



GUIDE TO THE
CAMARILLA



ROSES WATERED WITH BLOOD

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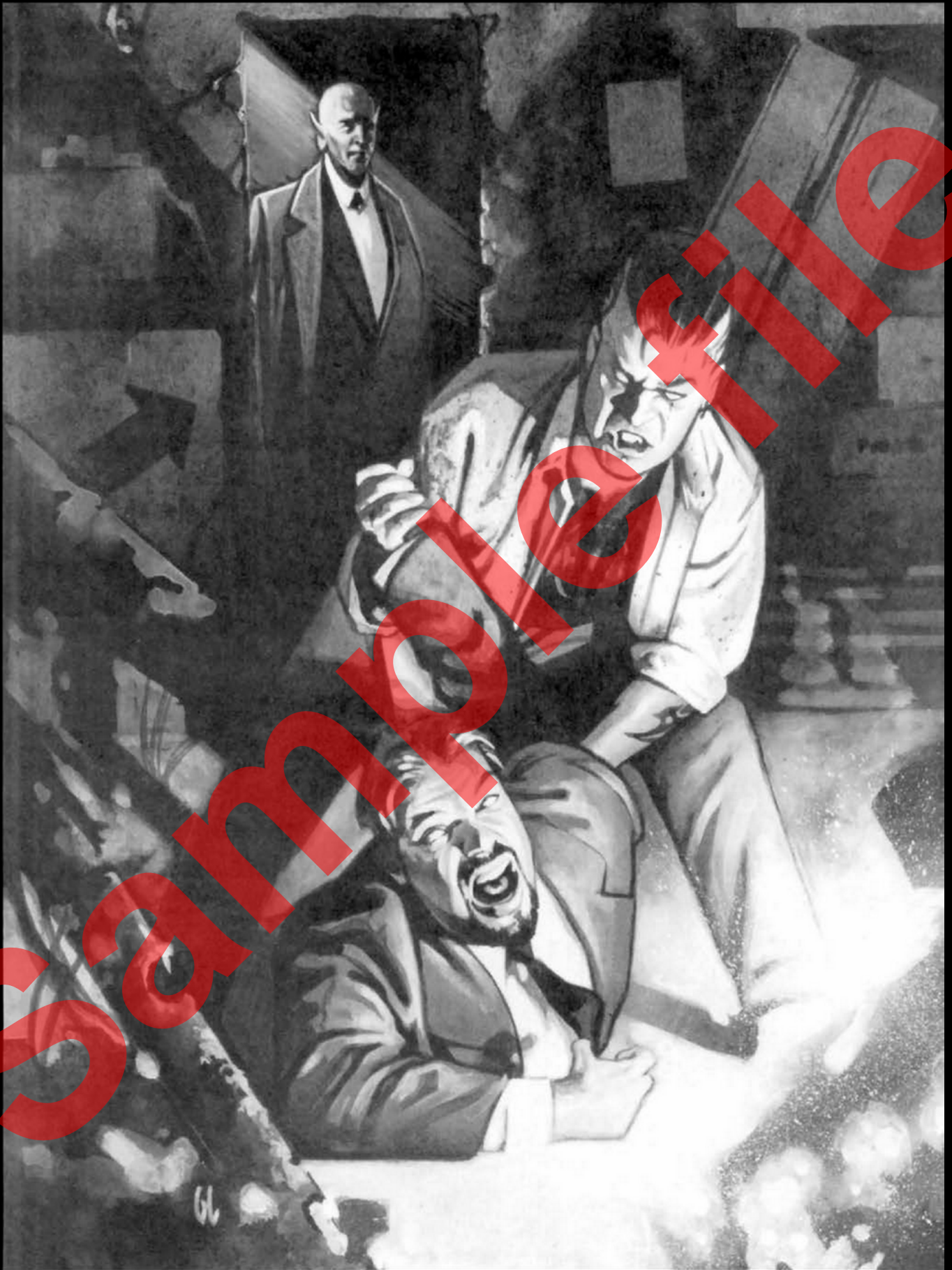
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ROULETTE: A CAUTIONARY TALE

It had been about two months since the last Sabbat scouting excursion, which meant that we were due for another one. Every so often, one of the bishops hiding in the SoCal sandbox decides the time is right to send another couple of shovelheads into town on some sort of bad Hunter S. Thompson-style info-gathering jaunt, and it's my job to watch out for that sort of thing, Truth be told, it's not so hard to watch out for. This town is neck-deep in anarchs who think they're hardcases but aren't; a real Sabbat badass sticks out like a sore thumb.

So that's my job. His Majesty (Prince Benedic, not that low-rent Giovanni Rorhstein who claims to run the town out of Bally's) tells me to watch for Sabbat infiltrators, which I do. When one (or two, or three—they like to travel in groups, I've found) members of the other sideshow up, I make my report to the prince, and we bang heads and decide what to do. The decision varies from case to case, but usually we have to be delicate about squashing the bastards as soon as they show their faces. I mean, Sabbat spies aren't necessarily stupid; they go to ground with the best of them. That means that if Tzammy Tzimisce tzchows, err, shows up he's going to do it with a safety pin fleshcrafted through his nose so he can claim to be an anarch, nor Sabbat. So if I go out there with my squad and take down the impostor, well, let's just say that any real anarchs he'd managed to fool would be up in arms about "being oppressed by the man." At that point the neonates would start throwing things and blowing the Masquerade to hell sideways, and that would mean more work for me and mine.

His Majesty, in case you were wondering, does not like to pay overtime.

No, it makes a lot more sense to play along, and then either stake the spy *en route* to his "private audience" with the prince, or feed the mark false information about our defenses, numbers, disposition and so on. Send back three different

scouting parties with three different reports, and you can almost hear them tearing into each other from here once someone takes the time to compare notes. It's a joy to ponder.

Vegas is a very volatile town, you see. This burg survives on tourism, which means that if tourists start going missing, the visiting traffic goes down and the place goes to hell. But if we control the take, make sure that it's just the lonely and unloved who get taken, well, then, this place is a paradise for our kind. You think the casinos have all-night buffets, you should see what the streets look like. That's why people like me — and I use the term "people" loosely — have to make sure that all of the rules and regulations get followed. If anyone gets greedy, or takes too much, or does anything stupid in public, the entire game could go in the crapper. I like this place, and so does His Majesty, entirely too much to allow that to happen.

The red phone rings. It only rings when there's something about to go down. I sigh as the damn thing keeps jangling, then walk across the room to pick it up. The prince gives me a nice suite in the Mirage as part of my compensation package (it's a running joke that one of these years we're all going to get dental), and like that just fine. I never could have afforded a place like this when I was alive, and it's nice that Benedic appreciates what I do enough to give me this as a token of his esteem.

I place the phone to my ear and made a noncommittal noise. Duke, the ghoul who works hotel security, answers, "Mr. Montrose?" As if it would be anyone else on my direct connect phone. Good help has never been easy to find.

"Yes? I take it we've got visitors?"

"Oh, we've got a live one indeed, sir." A live one. That was Duke's idea of a joke. He'd been using it every time he spotted a Kindred for the past 15 years, and he hadn't quite warmed to the notion that none of the rest of Prince Benedic's

employees found the gag particularly amusing. Still, he's a good man in a fight, and loyal. Plus, he has a good nose for sniffing out infiltrators. Useful talent, that.

"just one"

"Two, actually, A man and a woman. He's currently giving the desk help something of a hard time, claiming his name is Tom Cruise. He's too tall by half for the impersonation to rake, but it's one of the more clever attempts I've seen in a while."

"Get his room assignment and make sure no one goes in or out once he and his friend settle in. Have one of the specials handle the valet parking on their car, and check the trunk for ordnance. Also run the floorboards to see if they're trying to smuggle anything in, and have your friend at LVPD run the plates to see if the car is hot."

Duke's annoyance is palpable as he responds, "They self-parked, Mr. Montrose. It was part of what tipped me off to their presence. Otherwise, I'll perform the usual functions, as per our SOP. Do you have any other instructions?"

I find myself frowning. Something about this caper feels wrong. "Nothing else. Just be extra careful on this one, OK? I've got a feeling."

"You always have a feeling, Mr. Montrose," Duke says as he hangs up. He's right, though. I always have the same bad feeling in what used to be my gut, and I always give him the same orders once a suspicious character checks in or otherwise appears on the scene. That's one of the strengths of the team, though: routine. Tradition. The knowledge that we're going to do it right this time, because we've done it right a hundred times before.

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An hour later, Duke is sitting in the almost-but-not-quite overstuffed beige chair in the corner of my suite, nursing a hideous concoction he calls a Rusty Nail. He claims that the taste of one of those monsters allows him to look forward to the tang of the vitae he receives every month from Prince Benedic, but I think he just has lousy taste.

"Where shall I begin, Mr. Montrose?" he says, as I plant myself in the chair opposite his.

"Start with the basics. As always."

Good old long-suffering Duke. Completely predictable. "The car was our first area of inquiry. It is, much to my surprise, completely legitimate. There's not much else spectacular about it, save that it can probably get up near 200 mph in a pinch, guzzles gas dreadfully and has the sort of solid steel chassis that can serve to knock down telephone poles."

I let out a low whistle. "Impressive. I take it the trunk had equipment for dayproofing?"

Duke coughed embarrassedly. "Delgado didn't get a good enough look to see, Mr. Montrose."

"He didn't? Well, why the hell not?" I fling a coaster — why the hell does housekeeping insist on putting coasters in my room? — in disgust.

"Because of the Kindred in the way, Mr. Montrose."

"The *What*?"

"Apparently there was a recently Embraced Cainite, an African-American youth in his early teens, locked in there.

Delgado opened the trunk, and the unregistered passenger started thrashing about. He shut the trunk and reported to me."

"Where is he now?"

"He's at home. I rotated him off shift, so our visitors don't see his face, match it with any description the childe in the trunk might give, and put two and two together."

"Ah. I'll want to talk to him. Have him give me a call here. How about our happy couple?"

Duke shuffled his papers and flipped to another page in his notes. "They're in Room 1413, and we're reasonably certain they've done some crude lightproofing. By the sounds at the door, they're sleeping in the bathroom, most likely in the tub. The arrangement is nothing we haven't seen before, should we wish to extract our visitors quietly. They haven't even made contact with any local Kindred, so it's not as if they'd be missed."

"Hmm. Let me think. Do we have descriptions on them?"

Without a word, Duke hands me an envelope containing enhanced images of the pair from the lobby's security cameras. Two are close-ups, while the third is a wide-angle pan. "All right, I see the woman's quite attractive, and that cowboy hat looks like it's welded on. She probably dug herself out of the ground with it. The other one — I don't see anything interesting here. What's the deal with the third picture? I can barely see their faces!"

"If you please, Mr. Montrose," Duke takes the picture in question hack, grinning that smug little grin that means he thinks he's about to show me up. "If you will observe, this picture was taken from camera four, which takes a long sweep of the lobby and silhouettes those who are checking in —"

"—against the mirrors on those columns."

"Exactly, Mr. Montrose." Duke is nodding, and he still has that smirk on his face. "I believe I suggested we install camera four for precisely that purpose, so that we might see if any of our guests might be —"

"Lasombra. They actually sent in a Lasombra this time. *Beautiful*."

Duke loses the smirk and looks slightly alarmed as I chortle. "Mr. Montrose, shouldn't we inform Prince Benedic? If there's a Lasombra in the city —"

I cut him off again. It's getting to be a habit. "I will inform the prince in due time, in the meanwhile, I think we're going to run a disinformation job on this guy. I want you to get me, let's see, how about Cantor, and get the team in place, and meet me back here in tin hour." I'm up out of the chair now, pacing excitedly. This could be a good break. Duke is rising as well, heading for the door as he mumbles some impeccably polite and semantically empty parting.

Once Duke is gone, I head for the other phone, the one that speed-dials Benedic's private line. We know better than to take our conversations onto cell phones — one particularly sensitive conversation got picked up by a kid who had stumbled across Benedic's frequency with some sort of pirating device, and I had to arrange a very tricky accident on short notice to hide the evidence. These nights, it's all as close to solid state as we can make it.