

*Michael Scott*

*The Secrets of*  
THE IMMORTAL  
NICHOLAS FLATTEL

BILLY *the* KID

*and the*

VAMPIRES

*of*

VEGAS

A LOST STORY FROM THE  
BESTSELLING SERIES

# Billy the Kid and the Vampyres of Vegas

A Lost Story from the Secrets  
of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel

Michael Scott  
Delacorte Press

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# Contents

[Cover](#)  
[Title Page](#)  
[Other Books by This Author](#)  
[Copyright](#)  
[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)  
[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)

I never wanted to be immortal.

Like just about everything else in my life, it happened without my asking. I didn't even know I'd changed until I fell off my horse and rolled halfway down a mountainside. That fall broke just about every bone in my body. I could hear them snapping all the way down. By rights that fall should have killed me—but I got up and walked away.

I knew then I was different. Really different.

It wasn't until much later that I discovered what I had become: ageless. I wasn't too upset about it at first. Then I discovered that being immortal comes with some serious enemies, and only a few of them are human.

But sometimes your friends are even more dangerous than your enemies.

From Notes & Scraps

Being the Private Journal of William H. Bonney

Commonly known as Billy the Kid

(Undated, possibly September 2005)

“Billy, let me be very clear,” said the white-bearded Elder Quetzalcoatl. “You do not open the jar.”

The young man in the faded Route 66 T-shirt and weathered blue jeans nodded. Hooking his thumbs in his belt, fingertips resting on the ornate buckle, he leaned over and looked at the beautifully decorated earthenware vessel in the center of the table. Its wide mouth was sealed with what looked like black wax etched with sticklike writing.

“Don’t open the jar,” Billy repeated quietly to himself, then asked, “Why—what’s in it?”

Quetzalcoatl remained expressionless. “You do not want to know.”

“I do, actually.” Billy the Kid looked at the slender figure with the hawk nose and solid black eyes standing across from him. “If you want me to deliver this, the least you can do is tell me what’s in it.”

A look of irritation flashed across the copper-skinned Elder’s face. His long serpent’s tail, bright with scales and feathers, swished beneath the hem of his white cotton robe and rasped back and forth over the floor.

Billy reached out to poke the jar with a calloused finger. But before he could touch it, a spark crackled from one of the ornate decorations ringing its surface. Billy leapt back, shaking out his suddenly numb fingers. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and sucked. “That hurts.”

“I told you not to touch it.”

“You told me not to *open* it,” Billy corrected the Elder.

Quetzalcoatl’s black eyes fixed on Billy. The American immortal shrugged. “ ‘Don’t open,’ you said, not ‘don’t touch.’ ”

“Do not touch,” Quetzalcoatl snapped.

Billy grinned. “Then how am I going to carry it?”

The Elder’s mouth opened and his black tongue flickered through razor-sharp teeth. “Your smart mouth is going to get you killed one day.”

“Maybe,” Billy said. “But only when I’m no longer of any use to you.”

Quetzalcoatl leaned toward the Kid, wisps of his beard brushing the jar, which gave off tiny blue-green sparks. “Do you know how many humani servants I have?”

“No.” Billy’s cold blue eyes stared, unwavering, into the Elder’s face. “How many?”

Swirls of oily color moved across the surface of Quetzalcoatl’s black eyes. Then he leaned back and his mouth opened in what might have passed for a smile. “Maybe I *should* let you open it,” he said. He tapped the jar with his black-nailed index finger. “This is a pithos.”

“I thought it was a jar,” Billy said. He looked back at the table. The jar was about four feet tall, with a wide mouth above a bulging body narrowing to a circular base. The body of the artifact had been etched with horizontal lines of ancient script and spiral decorations resembling waves.

“A pithos a jar. Didn’t you learn anything in school?”

Billy shook his head. “We spent a lot of time on the road when I was young; there wasn’t much time for schooling, and I went to work when my ma died. I was fourteen. Anything I’ve learned I taught myself.”

Quetzalcoatl shook his head. “I sometimes wonder why I made you immortal.”

“Because I saved your life,” Billy reminded him with a grin. He held up his forefinger and thumb.

“If I remember correctly, you were *this* close to ending your ten thousand years upon this earth.”

Quetzalcoatl spun away and moved across the low-ceilinged room. Late-afternoon sunlight washed in through the large open windows, and the air smelled of exotic spices. “Just remember, Billy, I can take away your immortality just as easily as I granted it.”

Billy the Kid bit back his response and folded his arms across his chest. He’d never asked for immortality, but he’d come to enjoy his extended life span and knew that if he was careful he could live for another one or two or even three hundred years. He’d heard stories of European immortals who had lived for more than half a millennium. His friend Black Hawk had told him that he’d once met an immortal human who was reputed to be one thousand years old. Billy wasn’t sure he believed that; Black Hawk was a hundred years older than Billy, and delighted in telling him the most outlandish stories.

Quetzalcoatl returned to the table with a thick brown canvas sack. He shook the sack open and a handful of gnarled brown beans rattled out. “Hold this,” he commanded. Billy held the sack, coughing as the dry bitterness of cacao wafted up from the interior. Quetzalcoatl was addicted to chocolate and had the finest beans shipped in from all across South America every month. Lifting the pithos, the Elder carefully placed it in the sack and tied the neck with a strip of leather.

“I want you to take it to this address in Chinatown. Hand it over to the person there. I will call her as soon as you leave and tell her you are bringing it. She’s expecting it. And Billy,” Quetzalcoatl added with a ragged grin. “Do not talk to her. Don’t try to be smart or funny or clever. Just give her the pithos and walk away. Make sure you put it into her hands. And then forget you’ve ever met her.”

“Trying to scare me?” Billy raised an eyebrow.

“Trying to warn you.”

“Well, I don’t scare easy.” Billy the Kid lifted the bag. It was surprisingly heavy. “You’re sounding a little nervous there,” he teased the Elder. “Who is this woman?”

“No human woman. This is the warrior’s warrior, sometimes called the Daemon Slayer or the King Maker. This is Scathach the Shadow, and she is deadly beyond reckoning.”



“See you next week. Keep practicing.” The slender red-haired young woman with the shocking green eyes bowed as the last of her students left the dojo, then locked the door and turned back to the broad room. The artificial smile she always used when dealing with humans faded and her features turned sharp, almost cruel. She looked about seventeen, but Scathach had been born in the dark days after the fall of Danu Talis ten thousand years earlier. She had spent more than two and half thousand of those years on the Earth Shadowrealm. She had never been entirely comfortable among the humani; bitter experience had taught her not to get too close to them. She was always happiest when she was alone. And she had been alone for most of her long life.

Humming a tune that had been popular in the Egyptian court of Tutankhamen, Scathach opened a narrow cupboard and pulled out a broom, its head wrapped in a yellow cloth. Starting at the back of the room, she began to sweep the floor in long, rhythmic strokes.

The martial arts dojo was plain and unadorned, painted in shades of white and cream with black mats scattered across the gleaming wooden floor. Long beams of late-afternoon sunlight slanted in through the high windows, trapping spiraling dust motes in the slightly stale air. Four evenings a week Scathach taught karate classes, and every Friday morning she held a free self-defense workshop for women. Twice a week, she instructed a handful of special students in the ancient Indian art of Kalarippayattu, the oldest martial art in the world. None of her students realized that their teacher had been one of the originators of the ancient fighting system, which had inspired the Chinese and then the Japanese martial arts.

“I’d better go out and buy some food later,” she decided as she swept. Scathach was vampire. She had no need for food but had long ago realized that in order to blend in with the humani world, she needed to do what they did. In the ancient past too many of her clan had betrayed themselves through either stupidity or arrogance. And the most common mistake was being seen as not requiring everyday necessities like food—fruit, milk, tea. She’d made sure most of the shopkeepers in her neighborhood knew her. She even faked poor Mandarin or Cantonese to speak to them. She knew both languages perfectly but thought it would make her less conspicuous if she seemed to struggle.

When she’d finished sweeping, Scathach stepped into the tiny office at the back of the dojo. Like the rest of the space, it was plain to the point of austerity: it contained only a simple wooden desk with a battered kitchen chair behind it facing the door. There were no martial arts certificates on the walls—no one ever questioned her skills—but one wall was adorned with antique weapons from around the world: swords and scythes, axes, spears, nunchaku and sai, khanda and claymores. All of them were nicked and battered from centuries of use in countless fights across a hundred Shadowrealms.

The cordless telephone and answering machine on the corner of the desk were the only modern devices in the room. The answering machine was blinking, a red 2 flashing on and off.

A flicker of surprise shifted across Scathach’s normally expressionless face. She rarely received any calls on this phone. The number was not only private, even the telephone company didn’t have it in their records. Any calls were routed through a dozen switching points and bounced across two continents and one satellite, making the number untraceable. Scathach could count on the fingers on one hand the people who knew how to reach her here. It had been a year—no, fourteen months—since

the last call, and that had been someone selling life insurance.

Scathach shook her head slightly. This could only be trouble. And trouble meant she would have to move. She sighed. She really loved San Francisco; she'd hoped she'd be able to stay here for another decade at least before her unchanging appearance would force her to relocate to avoid suspicion. She could return in a century or so when everyone who had known her would be dead—but she didn't want to leave quite yet.

She pressed Play. "You have two new messages."

"I understand you have been seeking a certain pithos." The voice was an arrogant rasp, speaking in a language that had not been used on the American continent in millennia. "I am in a position to give it to you."

"Of course you are," Scathach whispered with a smile. Quetzalcoatl had phoned her deliberately, allowing her to see that he knew where she lived. She had recently discovered—quite by accident—that the snake-tailed Elder had the artifact in his collection of antiquities. During the past few weeks, she had visited a dozen of his agents and let them know she wanted it. She knew the message would get to Quetzalcoatl sooner rather than later, and knew that he would contact her. The Elder known as the Feathered Serpent would gladly give up the pithos to keep her from rampaging through his Shadowrealm in search of it. Scathach was likely to leave his world a smoking ruin.

"Although the pithos is of great personal value to me, I would like to present it to you as a token of my goodwill."

*Goodwill!* Scathach was surprised Quetzalcoatl even knew how to pronounce the word. Her lips curled in a cruel smile. He was giving her the jar because he was afraid of her.

The answering machine tape hissed for a minute and then there was a coughing sound and Scathach realized that Quetzalcoatl was attempting a laugh. "I have no wish to make an enemy of you. I was a good friend to your parents. Indeed, I believe we may even be related by blood on your mother's side. We are not that different, you and I."

"You have no idea just how different we are," Scathach murmured into the pause that followed.

"My representative will call upon you later today. He is an immortal humani and knows of your nature. He can be a little arrogant, but I would be grateful if you did not kill him. He is useful to me."

There was a click and then the message stopped.

"Well, that was easy." Scathach grinned. She'd been quite prepared to invade the Elder's Shadowrealm in search of the famous pithos. She pressed the Play button again to listen to the second call.

"A long time ago, you told me that if I was ever in any trouble I could call upon you."

Scathach's breath caught in her throat. It was a voice she had not heard in a long time, a youthful man's voice with just a trace of an accent. A man she *knew* to be dead.

"But when I called, you did not come, and I paid a terrible price. You failed me once. Scathach, I am in trouble now. Deep trouble. I need you, Shadow. There are vampyres in Las Vegas, and they are hunting me. I'm staying at—"

Before he finished his sentence the call was cut off.

Billy had driven around the block twice looking for a place to park and eventually decided that he was not leaving his precious Thunderbird at a parking meter. He found a garage on Vallejo Street and parked his bright red convertible as far away from any of the other cars as possible. Two weeks earlier someone had bumped into his door with a shopping cart, leaving a long, thin scar in the paint. It had taken him an entire day to buff out the scratch and another to repaint the door.

Wrapping his left hand in the leather cord around the sack's mouth, Billy hefted the heavy bag holding the pithos over his shoulder and set off down Vallejo Street toward Stockton. Although he had lived in and around San Francisco for the better part of a century, he'd never spent a lot of time exploring the city itself. Narrow streets and crowds made him nervous. He preferred the open countryside.

He walked past two youths leaning against a wall—one unnaturally skinny, the other muscular—and saw how their eyes drifted across him and settled on the bag. They exchanged a look. Billy knew their type: he'd ridden horseback alongside them once and fought against them for the rest of his life. "Don't even think about it, boys," he said lightly as he strode past. "You do not want to mess with me today. Or any day." There was something about the expression on his face and the look in his eyes that made both young men step back and turn to hurry away. Billy grinned. All bullies were cowards.

The immortal turned onto Stockton Street, then left onto Broadway, walked past the Sam Wong Hotel and turned right into a cramped back street. He knew he was close. He consulted the address on the sweat-stained scrap of paper in the palm of his hand. He was in a narrow alleyway barely wide enough for one car. The buildings on either side were so high they blocked out the sun, leaving the alley in gloomy shadow. Metal bins, stinking with rotting food and buzzing with flies, lined one wall. Billy took care to breathe only through his mouth. He had no idea who this Scathach person was, but he didn't think much of where she lived. Quetzalcoatl had called her the King Maker and the Daemon Slayer and had said she was a Shadow, whatever that meant. A shadow of her former self? Billy was guessing she was a dumpy old bag lady who probably kept cats. Dozens of cats. He shifted the sack from one shoulder to the other and once again wondered what exactly it contained. It looked like a Greek wine jar, but he was almost certain there was no wine in it. He'd shaken it when he'd put it in the back of his car, then pressed his ear against the rough cacao-scented cloth. For the merest instant he could have sworn he'd heard voices coming from inside the jar. Maybe it was full of Nirumbee—Little People. If so, he was in no hurry to open it. Fifty years earlier, in Montana, he'd rescued Virginia Dare from some of the little horned monsters and they'd both barely escaped with their immortal lives.

Billy rounded a pile of trash and found himself facing a building at the end of the alleyway. There were no windows, and the only door was behind a narrow-slatted metal grille. As he got closer he saw a simple plastic sign next to the door. KARATE CLASSES. SELF-DEFENSE. QUALIFIED INSTRUCTOR.

He stopped and checked the address again. It was correct. He turned slowly, making sure he wasn't being followed, and then pressed a small white bell under the sign. His acute hearing picked up the rattle of what sounded like wind chimes. He checked the alleyway, the habits that had kept him alive for so long making him look behind him once more.

Billy was turning back to the door, finger outstretched to press the bell again, when he realized that

the door had opened and a young woman with spiky red hair was glaring at him. He stepped away and smiled to hide his discomfort; he hadn't even heard the door open.

"Hi. I've got a parcel for a Mrs. Skatog."

"Scathach," the young woman corrected him, reaching for the sack.

Billy took a step back and shook his head. "I can only give it to Mrs. Scathach herself."

"I'm Scathach," the woman snapped, green eyes flashing.

"And how do I know that?" Billy asked. "You can't be too careful these days."

"You are the servant of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent," she snarled. Her nostrils flared. "You stink of his foul odor." And then her mouth opened to reveal vampire teeth. "I am the Shadow."

"Yes, ma'am ...," Billy said. He thrust the bag toward the young woman hastily. He didn't want anything to do with those teeth. As she reached out to take it, a phone started ringing from somewhere deep inside the building.

Scathach turned without a word and disappeared, leaving Billy holding the bag.

Scathach had no idea who the young man was. An immortal, certainly, and judging by his appearance, he'd been granted immortality when he was still quite young; he looked like he was in his late teens or early twenties. Handsome, too, with startling blue eyes. His two front teeth were a little prominent, and he deliberately kept his mouth shut to hide them. His red pepper scent was layered with Quetzalcoatl's serpent odor.

Scathach flew across the polished wooden floor and snatched up the phone on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Do you remember my voice?"

In her long life, Scathach the Shadow had faced down monsters and challenged terrors. She had ridden across nightmare landscapes and fought creatures that should never have existed. There was little that frightened her. Yet the sound of this voice set her legs shaking. She sat down heavily in the chair.

"It's been a long time," she whispered. Scathach was overtaken by a wave of swirling memories, and all the good ones were washed away by bitterness. "I thought you were dead."

"Almost."

"I looked for you," she said, her voice quavering.

"Not hard enough," the man said, a touch of sadness in his voice. "I came back, Scathach. I came back in search of you. I looked everywhere, but I could never find you."

"Where are you now?" she said quickly. "I'll come to you."

"I'm in trouble. Terrible trouble. I'm in Las Vegas. The town is run by vampyres and cucubuths. And they're hunting me. Scathach, I need you. You won't fail me again, will you?"

There was a sudden shout, which turned to a crackle on the line ... and then silence.

"Hello? ... Hello? ... Hello?" Scathach called, slowly standing.

She heard a click, followed by a dial tone.

And for the first time in many years, the Shadow buried her face in her hands and wept bloodred tears.

Billy the Kid stood awkwardly in the doorway, the sack in one hand, his boots in the other, and looked at Scathach. Blood—thick and bright red—seeped between her fingers.

“Are you all right?”

The creature that looked up at him was no longer human. Her pale skin had tightened across her cheekbones and chin, and her eyes—completely red now—had sunk into her skull. The flesh had drawn back from her jaws, revealing the savage vampire teeth Billy had glimpsed earlier, and her hair had stiffened into needlelike quills.

Billy bit down hard on the inside of his cheek to keep his face expressionless; he’d never shown fear in his life. He held up his boots. “I hope you don’t mind. I invited myself in. I didn’t want to leave the pithos on the steps. And I took my boots off. I know you martial arts types don’t like people walking across your floors in their street shoes.” He looked down at his threadbare and mismatched socks. “If I’d known, I would have worn better socks. My ma always did tell me to wear clean underwear and decent socks when I went out...” His voice trailed away as the creature behind the desk rose to her feet. She turned and started lifting weapons off the wall and piling them on the table.

“Look, this might not be the best time,” Billy continued. “I’ll just leave this here and head out. I’ve got some—”

“What’s your name?” the Shadow asked.

“William Bonney ... well, Billy. Everyone calls me Billy.”

“I’m Scathach. Don’t ever call me Scatty.” She turned to Billy again. Her face had smoothed out, the vampire features hidden. As he watched, the solid redness in her eyes swirled away, revealing grass-green irises. She rubbed at the streaks of dried blood on her cheeks. “Do you have a car, Billy?”

“Sure do. A 1960 Thunderbird, Monte Carlo. That’s the Second Generation model with a 430-cubic-inch 350-horsepower V8—”

“You’re going to do me a favor, Billy,” Scathach interrupted.

“I am?”

“You are. And your Elder Master will be thrilled that I’ll now be indebted to you and thus to him. He knows I’m the sort of person who takes favors very seriously and remembers each one. Someday you will need a favor from me and I will repay you.”

“I’m sort of big on favors myself,” Billy said with a shy smile. “That’s the way I was brought up. What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“For a start, you will never call me ma’am again.”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma—sorry, Miss Scathach.”

“Just Scathach. Do you have plans for the rest of the day?”

“Not really.”

“Good. I need you to drive me to Vegas.”

“Vegas!” Billy looked nostalgic for a moment. “I haven’t been there in more than a hundred years. I used to stay at the Old Adobe Hotel, and I think I might have been in jail there once or twice.”

Scathach stared at him, saying nothing.

Billy shrugged. “It was a long time ago. And I was innocent. I think... Or at least that time I was

innocent. I take it we're not going to Vegas for the shows."

"A ... a ..." She hesitated, looking for the right word. "A *friend* of mine is in trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Vampyre trouble," Scathach said, gathering up the weapons and shoving them into a sports bag.

"I'm going to get dressed. Take the pithos and put it back in the car—we're bringing it with us."

"Vampyres," Billy muttered. "I hate vampyres. Nasty, toothy, clawy ..."

The Shadow stopped. "I am a vampire," she said, showing him her teeth.

Billy picked up the pithos. "I'll get the car."

"I'm driving Miss Scathach to Las Vegas." Billy spoke into a Bluetooth headset. He handed his passenger the cell phone and transferred the call from the earpiece to the handset. "He wants to talk to you. He sounds upset," he added with a grin.

"Is there a problem?" Scathach snapped. The sun was low in the sky, and she pulled a pair of mirrored aviator shades off her head and slipped them over her eyes. The lenses reflected the white façade of the Embarcadero.

Quetzalcoatl started to speak, but Scathach cut him off. "Something came up and I needed transportation. No, I still haven't learned to drive, but no doubt you know that. I suppose I should be honored that you've obviously kept tabs on me over the centuries. Just as I've kept them on you," she added. The Shadow glanced at the young American immortal. She knew he could not speak the ancient language of Danu Talis, but she was careful to keep her tone neutral so he couldn't pick up the nuances of her speech. "Your servant arrived just when I needed him." She turned to Billy and reverted to English. "How long will it take to get to Vegas?" Traffic along the Embarcadero was at a standstill.

He shrugged. "Once we get out of the city, it should be fairly easy. At this time of night, with me driving, I'd say eight, maybe nine hours."

"Do you sleep?" she asked.

"Not much anymore. Naps every few days."

Scathach turned back to the phone. "If he drops me on the Strip and turns around, he should be back in San Francisco by midmorning tomorrow. I'll make my own way home," she continued in English, before slipping back into the language of Danu Talis. "I hope this is not too much of an inconvenience for you, but I am sure you have many other servants."

"None like Billy the Kid," Quetzalcoatl said. "Try not to damage him."

Scathach hung up and passed the phone back to Billy. "He likes you," she said.

Billy laughed delightedly. "That old monster. He doesn't like anyone. I'm not even sure he likes himself."

Scathach shifted in the seat to get a better look at her driver. "So you're the famous Billy the Kid. I thought you'd be taller."

"I'm five eight," he answered, then paused. "You know, people used to say that all the time. But I haven't heard it in a while."

"Why not?"

"They're all dead." Billy smiled. "The curse of immortality, eh?"

Scathach nodded and turned away, looking out across San Francisco Bay as Billy swung right, then circled left onto the Bay Bridge.

"I know you're not human, so I'm guessing you're an Elder, like Quetzalcoatl?"

"Next Generation," Scathach said shortly.

"What's the difference?" Billy asked.

"I was born after the Fall of Danu Talis. Quetzalcoatl was born on the island."

"So you've lived a long time. You know what it's like to be immortal, to see everyone around you age and die. How do you deal with that?"



“You need to ask your master,” Scathach snapped.

“He doesn’t tell me anything.”

Scathach remained silent for a few moments. “I’ve seen many humans face immortality, and they never get used to it. You’ll learn to accept it. You’ll learn never to make a close association with a mortal human.” She turned to look at Billy. “You’ll never take a mortal wife, or have a mortal girlfriend. You’ll learn to artificially age yourself. You’ll dress differently, add gray to your hair, grow a beard and then move on. You’ll never live too long in any one place. You’ll spend the rest of your life on the run, looking over your shoulders.”

“I did that when I was human,” Billy said. “I’m well used to it.”

“You’re young. Enjoy it while you can. In another hundred years, two hundred, five hundred, a thousand, you will see things differently.”

“You’re just a bundle of laughs,” Billy muttered. “I was enjoying being immortal.”

“Billy, I have lived on this world—and others—for ten thousand years. I have watched the very Earth reshape itself. I have seen empires rise and fall.” Her voice turned lost and lonely, and Billy caught the hint of what he recognized as an Irish accent, not unlike his mother’s. “I have watched the death of nations; I have seen entire tribes vanish into myth and great civilizations fade to dust. I have seen so many friends die ... and do you know the true curse of immortality?”

Billy the Kid shook his head. “Not sure I want to know now....”

“The curse is that you remember every single face.” Her expression became hard, lips disappearing into a thin line. “Ultimately, that’s what will drive you mad.”

“You remember all the faces?”

“All of them,” she breathed.

“But you’re not mad,” he said lightly.

Scathach peered at him over the top of her aviator glasses. “How do you know?”

Quetzalcoatl sat in a room surrounded by the remnants of a lost empire, holding a cell phone in his hand. It was a slender rectangle of glass, metal and liquid crystal, the very latest in high-tech gadgets, and yet incredibly crude when compared to the technology of his youth.

Every day Quetzalcoatl mourned the loss of his world. Once he had been worshipped as a god—now he was almost forgotten, remembered in a twisted collection of stories and folk songs that barely hinted at his true nature. But his time would come again. He had ruled the humani in the past; he would rule them once more. Even now, plans were in place to return the Elders to the earth. Within two years, three at the most, the humani would be nothing more than slaves again. There were, however, a few inconveniences—certain Elders and Next Generation and a few immortal humani—who would stand with the humans and fight. They had to be removed, but carefully, discreetly, quietly. Scathach presented a particular problem. There was no point in sending assassins after her: she had survived innumerable attempts on her life. And then she invariably went after the would-be assassin's employer.

Quetzalcoatl had been authorized to try a much more devious method of killing the Shadow.

He hit Send and watched a 702 area code number scroll across the screen. The call was picked up on the first ring. "She is on the way," Quetzalcoatl said.

"Alone?"

"She is being delivered by one of my servants, an immortal humani known as Billy the Kid." The Elder sighed. "She has told me she will send Billy back to me, but I know his nature: he will want to help her." Quetzalcoatl's thin lips twisted into a sneer. "So be aware that you may have two enemies."

"If he sides with her, he will die with her."

The Elder shrugged. "A pity. His loss would be an inconvenience. If you can spare him, I would be grateful."

"I have a pack of cucubuths I've been starving for the past week and a nest of vampyres—proper blood drinkers—that I have not permitted to feed for a month. Once I unleash them, there will be no escape for Scathach or her accomplice."

"I will not advise you to be careful, but let me offer a word of friendly caution: you have never dealt with anyone like the Shadow before," Quetzalcoatl said.

"Ah, but I have, Elder. You forget: Scathach trained me."

Billy was happiest when he was driving. It represented the ultimate freedom. He didn't remember learning how to ride; riding was just something he had always done. A huge body of myth had grown up about the special bond between cowboy and horse. In truth, Billy had never felt that connection with an animal, and had known few cowboys who did. You took care of your horse the same way you took care of a car. It got you from point A to point B faster than you could walk. But he did remember the precise moment he'd bought his first car. It had been—naturally—a Model T, and in 1916, it had cost him over seven hundred dollars, which was a fortune in those days. He'd driven Fords for the next forty years, until he'd bought the 1960 Thunderbird convertible. He'd instantly fallen in love with the car with the sweeping tailfins and had never bought another. In the past five decades he'd spent a fortune maintaining the Thunderbird, and he didn't regret a single cent. This car was his pride and joy. Sitting back, he pressed gently on the accelerator and the big V8 engine surged forward with a low bubbling growl.

"Careful," Scathach said, the first words she'd spoke in over three hundred miles. "We don't want to get pulled over for speeding."

"I'm always careful." Billy smiled.

The red-haired woman straightened in the seat and pushed her sunglasses up onto her head. She looked around. The road on either side was lost in the night, only briefly illuminated as the headlights washed over road signs. "Where are we?"

"We've made good time. We've just gone through Barstow and turned onto Interstate 15. Maybe two and half hours to Vegas. We should arrive there with the dawn."

Scathach stretched, working her head up and down. Muscles popped. "You've been driving all night. How do you feel?"

"I'm fine. I love driving. One of these days I think I'd like to drive from one side of the country to the other, coast to coast."

Scathach nodded. "I went by train a long time ago," she offered. "I never really thanked you for this, did I? I know you didn't exactly volunteer."

"No, I didn't," he admitted, and grinned. "But I didn't think I was in a position to protest. I thought you were going to bite my head off. I didn't realize you were a vampire."

"I don't drink blood," she said with a smile, deliberately showing her teeth. The dashboard lit her face from below, turning it into a terrifying mask. "My clan, the vampires—vampire with an *i*—are vegetarians. There are others, vampyres, with a *y*, who are blood drinkers."

"That's good to know. I thought you were all blood drinkers. How can I tell the clans apart?"

"You can't. The best advice I can give you is to stay away from all of them. We're bad news."

"Even you?" he teased.

"Especially me."

Billy grimaced. "So," he said, changing the subject. "Your friend who's in trouble. What are you going to do?"

"Rescue him."

"All on your own?"

"You really have no idea who I am, do you?"

The immortal shook his head. “Never heard of you before today.”

“Well, let’s hope you never find out.”

“Look ...,” Billy began slowly. He’d been thinking as they drove. “I’m not real comfortable with the idea of you facing off against a bunch of vampyres—with a y—on your own. Maybe I could hang around and back you up.”

It took the Shadow a moment before she could answer. She threw back her head and laughed, the sound high and pure on the desert air. And then, as quickly as it had come, the laughter died. “Why, do you not think I’m up to it?”

Billy shook his head. “No, no, nothing like that. But there might be a lot of them, and besides, everyone needs a helping hand sometimes.”

Scathach straightened and quickly reached down for the nunchaku on the floor by her feet. The chain connecting the two short lengths of wood rattled as she picked it up.

“Something wrong?” Billy glanced in the rearview mirror. They were the only car on the long, straight Interstate 15.

“We’ve got company,” Scathach said quietly. She pointed off to her side of the road with the blunt end of the nunchaku.

For a moment, the immortal saw nothing, and then a dozen red and golden circles briefly flared before vanishing. “Coyotes?” he asked.

Scathach shook her head. “Too big. Wolves.”

“There are no wolves in this part of California.”

“Exactly.”

He peered out into the night. “Where are they?”

“They’re here.”

The road curved slightly and the Thunderbird’s headlights picked out four huge gray wolves sitting up ahead at the edge of the highway. As the lights washed over their snouts, their eyes glowed golden.

“I’m guessing these are not natural,” Billy said quietly.

“What do you think?” Scathach asked. She leaned back so that Billy could look across her. The wolves were loping silently alongside the car, keeping pace with it.

Billy checked the speedometer. “We’re doing seventy-five miles an hour. What kind of unnatural are they?”

“Cucubuths. Shape-changers. Abominations. They’re the spawn of a vampire and one of the Were clans. Can you see their auras?”

Billy squinted into the night. Wisps of smoke curled off the running wolves. “Dirty gray?”

“In their human form, they will have tails, but their auras will always reveal them.”

“Will they attack?”

“No. They’re merely monitoring our progress.”

“So we’re expected.”

“I am expected,” she clarified.

“You said your friend was being held captive by vampyres.”

“I did.”

“So who told them you were coming?” Billy asked. “And coming down this road?”

The Shadow shook her head. The same thoughts had been running through her head.

“Sounds to me like you’re riding into a trap,” Billy murmured.

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” Scathach showed her vampire teeth. “And I’m still here.”

The apartment took up the entire top floor of one of the newest towers in Las Vegas. The walls were entirely glass, offering a 360-degree vista of the city and the surrounding desert landscape. And while every room in the hotel and casino below had been decorated to the most particular specifications, the penthouse was unfinished. Snaking loops of wire curled from the metal ceiling joists, the supporting columns were bare metal and the concrete floor was still covered in thick sheets of plastic. Workmen's tools were piled in one corner of the huge room, cans of paint and ladders in another.

The golden-haired young man in the impeccably tailored black suit was reflected in the dirty floor-to-ceiling windows. Opening a sliding door, he stepped out onto a broad curved balcony. Far below him, spread out in a glittering sweep of color, lay Las Vegas. He loved this view. There were taller buildings in Vegas, more spectacular hotels and casinos, but none of them had this view. The apartment had been chosen and designed to allow him to look out over the city he secretly ruled, but he'd stopped construction midway to completion. Before it could be finished, there was something he needed to do. Someone he needed to kill.

Bitter memories soured his expression, making his beautiful face ugly and cruel. Maybe when the night was over, he would be able to call in the builders to complete work on the apartment. Stepping back inside, he looked around. He knew exactly how this room would be: pure white. White Italian marble would be laid on the floor, and tiny spotlights in the ceiling would outline the constellation Cygnus. In some Eastern and African cultures, white was the color of mourning. He would keep this room as a shrine to the memory of the woman he had once loved ... before she betrayed him.

Suddenly, the dry, gritty air was touched with an indefinable musky scent and he felt a vibration. He adjusted his tie the instant before a shape stepped out of the shadows behind him.

"She's coming." The creature spoke in the ancient language of the Celts.

The young man turned and spread his arms wide. "Morrigan, Great Queen," he said in the same tongue. "It is good to see you."

Pale-skinned and dark-haired, the woman had a narrow, angular face, with prominent cheekbones and a pointed chin. Her eyes were hidden behind small black circular glasses. The Morrigan was dressed from head to foot in figure-hugging black leather. An ornate corset was studded with silver bolts and bars, giving it the appearance of a medieval breastplate, and her leather gloves had rectangular silver studs sewn onto the backs of the fingers. The gloves had no fingertips, which allowed the Elder's long black nails to show. She wore a heavy leather belt decorated with thirteen round shields, and draped over her shoulders was a shimmering cloak made entirely of ravens' feathers. The ancient Irish had called her the Crow Goddess. She was worshipped and feared throughout the Celtic lands as the Goddess of Death and Destruction.

The man caught her right hand and bowed over it, pressing his lips to her cold flesh. "Thank you for coming."

The Morrigan stood at the window and looked down over the city. Even in the early hours of the morning, it was a kaleidoscope of lights. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

The young man blinked in surprise. "I never thought I'd hear you say that."

"I've known The Shadow a lot longer than you. I have followed her down through the millennia in

this world and the other Shadowrealms. She is fearless and deadly.”

He turned to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Morrigan. Pulling a white handkerchief from his pocket, he ran it over the glass. The white cloth came away smeared with black, and he tossed it aside. “Ah, but we have a huge advantage.” The Morrigan glanced sidelong at him, razor-thin eyebrows raised in a silent question. “We have the element of surprise,” he continued. “Scathach believes she is coming here to rescue me.” He laughed and his breath created a moist circle on the glass. “And in that moment of surprise lies her doom. I will have my revenge.”

“Revenge is always a dangerous game,” the Morrigan said quietly. She slid open a door and stepped out onto the balcony. A waft of sour, dry heat accompanied by a dull, buzzing rumble of traffic washed in from the city below. Then, climbing onto the rail, the Crow Goddess launched herself into the night, soaring high over the never-sleeping city.

Uninterested in the Morrigan’s flight, the young man turned away from the window, slid a flat black phone from his shirt pocket and hit a speed dial number. The phone was answered on the first ring. “She’s coming,” he announced. “Remember, the red-haired female is mine and mine alone. Any companions are yours.” His smooth, handsome face turned bestial. “If she is harmed by anyone other than me, my vengeance will be terrible.”

The lights of Vegas bloomed on the horizon, a glowing stain against the waning night.

“Decision time,” Billy said. “Where are we going?”

“*We?*” Scathach asked.

“We. I’ve decided I’m going to hang around for a while. Just in case you need a hand.”

“It is a very sweet offer,” Scathach said, sounding genuinely moved. “But if you stay with me, you will end up dead. Everyone does. It’s one of the reasons I don’t have a companion.”

“I’m not that easy to kill,” Billy said. “Trust me, a lot of people have tried and failed. I’m still here and they’re not.”

“It’s your decision. I can’t be responsible for you,” Scathach said, her voice turning cold.

“I wouldn’t want you to be,” Billy said. “I’ve been responsible for myself for my entire life. This is my decision.”

“As you wish.” The Shadow turned away and looked back outside at the cucubuths still keeping pace with the car.

“‘As you wish?’” Billy said. “That’s it? No arguments?”

“Would you listen to me if I argued?”

“No.”

“Would you obey me if I told you to leave me alone and head back to San Francisco?”

“No.”

“Exactly, so what’s the point in arguing?”

“There is none.” Billy grinned. “I’m sticking right here. I have a feeling that hanging around with you might be fun.”

Something like a smile curled Scathach’s lips. “Fun. I don’t believe anyone has ever said that to me before. You know something,” she added, reaching for the nunchaku on the floor, “these cucubuths are really starting to irritate me!”

Without warning she leapt from the moving car.

Billy stood on the brakes, locking the tires. The heavy car fishtailed down the road, rubber screaming and smoking. By the time he came to a stop, Scathach had landed in the middle of the startled creatures. Instinctively, one lashed out at her, dagger-sharp curled talons hissing through the air toward her face. The Shadow moved her head a fraction and the claws missed her; then the heavy end of the nunchaku shot out to hit the creature between the eyes above its long wolf’s snout. It fell without a sound. A second threw himself at her, transforming from a wolf into a man in midair. The nunchaku struck him down, and as he fell, Scathach caught him and flung him into another creature. They tumbled into the dirt together, yelping and barking like dogs. The Shadow’s nunchaku whirled around her in a buzzing blur and then connected with both creatures’ skulls. They crashed back into the dry undergrowth and lay still.

“You should not have done that,” another of the monsters lisped, its tongue struggling to make sounds in a mouth never designed for human speech.

Scathach whirled. She was facing three huge cucubuths. They were caught halfway between their human and wolf forms: a wolf’s head on a human body, animal claws on the end of muscular human arms. The biggest creature dangled a length of chain, while its two companions carried clubs.



“You cannot take all of us,” the creature said.

Scathach laughed, her face rippling through a change that revealed the beast beneath the flesh. “Oh yes, I can.”

Suddenly, the three creatures were lit up by approaching red lights. The Thunderbird appeared, engine howling as it backed toward them at high speed. Brakes screamed and the car rocked, sliding sideways, slamming into the three cucubuths. Two were catapulted off into the night, while the biggest was shoved straight toward the Shadow. Her nunchaku whirled and the creature stopped as if it had run into a wall. It folded to the ground at Scathach’s feet.

Billy launched himself out of the car and darted around to examine the passenger side. The door was buckled and there was a deep indentation on the front wing. He pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and rubbed furiously at the longest of the scrapes.

“I don’t think it’s going to rub out,” Scathach said gently. “That was a very brave thing you did. Great driving, too.”

“Get in the car,” Billy snapped. “We’re going to Vegas. I’ve stripped inches of rubber off the tires, and do you know what a new door for one of these costs? Someone is going to pay for that.”

Elvis—fat, white-suited Elvis—was standing on the sidewalk across the road from the Las Vegas Wedding Chapel of the Bells. Marilyn Monroe, wearing a badly fitting white dress, was leaning against him. Both looked as if they had been out all night. Marilyn was wearing a Just Married sign around her neck.

“That’s the third Elvis we’ve seen so far,” Billy said, grinning. “And always the jumpsuit-and-rhinestones Elvis.

“Say, you don’t know if he was ever made immortal, do you?”

Scathach shook her head. “I have no idea. No, that’s not true. I do know—because I sang with him once,” she said absently, “and I would have known if he was immortal. So no, he wasn’t.”

Billy was so startled, he almost ran a red light at Sahara Avenue. “You sang with Elvis?” He turned in the seat to look at the red-haired girl. She had rested her elbow on the window and her chin was in her palm, long fingers touching the side of her face. She would never be called beautiful, Billy knew, and yet, in the kaleidoscopic wash of lights from the Las Vegas strip, she was striking.

“I was a backup singer. It was a long time ago.”

Billy shook his head. “I had plans to see him in Indianapolis in ’77, but something came up and I couldn’t go. I’ve got all his albums on vinyl, though.”

“I’m more of a Dean Martin fan myself.”

“Don’t tell me you sang with him, too,” Billy said breathlessly.

“Twice,” Scathach said. “Once in this very town, back in 1964.”

They were almost opposite the Sahara Hotel when Scathach abruptly straightened. She’d spotted a figure sitting on the bench inside a bus shelter. “Pull in here,” she said very quietly.

The figure stood and Billy squinted. “It’s someone wearing a superhero cloak.” He watched the warrior slide a long, narrow dagger out of its sheath and hold it flat against her arm. “I’m guessing it’s not a superhero cloak.” And then he saw who was standing by the side of the road. “Try not to do any more damage to the car,” he muttered as he pulled into the Buses Only zone and stopped.

The Morrigan stepped out of the shadows of the bus shelter and examined the indentations in the car door. “Those cucubuths are tougher than they look,” she said. As she spoke she opened her mouth in a smile, revealing sharp teeth.

“You were watching us,” Scathach said.

The Morrigan pointed a black-nailed finger upward. “I was around. It’s a shame about the damage. It should never have happened,” she added. “But it’s your own fault: you should never have engaged the cucubuths. They were ordered to leave you alone.” She leaned forward to look squarely into Billy’s face. “Good evening, Billy.”

“Evening, ma’am. Or should that be good morning?”

“I see you’ve met,” Scathach said.

Billy nodded. “The Morrigan is an old friend of Quetzalcoatl—my master. She’s come a-calling once or twice.” Although he kept his face expressionless, he was unable to disguise the distaste in his voice.

“It is not too late for you to turn back, Billy. Siding with this”—the Morrigan paused, looking for the correct word—“this *creature* would be a mistake.”

“That’s what she said.” Billy grinned. “And I didn’t listen to her, either.”

“And while the cucubuths are under instructions to leave the Shadow alone, the same protection does not extend to her companions.”

Billy laughed. “I ain’t afraid of no dogs.”

“You should be,” Scathach and the Morrigan said simultaneously.

“Since when did you two become my mother?”

The Morrigan glanced up and down the street, then folded her arms and leaned casually against the side of the car. She looked down at Scathach. “I seem to remember that you were told you would die in an exotic location.” She deliberately spoke in English for Billy’s benefit.

“I’m not sure Las Vegas counts as exotic,” Scathach answered. “It only thinks it’s exotic.”

“You will die here, Shadow. Before the sun rises.”

The red-haired girl shrugged. “So, I take it you know why I’ve come?”

“I do.”

“Is it true, then? Is he here?”

The Morrigan blinked her black eyes and then she nodded. “He’s here.”

“A prisoner of the vampyres?”

“The blood drinkers are everywhere.”

“And you—why are you here, Morrigan?”

“Oh, Scathach,” the Crow Goddess said, reverting to the Irish language. “I was there at the very beginning, all those centuries ago. It is only fitting that I should be here at the end. I will give you a proper burial and sing the old songs over your corpse.”

“I’d really prefer that you did not.”

Scathach and the Morrigan eyed each other silently, and finally Billy cleared his throat. “Ladies,” he asked, “are we going to sit here and chat all night?”

The Morrigan tossed a scrap of paper at Billy, who deftly caught it in his right hand.

“It’s the address of an as-yet-unopened hotel and casino,” the Morrigan snapped. “Drive around the back and into the garage.” She smiled at Scathach, and a dark hunger flickered behind her eyes. “You will find what you are looking for on the top floor,” she said in English, and then continued in the ancient language of Danu Talis. “I will come for your corpse after your defeat.” She looked at Billy. “Take her there now ... and if you value your immortal life, turn around and drive away.”

“See you on the top floor,” Billy said cheerfully.

The Crow Goddess glared at the immortal. “You won’t even get past the lobby.” She stepped back into the shadow of the bus shelter, and her form warped and changed. Billy pulled away from the curb as the huge birdlike figure took to the sky in a slow ascending spiral.

They drove down Las Vegas Boulevard toward the garish lights of the enormous hotels and casinos. After a few moments Billy broke the silence.

“So what’s the plan?” he asked.

“I don’t plan. Anyone in my way can either step aside or I will step over them.”

“You’re my type of girl,” the immortal said admiringly.

Scathach laughed. “Oh, Billy. I’m a ten-thousand-year-old vampire. I am most definitely not your type of girl.”

Billy’s cheeks suddenly reddened. “I was talking about planning. I—I’m not that big on planning myself,” he stammered. “I wasn’t suggesting anything else....”

“Stop talking now,” the Shadow commanded with a grin.

Billy felt the familiar rush of excitement as he pulled the car into the empty parking lot beneath the unopened casino. Black Hawk had once told him that one of the great dangers of immortality was boredom. Immortals didn't need to be cautious or careful. Wounds would heal; bones would mend. As they aged, some immortals sought out more and more dangerous or challenging experiences simply to remember what it felt to be human again. Billy had laughed; he'd always been that way—he needed excitement. He loved this feeling, the buzz at the base of his stomach, the tightness across his chest, the tingling in his fingertips. It had been a long time since he'd experienced it so strongly.

He turned off the car and the couple sat in silence, listening to the engine tick softly. Finally, he shifted in the seat and looked at the Shadow. She seemed unconcerned. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine," she said, surprised. "Why?"

"The Crow Goddess said you could die."

"When you've lived as long as I have, that isn't really a threat anymore. I've done just about everything I've ever wanted to do, and a lot that I haven't as well. I've lived a full life, with few regrets. This is a good day to die."

"Well, I don't fancy dying today, if you don't mind."

"Then you should drive on," the Shadow said matter-of-factly. "Stay here with me and there's a very real possibility that you will be killed. And probably eaten, too," she added, pushing open the car door and climbing out. She twisted her body from side to side, stretching. "Pop the trunk."

Billy climbed out and opened the trunk. The cloying tang of cacao beans wafted out. Scathach unwrapped the pithos and tossed the bag to the side. She ran her fingers over the jar and the curling text shifted and twisted under her touch. Then she brought the jar to her ear and shook it.

"I thought I heard voices inside," Billy said.

"You did."

"Little People?"

Scathach grinned. "No. Worse. Much worse." She returned the jar to the trunk. "I've got a feeling that Quetzalcoatl conveniently surrendering the jar and this call to Vegas may not be unconnected."

"How do you reckon that?"

"The Morrigan. You said you had seen her with the Feathered Serpent...."

Billy nodded. "More than once."

"And she is inextricably entwined with the story of my ... friend." Scathach returned the pithos to the trunk. "When this is over, perhaps I'll visit your Elder master."

"He wouldn't like that."

"No, he wouldn't."

"I'd probably have to fight you," Billy said.

"And I wouldn't like that," Scathach said.

"Me neither." Billy watched the Shadow unzip the bag of weapons she'd packed and begin to sort through the metal and wood. When he'd first seen her standing in the doorway of the dojo, he'd thought she looked like a girl, but now he realized he was looking at a warrior. Scathach was dressed in black combat trousers, a short-sleeved black T-shirt and steel-toed combat boots. She strapped two short swords onto her back, with the hilts protruding over each shoulder, added a handful of shuriken

—throwing stars—to a pouch on her belt and attached a second nunchaku to her hip, making a matching set. She coiled what looked like a long black metal jump rope around her waist. Billy had never seen anything like it before.

“What is that?” he asked.

“Manrikigusari. A Japanese throwing chain.”

“Man-ri-ki-gus-ari.” Billy struggled to pronounce the word.

“It means ‘the strength of a thousand men.’ ” In a flash, Scathach pulled the six-foot length of chain off her waist and sent it hissing through the air. It snapped around a concrete pillar, the two heavy heads at either end cracking into the cement, biting out huge chunks. “I can also use it as a whip,” she said as she went to retrieve the chain. “I’m betting you have a pair of six-guns, maybe Colts, and probably a Winchester rifle.” When she turned around, Billy the Kid was holding a simple black police baton with a side handle.

The Kid’s face was a solemn mask. “I haven’t touched a gun in a long time,” he said quietly. “They never brought me anything but misery while I lived.”

Scathach nodded at the baton. “A tonfa. You’re full of surprises, Mr. Bonney.” She wrapped the chain around her waist again. “Do you know how to use that?”

Billy flowed into a defensive pose, right hand outstretched, left hand clutching the baton by the protruding side handle, the black stick stretching the length of his forearm. “Oh, I know how to use it. My friend Black Hawk runs one of the biggest security firms in the Bay Area. I help him out when he’s short-staffed. Concert security is the best; I get to see a lot of great shows for free. The Rolling Stones are coming to SBC Park in a couple of weeks for two shows,” he added, excited. “I’ll be at both of them.”

“If you survive tonight.”

“I’ll survive,” Billy said confidently.

“Full of surprises,” Scathach repeated, shaking her head. She clapped him on the shoulder. “If—and it is a very big if—we both survive this, come and visit me at the dojo. Maybe I could train you to use a matched pair of tonfa,” she added lightly.

“I’d like that,” Billy said. Then his face fell. “But ...”

“But?”

“I’m not sure Quetzalcoatl would. I don’t think he likes you very much.”

“So don’t tell him. You’re his servant, not his slave. And let me give you a piece of advice: never admit to anyone—Elder, Next Generation or immortal human—that you know me. I’ve made a lot of enemies over the millennia.”

“I can do that. Never met you. Never heard of you.” He smiled.

They walked across the garage toward the escalators and stairs. “Would you have a problem being trained by a woman?” Scathach asked.

Billy laughed. “Oh, I’ve learned a lot from women. You should have met my ma. Now, there was a fighter....”

Unseen, deadly and eternally hungry, vampyres controlled Vegas.

The first vampyres arrived when gambling was legalized in the 1930s, quickly realizing that the town would attract countless transients and tourists. It was a city where the nights were as busy as the days, and within the constantly shifting population, the vampyres could remain invisible. Over the years, more and more of the blood-drinking clan, and their close kin, the cucubuths, had made their way to the city. Most worked in the hotels and casinos; others found employment in the spectacular shows; a few were police officers, working the night shift.

And for the first time in a millennium, they owed allegiance to a single figure who was not one of their own, neither vampyre nor cucubuth, but an immortal human. Setanta.

The young-looking man moved around the empty penthouse, checking the traps, making sure his cache of weapons were in their positions. He had changed out of his elegant black suit into an outfit that almost matched Scathach's: black trousers, black vest and high-topped steel-toed combat boots. He had no doubt that the Shadow would reach this room. The cucubuths were good, the vampyres even better, but no one was as good as the Shadow.

Except him. She had trained him. He knew her secrets.

Setanta had spent a thousand years—ever since he had returned to the Earth Shadowrealm—looking for the Shadow. He'd come close on a few occasions, but she had always eluded him. There were rumors of a young red-haired girl on the fringes of every major world conflict. He had learned that she was in contact with the Flamels, but he'd never been tempted to go in search of them or to offer a reward for information about them. Everyone knew that John Dee was hunting the Alchemyst and his wife. And even Setanta, with his deadly cucubuth guards and vampyre allies, did not want to cross the dangerous Dr. John Dee. Everyone knew that Dee was quite, quite mad.

And then, entirely unexpectedly, he'd received a call from an Elder he'd never heard of before: Quetzalcoatl. Setanta was stunned that the Elder even knew who he was, but he was even more astonished when the gravel-voiced creature had revealed that he knew Scathach's whereabouts.

Setanta had traveled the world in search of the woman, and for the last few years, she'd been little more than five hundred miles away, in San Francisco.

Setanta had immediately put in place a plan for vengeance, a plan to lure Scathach to Vegas and her doom. And Quetzalcoatl had been more than willing to help.

A flicker in the half-light made him turn. The huge crowlike creature perched on the railing of the balcony outside his window shifted into the Morrigan. She pulled open the sliding door and stepped inside. "They're here."

"So it begins." Setanta rubbed his calloused hands together. "So it ends. Finally," he breathed.

The elevator door pinged open and Billy the Kid stepped out into an empty glass and marble lobby. The air smelled of sawdust and fresh paint, and all the furniture was covered in thick plastic sheets.

Billy looked around, mouth agape, as awestruck as any tourist confronted with the gaudy excess of Las Vegas. There was gold everywhere: an enormous gold-plated fountain dominated the center of the lobby, all the supporting columns were painted with gold leaf, and a spectacularly complex fresco depicting a man he thought might be King Midas took up an entire wall. There were a dozen golden statues of armored women scattered around the room, each one complete with a golden sword or spear. Even the mirror-glossy marble floor was a warm golden color. "Very shiny," he murmured. He wondered if the gold was real, and then, remembering that this was Vegas, decided that it probably was.

Billy was striding across the floor when the first of the vampyres appeared. They were all women, pale-skinned, dark-eyed, pointy-toothed. He counted six of them, and he had a feeling that there was at least one more behind him, but he wasn't going to look. They were dressed in an assortment of clothes: smart suits and croupier's uniforms, store clerk's smocks—there was even one in an exotic fish-skin circus costume. Billy's first reaction was one of relief—none of them were armed—but then he looked at their hands and saw the length of their nails.

"I thought there would be more of you," he said lightly, stepping over to position himself with his back to a wall. Although he'd sworn off guns a lifetime ago, he quite liked the idea of having a gun now, something big and ugly with lots of barrels. He tightened his grip on the tonfa.

He could handle seven.

"Oh, but there are more," one of the creatures said. She was shorter than the others, a small but powerfully built woman wearing a blue security guard's uniform. Four more women and two men stepped out from behind the gold pillars.

"Thirteen." He thought he might be able to handle thirteen.

There was a commotion on the stairs and three hulking cucubuths in wolf form appeared. The biggest one licked its lips.

"Sixteen." Thirteen vampyres and three cucubuths ... that might be a stretch. "Are you going to turn me into a vampyre?" Billy asked.

"We're not that type of vampyre," the creature answered. They all chuckled, the sound liquid and ugly.

"What sort are you?"

"The flesh-eating kind."

"I'll give you indigestion," Billy muttered.

"Where is the Shadow?" the vampyre demanded.

"She'll be right along," he said vaguely. "Any minute now."

"She will find us feasting on your bones!" the creature screamed, and launched herself at Billy, mouth gaping, teeth bared.



Scathach had decided to get to the penthouse from the outside. The building was only fifty stories high, and she guessed there would be vampyres on every floor and probably cucubuths in the stairwells. Fighting her way up from the inside would be tedious and exhausting; climbing was the safest way to the top. The facade was decorated with a vaguely Celtic motif—intricate swirls and waves, leaf-shaped patterns that almost resembled shamrocks, and etched lines that Scathach thought looked remarkably like Ogham, the ancient writing of Ireland, were carved into its surface.

She used the manrikigusari chain like a lasso, wrapping it around the railing of the first-floor balcony and hauling herself up. She scaled the building quickly, finding finger- and footholds in the decorations and patterns. Halfway up she glanced over her head: the sky had lightened and was beginning to fade to purple. It would soon be dawn and the sun would quickly rise, and then it would only be a matter of time before someone spotted her and called the police.

She pressed on. Clambering over a Celtic spiral, she lost her footing—steel-toed boots had never been intended for climbing—and she lashed out with the manrikigusari, snagging the balcony railings above her in the last instant before she lost her grip completely. The chain rattled and then caught, and Scathach swung gently against the side of the building, holding on with one hand. She pulled herself up the chain and dropped onto the balcony, then looked down. She'd climbed about twenty floors. Only another thirty to go.

The door from the balcony into the suite was open and Scathach slipped inside, tracking black boot prints across the white carpet. The entire suite was probably bigger than her dojo, she realized; the bed alone was about the same size as her entire apartment. And did anyone really need six huge televisions in their room? Pressing the side of her face against the door, she closed her eyes and listened. Below, far below, her acute hearing picked up the noise of a commotion, and she grinned. That meant that Billy was still alive and fighting. She liked him; he reminded her of Joan of Arc.

Focusing, she turned to the corridor outside. Nothing. She was guessing the guards on the lower floors had been called down to deal with the Kid. There would be guards on the upper floors, but she could cope with them.

Pulling open the door, she found herself staring into the jaws of a huge, hairy, yellow-eyed cucubuth. He was cleaning his claws with a dagger as long as her arm. "Ska-tog," he squeaked.

The Shadow's right hand shot forward and up, the heel of her palm catching the cucubuth under the jaw. His teeth clicked together and his head snapped back. The force of the blow lifted the cucubuth's feet off the floor; he was unconscious before he hit the thick carpet. Scathach stepped over the body, shaking her head. She must be losing it; she hadn't even smelled the creature. And then she stopped and returned to the beast and bent low, nostrils flaring. Scathach blinked in surprise. A cucubuth who showered; now, there was a first.

“You wouldn’t hit a woman, would you?” the vampyre snarled, landing on her feet directly in front of Billy the Kid.

He smiled. “You’re right. I wouldn’t.” He whipped his wrist and the tonfa spun around on its short handle. He snapped it out and struck the creature on the side of the head. “You’re not a woman.”

They swarmed him then, hissing and snarling like cats, long nails clawing, razor-sharp teeth snapping at him. Billy was fast, always had been. Speed had kept him alive in the Old West, and the past century had only honed his skills. The tonfa blurred about him as he turned, the heavy polycarbonate baton striking and blocking, while his right hand punched, shoved, slapped and chopped. He kept moving, moving, moving. One of the first lessons he’d learned from an old gunfighter was never to present a still target.

A dozen more vampyres swarmed into the building. There were so many of the vampyres that they got in each other’s way in their eagerness to reach him. A male vampyre in hospital scrubs struck out at him. Billy ducked and the creature’s talons scored long gouges in the wall over his head. He cracked the tonfa into the vampyre’s kneecap and the creature fell to the ground, howling. He turned, and another leapt onto his back, nails tearing at his chest, teeth dangerously close to his throat. Billy reached behind him and rammed the handle of the black stick into its mouth and then lunged backward, slamming the creature into a wall. Two of the cucubuths lumbered toward him, shoving the vampyres aside. They were enormous beasts, with the bodies of wolves but the heads and hands of men. Billy rapped the tonfa on the skull of the nearer one. His weapon bounced away.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” the cucubuth growled.

Billy spun, gripped one of the ornate golden statues and used all his weight to push it at the creature. The heavy stone likeness of a Greek goddess carrying a bow shivered on its pedestal and then toppled toward the cucubuth, which simply reached up and caught it in both hands. “You’ll have to do better than that, too,” the creature growled.

“Will this do?” Billy lifted a foot and stamped—hard—on the cucubuth’s bare toes. The creature bellowed and released its grip on the statue, which thumped onto its head, knocking it to the floor.

The second monster leapt at him. Billy sidestepped at the last moment and the beast crashed headfirst into the gold mural of King Midas. The cucubuth staggered back, flakes of gold paint stuck to its forehead, and Billy swung his stick, connecting with the base of the cucubuth’s skull.

The room was littered with groaning and injured vampyres. He had hurt more than a dozen, but there were at least twice that number remaining. And Billy was starting to tire. The creatures were strong and fast, and his shirt and jeans were in shreds from their nails. He was bleeding from a score of scrapes and cuts, and his tonfa was scored with deep claw marks. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could last.

The vampyres circled Billy warily. He knew that if they all rushed him at once, it would be over. But the best form of defense, he’d been told, was offense. With a scream of defiance, he launched himself at the nearest vampyre, a huge man in a casino security officer’s uniform. Billy swung the black tonfa up, but the creature blocked it with his own baton, twisted, and sent the immortal’s weapon spinning from his hand. The vampyre wrapped a clawed hand around Billy’s throat and squeezed, but the Kid brought both hands in a ringing clap over the creature’s ears. It hissed and

staggered back and Billy wrenched the vampyre's stick from its hands. "I'll take that. Thank you kindly...."

But the remaining vampyres were on top of him now, catching him, holding him, tearing at him. He felt claws in his flesh, in his hair.

And then Billy the Kid went down.

Scathach stopped five floors below the penthouse. She had run up twenty-five flights of stairs and had encountered no one, but now she could smell the guards on the floors above. Vampyre. The metallic odor of old blood and rotten meat.

The Shadow padded silently down a corridor and chose a door at random. It was unlocked. The room it led into was even larger than the one below, and even more opulently decorated. As she crossed the floor, she counted eight television sets. Sliding open the patio door, she stepped out onto the balcony. The view across Las Vegas was spectacular. Although it was still night overhead, the sky to the east had turned salmon and mauve and she knew it was only minutes until sunrise. The lights on that side of the city had faded and turned tawdry. Ignoring the Do Not Stand On This Railing sign, she climbed up and balanced on the railing. Turning her back to the city, she reached up and found a handhold. It was only five floors to the penthouse.

She could hear vampyres and cucubuths moving restlessly on each of the next four floors, and she caught fragments of a dozen conversations in languages no longer spoken on the Earth Shadowrealm. The creatures were worried; some even sounded frightened. They knew the Shadow was coming. Scathach grinned, showing her own vampire teeth: it was nice to know that she still inspired fear in the blood drinkers.

Catching the rail of the final floor, she heaved herself up onto the penthouse balcony. She stood outside the glass door and peered in to assess the situation. In the center of the huge space was a wooden kitchen chair, and tied to the chair, facing the door, with his back to her, was the man she had come to rescue.

Scathach's instincts were to charge in and untie him, but over the centuries she had learned to temper her first reactions with caution. Tilting her head to one side, she closed her eyes and allowed her other senses to expand.

Blocking out the acrid, sickly smells of the city, the blood and copper of the vampyre and the paint and plaster of the room, she smelled the man. It was an odor she had not smelled in millennia, strong and heady: honey and wet grass, a hint of sea salt, the muskiness of wet bog land, the tang of peat smoke.

Scathach breathed in deeply, indulging herself for the last time, remembering the man, remembering the time when she had been in love. She had been happy then.

There was only his scent. He was alone in the room. And that was wrong. If he was a prisoner—then where were his guards?

Scathach breathed deeply again, and there, right at the edge of her consciousness, was a second odor. Faint and bitter: the chalkiness of crushed eggshells, the musty ammonia of a fouled nest: the Morrigan. The Crow Goddess had been here.

All this had to be a trap.

Scathach turned and scanned the lightening skies, but there was no sign of the Morrigan. She unsheathed her two short swords, caught the edge of the door, flung it open and launched herself into the room. Rolling across the floor, she came up behind the figure tied to the chair and her left-hand sword flashed, slicing through the thick ropes in one smooth movement.

The man surged out of the chair and spun to face her.

And even though she knew who it was, Scathach felt as if she had been struck a hammer blow.

He was as she remembered him: short, broad-shouldered and narrow-waisted, with eyes the color of wet stone and fine golden hair hanging to his shoulders. He had been born with seven fingers on each hand.

“I knew you would come for me,” he said in the language of ancient Ireland.

“Cuchulain,” she breathed. The only man she had ever loved.

"I've gone back to my original name. I'm called Setanta." He rubbed his wrists, smiling broadly at her. "You've not changed in the slightest." His eyes sparkled. "Except for the hair. Short. I like it."

"The—the last time I saw you ...," Scathach stammered.

"I was dead."

The Shadow nodded. Her lips moved before she could find the breath to say the words. "Dead. Aoife and I came for you, but the Morrigan was already carrying your body away."

"You should have come sooner," Setanta said quietly. He clasped his hands behind his back and stepped past her to look at the rising sun. A thin bar of amber was creeping across the ceiling. "I needed you, Shadow. But you were not there."

"We came ... Aoife and I ..." There were bloodred tears on her face now. "We put aside our differences and came for you."

"Do you know how long it took for me to die on that hillside?" His voice had changed; there was a streak of anger running through it. He walked slowly around the stricken Shadow. "Behind me, my entire army lay ensorcelled and asleep, and before me lay the horde of the Witch Queen. I was left to stand alone against the Queen's army."

"And you got what you always wanted: that day you became a legend," Scathach said quietly. "The stories say that you tied yourself to a stone and that none of the Queen's army dared approach you until a raven landed on your shoulder. Only then did they know you were dead."

"I died because you were not there," Cuchulain whispered, walking close to Scathach, pointing an accusing finger. The anger was now almost palpable in every word. "You are as responsible as they are for my death." He was behind her now, and as he spoke, he lifted a huge broadsword from behind a pillar, gripped it in both hands and swung.

Lost in her grief, the Shadow smelled the metal only at the very last moment. She heard it part the air. Instinct sent her forward and down, and the razor-sharp blade took just the tips of her spiked hair. She rolled to her feet, bringing her swords up as Cuchulain attacked.

"I blame you, Shadow. You. You. You." He hacked and slashed, the ferocity of his attack driving her back across the room.

Scathach defended herself but made no move to attack.

Cuchulain slashed at her with the huge broadsword. "The Morrigan rescued me before I breathed my last and brought me to the Tir na nOg Shadowrealm. The Elder Crom Cruach made me immortal, but in return I was bound to him for a millennium of servitude. A thousand years in the service of that monster. You have no idea of the things he made me do, and for every world I've destroyed, I blamed you." He swung again, the heavy blade striking sparks off Scathach's swords. "For every death I've caused, I cursed your name." He cut again, and the Shadow jerked her head back. She actually felt the whisper of air as the edge keened past her throat.

"Cuchulain," she breathed.

"Setanta!" he roared. "Cuchulain died on that Irish mountainside when you betrayed me."

A surge of anger roused Scathach. "I never betrayed you. Because of you, my sister and I haven't spoken in centuries. I loved you. I have always loved you. I still love you," she added in a raw whisper.

“I don’t love you.” He thrust with the sword. Scathach sidestepped and the blade punched straight through what was meant to be shatterproof glass. When he jerked the sword free, the entire window dissolved into glass pebbles.

Cuchulain pressed home his attack, hacking and cutting. He had been trained by the best—Scathach herself—and she struggled to parry and block. It was like fighting her mirror image. The force of the blows almost drove her to her knees, and the edges of her own swords were chipping and denting.

“I took you into my home, Cuchulain,” Scathach said sadly. “I trained you to be the finest warrior in the known world. And I broke my own vow—never to fall in love with a human. I loved you, Cuchulain, with all my heart. There was nothing you couldn’t do. Nothing couldn’t do. But you betrayed and fell in love with my sister,” she added bitterly, and her anger flowed through her sword. Suddenly she attacked in a blur of metal. Cuchulain’s sword was ripped from his grasp and went clattering across the room.

Scathach sheathed her swords and turned to face the broken window, breathing in the crisp morning air. “The phone call was nothing more than a ruse to get me here, I take it?” she asked coolly.

“You’re the one who taught me to bring my enemies to my ground, to fight them on my terms. I’ve been hunting you for a thousand years.”

“I did teach you that.” Gripping the window frame, the Shadow looked out over the wakening city. She could hear car horns now, and the first white contrails from the early-morning flights were visible in the skies over Nevada. “Did I ever mean anything to you?” she asked.

Setanta hesitated a fraction before responding. “Once, perhaps, when I was young and knew no better.”

“And now?”

“Now, you mean nothing to me,” he said cruelly.

“I don’t believe that,” she said wistfully.

“It’s true, Shadow. You failed me and I became an immortal slave to a monster. In time, I too became a monster, a master of blood drinkers and flesh eaters.”

“You became what you were meant to be,” Scathach murmured. “You fulfilled your destiny.”

“And now it’s time to fulfill yours—it is time to die, Shadow.”

Scathach turned.

Setanta was standing in the center of the room, holding a spear as tall as he was. The head of the spear was a pyramid-shaped wedge of barbed and hooked metal. The shaft was a pale white bone. “Recognize this?” he asked.

“The Gáe Bolga,” she whispered. The Death Spear. She hadn’t seen the legendary weapon in millennia. Any wound from this weapon—no matter how minor—was fatal. “I gave that to you a long time ago.” She turned back to the window as if unconcerned. “What will you do when you kill me, Cuchulain?”

“I am Setanta,” he insisted. “There is a war coming, Shadow. The Elders will reclaim this Shadowrealm. I have been told to build a vampyre army, to create legions of cucubuths and hold them in readiness to unleash them on San Francisco and Los Angeles. When the war is over, I will control the entire West Coast of America.”

“You could stand against them and fight with me,” she suggested. “We’ve faced down monsters before.”

“I prefer the winning side.”

“Did you ever wonder why I loved you, Cuchulain?” Scathach asked.

“Everyone loved me,” he said arrogantly.

“I loved you because I once saw in you the very best of the new human race. But that love blinded me to what you really were.”

Setanta ignored her words. Drawing back his arm, he flung the Gáe Bolga. It screamed through the air. “Time to die.”

“Time to die,” Scathach echoed. Without looking around, she stepped to the side, caught the spear in midair, turned and flung it back at the young man.

Setanta managed a single horrified scream before the spear took him high in the chest. The weapon vibrated, the bone-white shaft shimmering with bands of color. Setanta’s golden hair turned gray, then white. His smooth skin ran with wrinkles. “You said you loved me ...,” he breathed.

The Shadow’s face was a mask. “I loved Cuchulain, but you’re Setanta.” She clapped her hands sharply together and the man exploded into fine white powder. For a single moment, a cloud hung in the center of the room, a vaguely man-shaped outline in dust.

The door burst open and Billy the Kid appeared. The sudden draft of air sent the powder curling past Scathach, through the broken window and out into the morning air.

Billy was red-faced and gasping and his entire body was covered in filthy grey-black grit. “You okay?” he wheezed.

“Fine.” She turned back to the window and watched the Crow Goddess swoop over the city, following the almost invisible twist of dust in the air.

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

Scathach crossed the floor and lifted the Gáe Bolga, tapping the head against her boot. “In a manner of speaking.”

“And the person you came to rescue?”

“Set free,” she said. She looked Billy up and down. “I am pleased that you survived.”

“I’m rather pleased myself.” Billy grinned. “The vampyres—with a—were so intent on fighting me, they forgot about the sun!” He brushed some of the filthy grit off his clothes. “You should have seen it. One moment they were getting set to eat me and the next it looked like an explosion in a flour factory!”

“And then you raced up here to rescue me,” Scathach teased.

Beneath the gritty ash, Billy the Kid’s cheeks flared crimson.

The Shadow squeezed his shoulder hard. “You remind me of someone I knew a long time ago.”



“You never did tell me what’s in the jar I delivered,” Billy said as they pulled out of the garage. Scathach nodded. “Yes. The jar. Have you ever heard of Pandora’s Box?”

“Sure,” the Kid answered, then jerked his thumb behind him toward the trunk of the car. “But that’s a jar, not a box.”

Scathach smiled, showing her vampire teeth. “Well, *pithos* was a bad translation. It doesn’t mean ‘box.’ It means ‘jar.’ ”

“So we just drove to Las Vegas with all the evils in the world in the trunk of my car?”

Scathach nodded happily. “I could hardly leave it at the dojo. Someone might have opened it.”

Billy shook his head and let out a sigh. “All the evils of the world,” he murmured. “Can I ask what you’re going to do with them?”

“I was going to lock them away where they would never be found....”

“But I’m guessing you’ve changed your mind,” Billy said.

The Shadow smiled. She dropped her mirrored Aviators onto her face. “There’s a Shadowrealm I’m going to release them into. It’s the home of the Elder Crom Cruach.” She paused and added hesitantly, “You could tag along if you like. It’ll be dangerous.” She turned to look at him and peered over the top of her glasses. “It might even be fun.”

An authority on mythology and folklore, Michael Scott is one of Ireland's most successful authors. A master of fantasy, science fiction, horror, and folklore, he has been hailed by the *Irish Times* as “the King of Fantasy in these isles.” “Billy the Kid and the Vampyres of Vegas” is a short story based on Scott's worldwide bestselling Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel series: *The Alchemyst*, *The Magician*, *The Sorceress*, *The Necromancer*, and *The Warlock*, all available from Delacorte Press. Also available as an ebook original is the short story “The Death of Joan of Arc.”

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