



# Storyline: Rise Of The Emperor



## THE AFTERMATH

"I lived through the French Revolution. My whole unlife I've worked to take down the Camarilla just like I worked to take down the French royalty when I was alive. No way could I be one of them. I don't have the stomach for it." Germaine spat.

"Trust me when I say this, my friend." Yazid smiled his sinister toothy grin. "The best way to take down an organization is from the inside. If you truly are committed, you will walk the path I've laid for you."

"I don't walk anyone else's path. I make my own."

Yazid bowed. "Of course."

"Besides, I'm anathema. Don't you get that? I walk in there it's game over. The entire clan Toreador has a bounty on my head. Every justicar is sworn to hunt me down and eliminate me. No way I'd last ten seconds."

Yazid's smile widened. "My dear, dear friend," he took a sip of his wine goblet as the two of them sat in the basement of a the rug store, on top of the hand-woven tapestry Germaine had just been transported in, rolled. "You would not have survived had several powers been consistently stopping your oppressors at every opportunity. Go, and you will see I speak the truth."

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The amphitheater was built in a similar fashion to the ancient Roman coliseum, complete with stone columns reaching up to the stalactite-dotted roof of the cavern. Each clan's elders took up a section of the circle of stone steps, like slices of a pie, with thrones, reserved for the Inner Circle members, empty. In the center of the sand covered floor, Dmitra Ilyanova of the Brujah, made the case for Count Germaine's ascendance to the position of Emperor, military commander of the Camarilla.



Three rows back, Madame Guil of Clan Toreador was teetering on the edge of frenzy. It was she who had named Germaine as anathema, and she who had encouraged all justicars to hunt him for two hundred years. This would be Germaine's moment of triumph, and she was forbidden to touch him. Behind her hate-filled eyes Germaine saw fear. The rest of his clan saw it too, and they relished it. Germaine stared directly at her, daring her to defy her clan's orders and set foot on the sand.

Dmitra spoke to the assembled crowd. The former justicar passionately described how Germaine had displayed courage and leadership. He had recruited his own army, with followers from all the clans, and driven it through Sabbat country, taking the fight to their enemy, fighting Sabbat packs from Los Angeles to Montreal. She explained how only Germaine had the support, the experience and the guts to lead the Camarilla through this time of crisis. It sounded like she actually believed it.

It wasn't the Inner Circle members she was trying to convince. They had already left for their final deliberation. Everyone in the amphitheater knew who was going to be chosen. Dmitra was reminding everyone why it was a good decision. A smart move for the future, when he'd have to command more than just his own loyal people.

The rest of the assembled elders wore cold, silent stares. They had called him anathema, a cultist, an anarchist. Yet the accusations had been nothing in comparison to Germaine's support. Yazid had been true to his word. The Brujah had dominated the contest and had the most delegates by far. Within the clan, Germaine's faction was the strongest. There was no question that he would be chosen.

His place on the Red List was the result of private concerns tainting public duty, Dmitra continued. And still, outcast from the Camarilla, he had done more to damage the Sabbat than all their recent efforts. The Camarilla had a duty to recognize and welcome back their wayward son. He was their prodigal child, returned from the wilderness when the Camarilla needed him most.

Germaine nearly gagged at that last bit. Prodigal child indeed. That was the problem with the whole damned lot of them. This was a society of privilege, nepotism and snivelling yes-men. The few with real power were so busy watching the ones beneath them and within their own coteries that they had no time to focus on the Sabbat. It was no wonder the Sabbat were winning. What was surprising was that they hadn't won already.

The room fell silent. They all awaited the final, inevitable, pronouncement. Germaine's eyes fell to the Ventrue justicar, Lucinde, all done up in her prim and proper suit. He smirked. She'd looked so much better in fishnets and blue hair. She was good though, real good. She didn't believe Dmitra's honeyed babble for a moment. She knew what he and his gang had been after because she'd been in that gang. What Lucy didn't know was that he'd succeeded, well beyond what he'd originally been after. She thought a thorn in her side was going to be put in charge. She had no idea what kind of powers were backing Germaine now. He was going to rip her precious Camarilla apart brick by freaking brick.



The doors at the edge of the amphitheater opened and the Ventrue leader Hardestadt led the Inner Circle members to sit with their clans. Germaine frowned. Adana de Sforza was scowling. Behind her was a surprise. A small cluster followed them into the room. Germaine recognized some of them - Anson, Duane, Nash, Breidenstein, Santaleous, Brandywine, Zagreb, Humboldt, Voshkov. Jann Berger? Valerius Maior? What the hell was this committee? The last to enter was a powerful man with gray-green eyes, long flowing dark hair, and a weatherworn, but still young, face.

The stranger stood before the open doors as the head of each clan took his or her place in front of their people. Something changed in the air.

"What?" Germaine whispered. He looked across the coliseum. Lucinde's eyes were wide as she stared at the newcomer. She knew him. Germaine looked around. Several people knew this man.

"During the final deliberation," Hardestadt began, "Clan Malkavian brought forth their nominee for Imperator."

Dmitra hissed.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Germaine moved to stand as he spoke. Claws sunk painfully into the muscles of his left shoulder. Adana de Sforza's fingers elongated and burrowed into his back. Germaine would have had to rip out half of the musculature in his back to successfully stand. Germaine resented the control but the pain also helped to clear his mind and keep him grounded. Dying now would do nothing useful.

Hardestadt nodded toward Lutz.

"Clan Malkavian nominates Karsh," Lutz intoned in his thick accent. "Varlord of ze Camarilla. 'Iz 'istory needs no explaining. 'E iz ze most qualified for ze job."

Germaine didn't know the face, but he knew the name. Karsh, Warlord of the Camarilla. Absent for so long everyone assumed he was dead.

"Clan Ventrue seconds the nomination," Hardestadt added quickly.

"Clan Tremere also stands behind Karsh." That was three.



"As does Clan Toreador." The haughty voice sounded greatly relieved.

Germaine heard a sigh of frustration behind him.

"Clan Brujah withdraws our candidate."

"WHAT?" Germaine began to see red. A second set of claws sunk into his right shoulder to keep him seated.

"It is good to have you back, Karsh," Adana continued. "We look forward to working with you."

Karsh's eyes flickered to Germaine's for a moment. They weren't gloating. Germaine felt calm wash over him from Karsh's eyes. It wasn't an apology, but the soothing of Germaine's beast was definitely a peace offering both to Germaine and his clan. Karsh nodded to Adana. Adana nodded back.

"Of course, the Nosferatu also support Karsh." The nasal voice of Josef von Bauren was interrupted by Cock Robin twisting his bird-like head to the side until it cracked loudly. "...Warlord of the Camarilla, now Imperator."

Karsh bowed to the entire assembly. "I am grateful for your support. I look forward to working with all of you to the greater glory of the Camarilla." His voice was gentle, but powerful.

The pain left Germaine's shoulders. Adana leaned forward. "I'm not happy either, but the wise leader picks her battles. We will talk soon."

Germaine glared at the Inner Circle member. Something happened here. Something more than just Germaine losing. The whole thing stunk of a setup. It had stunk from the beginning but the bait had been too sweet and Germaine had been so focused on his goal he hadn't paid enough attention to what else was happening. "Talk? Like Hell we will," Germaine thought. He'd played his part and failed. Now he had to get the hell out of Dodge before the other shoe dropped.

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Moonlight glinted off the waves around a sailboat that floated lazily on the edge of the Red Sea. On the deck of the ship was a pagoda built from fine wood and draped in silk. Helena sat on perfumed cushions fondling a metal disk hanging from a leather thong around her neck. It was the only thing she wore.



A dark-eyed, chocolate-skinned woman rushed to Helena's side and knelt with her forehead touching the floor. In her hands she held a blinking Blackberry device.

"Yes?"

"News through satellite, my lady."

Helena's tongue wet her lips. "Tell me."

"All glory and praise to the Dark Mother as she stands victorious with her foot on the neck of the beaten dog," the woman read. "Your humble servant -."

"Skip Yazid's pandering drivel. What is his point?"

"Karsh has become Imperator, my lady."

Helena closed her eyes and flopped back on her cushions, letting the moonlight play across her skin. She savored the moment, wondering what it would have been like had Claudia and Rodrigo survived to share it with her.

"Set a course for Zanzibar."

"My lady?"

Helena's eyes darkened. "It's time I paid a visit to an old... friend." She smiled as she said the last word. It wasn't a friendly smile.