"

Stryker grumbled. "Get your people gathered as soon as you can. Kahn's going to send them back across tonight."

Stryker thought Dracula couldn't look any angrier. He was wrong. "They will have escaped by the time we get there."

Stryker nodded, and turned to walk away. "I know. I'll go see if I can stop them. In the meantime, like I said, get me some backup as soon as you can."

#

It had taken Stryker a half-hour or so to make his way down the mountain path from Dracula's castle. He had made good time; at a jog, he had gone past the fork in the road where he had first arrived into Outworld and down the path he had seen the carriage travel down. Fortunately, the carriage had been moving at a slow speed, so he surmised it hadn't had that much of a head start on him.

That said, he had finally made it to where the carriage was parked, in front of a large cave in the mountainside. He hid behind a large boulder, and peeked his head around. An Outworld soldier stood guard by the carriage, a large spear in his hand. Beside him, the two beasts of burden snuffled and huffed. Now that he got a good look at them, they reminded Stryker of a pair of large bison, except with no hair.

I need to get into the cave, he thought to himself.

Normally I wouldn't use lethal force, but these ARE Shao Kahn's guys, and what he's doing is an act of war...

One of the beasts growled. The guard turned to it, and said something indistinct and decidedly unpleasant. *Now's my chance*, Stryker thought. He quickly slipped around the boulder, and hurried over to the guard. He pulled his nightstick out of its holster, and swung it, cracking it against the guard's skull. The guard fell to his knees, dazed, the surprise and force of the blow preventing him from making any sound. Stryker quickly dropped his nightstick, took the guard's head with his hands, and twisted sharply. There was a loud snap as the guard's neck broke, and he slumped over dead.

Stryker picked up his nightstick, and made his way around the back of the carriage to the cavern entrance. Steeling himself, he walked into the darkness. The cavern itself was dark and large, with little cover. He cursed silently as he crept along. *I'm a sitting duck*, he thought bitterly. The only light came from an occasional lit torch hanging on the cavern wall.

After a couple of minutes, Stryker saw that the tunnel turned sharply to the right. Also, a white glow was coming from that direction. He could hear voices as well, though not

clearly enough to make out what they were saying. Pressing against the cavern wall, he went up to the corner, and listened.

"Are you sure these... 'nightclubs' of which you speak will be good hunting grounds?" a woman's voice asked.

"Yes," a man's voice quickly followed. "We've since found that those 'strip clubs' and 'motels' you recommended are more heavily guarded."

"Don't worry about it, mates," a rough but familiar Australian-accented voice said. "I keep telling ya I know the best places for you lot to feed from. The emperor's been grateful for your help, and that's why I'm here, to make ya happy."

Stryker looked around the corner. The tunnel opened up into a much larger chamber. In the center, an orb about the size of a basketball glowed with a bright light, illuminating the area. Off to his left, two vampires stood, one a tall blond haired man, and the other a shorter red-haired woman. He recognized both from the police sketches taken after the latest Dracula Killer murders. In front of him, about twenty feet away, stood two other figures. One was head to toe in purple robes, and seemed to float over the ground. Stryker recognized him as one of Shang Tsung's shadow priests. In his hands he held a large leather-bound book. The other figure was a burly

man wearing tactical pants and boots, no shirt, and a brown vest. His face was brutal and needed a shave, and his close cropped hair was receding fast. Stryker couldn't see the right side of his face, but knew there was a metal plate and red cybernetic eye there.

So Kano survived the invasion and is working for Kahn, he thought. Everything made sense now. Kano was once a member of the criminal syndicate known as the Black Dragon. Stryker had seen him fighting alongside Kahn's extermination squads during the Earthrealm invasion, but the last he had heard the man had been presumed dead after a fight with Sonya Blade. I wondered how vampires from another realm had been so good at picking victims. As a criminal Kano would know the best places for them to easily find their prey.

The vampires turned to each other, and conferred quietly while Kano watched with a smug grin. The shadow priest's expression, on the other hand, was hidden under his hood. Finally, the vampires turned to Kano and said, "Very well. We are ready."

Kano grinned. "That's the spirit!" he cackled. He turned to the shadow priest and nodded. The shadow priest turned away from Kano and faced the vampires, his back to Stryker. He then opened the book, flipped to a certain page, and began to read an

incantation. As he did, the crystals on the vampires' pendants began to glow with a blue light.

They're getting ready to cross over, Stryker realized. He had to act quickly. He pulled his pistol out from his holster, and aimed at the shadow priest. He narrowed his eyes, sighting his target, and pulled the trigger twice. The pistol bucked in his hands.

The results were dramatic. The shadow priest's head whipped forward as the bullets smashed through the back of his skull. The body started falling forward; as it did, the robes burst into green flames. The flames quickly spread to the book, immolating it.

"NO!" the female vampire screamed. Both vampires and Kano turned to the cave entrance, their faces twisted in shock and anger. Stryker stepped out into the open, his gun pointed at them.

"All right, nobody move," he stated firmly.

Kano's eye narrowed, and then widened in recognition. "You gotta be kidding me," he said. "Of all the people, I get the Village People reject?"

Stryker decided to ignore the insult. "Put your hands behind your head," he stated.

"Or what?" Kano sneered. The vampires remained silent,

watching Stryker intently. "You going to place us under arrest?"

"Nope," Stryker replied. "No jurisdiction here. We're just going to wait quietly for Dracula to get here."

"Dracula?" the male vampire hissed. "He knows?"

"Yeah," Stryker answered. "So, we're going to wait for him to get here."

"Yeah, I don't think so," Kano replied. Stryker turned to look at him, and saw that his cybernetic eye was glowing brighter than usual. Knowing what that meant, Stryker ducked to his knees. An instant later, he felt a surge of intense heat as a laser blast fired from Kano's eye, slicing through the space where Stryker's head had been.

Stryker heard a screech. He turned his head, and saw the female vampire fill his vision. A second later, she had bodily slammed into him, knocking him to the ground and causing him to lose hold of his gun. The gun scattered across the ground out of his grasp. He quickly brought his leg up, and kicked as hard as he could. His boot hit the vampire's pelvis, and knocked her off him.

He quickly got to his knees and looked around. Kano was eyeing the gun, and it was halfway between the two of them. They locked gazes, and Stryker put his hand on his nightstick. Kano reached behind him, and pulled out a large knife. Holding

it before him, he grinned wickedly. Stryker grunted and pulled the nightstick out.

He sensed a motion to the left of him. He quickly dived again, doing a forward roll. Behind him, the male vampire had swiped through the air, hoping to have savaged Stryker with his claws. Not wasting time, Stryker sprung forward, swinging the nightstick up. Kano had raced forward to try and pick up the gun; instead, the nightstick connected with Kano's jaw. Kano staggered to the right of Stryker, who quickly straightened up and swung his nightstick again. The stick smashed into the side of Kano's head with a crack. Kano quickly crumpled to the floor.

He spun around. The vampire had recovered and was sprinting towards him, a snarl on his face. Stryker dashed forward as well, bringing his nightstick up. Right as he got within a few feet of the vampire, he brought both feet down in a skidding slide, leaning back. The vampire tried to claw at Stryker; instead, Stryker slammed his nightstick across the vampire's gut. His momentum caused the vampire to lose balance and topple forward against the nightstick. He threw his arm up, and the vampire sailed head over feet into the air, landing on his head with a crack. The prone form twitched once, and then lay still.

Stryker brought his knee down, stopping himself. Before he

could recover, the female vampire jumped onto his shoulders, clawing and screeching. Stryker thrashed back and forth, trying to shake her loose. She then thrust her knee up, hitting the small of his back. He yelped in pain, and fell forward his knees, his hands on the ground. He felt her trying to pull his head back, to expose his throat. He grunted, and shrugged his shoulders, trying to protect himself.

"You've denied me my hunting ground, human," she growled. "But I will make up for it by feasting on you!"

Stryker thought quickly. If he tried to grab at her, he'd fall forward and be fully at her mercy. He also wasn't sure how long he had until the other vampire awoke. He looked around, and saw he was right by his gun. However, if he went for it, he knew he would still be in the same predicament he was in before. He then looked up, and saw the glowing orb. A last desperate plan came to mind.

He quickly grabbed forward, his right hand taking hold of the gun as his chest crashed to the ground. He quickly raised the gun up, and aimed as the female vampire laughed in triumph. *I hope this works*, he prayed silently, and pulled the trigger, closing his eyes.

He had expected a bright flare of light that would surprise the vampire long enough for Stryker to do something. Instead,

the orb exploded with a loud rush and a brilliance he could see through his closed eyes. A blast of air and energy hit him, tossing him into the air and across the chamber. He felt himself hit the chamber wall at full force, his head smacking against the cold stone. He crumpled to the ground, and felt the world fade to black...

#

The first thought that went through Stryker's head was that the room was slightly lighter than it should be, with the light orb having been destroyed. The second was that he hadn't noticed a soft bed in the cavern.

He awoke with a start. He quickly sat up, and looked around. He was in a modestly-sized bedchamber, on a well-kept bed. The walls were made of grey stone, and decorated with maroon curtains and portraits of different individuals. He quickly checked his throat, and found no evidence of bite marks.

"You have not been fed upon," a woman's voice said softly to his right. "The master would not allow it."

Stryker turned. Standing by one of the windows was a beautiful young woman with dark hair. Her slight form was clad in a simple white dress, and her feet were in simple shoes. Even if she hadn't been wearing a portal crystal on a pendant, Stryker would have known she was a vampire due to the wings she

possessed.

"Dracula's castle, I guess?" he asked.

"Yes," she nodded. She walked over, and sat on the bed by him. "Our master and several others arrived at the cavern to find the three of you unconscious. We brought you back here."

Stryker grunted, and swung his legs off the bed. Then, he paused. "Wait, three of us?"

"Yes, you and the traitors Taris and Selica."

"Damn," Stryker muttered. *Sonya's not going to like that Kano got away again.* He gingerly stood up, and looked at the girl. "I don't suppose you're my guard?"

She smiled softly. "No. My master wished me to bring you to him once you had awakened." She stood, and gracefully strode over to the door, opening it for him. He walked out the door, and she brushed past him.

She led him down the hallway, around a corner, and into a doorway. Walking through it, Stryker saw that he was standing on the balcony overlooking the main hall. He looked down, and saw Dracula speaking to another female vampire. He walked down the steps, noting his guide was walking behind him. As he approached, he heard Dracula say, "This has gone on long enough. We must be free of this damned emperor..."

Dracula turned, and smiled at Stryker. "So, our hero

awakens. I must thank you for your services to me, human."

Stryker stood there, and regarded Dracula evenly. "No offense, but I didn't do it for you. I did it for my people."

"Of course," Dracula said. "It is a pity you were not able to recover the Inselaciune Stone."

"From what I could hear, it's already in Kahn's possession," Stryker replied. "Kano's probably already told Kahn by now that you're on to him, so good luck in trying to get it back."

Dracula's smile faltered. "I have no intention of dealing with the emperor ever again. Nor, hopefully, with you. Mircalla will send you home. Thank you again, Kurtis Stryker."

With that, Dracula turned back to the woman he had been talking to. Stryker looked at her briefly, in her skimpy bustier and knee-length boots. *She looks like a damn pirate*, he thought idly, before turning to his escort. Mircalla smiled, and gestured to the main doors. As they walked to them, Stryker could hear Dracula say, "Now, Nitara, as I was saying..."

They walked out into the courtyard, and as they approached the portcullis, it raised to let them through. They stepped onto the path, and Stryker stopped, turning to Mircalla. "I do have one question," he said. "How is he going to punish Taris and Selica?"

She smiled, and said, "He already has."

Stryker looked at her in confusion. She raised an arm, and pointed down the path. He looked at her arm, and then turned around to see what she was pointing at. A second later, he understood with a sick realization what she meant. The pointed staves along the side of the road were still there. However, the two closest to the castle had new adornments: both Tavis and Selica had been impaled upon them, face-down, their bodies hanging a third of the way down. The expressions of absolute agony and terror frozen on their faces made it clear they were alive and conscious of their fates when lowered onto the staves.

He turned to Mircalla, disgusted. She smiled, and touched the crystal on her pendant. It glowed blue, and a bluish vortex of energy appeared next to him. "Fare thee well, Kurtis Stryker," she said.

Stryker nodded, and stepped into the portal, feeling himself pulled away from Outworld and into the darkness.

#

"So, what do you think about this headline?" Ramirez asked, holding up the newspaper. Stryker looked at it; his portrait was featured prominently. The headline above it read "HERO COP TAKES DOWN DRACULA KILLERS".

"I dunno," Stryker replied, looking up from where he was

sitting on the locker room bench. "Not sure about the hero part, though."

It had been a week since Stryker had returned from Outworld. Mircalla's portal had dropped him into the middle of Bucharest. His arrival had frightened some nearby residents, who had called police. Local police had locked him up for several hours, not listening to his requests to speak to the U.S. embassy, until a couple of OIA agents had arrived with consular officials and arranged to have him released into their custody.

Since then he had to be repeatedly debriefed by OIA agents until Sonya Blade had arrived and cleared things up. After that, he had been flown back home and into a storm of problems at the station.

Ramirez chuckled. "Yeah, I still gotta laugh. McGurk was ready to have you suspended without pay for taking off like that until that Blade chick threatened him. He *really* didn't like that you took the credit away from his taskforce."

"Yeah, well, that's what friends are for," Stryker replied. He read through the newspaper to see what line the OIA had fed them. According to the story, it seemed he had tracked the killers back to their home in Romania, where they had died in a confrontation with him and local police who were assisting in

the investigation.

Ramirez nodded. "You did good work, man," he said. "I owe you one." He patted Stryker on the back, and walked out of the locker room.

Stryker watched Ramirez leave, and smiled to himself. He then put the paper down, and sipped at his coffee. It was time to get back to work.

He stood up, and finished buttoning his uniform shirt. Making sure his belt was secure and he had everything he needed, he stepped out of the locker room, ready to begin a new shift.