Both Fisk’s information sheet and Roger’s testimony told me Amelia had frequented the Glass Slipper. I’d suspected as much; I’d checked the archives of the Herald that afternoon and had found the original article from which Fisk had taken the photo of Amelia dancing. It had appeared in a Sunday insert a year ago about the downtown clubs—and that particular photo was taken inside the Slipper. I imagine the only reason Fisk remembered the name of the club was that he’d read the caption.

I walked back into the Shore Zone and up a block. And there it was.

The Glass Slipper was even wilder than I’d envisioned.

It screamed out at me from the side of the street in a furious explosion of neon, flashing lights, and thunderous heavy metal. In any other part of the town, a place called the Glass Slipper would be a nightclub for the elderly set, or maybe even an upscale restaurant. But this was the Shore, and here a nightclub was noted for its excesses, not its restraint. The Las Vegas Strip had nothing up on Bayport’s North Shore in terms of annoying lights and plain sonic bawdiness.
I stood outside for a time, considering my options. Assuming Andre was in, I would have to question him. Unfortunately, Andre dealt in heroin. My guess was that he was not going to be the type of man who would offer me a cup of cappuccino and a chance to talk things over reasonably. Most likely, he would be small and unshaven and would carry a gun big enough to do me in ten times over.

In an alley, off the streets, he would be no problem. I could have burnt him, or blinded him. But this encounter might take place in the open.

That's one of the drawbacks to magic. When you're an associate professor bucking for both a promotion and tenure, it's not a good idea to be seen in a club like the Slipper, let alone face rumors to the effect that you're anything more than a boring neo-academic.

I thought about a less confrontational approach, but I could think of nothing appropriate. I wondered what Philip Marlowe would have done, and then I told myself to charge in and make it up as I went along. Thinking was for wimps and normal folk.

Besides, I was beginning to suspect that Amelia, for various reasons, may have gotten herself into trouble. One does not tend to frequent places like the Glass Slipper and expect to stay untainted for long. I couldn't afford the time a stakeout would require.

I walked in. The bouncer--a hulking gentleman wearing an overcoat and a nose ring--smirkingly nodded at me, then carded the two kids attempting to charge by in my wake.
I was immediately assailed by the smell of pot; I was beginning to wonder if anyone smoked straight cigarettes in college anymore. Mixed with the odor was the tangy reek of spilled beer and the unmistakable bite of human sweat. I cringed away from it at first, as though the smell were living and might try to converse, or dance.

I stood in front of the dance floor—though by the looks of it not much dancing was going on. Rather, it seemed as though several enterprising youngsters had decided to re-enact the Battle of Gettysburg.

Perhaps a hundred and fifty people surged in constant motion in front of me, bobbing their long-haired heads in time with the erratic, rabbity beat of the music, many throwing themselves headlong at their fellow dancers, like living projectiles. Most of them wore black or paisley or leather, and adorned themselves with ear and nose rings of all varieties. I knew the type; they usually sat—or slept—in the back rows of my classes, rousing themselves only to ask me if I'd ever heard of Charles Bukowski—and how could I call shit like Wordsworth rebellious, man?

Ah, youth.

I edged my way across the fringes of the crowd; I had spotted a bar across the room, opposite the doors, and any self-respecting sleuth knows that bartenders know everything about everything relevant to the case. Thus we slip them ten-dollar bills and ask them questions in hushed voices; they nod knowingly and point at our contacts in the corner. "Dat's da guy," they say, every time.

They teach that phrase in bartender school; I'm almost sure of it.

The bartender here was a young black man; he was short and meaty and wore
a goatee and a shaved head. His T-shirt told the world he preferred the music of Suicidal Tendencies, and his bare arms told me he lifted quite a few heavy objects—often. His skin seemed ready to split apart. He saw me, idly glanced up and down at my clothes, and then said something under his breath to the woman he served. They both looked back at me and laughed. Casually, he ambled down to where I sat.

"Getcha something?" he asked. He made slurping noises with his mouth; he seemed to be sucking on an ice cube.

"I need to ask you a couple of questions," I began, and then saw the look that came into his eyes. Somewhere inside his head, steel doors had just slammed shut on any information I could use. I changed course: "You could get me a beer, though. What's on tap?"

"Bud," he said.

"A fine ale."

"What?"

"One, please."

"Sure, man. Just a sec." He sucked at his ice and then reached behind the bar for a mug. He drew my beer and then made his slow way back to me.

"Here," he said. "Dollar fifty."

I paid him a ten. When in doubt, follow form.

"Keep the change," I said. "I need to ask you something."

He looked at the ten, then at me.

"I ain't cheap," he said.
I put another ten on the counter.

" Shoot," he said.

I lowered my voice as best I could. "I need to score some H."

"What?"

"Some dope," I said. "Horse. I heard I could get it here."

He nodded agreeably. "You can get lots of shit here, man. Everyone knows that."

"Can I get what I want?"

"You a cop?"

"Nope."

"Look like a cop."

"You want to search me for a wire? I'm clean."

"Right," he said, drawing out the word and making it sound ineffably dangerous. I wondered if perhaps I was getting in over my head.

"I need to talk to a guy named Andre," I said. "I heard he was here."

The name sparked some sort of reaction in the man's head. He half-smiled at me, and then scratched at his chin. "Andre's here," he said.

"Where?"

"Privileged information." He smiled. "Cost you another twenty."

Thus the smile. He got a cut of Andre's business.

"You the owner?" I asked, on a whim.

"Uh-huh. Name's Terry." He kept smiling. "Man, drink up. I'll get you
I shook my head, and pulled out my last two tens. I set them on the bar in front of me.

"I'll finish," I said, "And then I want to see Andre."

"You got it. I'll tell him you're here." Terry pocketed the money and then walked off down the bar. Four other customers began to call his name. He waved them off and made a call on a wall phone at the other end of the bar.

Like a good boy, I drank my beer. It had been watered. For a dollar-fifty.

Terry came back when I was done. "End of the bar. Man named Tommy take you back. Big man, brother like me."

I nodded. "Thanks," I said.

Terry grinned. "Man, ain't you gonna tip?" he asked, and laughed when I stood and shot him the bird.

I wondered how I could make friends with bartenders and junkies but not with the head of my department. I could take to Terry but not to Deborah. Yet another piece of evidence that, fundamentally, I was messed up.

I dismissed the thought and pushed my way to the end of the bar. As promised, a tall black man wearing wraparound sunglasses met me. He put a hand on my shoulder. "You the man?" he asked.

"That would be me, yeah." I smiled up at him. He looked like Alonzo Mourning. I thought about telling him that, but judgment prevailed.

"Come with me."
He turned and walked to a recessed door in the panelled wall. A song ended on the floor, and I heard a chorus of ragged screams and whoops greet the silence as Tommy opened the door and ushered me through.

I walked into darkness. Taking a deep breath, I fought back the urge to flood the place with light. They were only being cautious, like any businessmen. I hoped.

Tommy placed something cold and hard against the side of my head.

"Relax," said a new voice. "We gonna strip you, check for wires. Terry thinks you're a cop."

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, lamely.

"No, you ain't." A light came on above me, and I saw I was in a small connecting hallway, perhaps five feet long, whose walls were covered in badly-warped panelled wood. A thin Caucasian man stood in front of me, smoking a joint. He wore a goatee, and his head was shaved except for a long, dyed-blonde thatch of hair mushrooming from the top. A thin and torn tank-top covered his chest; his arms, I saw, were both marked by heroin runs. Behind him was the other door.

The gun still pressed against my head.

The man in front of me spoke. His voice was high and reedy, and he seemed nervous.

"Awright," he said, and sucked on the joint. "Start with the coat. Slip it off and let it fall to the floor."

I did so.
"Kick it over to me and take off your shirt," he said.
"I'll have to pull it over my head," I said.
"Yeah, right." He turned his eyes to Tommy, behind me. "Back off a bit, okay?"

The gun was removed from my skull.
I slipped off my shirt. The air was cool here; my forearms prickled.
"Hand it over," the man said, rummaging through my overcoat pockets.
"And drop your pants around your ankles."
I did so.
He nodded at me, then gave my crotch a glance—presumably to check for unseemly bulges. I thought about commenting, but again decided against it.

"Okay," he said. "Get dressed." He tossed my things back to me, and I slid into them as quickly as I could. The gun never rose to my head again, as far as I could tell, but I could sense it behind me. Guns have their own aura; this one was frighteningly near.
When I was done, the man rapped on the door behind him with his index knuckle. "Clean," he said.
"Let him in," was the reply.
He nodded to himself and opened the door. "Go on in," he said. "We're right behind you. Don't try nothing, all right? You look smart."
"I am," I said.
He seemed unconvinced.
I walked past him and through the door.

I entered a tiny room that probably served as Terry's office, whenever heroin wasn't being sold from within it. The wall behind me was panelled with fake wood, like the hallway, while the one ahead of me--presumably the outside wall--was made of stone. The rest of the decor consisted of a grey steel desk, a filing cabinet, a safe, and a rolling chair. A lamp, sans shade, sat atop the safe on a stained doily.

Habit made me swing my eyes to the ceiling. No spirits circled overhead. I took a breath. And then I wondered, for the hundredth time, if I would be allowed to see the ring that presaged my own death. A thimbleful of quicksilver fear ran down my throat at the thought.

I swallowed and turned my attention back to the room's more mundane trappings.

Andre sat in the swivel chair before the desk. He was small and wiry and looked identical to one of the dancers outside; his head was partly shaved, and he wore a Metallica T-shirt, khaki shorts, and black work boots. Tattoos covered his arms, but I saw no heroin tracks. In the world of the dealers, that absence was the mark of a shrewd businessman. A chain ran from his earring to his nose ring.

There was a difference, though, between Andre and the numb kids pounding themselves to pulp out on the floor. Andre's eyes were clear and suspicious and clever. He had the eyes of a jungle cat; they sized me up in terms of my edibility and not my worth. He was a player, all right.

He didn't stand. "I'm Andre," he said, slowly. "Heard you want to score
"That's what I told Terry up front," I said, after a deep breath. "But I need to know some things from you. I'm not a cop. But I'm looking for someone. I can make it worth your time if you answer my questions." I played it as carefully as I could. Tommy's gun was still behind me; even if things were desperate enough for me to have to use my stuff I might not be quick enough to counter the bullet.

Andre stared at me, his brows drawing together. They were thick and bushy and very black. "Questions," he said, repeating the word.

"Yes."

"Looking for someone."

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Amelia Fisk."

"Waste him," Andre said.

I ducked and started to draw fire to my hands, expecting to hear a gunshot. It didn't come. I whirled to face Tommy behind me, only to see him on his rear, slouched against the wall, beneath a gaping, skull-sized crater in the panelling above his head. Blood trickled from his one visible ear and his nose. His eyes were open. The thin junkie who'd undressed me was slumped against him, twitching and holding his groin.

Paul stood above them, expressionless. He held Tommy's gun in one hand, by the barrel, as though it smelled unpleasant. His flesh was ashen, his eyes cold: he
hadn't fed.

I turned to Andre, dismissing my magic. One look at him told me it wasn't necessary. He was staring slack-jawed at Paul.

"Jesus," he said, in a whisper. "How--"

"My friend is very quick," I said, "And very quiet. And very strong." I could have gone on, but I let it ride. "He backs me up."

Paul spoke. His voice was low and smooth and uninflected. "Answer his questions," he said, and handed me the gun.

"No," I told him. "The punk tried to kill me. Let me do this my way."

I advanced on Andre. He shrank into his chair. "Man, relax," he said. "Just chill a sec, okay? I can deal."

I laced the fingers of my left hand into the long, greasy knot of his hair and yanked; Andre let out a choked cry and rose to his feet, his face squeezing and working at itself. I pulled his head back until he faced me.

"Why did you try to kill me?" I asked.

Andre stammered.

"Tell me soon, kid, or it's over."

"I . . . I was, uh . . ."

I decided to pull a Mr. Scary on him. I smiled.

Then I concentrated and built up in my cupped hands a warm cloud of blazing, blinding light. I grinned and poured it upon his face.

Andre shrieked thinly and clawed at the brilliance that engulfed him. I let
him go; he stumbled back from me and immediately barked his shin on the rolling chair from whence he'd come.

He fell to his knees.

I dismissed the light with a wave of my hand, and then picked the kid up by his hair again. The fight was completely gone from him now; he bounced up like a rubber band, and his knees wobbled as he turned to face me. I smelled feces in a cloud around him: tainted darkness. Marlowe would have been proud.

"The truth," I said. "Did you know Amelia Fisk?"

He nodded.

"She bought heroin from you?"

Another nod.

"She's disappeared. You know where?"

He closed his eyes, and then nodded a third time.

I smiled. Piece of cake.

"Where is she?"

He swallowed, then spoke. His voice was now higher and thin, like a child's.

"She and me was, um, close. She wanted to cut out on her boy down the street, but she said he was a little whacked. Plus she didn't want her fuckin' dad coming to find her."

I shook him. "Where is she?"

"I put her up in a house on the south side," he said. "I ain't been down there to see her, though. Not for a few days." His eyes rolled like a panicked horse's.
"We had a fight, you know. She wanted some time."

"So why try to kill me?"

"She asked me to keep it a secret."

"Worth killing for?"

"I love her, man." He paused. "Besides, you talk like a cop."

I smiled grimly. Andre closed his eyes. Paul stood to my side, watching Andre's face. Something worked within his eyes—I saw in them a fiery greed that could only be hunger. I resisted the urge to shiver.

"Where's the house?" I asked.

Andre told me an address. I committed it to memory, and then I let him go.

He sank to his knees in front of me, silent.

I looked at Paul. "Do you want him?" I asked, quietly.

"No," he replied. "But he'll do." He cast a glance at the two unconscious men by the door. "The others are polluted."

"Right. Andre."

Andre looked up at me.

I chopped at him near the back of his skull. It was a good hit; his eyes turned toward the back of his skull, and he fell forward onto my shoes.

Paul removed a small knife from one of his pants pockets. He unfolded it and then crouched to lift one of Andre's wrists.

"I won't kill him," Paul told me, looking up at my face with unblinking eyes.

"I know," I said.
He looked away from me and focused on Andre's wrist. He slit it with a surgeon's precision, then lifted the dripping wound to his mouth. He was quiet as he drank. Andre twitched and moaned.

I turned away. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be both more than a man and an animal, all at once.

I could not.

And then I thought of the fear I'd seen in the expressions of both Roger and Andre. And how I'd enjoyed it. Maybe I did know, after all.

I tried to think of nothing. I failed miserably until Paul tapped me on the shoulder.

"Let's go," he said.

His eyes glowed.
Ten minutes later, we stood outside the Glass Slipper, in the cold. Paul's cheeks were red, and on occasion he closed his eyes and swallowed, as though trying to regain his breath.

The air was damnably cold. The temperature seemed to have dropped a good ten degrees while I was inside the club.

"You've been following me?" I asked him, once he seemed to have calmed.

"Yes," he answered.

"Because of the Darkling?"

"Yes," he said again. "I told you I'd watch out for you."

He'd probably been tailing me the entire time, and I'd never seen him until I was in danger. Some sleuth. I shivered, grateful that he was on my side. Still, Paul had a way of making me feel small, puny in comparison to the forces through which I moved. Ineffective.

I wanted to go home and crawl into bed and curl into an embryonic bundle. Like last night and the night before.

[65]
"Thank you," I said.

Paul nodded.

"Feeling better?"

"Yes. Thanks." He looked at his hands, as though inspecting them for damage. "It's out tonight," he said, suddenly.

"The Darkling?"

"Yes. It killed. A man across town." Paul looked up at the sky. "It consumed him."

"Where is it now?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

"I don't know. It has ways of hiding itself from my senses." He looked up and slowly swung his head from side to side, scanning the street, the crowds, the skies. "I think," he said, "I could sense it approaching. But I could not find it. Not easily."

I nodded, looking up and down the street. I checked my watch. It was only ten. The flow of people up and down Persimmon was still steady and substantive. And all this on a weeknight. I wondered what the street was like on a Friday night.

I sighed.

"Henry," Paul said.

"What?"

"Danger."

I started to look at him, and then tensed as I understood. Danger. Now. No need to glance at him for confirmation--I just had to trust him. I scanned the street.
It was maddening; I saw nothing.

"The Darkling?" I asked.

"Not it. But another. Verene."

I swallowed. My night was not getting much better.

I looked again, and didn't see her. The groups passing on the street seemed suddenly ominous, dangerous. I tried to read them, to simply look into them as Paul did and pull out the threat with my eyes. I couldn't. I was impotent.

"Be careful," Paul said. "I can't protect you against her."

"I can handle my--"

"Henry," said a female voice at my side.

I turned to my right, away from Paul, and there she stood. She was Hispanic tonight: curly-haired; short; beautiful in a childish way. Verene—or at least, that was the name she'd given me when she'd first confronted me, a year before, outside an alley on the West Side. I'd barely survived then—a burst of light gave me enough room to get away, and she'd followed me since. Intrigued, I supposed.

Even though I knew what she was, I had trouble imagining her to be anything less than human. But she was not—not by a long shot. She was a demon, a shadow-being lying coiled within an ever-changing human shell.

As far as I knew, she killed nightly. She seduced men and murdered them. For the sheer amusement of it.

She smiled; her cheeks dimpled, cherub-like. Her eyes gleamed at me like two gems set in flesh, as beautiful and as utterly cold. She wore a denim jacket lined
with fleece, and blue jeans and short boots. So utterly human. No one out of the ordinary, should you pass her on Persimmon Street.

I wondered absently if she'd managed to pull one of these poor kids into her bed tonight. Then it occurred to me that I might be this evening's target.

I glanced into the air. No spirit ring--again.

"It's been some time," she said.

"It has," I said, agreeably enough.

"Good evening, Paul," she said, never taking her eyes from my face. "I wonder if you'd mind leaving Henry and I alone for a moment?"

Paul glanced at me. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

Verene pressed her lips together. Her eyes narrowed, and then she recovered her balance. "Paul," she said, "I wish to speak with Henry. If you insist on being impolite I will have to slay you here on the street."

"You may try if you'd like."

I held up a hand. "Paul," I said. "Verene won't hurt me. Go on. I'll be back soon." I turned to Verene, who smiled up at me like a teenager with a crush. "Right?"

"I won't hurt you, Henry," she said, her eyes twinkling. She reached up and touched my face with a bare hand. Her touch was absurdly hot and dry. My cheek tingled under the pressure of her fingers. I swallowed. "I couldn't hurt you," she said, in a half-whisper.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Paul jerk towards motion, and then catch
himself. I sympathized. I wanted to run away cringing myself.

"Go ahead, Paul," I said. My lips were numb, both with the cold and with fear.

Verene pursed her lips bemusedly as Paul turned. He vanished. I swung my head to look for him and saw nothing. That quick, that precise, and still he feared the thing beside me.

I thought about Deborah. I wished I could hold her hand. It was the only balm I could formulate, out there in the cold of the street.

"Well," Verene said to me. "How have you been, Henry?"

"Well enough," I replied. A gust of wind blew a mist of frozen droplets into my face, and I winced. Verene took no notice. "Yourself?"

"Prospering," she told me, with a sly grin. "Henry, I have a room nearby. Why don't we go there, out of the cold? Hmm?"

"No thank you, Verene. I'm fine out here." I swallowed again. "Besides, I have business."

She laughed. Her voice was smooth and the sound of it quivered in the air like a run of notes plucked from a grand harp. The hair rose on my forearms.

"I see," she said. "You're on a case." She said it mockingly. "Mr. Moquin, the great detective."

"Apparently."

"Well," she said, "I shan't bother you for long, then. I saw you around and I thought I'd say hello." She took a step closer; her eyes grew theatrically wide, as
though she were on a silent movie screen. "And to warn you, Mr. Detective."

"About . . . about what?"

Her tongue darted out from between her lips and moistened them.

"One of my brethren is in Bayport," she said. "He is hungry."

"Hungry," I repeated, concentrating on deep, even breaths.

"He has slain a nosferatu," she said, in a near whisper. "He has followed you. And he has yet to visit me."

"Followed me?" I said.

"Oh, yes. Tonight I followed him following Paul following you. None of you knew." She grinned. "But he's gone now."

I looked at her. She winked.

"Be careful, Henry. I like you. Don't let my brother slay you."

I nodded. She wore an exotic, musky perfume I'd never smelled before in my life; it sidled up to me like an impatient lover and kissed me as any pair of lips might. I closed my eyes, against my will, and without surprise felt myself growing hard inside my slacks. I thought I felt fingers on my lower back, and I brushed at my skin there. Nothing. I heard Verene laugh.

"You're so strong, Henry," she said. "I delight in you. You play this game better than any of the others."

I didn't reply.

"Someday," she continued, "I'll see you in my bed."

"Perhaps," I conceded. At that moment the prospect did not seem
unreasonable.

She moved closer. I felt her torso press against my chest. She looked up at me. "Make a light for me, Henry," she said.

I stared at her. Her hand closed around my crotch, hidden by the bulk of our coats and the darkness of the street. She rubbed at me with slow, deliberate strokes of her palm. I was aware of the crowds flowing by like thick water, their faces blurred into long streaks of diluted ink, their sounds muddy, pudding-like.

"Do it for me," she said. "Give me a light as a present or I'll tear your treasure from you."

I nodded again and lifted my hand. I closed my eyes and concentrated. The act was difficult; I could barely think of anything but Verene, slowly caressing me. My knees lost some of their strength.

And I knew then that if I weakened--even for a moment--she would take me with a smile and with joy in her foul, heart.

I pulled a winking point of brightness the size of a matchflame to my hand.

"Good," she said, laughing and staring at the glow in my palm. "Can you shape it into a flower for me?"

I nodded. Carefully, I shaped the magic, until it seemed that a bright and dimly florescent rose blossom wobbled in my hand.

Verene removed her hand from my crotch and plucked the light-shape from me. It remained whole, even within her grasp. Laughing, she drew it to her face and sniffed at it. Weird shadows played across her features.
"Lovely," she said. "Smell."

Verene extended the blossom to me. I set my jaw, leaned forward, and inhaled.

Her perfume enveloped me; I was immediately captured within a seething cloud of her musk. My penis strained forward to her, as though it had gained independence from my body. My mind reeled; lights of all colors exploded behind my eyes.

I fell backwards to the ground.

I heard her whisper near my ear: "So strong. I love you, Henry. Like no other man."

And then I was aware of nothing. Nothing at all.
I awoke in a bed; it felt like mine.

The waking came all at once; I suffered no period of disorientation. I sat up, shaking my head, and saw that I was still clothed, and lying atop the covers. For a moment I remembered nothing but the smell of perfume and spice, and then even that vanished into the more pragmatic smells of home.

"You're at home," said Paul's voice, at the same time.

I turned my head and saw him sitting on a couch on the other side of the apartment. He was watching the television; from the sound of it, a basketball game was on.

"I figured that out," I said. "Thanks."

"You passed out on the street. I brought you back as soon as I could."

He said all of this without taking his eyes from the set.

"Who's winning?" I asked.

"Clairbourne is up by twelve. It's almost over."

"It was ten when we met Verene--"
"It's only ten-forty. You weren't out long."

He had a point. It felt as though I'd only just blinked; maybe I had.

"Did you drive me back?"

"Yes. Your car is in the garage." Paul looked up at me for the first time. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you against her."

"I don't expect you to protect me at all," I said. "But I'm glad you do it." I ran my tongue around my mouth; the insides of my cheeks felt like smooth, dry cloth. "At least you tried."

Paul nodded and turned back to the game. "Darklings are very powerful." He paused; his eyes lifted from the television, rested on mine, and then dropped again. "I'm surprised she hasn't killed you. She could have tonight."

"I wonder," I said. I sat up and waited for something to happen to me—dizziness, maybe, or blinding lights behind me eyes. Nothing. I looked at my hands. A little tremor in the fingers, but nothing a little booze couldn't cure. Verene had turned me off like a lightswitch, and somehow I'd been powered up again. I felt pretty good.

I got up off the bed and stretched. My side was a little sore. Probably from where I fell on the sidewalk. I walked to the kitchen and pulled a wine cooler out of the refrigerator.

"It's a game for her," I said. "She can't seduce me easily, and she likes that." I unscrewed the top of the cooler and took a sip. Good. Very good. "I was surprised tonight, though. She seems . . . more serious."
"The new Darkling has us all behaving strangely," Paul said.

_Us_, he said. How strange to have to include yourself in a group that included Verene and the Priests of the Brotherhood. United by inhumanity.

Unless he was including me, too.

I took another drink.

"Did you hear what she told me?" I asked him.

"About the Darkling following us all night?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

A little tightness had crept into his voice. "You're angry, aren't you?" I asked.

"For allowing yourself to be followed."

"There's no point in being angry. The Darkling is better at this than I am."

His voice was quiet and sounded old. I was struck by his strangeness, by the incongruity of a young man speaking like the aged, and the weary. He was not as timeless as some of the elder Brothers, but he'd seen his share of the world--enough of it, anyway, to encase his mind in a sarcophagus of years.

"But you're still hurt by it," I told him.

"Perhaps." He shrugged. Paul closed his eyes, and then opened them again.

I sat down at the island by the kitchen and watched him. He'd made an admission of emotion. Paul had never said anything that personal to me before. I'd never been required to say much to him before; I had little sense of anything with which I could reply now.
So I said nothing and drank my wine.

It occurred to me then that I would have to go out yet again tonight, to search for Amelia. Andre would be unconscious for a time, but when he woke up, he might try to warn her, wherever she was. I didn't relish having to find her over again, especially if she was on the run from me.

I opened my mouth to say this to Paul, but he interrupted me.

"I have a question," he said.

"Mm?"

"How did you learn your magic? I have never known."

I stared at him. A personal statement followed by a personal question. Wonders never ceased.

"I don't have time to answer that now," I said. "I have to get back out there."

"I know. Answer while you prepare, then. I would like to know."

"But--"

"Is it that private?" he asked, his eyebrows lifting archly.

"No," I said. "I don't know how I got it."

"You don't?"

"Nope." I finished the cooler in three long swallows and rose to get another.

"I've been doing this for as long as I can remember."

Paul shook his head. "You're a puzzle, Henry." He glanced toward the windows, then back to the television screen. "And not just to me. The Brotherhood was always concerned about you. You attract creatures like the
Darklings." He paused. "Before I defected, Ulrich told me you can see the souls of the dead."

Ulrich. The High Priest of the Brotherhood. I screwed off the cap of my drink and looked at the formica countertop. Ulrich had watched me that closely. I began to wonder how much of my private life was really private.

"He's right," I said.

"You can see the dead?"

"Sometimes. And we have to go." I moved to the living room, towards my overcoat. I thought for a moment as I searched for my gloves. "The Brotherhood is concerned with me?"

"You make them nervous. They're jealous of power."

"They really follow me, then?"

"They used to. That is why I came to you when I defected. I knew you were a good man because I used to spy on you myself."

I perked up, distracted from the alcohol for a moment. Pity I was going back out into the cold. It was a good night to get drunk.

"You followed me?"

"I did," Paul said. He looked at the screen. "Clairbourne has won the basketball game. They are tied for second now."

"I didn't know you watched basketball."

He shrugged and stood, watching me as I gathered my things. "Some of the Brotherhood keep pet cats. Some of them steal away little children and train them
as lackeys, or acolytes. One organizes games of gladitorial combat on the East side. Immortality usually brings a love of hobbies." He smiled ruefully. "Mine are gentler than those of others."

"Basketball?"

"It amuses me."

"Ah."

He walked over to my bookshelves and ran his fingers across the rows of paperbacks there. He selected *The Big Sleep* and thumbed through it, then replaced it. I shouldered into my overcoat.

"Henry?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do you play at being a detective? You put yourself in a great deal of danger."

It was a good question. I thought about evading it, but that would have been too easy. He'd saved my life tonight. I owed him an honest answer... but I would have had to formulate one first. I stood up and found my overcoat, then draped it over my arm. I looked for my keys.

"It's something to do," I said. "I don't think about it much." I grinned. "Besides, it pays well. I'm good at it."

Paul turned off the television. He lifted my keys from on top of the set and held them out to me. I took them and folded them into my palm.

"You don't seem the greedy type, Henry."
I shrugged. "Okay, then. Maybe it's not the money. But it still keeps me busy."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"I used to. These days everything seems so serious." I took a long slug from the bottle, and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. "Like tonight. Nobody ever noticed me before I started doing this--going out in the streets, using my stuff. Now I've drawn all of this attention." I smiled, looking at the tips of my shoes. "It's not pleasant to know that the Brotherhood Nocturne is concerned with me."

"That's why I follow you."

"I'm glad."

I set the bottle down on the formica.

"Why so curious?" I asked, glancing at him sidelong.

He shrugged again. Very eloquent, those shrugs. Like a European's.

"You saved my life," he said. "I have saved yours. And yet we've never known one another. You're a strange man, full of dichotomies." He turned to the window, towards the lights of downtown. "I used to enjoy puzzles."

I watched him. My brain handed me no words with which to respond.

He turned toward me. "Are we friends?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yes," I said. I was sure of that, at least. If for no other reason than sheer proximity, both in matters of life and loneliness.

"That's good," he said, softly. "Otherwise we'd both be alone."

He turned toward the door, and then opened it.

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I watched him for a while, wondering how he'd arrived at such a simple truth so quickly. He was right. Who else did I have? Deborah? I hardly even spoke to her. Besides, she knew only the Moquin I presented to her. He wasn't a bad chap, but he was a far walk from the Henry Moquin who dreamt alone at night, the man who could use magic and see the ghosts of the departed.

I wondered how Sarah ever found me at all, how she ever learned to love me. And, standing there, looking at Paul, I felt her absence in the echoing spaces inside me, where I felt pain even in the echoing void of my heart, where nothing remained to hurt.

I glanced at the city, through my windowglass.

I didn't want to go back into the cold. Not then. I didn't want to face a bit of it.

But I had committed myself. It was my own hole, and I thought I might as well get to the bottom of it before the sides caved in atop me. I owed Fisk that much for his money.

"Are you all right?" Paul asked.


I walked through the doorway. We descended the steps outside, entering the cold, entering the city.

Together, we went to find Amelia Fisk.
Bayport is, as cities go, gigantic.

It rivals Chicago in population; the two constantly exchange places on the Rand McNally list of Most Populous Cities. Bayport, though, is more compact in terms of geographic size. Keeping in mind its population of nearly six million, I never wonder that the city has one of the highest crime rates in the country. A great number of people allowed to squeeze into only a few square miles of land will find no shortage of hurts to inflict upon themselves; sociology tells us so. One needs only to glance at the great cities of America: New York, Houston, Atlanta, Detroit, Washington, Los Angeles, Miami, Philadelphia. Each is renowned for its industry, its location, its exotic sights and sounds. But each hides within it a region closeted away from outsiders. The cities may live, but each holds a tumor within its bodies, where humanity—out of nature or necessity—has degenerated into subtly organized savagery. Los Angeles has its South Central zone, which is dominated by the teen gangs; New York has Harlem, and Times Square at night; Houston has its Fifth Ward, Chicago has Hyde Park, and so on.

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Bayport has the South Side.

The territorial borders remain fairly stable; north of the line drawn by Tennyson Street, one may walk the streets in relative safety. South of Tennyson, the casual traveller will be attacked more often than not. The downtown area judiciously ends two blocks north of this demarcation; south of it exists only residential streets, low warehouses, factories, and rotting husks of buildings that may once have prospered, in a faraway age when all parts of the city were equal.

The South Side has its gangs, but they have yet to organize themselves like L.A.'s Crips and Bloods; here a dozen different factions vie for power or turf. Racial tensions have boiled over; blacks are constantly at odds with whites, and Hispanics, and the large population of Middle Easterns and Koreans who somehow try to gain a foothold through business. On the South Side the prudent businessman draws steel shutters down over his windows upon closing. There, the schools lock their doors and employ armed guards. Those youths that bother to attend often come armed with knives and, in one or two instances, a sawed-off shotgun, submachine gun, or such.

In all, not an altogether pleasant place in which to live, or even do business.

Amelia Fisk was there. And, in finding her, so were Paul and I.

We crossed Tennyson with little fanfare; I drove with one hand perched timidly atop the wheel, while Paul shuffled through the cassettes I had strewn across the passenger side floormat, pausing occasionally to play one song or another. I said nothing to him, nor asked him any questions; he listened to whatever music struck
his fancy, and I gazed out the windows, looking for trouble. My headlights picked out a group of Hispanic youths gathered in the doorway of an abandoned building; their eyes followed my car as it passed, their expressions as neutral as any spirit's. Paul had found a jazz recording of Stanley Jordan and listened to it with his head cocked slightly, like a dog's.

"He's very good," he said, his voice barely audible above the humming of the engine.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Where do I need to turn?"

"Soon . . . You know Lincoln Street?"

"Sort of."

"You'll take a left. There's a light."

I looked at him; he ejected the tape and inserted David Sanborne. "You know the South Side well," I told him.

"The nosferatu feed here a great deal," he said, without looking at me. "The Brotherhood used to refer to this place as the Butcher Shop--this is where one comes for fresh meat." His eyes lifted to mine. "No one matters here, according to the police. Nosferatu kill as sloppily as they wish; one more corpse matters very little. The press attributes it to a lack of family values, and the Brotherhood goes to bed with full veins." Paul smiled.

"Oh," I said, and looked away.

"You haven't offended me," he said. "You shouldn't tiptoe so much, Henry. You'll never find out anything about anyone."
"I don't tiptoe," I snorted. "I'm an investigator--"

"But you're careful with me," he said. "I don't mind quiet people, but I don't think you wish to be one. You're very curious."

I opened my mouth to deny him, and then shut it again. I frowned out the window.

"Turn here," he said. He lifted the sheet upon which I'd written the address I'd gleaned from Andre. "Then drive to Samson Avenue and turn right--south." He looked up, then frowned and ejected Sanborne from the cassette player. In went Pink Floyd.

"Ah," he said.

"You like that?" I asked.

"It has words."

He closed his eyes.

I drove along Lincoln Street. Trees arched over the road, and the streetlights were few and far between; quite a few had been shattered by rocks. To the right and left of the road houses squatted, mostly one-story cheapies with peeling paint and furniture on the porches. I saw a great many orange city condemnation notices on doors and windows, as well as No Trespassing signs. A difference between city and country: in the country a household will place a No Trespassing sign at the end of the driveway, or along a fence row. In the city the sign goes on the front door, and is too often ignored.

A stoplight shone at me ahead. In its light I saw snowflakes tumbling down

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from above--thick, half-liquid ones that stuck to my windshield.

"Snow," I said.

"Yes," Paul said, from beside me.

I grunted and flicked on my wipers.

We travelled in silence to Samson Avenue; I turned onto it as instructed.

"Cross the river," Paul said, "The address is the first house on the right."

An arching stone bridge reared up in front of me. I slowed and put on my signal; immediately my tires began to fishtail in the slush of snow and ice on the bridge. I cursed and brought us under control.

"Careful," Paul said.

"Thanks," I said. "You want to drive on this shit?"

"If you'd like," he said.

I didn't answer.

At the end of the bridge, I saw a gravel drive descending from the main road. I crossed my fingers, nudged the wheel, and tapped at the brakes. The LeBaron obligingly slewed onto the drive, the rear end barely missing the canting mailbox at the its end.

I stopped the car and turned off the headlights. Through the windshield and the sporadic snowfall we beheld a small house, as grey as a shadow. No lights shone from its windows; it squatted like a rock or a snowdrift in the dim light of the sodium lamp across the street. Two dark, curtainless windows flanked a narrow door at the front of the house, facing the street. A metal awning painted with
alternating light and dark stripes overhung the door. That was it in terms of decoration. The house had no garage. A small Citation of indiscriminate color was parked in the drive ahead of us.

"Welcome to Andre Manor," I said, and cut the engine. "Doesn't look like anyone's up."

Paul said nothing. With one fluid motion he exited the car, opening the door and sliding onto the drive, wraithlike. I heard nothing but the faint click of the door opening and shutting.

Through the window, I saw him motion me to do the same.

I did so, but nowhere near as quietly. In Paul's wake I felt as though I were Godzilla wreaking havoc on Tokyo. Even the crunch of my feet on the gravel seemed as loud as rolling thunder.

"She's awake," Paul said. "Her breath is quick. I think she's heard us." He lifted his face into the wind, and then cocked his head. "I believe she's just taken the safety off of a gun."

"You can hear her?" I asked. I'd asked him similar questions before, with the same dumbfounded tone.

He waved me into silence. I was happy to oblige him.

I watched the house, curling and uncurling fists at my side. Wet snow fell on my hair and caused my scalp to crawl. I watched the windows, expecting her to look out. She did, within moments—we saw the edge of a pale face peer out at us from beneath the sill, and then dart back down. Paul ducked beside the car. I stared at the
space he'd so recently occupied and then did the same. My knees creaked.

At least she knew we weren't Andre, come to kiss and make up. I wondered if that was a good thing. Who was the poor girl more likely to shoot--the man she supposedly loved, or two strangers in overcoats in the yard?

A moment's thought told me we had hold of the shitty end of the stick. I tried to remember if I'd ever been threatened with a bullet twice in one night, and decided this was a record.

"How much time would you need to disarm her?" I asked Paul.

"Theoretically."

"Not much."

"So I could try to talk to her?"

"Theoretically," he said.

"Asshole," I whispered.

He said nothing.

I stood up.

I let both hands fall limply at my side. If she checked again, she'd see they were empty. I had a gun, but it was in the glove compartment of the LeBaron, doing no harm to anyone. Not that I could hit anybody with the damn thing anyway--I hadn't so much as taken the safety off in two and a half years.

I walked forward across the lawn, feeling grass crusted with ice crack and snap under the soles of my shoes. I watched the window. A crescent of face appeared again, and then dropped away.
I crossed the grass and mounted the porch, then paused. I gave her time to look through the peephole, then knocked. In the back of my mind I carried the vague hope that Paul would be able to remove me from a bullet’s path should one suddenly be fired at me. I knew he could do it, but a part of my mind still found that hard to believe—and trust. I fought the urge to duck for cover.

Instead, I knocked on the storm door.

I waited ten seconds. Silence.

I knocked again. "Amelia?" I said, loudly. "Amelia Fisk?"

A five-second pause. And then a small, shrill voice said, "Yeah?"

"Amelia, a friend and I would like to speak with you. We're not going to... to harm you. We're unarmed. Please." It suddenly occurred to me that I had no idea what I was going to say to the girl, even if I could get her to open the door and not shoot me. My voice sounded high and childish out there in the cold. I thought of a little boy begging his mother for a candy bar in the checkout line of a grocery store.

A pause. "Go away," she said.

"Amelia," I said, quickly. "We just want to talk to you."

"Fuck off."

I bit at my lip.

"Amelia--"

"Look," she said. "I have a gun. Get away from the fucking door or I'll put a hole in it."
"Do it," I said, "And I'll have to come in and get you."

I felt a brief, unreal sensation of flying. Wind—searingly cold and quick—rushed past my face. Then I was sitting in the cold grass ten feet away from the porch, listening to the echo of a gunshot fade away to a gentle belling in my ears. Paul crouched next to me, his grip hard and immovable as stone on my arm. As promised, a smoking hole had magically appeared in the door of the house.

"Don't ever become a diplomat," Paul said.

"What--"

"She's retreating towards the back. Hurry, if you want to talk to her at all. And be careful."

He hauled me to my feet.

I took a second to gather my wits—my body thought it was still on the porch. Then I took off toward the back of the house. My feet skidded across the icy grass and I almost stumbled, but I caught myself in time to keep moving forward. I grimaced and held my hands out in front of me, then pushed out heat in a shimmering wave through my palms. Ice hissed into steam across my path, and I began to run at a good clip.

I reached the corner of the house just as a dark-headed woman—presumably Amelia—slid around it from the other direction, dressed in only a bathrobe. She stared at me for all of a half-second with wide, dark eyes, and then raised the barrel of a very big gun to a level even with my forehead.

I ducked and let a single beam of light snap out from my fingers; the force of it
sent me rolling backwards across the newly-warmed grass. The flash caught Amelia in the face; she shrieked and tried to hide her eyes with her forearms. The gun fired once, emitting a camera-flash and a crashing shot. The bullet slammed into the side of the house, and slivers of wood popped out around the crater.

Amelia slipped and fell onto her rear end. I saw her bare legs kicking for purchase in the grass ahead of me; the observant part of my mind noted the smudgy heroin runs around one ankle, and the tattoo of a serpent that coiled around the other. The gun slipped from her hand and out of reach, into the yard. She hid her eyes behind her hands, and I felt both relieved and guilty—she hadn't shot me, but I might have blinded her for her attempt.

Amelia made a grunting sound in her throat.

Paul walked up behind her and frowned at us.

"Thanks for the help," I said, and began to crawl to Amelia. At the sound of my voice, she whipped out a hand and began to claw at the air around her.

"Get the fuck away!" she screamed.

"I suggest we get her in the house," Paul said, quietly. "The police might come."

I looked up.

"Gunshots," he said.

Amelia kicked out at the air with her bare, dirty feet. One missed my cheek by an inch or so. She opened her mouth and would have begun screaming had Paul not wrapped his arm around her from behind and stopped the sound.
"Come on," he said.

I nodded and managed to subdue Amelia's ankles. She made threatening *Mmmph* sounds into Paul's forearms, then began to twist her body. We lifted her--barely--and quickly shuttled her through the open back door to the house.

The inside of the house was dark and cool and smelled of must. Paul took the lead, backing through what seemed to be a kitchen as though he had grown up in the place. I banged my hip against a card table laden with stacked plates; a dish fell from the top of a tower and shattered on the floor next to my leg. Amelia screamed into Paul's arm and began to buck with more ferocity. I began to envy him his cool-headedness; I was ready to knock Amelia unconscious and deliver her in a handcuffed package to Fisk's office, just to save us the trouble.

But I was the one who'd wanted to talk.

Paul led us into the front room; pale light spilled through the two windows and the large hole in the door. The room was empty except for a couch beneath the right window and a mattress in the center of the floor. Paul set her shoulders gently down on the mattress and stepped away.

Amelia's voice, high and grating, immediately assailed us. I let go of her feet and retreated a good ten feet. "I can't see, you cocksuckers! I can't see!" She sat up. "What the hell did you do to me?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "You were going to shoot me."

My logic was lost on her; a pale foot thrust out at the sound of my voice. Amelia began to make sobbing sounds. She lowered her forearms from her
eyes; I saw they were squinted tightly shut, and wet trails descended from their outer corners and down her cheeks. Her mouth was pale and thin and twisted in an ugly comic grimace.

"Listen," I said. "I was sent by your father. He wanted to know if you were all right. He wanted to know where you were."

Her sobbing grew louder.

"Jesus," she said. "I should have . . . fuh-fucking known."

She rubbed at her eyes.

Paul moved to the windows and gazed out at the lawn.

"I'm sorry about your eyes," I said. "I'm just doing a job."

That sounded like a lie. I frowned.

"You're a son of a bitch," Amelia told me. "Like him."

I saw that the insides of her elbows bore more runs. She was dreadfully thin. I wondered how long she could continue to live in her current state.

"Amelia," I said, "You're in trouble. At least your father wants to help."

It occurred to me that I could have simply given Fisk the address of the house. He could have come here on his own. He could have tried to reason with the emaciated junkie that was his daughter. He'd never asked me to do this.

I'd done it on my own. I'd come here like Marlowe or Spenser, thinking I could do some good, somehow. I'd thought I could be the smooth talker, the savior of a frightened damsel.

I should have stuck with what was asked of me. Now I could only mouth
empty words at a woman who wouldn't listen because I'd blinded her, maybe for good.

"Tell my father he can suck himself," Amelia said, sulkily. "Though he's pruh-probably figured that uh-out already." She wiped a sheen of snot away from her upper lip. "Where's my goddamned gun?" she asked.

"In the yard. You can pick it up when we're gone."

In a clear, calm voice, Paul said, "Henry--the Darkling's here."

I looked up, not even comprehending what he'd said.

And then he picked me up by the front of the shirt. "Take the girl," he said.

"Go out the back door. I'll try and hold it off here." His face was tight and pale.

I nodded, feeling a bright and cold flower of fear spread its petals in the core of my belly. I bent to take hold of Amelia's wrist. She shrieked as I hauled her upright.

"Come with me," I said. "Or we'll both die."

"Fuck you--"

I ignored her and shoved her toward the kitchen. I could see the outlines of a table, chairs and refrigerator inside, all limned in blue light. I didn't realize why until I entered the kitchen behind Amelia and saw the spirits gathered in a ring near the ceiling, clustered within the small boundaries of the peeling walls and shining like moonlight.

I stopped. My throat dried up and choked on a half-swallowed scream. I swayed in place. Amelia fell forward onto the smudged linoleum with a grunt, and
then cursed me.

From behind, I heard the sound of breaking glass, and then Paul shouted my name.

I paid no attention. My eyes were fixed upon the slowly rotating spirits and their glowing eyes. They looked down at the floor beneath them, and the sobbing form struggling to rise from its surface.

Amelia. They looked at Amelia.

Fear fled, followed by relief. It would be her, not me.

Darkness rose outside the kitchen windows. I turned my head to the glass and saw a wave of shadow rise like an ocean swell, blocking out the sight of the yard and the snow behind it. The Darkling. I felt light crackle at my palms; I'd summoned it somehow, in my terror.

The kitchen windows exploded inward. Shards of glittering glass sprayed across the cold air of the room and fell in a tinkle across the floor and table. Two slashed across Amelia's face, leaving dark tracks behind. She screamed and covered her useless eyes.

The Darkling poured into the kitchen like liquid shadow, its form fluid and serpentine and completely unreflective. I watched it, fascinated, such as a rodent might stare at the viper readied to consume it. Verene was a Darkling, too, but she had chosen a human form with which to walk the streets. This was what she looked like, then, under her shell of skin. This was what she was. I felt awe and horror in equal proportions.

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It gathered together and then rose, like a wave.

Amelia screamed as her palms fell on pieces of glass and began to bleed onto the linoleum.

The Darkling fell on her. Her screams rose to a feverish wail, and then died with a shocking suddenness. The kitchen was utterly silent.

I backed into the living room.

The Darkling's form rose and fell, quivering around the human being at its center.

I saw Paul lying on the floor to my right, curled into a fetal shape. He shook violently. Glass was embedded in his cheeks and throat. The cuts did not bleed.

"Paul," I said.

He didn't answer.

The Darkling began to swell again, in the kitchen. A portion of it bulged through the door between it and us.

That provoked action. My joints allowed motion again. I shouted hoarsely and let fly with the brightest beam of light I could muster. It lit up the room like a lightning bolt and struck the creature's fluid form dead-center. A depression in its surface appeared where my magic had hit, and it retreated, somewhat. Somewhere in my head I heard an impatient noise, tinged with pain.

A cold breeze blew through the open windows at my back.

The Darkling came again, as swiftly as a striking cobra.

I let my light blaze out, but the Darkling shifted subtly out of the way. It
rolled into the room to my left, filling a corner with its ebon mass. A stalk rose from it like a draconian neck, and then I realized that was precisely what the construction was; two reddish eyes peered out at me from the end of the tendril, bobbing before mine, each the size of my outstretched hand.

It spoke to me, its voice whispering just beside my ear: **Moquin**.

I screamed and let fire pulse from me in a sweeping wave. Tongues of it swept across the floor, setting it aflame. The miniature inferno reached the Darkling too late; it bridged its body across the encroaching threat and gathered to the right of the kitchen doorway.

*Not good enough*, it said.

It's tentacular neck shot out toward me like a rocket.

And then Paul's cold hands touched me, gathering me to him. I saw only a blur, and felt the eerie sensation of flight once again. I heard the voice of the Darkling hissing behind me, incomprehensible, fading into the distance.

I caught a brief glimpse of the yard outside Amelia's home. A flash of the car, sitting darkly in the drive. The door. And then I sat in the passenger seat, struggling for breath, while Paul worked the key into the ignition with mechanical grace.

Through the windshield, the wave of blackness that was the Darkling rushed out of the living room window and across the grass with astonishing speed.

We backed out of the drive in a fury of spraying gravel. We slid backwards along the street, and then the Lebaron's tires caught in the slush and propelled us
forward, across the arch of the bridge.

I realized I was crying, loudly.

I looked at Paul. He drove grimly, his hands tight and white on the steering wheel. Points of glass protruded from the backs.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice as tense as his expression.

I nodded.

"She's dead," I said, in a whisper.

"You did what you could," he said.

That was a lie. He'd been out cold when Amelia died. I hadn't done anything.

And then lights swirled in front of my retinas in a maelstrom; I felt my skull grow light as a balloon. I saw the road rushing past, and my own pale hands folded together in my lap, and then only blackness, as complete and impenetrable as the body of the Darkling itself.
We arrived home at one in the morning of the second-longest day of my life.

Paul and I said nothing to each other as we walked up the narrow, slick steps to the door of my apartment. My mind had shut itself down into a tiny point, like the last dot of light flickering in the depths of a television screen when its power is cut. I concentrated upon one detail at a time: lifting my foot for the next step, closing my numb fingers around bright, cold keys, unlocking the door.

Behind us, the wind slithered and howled through the empty streets, driving snow upon it. I thought about the Darkling, imagining its smooth ebon form flowing from shadow to shadow in the city streets, searching for us. Surely it knew where I lived. Surely, I thought, it watched us even then, crouched in the darkness behind me where I could not detect it.

I turned to look for it, my hands shaking. The keys slid from my cold fingers and fell upon the ice. Paul bent and retrieved them. I strained to see into the dark while he crouched. Nothing.
I took a shaky breath.

"Henry?" Paul asked, his voice low. I looked at him. The skin at his cheeks still bore puncture marks from broken glass. The cuts gaped like the mouths of miniature fish, bloodless and idiotic.

"Is it out there?" I whispered.

"Nowhere near," he said. "Come on. Go inside." He handed me the keys. His dark eyes bore in upon mine, and I calmed somewhat. Those eyes held no trace of the panic upon whose edge I stumbled.

"God," I said.

Paul reached past me and opened the door. He then took hold of my arm and led me through the door. The warmth of my apartment spilled out in an almost palpable wave, bathing my face. I took another breath, this one stronger. I walked to the center of the room.

"That's twice tonight," I said.

"Hm?"

"You saved my life twice tonight."

He shrugged and walked to stand in front of the windows. I looked out. Nothing was visible save snow, falling in vertical, wind-torn curtains.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome."

I swallowed. My throat was dry. I shuffled into the kitchen and opened the cabinet above the refrigerator. I was pleased to see it stocked full of my favorite
beverages, just as I had left it. I closed my still-cold hands around a bottle of whiskey and withdrew it.

I drank a slug straight from the bottle. Just like a Wild West shoot-em-up good guy. It burnt my throat like a lighted torch, and I coughed. No wonder private eyes always seemed so grim; straight whiskey can do that to a man.

I closed my eyes and saw palpable shadow falling on the crouching, pale form of Amelia Fisk. While I stood and watched.

I wanted to cry. Something harsh caught in my throat besides booze.

"What are you going to do?" Paul asked, from his post near the window.

"Don't know," I said. I sat at the island and slumped forward, resting my cheek against the cool formica. I looked sideways at the bottle of Makers Mark.

But I did know. I knew I had to do one thing, and I was afraid of doing it almost as much as I feared the Darkling.

I had to call Fisk and tell him his daughter was dead.

I heard Paul turn on the television behind me. For a brief moment, I wanted to laugh. It passed. I lifted my head and took another drink. I swallowed fire and closed my eyes against the harsh stinging and the tears that came in the liquor's wake.

The phone sat two feet away, on the other side of the island. Standard grey plastic capsule touch-tone. I'd bought it for twenty dollars at Hadwell's, at the clearance shelf.

I reached inside of my overcoat pocket and fished out the information sheet
Fisk had given me. His number was scrawled at the bottom in big, masculine block print, hard enough to dent the paper.

I picked up the phone and tried to formulate words.

I punched in the number anyway, resting my forehead on my palm.

Fisk answered on the third ring. His voice was thick and groggy with sleep.

"Fisk," I said. "This is Moquin."

"Oh," he said, his voice lifting a few alert notes. "Hello. Have you found out any--"

"I found Amelia," I said. My voice sounded clean and unreal, and devoid of sincerity. I would have to lie to him. I couldn't tell him the truth. Best to let him think human evil had done his daughter in.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"A house on the Southwest side. Fisk--"

"Hm? What's the address?"

"Fisk."

He must have heard it. He quieted, and I knew then I had his full attention. The parent in him was now alert, listening for the voice of authority to tell him the bad news he'd probably been half-expecting since his child's birth.

"Is she all right?" he asked.

"I'm sorry--" I began, but he broke in:

"What's happened?"

"She's been murdered."
I looked into the amber depths of the liquor bottle. From my position it looked like a huge jewel, cold and silky-smooth. I felt Fisk absorbing what I'd told him, felt the phone growing warm from my body heat, felt the smooth plastic of the mouthpiece against my stubbled chin.

"What?"

"I went to the house. She'd been killed."

I heard him take a breath. Long and slow.

"Who?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"When?"

"Recently. Tonight, I think."

Silence.

"I didn't call the police," I said. "I wanted to tell you first. I can still call them if you wish."

"No," he said. "I want to see her first."

"Come on. You don't need that--"

"Give me the address."

"Fisk--"

"Give me the address."

I swallowed, and then rattled it off. The guilty part of my mind surveyed Amelia's house room by room inside my head, looking for incriminating evidence. Would the Darkling have left any tracks? Was there any sign of what had really
happened?

I heard him breathing into the phone. I remembered the call I'd received from an Officer Philip Hurley one fine winter afternoon five years before. I realized with a shock that I was trying to mimic him, his delivery, his attitude. And failing. Hurley had been cool, reserved, informative.

He did this often.

"I have to see her," Fisk said. I don't think he was talking to anyone in particular. I tried to remember if he was married, if perhaps a wife was with him.

"Are you all right?" I asked. An inane question.

"No," he said.

"Don't go. Just let me call the police--"

"No. I'll go and call them. I'll . . . I'll leave your name out of it. Don't worry."

I swallowed.

"Moquin?"

"Yeah?"

"Is it . . . is she . . . in bad shape?"

I looked at the whiskey. My throat felt dry and raw and scraped.

"Yeah. It's bad."

"Oh." A pause. "Oh, Christ."

He began to cry.

"Fisk . . . " I began, and stopped.
I saw Amelia looking around, blinded by my magic, not even realizing that death arched over her in a wave of midnight.

The wave descended. Again. Her screams swallowed up like candy.

"Fisk," I said. "I'll bring your money back, I'll leave it at your office--"

"No," he said, softly. "Keep it."

"But--"

"You found her. Keep it."

I found her. The Darkling found me. Amelia was caught in the middle, scrabbling through broken glass, screaming, blind.

My mind truly passed into mutiny then; I imagined Sarah turning at the last minute to face the car skidding toward her. I heard her screaming, holding up useless hands to ward off impact.

"Fisk--" I said, sickly.

"Goodbye, Moquin," he said.

He hung up.

I stared at the receiver for an interminable time, until it began beeping obscenely. I replaced it in its cradle.

I opened up the whiskey again and took a drink.

The television chattered behind me. I turned and saw Paul sitting before it. His eyes moved from the set to mine. I saw, for a moment, Sarah sitting in a chair beyond, feet tucked under her, reading, smiling slightly when she knew I was watching.
"Well," I said. "Case closed."