

**Saturday, 24 July 1999, 4:05 AM**  
**Upstate New York**

For hours they kept coming, and they were all Gangrel. One at a time they wandered in, or occasionally two arrived together who had met on the way. Most had traveled east, though once near Table Rock they circled and approached from various directions. They were a wary lot. Most entered the clearing around the rock for at least a short time. Some soon edged back into the more complete darkness of the forest. Others never ventured beyond the protective cover of the trees in the first place. But Ramona knew they were out there, as was Stalker-in-the-Woods. Watching.

There was some quiet talking among them. Acquaintances separated for several years greeted one another and caught up. They told stories of their adventures, but never until after the ritualistic greetings:

“I’m Snodgrass. This scar is from a lupine I met in Central Park.”

“I am Mutabo. I feasted on the blood of the slavers who brought me to this country.”

“I am Renée Lightning. There are few Kindred Embraced who can match my speed.”

“I am Joshua, called Bloodhound. I track through cities infested by Sabbat, or wilderness crawling with lupines. I’ve never failed to earn my fee.”

Ramona listened to the first few introductions. She was curious about these creatures, all of whom apparently were of her clan—Gangrel. They were as different from one another as might be a group of

people on a random city bus. Some, like herself, were not in their element out here in the forest, miles from the nearest city or even decent-sized town. Others seemed perfectly at ease.

None, however, appeared particularly affluent. The appearances might have been misleading, Ramona knew, but Edmonson in his worn but mostly intact attire was at the upper end of the fashion spectrum for those assembled. Many more, like Ramona, had on what they might have been wearing years ago on the night of their change—their Embrace—and they just hadn't bothered with much of a wardrobe since. Ramona knew that she had gone months at a time without any thought of what she was wearing. The weather was not really a problem anymore; wind and cold didn't bother her. And she hadn't been particularly sociable since the change. She wondered if, in a few more years, she would run around naked like Stalker-in-the-Woods, with only her hair and the night to cover her.

Ramona peered out into the darkness. Just thinking of Stalker-in-the-Woods made her nervous. He wasn't someone she wanted to stumble on unawares, or even if she was expecting it, for that matter. His eyes burned with a cold fury. Ramona, before she'd looked away, had seen the hunger within him, but it was a different hunger from what she felt. Stalker-in-the-Woods would enjoy the suffering he inflicted, whether it was on mortal or vampire—Kindred, they called one another.

Aside from being uneasy not knowing where exactly he was, Ramona was embarrassed—embarrassed and *angry*—that she had looked away. She hadn't realized at the time that Stalker-in-the-Woods

was staring her down. It had just happened and she'd looked away. She hadn't been prepared. The worst part was that she didn't know if it would've made a difference if she *had* been prepared. Stalker-in-the-Woods was so...

"Close to the Beast," Ratface had said, when Ramona asked him about the frightening Gangrel.

It was an apt description. Ramona remembered what she had felt that night the two men had attacked Zhavon. Ramona hadn't planned to rip out their throats and string their intestines across the alley. It had just happened. It had felt right...natural. And she had enjoyed it—that scared her as much as anything. It was that kind of enjoyment that she thought she could see in Stalker-in-the-Woods.

Among the Gangrel, the dominant topics of conversation were the Sabbat and lupines. Ramona didn't take part in the discussions, but she heard bits of various stories. The tales about the Sabbat were exchanged in calm tones, as any interesting news might be related. Apparently that gang, which the Gangrel opposed—although Ramona did hear one story about a Gangrel, Korbit, who fought on the side of the Sabbat—was taking control of a great deal of territory that had belonged to the Camarilla along the East Coast. Ramona heard several cities mentioned—Atlanta, Charleston, Washington, D.C. It sounded bad, but Edmonson and the others didn't seem particularly worried.

When they spoke of the lupines, however, they did so in hushed tones. They glanced occasionally over their shoulders. Probably they denied it even to themselves, but Ramona could hear the fear in their voices. Several of the Gangrel in their litany of deeds

had spoken boastfully of lupines, but uncertainty, not pride, tinged their voices as they spoke of routes of safety through lupine territory or shifting hunting grounds. Even Edmonson, as calm and confident as Tanner, spoke respectfully of such things.

It was the talk about the lupines that made Ramona begin to feel strangely detached from everything that was going on around her. The stories were all of death and dismemberment: a friend decapitated in the wilds of northern Maine; an associate crossing the Grand Tetons split open from neck to belly; another who never returned from the Everglades.

Ramona withdrew into herself. The talk moved farther and farther away, until the voices were very small. They rang in the back of her head. Certain words echoed through her mind—*lupine... Texas... werewolf... lupine*—grew closer together, finally overlapped and merged into one disquieting mass.

*I saw a lupine in Texas*, Ramona said. She moved her lips, but no words emerged. She didn't remember sitting, but there she was on the ground by Zhavon's grave, sifting loose dirt through her fingers.

*I saw a lupine in Texas.*

They had still been several hours from San Antonio. Eddie had this thing for back roads. He wouldn't drive on an interstate if he could help it, and so when they ran out of gas, they were surrounded by nothing but miles and miles of gullies, mesquite, and dust.

Jen and Darnell argued bitterly over whose fault it was they'd run out of gas. Eddie didn't seem too upset. He claimed to have an unfailing sense of direction and saw finding a shortcut through the mesquite thickets as a challenge. Ramona had asked

him if his dick was a compass, but he ignored her. Too bad, they agreed, that they couldn't eat sand instead of drinking blood. Plenty of sand. No gas. No blood.

Then suddenly there was plenty of blood.

Maybe if Jen and Darnell hadn't been arguing, somebody would've heard it coming.

*Lupine.* The name fit the monster from Ramona's memory.

They were approaching the edge of a gully, a dry creek bed, and the lupine was there, where it hadn't been a second before.

Eddie stumbled back. The left side of his face was gone. Ramona heard the first snarl as she was splattered with his blood. Before they could speak or scream, a claw ripped open his gut like a pinata full of shriveled intestines. Eddie's knees buckled, and then the monster slammed its jaws shut and took off the top of his head.

Eddie fell. His blood wetted down the dust.

Ramona and the others behind her stood in shock, mouths agape. She could feel the lupine's moist breath heavy on the dry, Texas air.

The first moment of decision arrived—the creature needed only reach out to take off Ramona's head, but instead it fell upon Eddie, burying its snout in his opened belly. Eddie whimpered as it tore him apart from the inside out.

The second moment of decision fell to Ramona, Jen, and Darnell. They could pounce on the lupine. It was fully consumed by its passion for carnage. They could strike back for Eddie, who no longer could himself. The moment hung heavy in the air, bathed in blood and the staccato crack of ribs.

As one, Ramona and the others turned and ran. They stumbled through the mesquite. Thorns dug into their flesh, but they hardly noticed. They ran and didn't stop running until the rising sun forced them to burrow into the steep bank of a gully. They burrowed until the earth collapsed behind them, but they didn't need air. Only darkness.

*I saw a lupine in Texas.*

*I saw a lupine in Texas.*

"Ramona?"

Ratface was close to her, very close. Ramona blinked repeatedly at him. She raised a hand to wipe away Eddie's blood that had splattered on her face.

"Ramona?" Ratface's voice, too, seemed very far away, though he crouched less than a foot from her.

There were too many people here. Too many Gangrel. Ramona could see at least ten. Stalker-in-the-Woods and others were out there somewhere too.

*Too many.*

These were the others whom Tanner had called together. Ramona had never thought she'd want to see this many of her own kind—vampires, Kindred, Gangrel—together in one place, but if they were going back to that cave...

The thought seemed to flick a switch in her brain. *The cave...Darnell!* She'd been so caught up in her own grief and in the strangeness of the Gather that she'd almost forgotten Darnell. How long had he been in there? They had to get him out! There were plenty of Gangrel here now. Ramona scrambled to her feet.

"Where the hell is Tanner?" she asked no one in particular.

Ratface regarded her quizzically. "He is spreading word of the Gather."

“But we have to save Darnell!” Ramona suddenly couldn’t stand the thought of wasting another second. They’d waited too long already. She shoved her way past Ratface and stalked over to Brant Edmonson, who was talking with Joshua.

“Let’s go,” she demanded. “We’ve got enough folks here.” For the moment, she ignored the memory of Tanner’s fear and convinced herself that Edmonson would be more than a match for Darnell’s captor.

“Tanner has called the Gather,” Edmonson said. “We’ll wait for him.” He spoke kindly but firmly, and didn’t bother to ask what she wanted to do.

“I’ve been waitin’ for him for too long,” Ramona snarled. “I’m sick of it! There’s a...a...fuckin’ *thing* in a cave,” she pointed toward the meadow, “and it’s got one of my friends.”

“We will wait for Tanner,” Edmonson said again calmly. He placed a hand on her shoulder, but Ramona jerked and pushed him away.

“Don’t touch me!”

Joshua moved closer. “You need to calm down.”

Ramona jabbed an instantly formed claw toward his face. “Don’t tell me what I need! *I* don’t need anything. We need to rescue Darnell.”

Edmonson stared at her—a harder, less friendly stare than before—but said nothing. Other Gangrel were taking notice of her outburst, of the harsh tone of her words to Edmonson and Joshua.

Ramona threw her hands in the air. “He’s been there a whole day and night already. We have to get him out!” She was met with silence, which only stoked her anger. “What kind of chickenshit vampire club is this? Any of you fellas got any balls?” She glanced meaningfully around the clearing at the

various Gangrel. "Or is that just a mortal thing?"

At that, Edmonson drew himself up to his full height and glared down at Ramona. "We will wait for Tanner," he said in short, clipped tones, and raised a finger before her face. "Until he returns, little one, you had best watch your tongue." Then he turned and walked away from her.

"Little one? *Little one!*" She took a step after Brant, but found herself restrained. Someone was holding her shoulder. She tried to jerk away again, but this time the hand held tight. She whirled, ready to attack, and to her surprise faced Ratface.

"You are not helping your friend by aggravating Edmonson," he said quietly. The strength in his hands and the earnestness in his eyes brought her up short. At the same time, a great weariness took hold of her. Her frustration and fear had flashed to anger but that, for the moment, was spent. Ratface was right, she knew. Getting her ass whipped wasn't going to help Darnell. But that knowledge did little to curb her vexation. She started to think how she'd probably alienated Brant Edmonson, but then she noticed that despite the numerous Gangrel that had already gathered, the low buzz of conversation that had waxed and waned over the past few hours had now died away completely. Even Ratface, right next to her, was looking back toward Table Rock and sniffing at the air.

Another Gangrel had arrived, and all had stopped whatever they were doing to watch him. There was not the feel of danger about him, as with Stalker-in-the-Woods. He was not even tall and confident like Brant Edmonson. Yet the gaze of every Gangrel present followed him.

"Edward Blackfeather," Ratface turned back and

whispered to Ramona. "A Cherokee medicine man."

The man did have the look of an American Indian, though Ramona could never have made a guess about what tribe. He was here, so he must be Gangrel. Apparently the vampire clan cut across boundaries of gender, race, and nationality. Ramona already knew that from what she'd seen of those assembled.

Blackfeather was wiry and not tall, maybe five and a half feet, about Ramona's height. He wore what looked to be a deerskin shirt and moccasins of the same material, faded blue jeans, and a belt with a large Elvis buckle. His hair was long and white and stuck out at an awkward angle from beneath an old, felt hat, the brim of which, once round and stiff, hung limp almost down in his face. A gray and white feather hung from a string tied to his hat.

Ramona could feel the stillness that accompanied Blackfeather. It was a palpable quiet that began somewhere within him, but radiated from him as well. The Gangrel all paid him a certain deference—it didn't smell of fear exactly, but the old man's presence made the others uncomfortable.

He stepped up onto Table Rock and, acknowledging no one, began to walk slowly around the edge of the large stone. Edmonson and Joshua Bloodhound, who were sitting on the rock, eased off the opposite side to better watch what Blackfeather was doing, and from a bit more of a distance. He shuffled his feet and stared intently at the stone, not stopping until he'd completed one full circuit. Then he reached into the canvas sack he carried draped over one shoulder and pulled out a small pine bough. Using the bough like a brush or a small broom, he began to sweep the flat stone surface, starting in the center

and moving in a gradually expanding spiral.

No one spoke. His sweeping must have taken at least half an hour, for he was very thorough, but none spoke and few so much as crossed or uncrossed their arms. When he was done, Blackfeather placed the pine bough in the center of the stone, where he'd started his sweeping. Then he casually stepped down from the stone and walked into the forest.

Many of the Gangrel looked to one another with questioning gazes.

"What was that all about?" Ramona asked Ratface quietly.

Ratface only shrugged, and then pointed.

Blackfeather was returning. The hushed speculation all over the clearing quickly died away. He carried an armful of sticks and small branches, which he placed near the center of the rock and then began to build into a small teepee.

He worked as silently and as deliberately at his teepee as he had at his sweeping, and for the ten minutes his construction occupied, again, no one spoke or made a sound.

At last he was done, and he placed his canvas sack on the rock next to the foot-tall teepee. From his bag he took something, but Ramona couldn't see what until he moved closer to her and stood at the edge of Table Rock. In his left hand he held a piece of white chalk—a fat piece, like a child would use to draw on a sidewalk. His hand was open and flat, perfectly still. Against his dark and deeply wrinkled skin—tanned like leather during his mortal days—the chalk looked smooth and brilliant white. With his flattened right palm, he began to press down on the chalk with a steady, circular motion. As Ramona

looked on, he ground the fat piece of chalk into a fine powder using only the pressure of his hands, and not a single speck of white fell to the stone below.

As he finished and held in his hand nothing more than a pile of powdered chalk, Ramona realized that he was watching her. She had been intent on his hands and the transformation of chalk to powder, but he had been intent on her. His eyes sparkled with the mischievousness of kinship, and Ramona's startlement at noticing him watching her drained away.

For a long moment, he looked at her looking at him. Then Blackfeather turned. He knelt and began to sprinkle the chalk onto the rock, not in a haphazard manner but in a line, and as he edged backward around Table Rock he continued to spread the chalk. Not once did he look over his shoulder to check his direction as he went, but his movements were as sure as the turning of the earth.

He circled near the edge of the rock, not stopping or varying his deliberate pace until he came again to his starting point before Ramona. He stood, and then reached an open, white hand to her.

The next thing Ramona knew, she was stepping up onto Table Rock. She could see at once that the nearly completed circle Blackfeather had drawn was perfect of form, and that the teepee of sticks stood exactly in the center. For a moment, her legs nearly failed her. She could feel the weight of the trees and the sky and the stars pressing down on her, and she feared that she might be crushed against the flat stone, that she might become part of Table Rock. But Blackfeather took her hand, and the feeling passed. She stepped through the opening he had left in the

circle, and with the last of the chalk he closed it behind her.

Next, Blackfeather placed his hands upon her cheeks and jaw. His touch, that of the undead, was cold, but in his eyes a mirthful fire burned. Ramona knew without seeing that the pattern of his hands was white and perfect upon her dirty face. He bade her sit, then he sat as well, across from her, on the far side of the small teepee.

The silence that had come with Blackfeather when he first appeared was thicker now, heavier. Though the quiet was not so heavy as the sky and stars, Ramona didn't know if she could speak if she tried. So she merely sat and watched.

Blackfeather, wearing a slight smile beneath his sagging felt hat, produced from his sack a silver Zippo lighter. In one motion, his long thumb flicked open the cover and spun the tiny wheel. His thumb traced a white line through the darkness, and the whirring of the metal wheel slowed to one hundred individual clicks. A six-inch flame leapt to life and pounced almost instantly on the teepee. The crackling of the dry sticks filled Ramona's ears.

The world beyond the circle was black against the dancing fire. Ramona vaguely remembered the others there—Ratface, Edmonson, Stalker-in-the-Woods—but maybe they weren't there any longer. She and Blackfeather were as alone as if they sat on the surface of the moon or at the bottom of the ocean.

Ramona tried to look at the old man's laughing eyes, at his white teeth, but her gaze was drawn to the flames that danced so close to her. She knew deep inside that she should fear the fire, just as she feared the sun. No one had ever told her as much, but she

had naturally shied from fire since the change. Now it was very close. She should slide back, not sit so close, but her fear was numb and weak. She was so tired, her body, her mind...so tired.

Then she realized that Blackfeather was speaking to her. She strained to see his face through the flames and the rising smoke. Though he spoke in a low voice—he did little more than mumble under his breath—the sound carried to Ramona, but for some reason beyond her grasp, she couldn't untangle the words. They reached her ears but didn't proceed to her brain. She thought at first that he spoke a foreign tongue, maybe the language of the Cherokee, but she could fix in her mind not a single sound that he uttered. The words dissipated as soon as they touched her awareness, like smoke upon the breeze. Ramona heard, but she didn't hear.

So intent was Ramona on deciphering Blackfeather's mutterings, she didn't notice at first that he had fallen silent—the words seemed to continue with their own life, swirling upon the smoke that now clung close to the stone rather than rising skyward—or that he was calmly scooting around the fire toward her and dragging his canvas sack behind him.

The smoke, hanging low, grew thick, and shortly Ramona couldn't see much beyond the chalk circle. She tried to remember exactly what or who she expected to see beyond the smoke, but her thoughts were as elusive as Blackfeather's chant. Details of the outside world were less substantial than the gently churning smoke that almost formed a wall around Table Rock.

Blackfeather was at her side now. Reflected in

his eyes, she could see the white handprints on her face glowing in the firelight. He turned his sack upside down, and one after another several small items trickled out onto the stone between them. It was an odd collection: a plastic egg, like from a child's Easter basket; a bent and rusted butter knife; a snakeskin; a small, mostly empty plastic bottle of Visine; and two sticks of chewing gum in blank, white wrappers. Blackfeather stopped the egg from rolling away, then regarded silently the former contents of his sack. He rested his chin in his hand and didn't move for several minutes.

Ramona tried to pay attention, but her mind was wrestling with the chant, which seemed still to echo from the stone, and with the smoke that obscured all beyond Table Rock.

Finally, Blackfeather shifted from his contemplative pose. He reached down and took in his hand the two pieces of gum. One he offered to Ramona. She took it and watched as he, with focused, deliberate motions, unwrapped his piece. Then, bending the gum in half, he placed it in his mouth and began to chew. The wrapper he crumpled and tossed into the fire. That done, he returned his enigmatic gaze to Ramona.

She could only guess his wishes. Slowly, she began to unwrap her piece of gum. Neither seeing nor hearing any objection from Blackfeather, she placed the gum in her mouth with the same reverence she'd once witnessed in people eating communion wafers at a Catholic mass. Ramona folded the stick exactly as Blackfeather had, and chewed. The gum was sickly sweet. Ramona grimaced. She'd grown used to the more bitter sweetness of human blood.

Blackfeather, apparently satisfied, returned his attention to the remaining items. He picked up the snakeskin, tore it in two, and handed one of the foot-and-a-half lengths to Ramona. The thin veil of brown and gray scales was rough against her skin, not slimy as she had always expected a reptile should be. Blackfeather placed his half in the flames, still licking vigorously at the teepee. Ramona did the same with her portion and the skin was quickly consumed.

Next, Blackfeather took the tiny bottle of Visine. He held it in front of his face and squeezed so that a single drop fell to the ground before him. When he handed it to Ramona, she mimicked his actions, except when she squeezed the bottle, several drops shot out and splattered the stone. She turned the bottle upright so quickly that she fumbled with it and nearly dropped it.

Aghast at her own clumsiness, she looked warily to Blackfeather. She had no idea what kind of ceremony or spell he was performing, but she was sure she'd just ruined it. She half expected the flames from the fire to leap up and consume her, or the smoke to close in and suffocate her—never mind that she didn't breathe anymore.

But Blackfeather only shrugged and nodded toward the fire. Hesitantly, Ramona tossed the bottle into the glowing coals. The last of the liquid hissed away amidst the pungent odor of melting plastic.

Blackfeather picked up the egg next, but then he stopped and a strange expression crossed his face. Before Ramona could translate the odd pursing of his lips, he turned his head and spat his wrinkled ball of gum into the fire.

Ramona turned and did the same with hers.

“The flavor never lasts very long, does it?” said Blackfeather.

Ramona stared blankly at him and blinked. They were the first words he’d spoken since arriving, and amidst all this strangeness that he’d set in motion, he was worried about old chewing gum. Ramona opened her mouth, which despite the gum was dry and tasted of smoke, but had no idea what to say.

The old man took no notice of her befuddlement. He opened the plastic egg and took out a hard, gray mass that looked a bit like a larger version of the chewed gum. The two halves of the egg he tossed into the fire, and again the smell of melting plastic was apparent. The mass from inside the egg he handed to Ramona.

She recognized instantly the consistency and texture, even the faint smell, of the malleable object. She squeezed and kneaded it. *Silly Putty*.

“You got a Slinky in that bag too?” she asked with a wry smile.

Blackfeather cocked his head and stared at her in complete and silent puzzlement.

“You know....” Ramona tried to explain, her smile fading. “It’s fun for a girl and a boy...?”

But Blackfeather’s puzzlement, if anything, grew deeper.

“Uh...sorry.” Ramona held up the age-hardened mass of *Silly Putty* and pointed to the fire. Blackfeather nodded, so in it went.

All that remained was the rusted butter knife. Blackfeather took it and, using the crook of the bent utensil, scraped a pile of coals and ashes from the diminishing fire. Ramona instinctively cringed as he did this. She could handle sitting relatively near the

fire, but reaching a hand in among the flames was a different matter altogether.

With the knife, he crushed the few coals he'd gathered that were still red. Soon, the pile consisted purely of black and gray ash. Blackfeather continued to stir the ash for some time. Finally, he raised his face and met Ramona's gaze, but where before she'd seen laughter in his eyes, now she saw only sadness.

"The Final Nights are at hand," said Blackfeather, holding Ramona's gaze despite her sudden desire to turn away, "and your road will be a difficult one."

Ramona tensed. His words spread terror through her, not because she understood them, because she did not. But she felt the truth of what he said.

Blackfeather set the knife aside and scooped two handfuls of ash. He leaned toward Ramona, raised the ash toward her face. She wanted to pull away, to run screaming from this prison of chalk and smoke. She wanted to run back to her mortal life, to the way life had been before. But none of those things were possible.

Ramona couldn't even close her eyes as Blackfeather pressed the handfuls of ash into them.

The ash, though still warm, did not burn. Ramona could see nothing, but she could feel the Beast, like a volcano beneath the surface, rising up within her. She could feel how it filled her, how it destroyed every shred of anything else inside her. She could feel, too, that it was loose in the world as well. The hunger that dwelt within her, that dwelt within her sire, and her sire's sire, all the way back to the first spilling of human blood, that hunger was no longer contained within them. It was risen. It roamed free. And it would consume them all.

*The Final Nights are at hand.*

The warmth of the fire was gone. A fierce chill gripped Ramona's soul. Her very core was cold and dead.

She reached out for comfort. She fled from the cold, from the hunger. Thankfully, she found warmth, surrounded herself with it.

But still she could not completely shake the cold that gripped her.