

STARTING TO REMEMBER
GREG BUENO

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FOREWARD

I don't like making promises I can't keep, so I never promised I would write a second novel. It's taken me eight years to get around to writing this book, and the main character has been gestating in my head for about 15 years. The only reason this novel even exists is because I showed an incomplete draft to some friends, and they said, "When are you going to finish it? I want to know what happens." Well, OK. Now you know. And no, I'm not promising to write another one.

— Greg Bueno, June 2009

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1

I didn't feel like heading down just yet. I was three-quarters through my second Dos Equis, and the effects of the first hadn't yet kicked in. I wanted a bit of a buzz before I conducted business, a false shot of confidence aided by the numbing effects of alcohol.

As if it would compare to my next drink.

All around me, men with gym-sculpted bodies wearing tight shirts and ass-hugging jeans posed like they didn't care whether anyone found them fuckable. And they were fuckable. And they cared a hell of a lot. Some of them would deign to glance my way, hoping I'd join them in a tango of eye contact. Sorry, dude, not tonight.

I took another swig of my beer, thinking I was nearly finished but finding I wasn't. I didn't mind. I was in no rush. It's not the actual killing that makes me hesitant to go hunting. It's the hunt itself. It's not different from picking up a guy at a bar to have a one-night stand. Hell, it's exactly the same. And I'm no good at either.

The techno beat continued to pound away, four on the floor. One man threw a gaze in my direction. I didn't look back. He moved on. His eyes connected with someone across the room.

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They exchanged smiles. He went over. I gulped down the rest of my beer. The buzz finally started to kick in.

It was time.

I took the ring out of my jacket pocket and put it on. It looked like a normal, silver wedding band, but the engraving on the surface of the ring, imperceptible to the human eye, granted me access. I approached a door in a dark corner of the bar, my hands at my sides so the bouncer standing next to the door could see it. As I got closer, he offered his hand for a shake. I took it. We were pretending to be friends, but he was inspecting my ring, checking for the engraving.

His hand felt warm, and I could sense the pulse of his blood through his skin. Alive. Maybe mortal. But empowered with the ability to see something most people couldn't.

He released my hand and nodded. "Long time, no see," he said. It was the first time I've ever met him.

"Yeah," was all the reply I bothered giving.

He pulled a security card from a retractable band clipped to his pocket and waved it in front of a plastic pad. The red indicator light on the pad beeped and turned green, and the door made a thud as it unlocked. The bouncer pulled the door open for me and held it.

"Have a good time," the bouncer said, the professional courtesy in his voice as sincere as his lack of interest.

"Thank you," I replied similarly.

I stepped through the door, and I could smell it. Undead blood. It tickled my throat and nudged my stomach. It had been four days since my last drink, and the scent rammed home just how thirsty I was.

I walked down a hall till it ended in a sharp right corner,

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down a flight of stairs, which led to the lounge. Ambient music played over the system, while groups of people occupied the chairs and couches. A few heads turned when I stepped into the room, the usual hawks who keep every option open. My eyes scanned the room, while the rest of my body got a sense for everything. A few young, college-aged guys were living, but everyone else was undead. I breathed in, and that sweet scent filled my nostrils. The hunt was taking over me. I needed a goddamn drink, and my chickenshit nature wasn't going to get in the way.

I went to the bar and ordered another Dos Equis. The bartender looked glad for the reprieve from boredom. Most of the clientele in that room didn't need the services he provided. I paid for the beer and went for one of the empty barstools in the corner. It was Tuesday night – the lounge was full, but it wasn't packed.

I scanned the room, getting a sense of who might be willing and able. Almost everyone in the room was already hooked up. Two men were exchanging glances, telegraphing to each other how they wanted the night to end. Another man with two of his friends – his friends were a couple, but he was looking. We traded looks, and we both decided, “No”. He tried to flirt with a man across the room with short, brown hair, a wide, angular face and dark eyes. But the man across the room was looking at me. When the man across the room saw that I saw, he didn't hide his smile. I smiled back. He was part of a group of friends as well. I was sitting alone.

The man across the room looked Italian, a bit rugged, but dressed casually in a polo shirt and denim shorts. He was trying to key into that frat boy fantasy. He wore it well. He turned back to his conversation, while I continued to scan the room. Before either of us could sneak in another flirtation, the room grew heavy.

I looked toward the entrance and saw a man in his late

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middle age survey the lounge. His hair was short and white, his body was slim, even youthful, and his facial features were sharp – strong chin, strong nose. He had an authoritative air, and his mere presence suffocated the room.

Old blood. Very old blood.

He spotted someone he knew, went over and greeted them. As soon as he entered, everyone in the room turned away. The Italian man devoted his attention to his group, forgetting our flirtation, while the guy who wanted to vie for his attention found himself accommodated by his friends, the couple, who were into their own thing up to that point. The middle-age man, in the meantime, worked his way across the room, saying hello to his old acquaintances.

He was beautiful.

My instinct was to go. It had been a little more than nine months since I received my inheritance, and I was schooled to turn the other direction when I encounter someone with old blood flowing through his veins. I've sensed the presence of old blood before, but I knew enough not to close in on that perimeter. So I'd go another direction. This time was the first I'd been in a room with someone that powerful.

He caught me looking at him. I broke off the eye contact, but he didn't. I could feel his eyes on me. I could sense his smile. He moved on to another group and said his hello.

Get up. Leave. That's what my mind was telling me to do. Don't chance it. But further back in my mind, I knew – there was no point in going. Tonight would end badly for both of us.

I gave it shot anyway. I took my beer and made my way to the stairs. Just as I passed him, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around. It was him.

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“You didn’t think you were going to make it out of here, did you?” he asked. He may have intended to sound threatening, but I chose to hear it as flirtatious.

“Not really,” I admitted.

He smiled. “Come.” He led me back to a corner of the room. The group who had occupied a sofa decamped when he approached, leaving him and me alone. I sat on the couch, and he sat next to me. Close. His presence felt crushing, even though his face was warm and his demeanor charming, friendly.

There was an awkward silence. Awkward for me, anyway.

“You’re hunting?” he asked. He wasn’t fooled by the fact I was still breathing, the fact my heart was still pumping, the fact my blood was still warm.

“Yeah.”

“Who?”

I pointed out the Italian man across the room.

He smiled and nodded. “Nice. A few centuries old, maybe two or three. Good vintage.” I chuckled. “I’m a very good vintage,” he continued, a sly smile on his face.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“No. I’m sure you’ll find out for yourself.” I didn’t know what else to say. So I said nothing. “You can call me Thomas.”

He phrased it carefully – “you can call me ...” Names hold power, or so it’s been said. But nowadays, not many are convinced they hold as much power as they did before. I still had to create an identity for myself.

“Call me Crux.”

“Crux. Interesting choice. ‘An unresolved question.’ ‘A main or central feature.’”

“You like quoting dictionaries?”

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“I’m old enough to remember it used to mean ‘cross’. Where do you think the word ‘crucifix’ comes from? Crux – cross. Figere – to fasten.” He started to laugh. “That’s really clever.”

“What do you mean?”

“That whole thing about us curling up in fear at the sight of a crucifix. Or our skin burning when we touch a cross. You named yourself after the crucifix.”

“Actually, no.” He cocked his head, genuinely interested. “I just thought it sounded cool.”

He laughed. His smile was beautiful when he laughed.

“You’ve got something,” he started. “I don’t know what, but you’ve got something. But you’re young, barely an infant. Let me guess – you were turned six months ago.”

“Nine.”

He shrugged. “Close enough. Not even a year.” His demeanor changed even though he exuded warmth. “You don’t stand a chance against me, you know that, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Maybe after a few years – five, even, you could walk away from an evening with me. But you’d have to put up one hell of a fight. But nine months? There’s not enough poison in your veins to put a dent in me.”

“I know.”

“You’ve got something, though. I can sense it. So much potential. Maybe too much. I don’t want to admit this myself, but you have enough potential to be dangerous.”

I gave him a doubtful look. “We’ve barely sat on this couch for five minutes. How can you be so sure?”

“Trust me – there comes a point when I just accept what my instincts tell me. I don’t try to question it or rationalize it. If I

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feel strong enough, I go with it. You know?”

I nodded but didn't say anything.

“You realize I'm going to have to kill you tonight.”

A statement like that would send a mortal person into terror. For me, it was the reality of my surroundings. Immortality is just a concept, a measure of time, really. I had the ability to live forever. That didn't mean I'd survive if the sun went supernova on the earth's ass.

“Maybe I can convince you otherwise,” I said. I closed what little distance was between us and kissed him. As our mouths explored each other, I willed life through his skin, into his body. His blood moved through his veins slightly, warming his skin. We broke off the kiss after a few seconds.

The look on his face was disappointment. “I'm sorry,” he said. “Now I know I have to kill you.”

I looked away and hung my head. “Okay,” I said. “But we can have some fun first, right?”

He smiled.

2

We went back to my place. I warned him it was a dump no bigger than a broom closet, but he insisted. I understood, though – it was easier to abandon a corpse than dispose of it. Thomas had a driver waiting for him down the street from the club. We got in the back seat of the car, and I gave the driver my address. He didn't even need directions. Thomas and I fooled around on the ride over, kissing, touching – the usual stuff.

“I'm serious about killing you tonight,” Thomas said while I ran my fingers along the inside of his thigh. “You don't seem to be very worried.”

“I believe you will kill me,” I said. “But it doesn't have to be tonight.”

“I'm afraid it does.”

“The night's not over yet.”

Thomas smiled. “You're a confident one, aren't you?”

“No,” I answered. “Just trying to survive the only way I see how. I'm nine months, compared to your ... well, let's just say I'd be dumb to try to fight.”

“So you're going to seduce me into not killing you?”

“Or just make it a bit harder for you to go through with it, that's all.”

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He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “Smart. I like that.” He put his arm around me, and I nestled into his embrace. “We’ll see.”

The driver pulled up to my building, and we got out. Thomas told him he’d call when he was finished. The car pulled away, and I took him to my second-story walk-up. I opened the door, and we went in.

Thomas looked around at the cramped space, a 400-square-foot cell with little more than a bed, a desk and a chair. “What a dump,” he said, confirming what I’d told him earlier.

“Don’t I know it?”

He turned around and took me in his arms. The desire in his eyes was unmistakable, and I’m sure he saw the same in me. Whatever he was going to do to me was to come later.

“I would have loved to take you in,” he started, “teaching you, showing you ... everything. I’d like nothing more.”

“Then why don’t you?” I asked. He smiled and shook his head, his eyes not breaking from mine, nor losing any hint of desire. I ran my hand against the small of his back. “But are you absolutely certain you have to kill me tonight?”

I felt his hands start to explore my back as well. The lust in his eyes grew more intense. “No,” he answered. And we kissed.

His lips traveled all over my face and neck, as mine did his. His strong kiss felt like he could devour my mouth, and I shuddered when he pierced my ear with his tongue. After a while, my lips made a trail from his neck down the middle of his chest, my fingers unbuttoning his shirt as I went along. He pulled my shirt off me after his dropped to the floor. We continued.

At some point, we pulled back. He unbuttoned the top button of my jeans, and I pulled his belt and released the buckle. We were

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down to our underwear. Then to nothing at all.

I led him to the bed, lying face up, inviting him on top of me. He followed, and he continued to explore my body with his lips. He ran his tongue up from my waist to my collarbone in a series of long strokes, starting from the left side of my body, working his way to my right. The coolness of his tongue sent shocks through my skin. I grew harder with each stroke.

After a few minutes, it was his turn. We changed positions, he on the bottom, me on top. I mimicked what he did to me, kissing his body, licking his skin. I even sucked on his nipple, which made him squirm in joy. But all throughout our foreplay, his penis remained limp.

“Do you know how to play the game?” he whispered.

“I’ve heard about it,” I said. “Never tried it.”

“What do you know?”

“That I will enough life for you to get aroused.”

“You think you can do that?”

“I’ll give it a shot.”

I ran my hands over his chest, his stomach, and I let life flow through my hands into his body. His skin started to warm, and the blood in his veins started to move. My right hand ventured further down and found his limp penis. I took his balls into my hand and kneaded them. He started to harden. I took his shaft in my hand and caressed it, and it hardened even more.

“Oh God,” Thomas whispered. “It’s been a long time since I felt this.”

Thomas became fully gorged, and I started to rub harder. He was paralyzed in pleasure, moaning softly. I continued to rub, his moans getting louder as I increased the speed and pressure on his shaft.

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“What’s happening?” he asked.

“I’m jerking you off,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “No day hunter has enough power to sustain it this long.”

I ignored him. I wanted him to come. I could sense his need to explode. I could smell the blood ready to burst from him. I didn’t realize till then how thirsty I was, and I had every intention of taking him in my mouth.

“Oh, God, this isn’t possible! How are you doing this?” I could feel he wanted me to stop, but he was already too far-gone. I rubbed harder and faster, the heat deep in his groin burning.

Thomas let out a guttural groan as his penis shot its first stream of blood across his body. I clamped my mouth on his shaft, and he shot load after load of night hunter blood into my mouth. I gulped it down, relishing the sweet taste of it. For a moment, I thought I could hear his heart beat, pumping blood through his body.

After he spent his last shot, I released his shaft from my mouth and licked the rest of his blood off his chest and stomach. Then I lay down beside him. His skin was still flush from the life I gave him. He turned to me, a look of confusion on his face, mixed with fear.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Looked like an orgasm to me,” I said.

“It’s been more than a thousand years since I’ve ...” The fear in his face was taking over.

“Isn’t that how the game is played?” I asked, tentatively. From what I heard, a day hunter is supposed to infuse a night hunter with enough life to engage in sex. But that’s all I knew.

“No day hunter has enough power to bring the act to

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completion,” Thomas answered.

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t understand Thomas’ meaning. “This is the first time I’ve done this,” I said, not knowing what other excuse to use. “I didn’t know.”

“No,” Thomas replied. “You didn’t.”

I had only begun to acknowledge the regret in his voice when I found myself pinned against the wall. I didn’t even see Thomas get up, grab me and slam me against the wall so hard, my body made a dent in the concrete. He pressed the full weight of his naked body against me, pinned my legs with his, his hands on my wrists. The pain of the slam didn’t register till then.

“I have no choice now,” Thomas said, the fear in his voice tangible.

“Please. No.”

I felt him sink into an artery on my neck, and my blood shot into his mouth. I concentrated on my arms, trying to resist, and I could feel them start to push forward. But Thomas was stronger.

I relented, concentrated harder and began to resist again. All the while, Thomas drank from me. When I thought I was making better progress, Thomas broke off from my neck, nearly ripping the skin off and doubled over, groaning in pain. He dropped and curled up on the floor, his body tense, his face crushed in pain. I went on my knees, trying to calm him down but not knowing what to do. I took him into my arms.

“Your blood,” he managed to say, “The poison. Too strong.” He yelled a groan.

What do I do? How do I help him?

“Kill me,” Thomas said as he convulsed. “Don’t leave me trapped in this pain. Kill me.”

I concentrated a shock of life through my hands and shot

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it into his body. It stunned the pain out of him and made his body limp. I pulled him up to his feet, held him against me and sank into the same artery he had on me. His blood shot into my mouth, and I gulped it down.

I could feel his heart beating against me, pumping blood through his veins and into my mouth. I drank, and I drank. For a few short minutes, his body was once again alive, perhaps the first time in a thousand years, and he'd be dead by the time I finished with him.

The beating of his heart eventually slowed, and the stream of blood hitting the top of my mouth turned to a trickle. His body grew heavier. When his heart made its last beat, I pulled away slowly from his neck and lay his naked body gently on the floor. I realized I wasn't wearing any clothes myself.

I grabbed my clothes from the floor and put them on, then went to the bathroom to wash my face. I wiped Thomas' blood from the sides of my mouth with some tissue, then ran water in the sink and scrubbed around my lips. After I dried my face with a towel, I went back into the room and gazed at Thomas' body.

All night, I entertained the notion that I could die, hoping I could charm my way out of it. Power radiated from Thomas, and I accepted it, accepted on some level that I would be crushed under that power. But I stared at Thomas' corpse and didn't understand what happened.

I knelt down again and rearranged his body in a position of repose. I grabbed the sheet from my bed and covered him up to the shoulder. He still looked beautiful to me. I fought to keep the regret and sadness from bubbling up through my throat.

This was a hunt. I killed someone four days ago, someone else three days before that. In another few days, I would kill again.

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Get over it.

Easier said.

I looked for my phone and found it near the side of the bed. I punched in the number for my removal service. When I reached the automated system, I keyed in my account number and the kind of service I needed – “1” for victim removal. It would be a few minutes before the crew arrived.

3

The first thing Miguel did when I answered the door was launch into a stream of Spanish. I gave him a dead, uncomprehending look.

“Miguel, you know I don’t speak Spanish,” I said.

“What kind of Latino man are you who don’t speak Spanish?” he asked, his New York brogue mixed in with a Latino accent. He had a young assistant with him.

“The kind of Latino man who’s really Filipino?” I answered. I let both of them in.

“Eh, we conquered your people, too.”

“No, that would be the Spaniards, and they kicked your ancestors’ Mexican asses before they ever reached the Philippines.”

Miguel grumbled at me in some more Spanish. So I brushed off my college Japanese and asked him really politely to repeat what he had just said. He looked at me funny before saying, “Puto.”

I was glad for Miguel’s banter. It spared me from thinking much further about how I escaped a certain death.

“So who do we have today?” Miguel asked, getting into business mode.

“Tell you the truth, I really don’t know.”

“Is he cute?” Miguel was straight, but he had a good sense

of humor.

“Oh, God yeah.”

“Well, let’s see.” Miguel gave Thomas a long stare, and I sensed a subtle change in his demeanor. “He looks familiar.”

“He goes by Thomas.”

“*Tomas?*” Miguel asked, trying to hide his recognition. “Do you have his wallet or anything like that?”

“His pants are over here,” I said, retrieving them from the floor. I handed them to Miguel, who fished around the pockets till he found a wallet. He flipped through it, and his face went from curious to worried. “Can you excuse me for a moment?” he asked, then motioned for his assistant, “Mattias ...”

Miguel mumbled into Mattias’ ear, and Mattias left the room. Miguel took out a cell phone and punched in a number. He tried to speak low, but I caught, “Señor Santos, por favor.” A few second later, he spoke into the phone in more Spanish. Mattias came back with a body bag and got to work on Thomas, while Miguel tried to keep control of his voice. It wasn’t hard to hear his urgency.

Miguel ended his call and turned to me. “We have to wait till Senor Santos gets here,” he said.

“Juan? Why does Juan need to be here?” Juan Santos was Miguel’s boss, the owner of the removal service who handled my victims. I met him after I moved to New York City to arrange the transfer of my mentor’s account to me.

“I think this man made previous arrangements,” Miguel said. “Señor Santos has to check and verify them personally.” Something was telling me Miguel knew more than he let on.

“That’s some special treatment,” I commented. Miguel didn’t reply. In fact, he started to look nervous.

“You want something to drink while we wait?” I asked.

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“Sure. You have some Tecate?”

“I might have some Dos Equis.”

“That’ll do.”

I went to my refrigerator and retrieved three bottles (one for Mattias). “Juan won’t mind that you’re drinking on the clock?”

“I think he’d make an exception this time.” I didn’t take that remark as a good sign. Rather than push the issue, I started some small talk, which Miguel gladly took up. I’m not sure what made Miguel more nervous – Thomas’ body on my floor or the fact he died at my hands.

Juan Santos arrived about five minutes later. He was shorter than me by half a foot and had a husky build. He also possessed a presence that filled any room he was in, but he struck me as a warm person by nature. All of that warmth had given way to urgency when he appeared at my door.

“You got here fast,” I remarked, thinking Juan had driven from Brooklyn.

“I was in the field tonight,” he said by way of explanation. He went straight to business – “Let’s see the body.”

Mattias and Miguel had already placed Thomas’ corpse in the body bag, and Mattias unzipped it to reveal Thomas’ face. Juan hung his shoulders as he made a sign of the cross. He turned to Miguel and gave him more instructions in Spanish.

“Crux, could you come with me for a little while? Give these men some room to work?”

They didn’t need me out of the room before. Why now? “All right.”

“We’ll go get something to drink.”

I followed Juan down to his car, which was running idle in front of my building. Two men were waiting at the foot of the stoop.

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Night hunters. Juan mumbled something to one of them, who then cocked his head to his companion, indicating they were heading elsewhere. What were they doing working for a removal service?

“Who are they?” I asked.

“Line Security. I’ll explain later.” Juan opened the backseat door for me, and I went in. He followed.

Juan gave the driver directions in Spanish, and we pulled out into the road. We sat in silence for a few seconds – the kind of silence that can be nothing *but* awkward.

“So why were you in the field tonight?” I asked, trying to drum up more small talk.

“Abuela told me I should be out in Manhattan tonight.” Abuela was the nickname of Estrella Santos, Juan’s mother and a powerful witch who’s become a source of myth herself. Some people don’t even mention Abuela by name for fear that she might hear them.

“Ah,” was my only reply. I knew better than to continue that line of questioning. “Where are we going?”

“Some place good. An uncle of mine owns it. We’ll be safe there.” I’m not sure why he had to point out safety.

We drove about 20 blocks north and pulled in front of a Mexican restaurant. It looked closed, but as soon as we got out of the car, someone on the other side of the door unlocked it and opened it for us.

We were led to a booth back in a far corner of the restaurant. The lights were dim. Juan ordered a round of margaritas for us. I took mine without salt. Juan waited till the host was no longer within earshot.

“So, uh, what did I do?” I started, hoping to break some of the gravity.

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Juan smiled a little bit, but it went away fast. “How long have you been in New York?” he asked.

“Six months.”

“And you haven’t been a day hunter for much longer than that?”

“I moved here three months after I received my inheritance.” That last fact disturbed Juan visibly.

“So you haven’t been here long enough to know much about the local community?”

“Can’t say I have.”

Juan sighed. “Thomas is one of the most powerful coven leaders in the city, maybe the biggest. He holds tremendous sway.”

“When he came into the club I was at, everyone got out of his way.”

“You better believe it. No one really knows how old he is, but most guess he’s about 2,000 years old. His blood is so strong, it makes him nearly invincible. Day hunters like yourself are no threat to him.”

Our drinks arrived, and we stopped talking when they did. We resumed when our host once again was out of earshot.

“If that’s the case,” I started, “why did he die in my apartment?”

“I was hoping you would tell me.”

“What’s there to tell? We went back to my place. We had sex. All night, he said he was going to kill me, and all I was trying to do was convince him not to.”

Something I said got Juan’s attention. “You had sex?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t picture him servicing anyone.”

“He wasn’t servicing me – I was servicing him.”

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It was Juan's turn to hesitate. "You mean he ...?"

"Yeah."

"But he's ..."

"Look, I've been told night hunters can't get it up, that no day hunter can infuse enough life in them to do it. It didn't happen to me."

"Ever?"

"First time."

Now Juan really looked worried. "Tomorrow night, you're going to get a visit from a night hunter named Daren," he continued. "The two men you saw me talking to earlier are part of his crew. He may be able to help figure out what's going on."

"All right ..." I said, a tinge of skepticism in my voice.

"Tonight, I'd like you to stay here at our safe house."

"Uh, I guess, but why can't I go back to my place?"

"Thomas has a special arrangement with the removal services in the city. He's already chosen who will take care of his body, and we've let them take over. News of his death will spread very quickly tonight, and it won't be long before his legion start looking for the person who killed him. If you go back to your place while his removal service is still working, they will identify you to his progeny."

"So I've got a mob after me."

"Yes."

It was my turn to sigh.

"Thank you for putting me up, then."

"Don't think of this as a favor," Juan said, a disclaimer hanging in the air. "Our family has a vested interest in your safety."

"You like my money."

"That's only part of it."

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He was talking about Abuela. She told him to be in the field tonight. She knew something was going to happen.

Juan led me back through the kitchen to a set of stairs that went up to the second floor. We went down a narrow hall till we reached a guest bedroom.

“You can hang out here till sunrise,” Juan said. It was already 3 a.m., which meant I didn’t need to overstay my welcome. I didn’t need to be at work till 5 p.m., so I had enough time to go back to my place after sunrise and get some rest.

“Thanks again, Juan,” I said. His only reply was a grave nod, and he left.

I made myself comfortable on the plush chair in the room and dozed off.

4

The first hint of dawn registered through my eyelids. What time was it?

I woke up. My consciousness cut through the fog of grogginess to figure out which arm had my watch. Right? No, left. I twisted the band so I could read the face. Twenty to six. Most night hunters are dead to the world by then. Only the oldest – someone like Thomas – would be up this late.

I sat up in the chair and waited a few more seconds for the fog in my head to clear. I would need to be at work in 11 hours. I needed some sleep, and I wasn't about to count the two hours in that chair as part of my rest. I got up and found my way out of the restaurant through a back door. No one in the kitchen staff gave me a single look, and my presence aroused no suspicions. Ignorance is survival.

I got my bearings and discovered I was two blocks away from a No. 6 subway stop. The sun was already starting to cast light over the city, but it was still dark enough for the strongest to be out. I headed downstairs to the station. When I reached the platform, I looked around to feel any sort of presence – no one but warm-blooded, living beings around me. A downtown train pulled up, and I got on.

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I got off at 23rd Street, which meant walking four blocks east. I didn't mind. I passed a few deliverymen, tossing boxes at each other. A woman in a McDonald's uniform was walking nearly parallel with me on the other side of the street. Some morning joggers dodged me, while I walked around people following the whims of their pets.

I like mornings, even though I don't see very many of them. I work a night shift at a broadcast news organization, which is convenient when I need to feed. But it usually means getting up in the afternoon, at a point in the day where everyone is thinking about getting home. I spend only a few hours in daylight, and I try to savor that time. It's the only part of the day when I felt totally human.

When I got to my place, it looked as if nothing had happened. The dent in the wall outlining my body was still there, which meant I could kiss my deposit good-bye. The sheet I used to cover Thomas' body was folded at the foot of the bed. I tossed it in the laundry basket and grabbed another from the closet.

I pulled my heavy, dark drapes together and turned in. I replaced the cheap blinds left by the previous tenant with drapes that could block out the sun. I have a hard time going to sleep during the daytime. It usually takes a few minutes before I lose consciousness – or a few hours on some mornings – but this time, I was tired enough to fall asleep once my head hit the pillow.

I undressed, got into bed and closed my eyes.

My great-great grandfather was waiting for me in my dream.

The only grandfather I knew died two weeks after I met him. I was four years old, and even though I remember traveling to the Philippines to bury him, nothing from the trip stayed with me. But the slim, aged man with gray streaks in his black hair and sun-wrinkled, light brown skin standing before me was my great-great

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grandfather. There was no question.

He started to speak to me in Chinese. My mom told me she had Chinese blood in her family, but I never believed her, despite the fact her fair skin was totally at odds with the deep brown skin of my father's family. Now I knew it was true.

We were standing in a clearing amidst a wild bamboo forest, old green mountains looming in the distance, the air wet and sticky. I may not remember anything from my trip to the Philippines, but we were there now. And I was listening to the oldest relative I would never meet speak to me in a language neither of my parents learned. And I understood every word.

He was smiling.

"You have reclaimed yourself," he said. "Just like you said you would."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but it felt true to me. I understood, and I didn't understand.

"You do not remember now," he continued, "but you will soon enough."

"What happens to me now?" I asked. I was going to ask what it was I'd be remembering, but my voice posed that other question instead. It wasn't me who formed the thought to ask that question.

"You will die now, *nakkong*," he answered. "I will take you with me. Bring you back to your family as I promised. Your grandma is waiting. She wants to tell you how much she appreciated your caring for her. How she wanted to tell you for so long, but her English was never good. Now you will understand her completely."

In the last year of my grandmother's life, I ran errands for her, picking up her medicine, driving her to doctor's appointments. I knew she was thankful for my help, but the extent of that appreciation never resonated with me.

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“I can’t die,” I said to the old man.

“No. You who defy death have reclaimed yourself. My grandson who brought you here has done his work. Now I take him back, as you and I agreed to so long ago.” He extended his hand. “Come, *nakkong*. Let’s go see your grandma.”

For some reason, I liked the way he threw in that one Filipino word – *nakkong* – in the middle of all that Chinese.

I should have been afraid to take his hand. I should have been afraid of what would happen to me if I took his hand. But I wasn’t. I welcomed it. I welcomed him.

I grasped the old man’s hand, and he pulled me apart. I saw myself spring into the air and stumble to the ground, while I nearly lost my balance where I stood. He helped me up, and I looked back at myself. I was two people now – the one dreaming, and the one standing next to my grandfather.

“You are dead now,” he said to the man standing next to him. Then he turned to me. “And you – you have what you wanted. Now leave my family alone.”

The old man took the hand of my other self and walked across the clearing into the bamboo trees. I heard rustling as they made their way deeper and deeper into the stalks. Their footsteps crushed the grass beneath them, and the sound it made grew fainter and fainter and fainter. Then nothing. The field was silent. No birds chirping. No insects buzzing. No wind blowing. Just a deathly stillness in the wet, sticky air.

I felt cold.

I didn’t remember the dream right away when I woke up six hours later. In my grogginess, I was struck with the idea of calling my mom to ask her how far back she knew her family tree. Then a

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voice in my head said, *You can't call her. You're dead now.* That's when I remembered the dream and started to reconstruct it in my head as I brushed my teeth. I don't know why I believed that voice, but I ended up not calling her.

The phone rang while I was figuring out which of my dwindling supply of clean clothes I could stand wearing for the next nine hours. The caller ID showed it was Liselle.

"So, how did it go?" she started. I stammered a few nonsense syllables, thinking she was talking about my run-in with Thomas. "With Jared!" she clarified.

"Oh!" I said, exaggerating my realization to cover up my relief. It was time to get vague – Liz hated that. "It went fine."

"Fine?"

"Yeah. Fine."

"Like, you're-going-to-see-him-again fine? Or thanks-but-no-thanks fine?"

"We're going to have lunch one of these days."

"When?"

"I don't know when. Just one of these days." She exclaimed my name in a frustrated drawl. "What?" I replied.

"There you go with your low affect again."

"I like my low affect. It keeps my cholesterol down." She was having none of my humor.

"Do you not like this guy?"

"Yeah, he's hot."

"Then ask him out!"

"If he wants to hang out with me, I'll let him make that decision."

"He likes you."

"How do you know? He told you?"

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“No, but I can tell.”

I stretched out the tease long enough. “I suggested lunch. He said that sounded like a good idea. And I said he should call me. So I’m going to let him call me.”

“And if he doesn’t, you’re going to call him.”

“Is this you meddling?”

“Yes, this is me meddling.”

“Okay, okay ...”

Liselle worked the day shift as an associate producer, and a few weeks back, I met her and some of her friends from the print world for some drinks. Jared was one of those friends of friends. He was the only other person in that party working in online media, which gave us a chance to pair off.

Over the weekend, the same group of people met, and that time, I walked with Jared to the subway station. We rode the same line together, even though I got off a few stops before he did. Still, we talked the whole time, and we agreed to get together some time in some indeterminate future.

Liz witnessed the rapport developing between us, and she seemed rather proud of her role in facilitating. I wasn’t taking anything with Jared seriously, and if last night were any indication, it was probably best I didn’t. But I liked him, and if Liz were to be believed, he liked me. That kind of opportunity should never be squandered.

Truth be told, I was really hoping he’d call.

5

It was a slow news day – nothing thrilling to report in international affairs, and government reporting phoned in with the usual squabbling along party lines. The biggest stories dealt with the burgeoning economy – Internet hype, hot job markets, astronomical initial public offerings. I remember using YAHOO! when it was hosted on a server at Stanford University. People with my skills were supposedly being snatched up left and right, with salary demands beginning to skyrocket. Myself? I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I got some stories ready for the morning shows and kept an eye on the news wires for anything happening in the rest of the country. Since New York was on the far end of the time zones, the night shift had to make sure anything major happening in Texas, California and all those other states got on the site.

While I was surfing the wires, I ran across a feature story about the Manske Ruby. The writer likened the jewel to the Hope Diamond or the Ring of Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* – bad luck happened to everyone who's ever stolen the ruby from its resting place in a tiny Romanian town. Somehow, the ruby always finds its way back home. The ruby was named after Alfred Manske, a hapless millionaire who unwittingly bought the jewel, went crazy

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and ended up setting his mansion on fire while everyone – his family, his servants – was sleeping. A few days ago, it went missing – again. I found a picture of the ruby on the photo wires, and for some reason, it looked oddly familiar. I printed out the story and the picture.

We got out of work at midnight, and some of my co-workers wanted to get some drinks. The moment I stepped out of the building, my senses spiked – night hunters were close by. I looked down the street and saw the two hunters Juan talked to outside my apartment building standing on the corner, pretending to be taking a smoke break. I didn't think night hunters needed smoke breaks.

"I got some friends waiting for me, so I'm going to have to pass," I said. We proceeded in opposite directions as we all bid each other good night. As I neared the two night hunters, I asked, "Can I bum a smoke off of you?"

One of the night hunters obliged, taking out a hard pack of Camel Lights and pulling a single stick out for me. I took my lighter out of my pocket and lit it, pretending to be joining them in their smoke break.

"So," I started, after taking a few drags, "how much trouble am I in?"

One of them snickered, but the other threw a glare that said something stronger than "Shut the fuck up." The One with the Glare made a curt answer: "We can't say. Our boss will."

"Oh," I replied. "I guess you're going to take me to him."

"In a minute," he grunted. Charming fellow.

We each finished our cigarettes in silence. The One Who Glared finished before the One Who Snickered, but I decided to extinguish my butt at the same time Glare did. Cigarette smoke won't do shit to my lungs, but my breath and my fingers don't smell

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all that great after a smoke. When Snicker crushed his butt, he and Glare started walking toward Lincoln Center. I followed behind them.

They're watching.

I wasn't sure who "they" were, but my instincts told me I was being watched. I let my eyes wander while I trailed the two night hunters. I didn't see anything out of place. People with cell phones stuck to their ears. Couples strolling, enamored with each other, oblivious to everyone around them. Street kids disappearing underground to catch the next train out of the city. Any one of them could have been watching. But they weren't. The eyes on me wouldn't be so easy to spot.

Glare and Snicker turned north on Broadway. We walked up half a block when they turned into a small, upscale deli. The bright, welcoming lights and tasteful, wood-framed décor wasn't much of a draw for customers at that time of night – the place was nearly deserted. A man around my age with short, brown hair sat at a table off to my left, his face buried in a book. Our presence caught his attention because he looked up with the same startled look any of us get whenever another immortal walks into a room. He looked in our direction.

Night hunter.

Glare and Snicker approached him, and I followed. He stood up and trained his eyes on me. He was beautiful. His features were soft but angular, pale, blue eyes, attractive lips, a medium wide, even nose. His body was slim, and his shirt slightly hinted at the contours of his build. Gay. If he were alive, he would have been gay. The look of appreciation on his face after his own evaluation of me was confirmation enough.

He extended his hand as I approached the table. "You must

be Crux,” he started. “Call me Daren.”

I took his hand and gave it a firm shake. “Daren,” I repeated, an old habit of repeating a name to remember it. That trick never worked before I became immortal.

“Please, have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the seat across from him. Glare and Snicker took another table outside of earshot. I didn’t see anyone else in the deli, but I could feel a lot more of them nearby.

“Thank you for coming,” Daren started again. “News of Thomas’ death has spread quickly tonight. A lot of people will be looking for you now.”

“Juan told me as much. He said you might be able to help.”

Daren tried to hide his doubt but couldn’t. “I don’t know if what I have to offer could be considered help.” I didn’t know what that meant, so I didn’t say anything. He continued, “Are you familiar with the Line?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “I used it when I first moved here. Found out where to hunt, where the safe places were.”

“You used our free services.”

“Free?”

“Yes. We deal with information, much like yourself. We have a library that dates back a number of centuries, and we keep track of events happening now. Past and present.”

“No future?”

Daren made an unconvincing smile. “We leave that to the psychics.”

“So you work for the Line.”

“I run the Line. I created it a long time ago.”

“Oh.”

“I have something here,” Daren continued, pulling a book

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from the seat next to him. “I was instructed by the owner to give it to him when he returned. I was wondering whether you recognize it.” He pulled out an old sketchbook, probably a few centuries old. Despite the yellow tinge, the pages remained sturdy.

“It’s – ” *My sketchbook*. “It’s a sketchbook.”

Daren gently pushed it across the table to me. “Take a look. Tell me if anything looks familiar.” I took the sketchbook, opened it up and started flipping through the pages, trying my best not to damage them. The drawings looked like they were done in my hand. I used to draw up until college, when prose took over as my creative outlet of choice. I was good enough at it to develop a reputation. My lines were never clean, and the lines in this sketchbook were downright messy.

Daren flagged a page with a Post-It note, so I took the bait and turned to it. There was a portrait of him on that page.

I remember this. It was near the end of the century. I drew this of you to prove we had met before. So you would know when we met again. So you could tell me when I came back.

“You remember it, don’t you?”

For a second, I thought he had read my mind. He’s not supposed to be able. But he didn’t have to – he could read my face easily enough.

“I’m not sure,” I said. I was referring to how I was remembering, not the fact I remembered. I did remember. Even though it was the first time I’d ever met him or seen the book.

“You remember *something*.” It was a declaration, not an inquiry.

“What is this?” I asked, trying to change the subject. But really, I was asking what was happening at that moment.

Daren made a slight nod, as if recognizing a cue. He paused

before continuing, “Juan tells me you haven’t been around for very long. Nine months, is it?”

“Yeah.”

Daren paused again, parsing my responses through some sort of mental filter. “I’m just going to talk for a while, if that’s all right with you.”

I shrugged. “It’s your meeting.”

“OK,” he mumbled. Then he started: “I became immortal about 150 years ago. Back then, the most powerful among us was a night hunter named Killian. His powers were ... extraordinary. Most people thought he was older than those who had been around for millennia, but he never made his age a secret. He was 300 years old by the time I had been turned, but he was more powerful than even the oldest immortals at that time.

“No one seemed to inquire about how Killian came to such power, and he wasn’t very keen on anyone who tried. So a lot of people speculated, but no one would ever dare investigate. I was curious as anyone else, but I didn’t want to cross Killian either. So when I brought the Line together, I made finding the source of Killian’s power the lowest priority. And when you’re dealing with the history of immortal beings ...”

“It would never come up.”

Daren nodded. “Exactly. But Killian took interest in what I was doing. The Line wasn’t organized by any means back then. The resources were there, but everything was chaotic. After the Line started taking shape, Killian sought me out. He asked me to comb through some archives to find references to a legend.

“It’s something I’ve heard before, but not anything that’s widely known. There are stories of a being who dies many deaths. Each time he is reborn, he remembers the lives he lived, as a mortal

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and as an immortal. He possesses the knowledge of many lifetimes.”

“Reincarnation.”

“Not quite. This isn’t the kind of reincarnation you hear about in eastern religions. This being has been known to disappear. And many years later, he reappears as a different person, fully cognizant of who he was all the way back to his first ‘death’.

“I found quite a number of references to the story, all over the world. There was a hunter whom the Mayans called a powerful devil, and a Laotian god who knew the history of the spiritual world. There was a Native American wanderer who was heroic and wise and evil, and a recluse in the Balkan mountains, believed to possess the strength of a thousand night hunters. I’m sure if I looked further, I would have found more references.

“The thing that struck me about all these accounts was how I could see something of Killian in each of them – the way this being was described, at different times in different places. He could be unpredictable and magnanimous, compassionate and vengeful. He was wise, but it didn’t stop him from being foolish. Killian was incredibly private, but even back then, before mass communication, he was world-renowned.”

“You think this Killian guy was this being who could come back from the dead?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way. Coming back from the dead means your body comes back with you. This being – he would just manifest as himself completely in a new person every few generations.”

“Where’s Killian now?”

“Missing. For about 80 years now, give or take. No one isn’t sure exactly when he disappeared. No one back then minded his schedule, and he liked traveling on a whim, taking trips for months or years at a time without paying anyone heed. I think about 15

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years passed before anyone realized that he was just gone.”

“No one saw him die or anything?” Somehow, I knew the answer to this question, and I didn’t like where it was leading.

“No. He’s just gone. Much like the being himself. Or herself. She’s been a woman a few times. But no – Killian is gone.”

“So Killian was this being, then.”

“He left me enough clues to reach that conclusion. That’s his sketchbook, you know.”

“I figured as much.”

“Look familiar?”

Neither of us would really believe any answer I gave, so I told the truth. “Yeah. It looks familiar.”

“How old were you before you came into your inheritance?”

“Twenty-five.”

“The last time I took this book out of the vault was 30 years ago, so there’s no way you could have ever laid your eyes on it. Not that the chances were all that great to begin with.”

“So I’d imagine.”

Daren paused, letting me take up the conversation. I didn’t. “So what do you think?” he asked, prompting me.

“About what?”

“About why you think the book is familiar.”

I shrugged again. “I don’t.”

“You don’t have any thoughts.”

“I can see what kind of conclusion you’re trying to make. A 9-month-old day hunter who shouldn’t have any powers to speak of manages to kill a night hunter who’s thousands of years old. The most powerful night hunter in the world goes missing for 80 years, and he just may be the person referred to in an old legend – a legend that states there’s someone walking around who changes bodies

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every few generations. And you're thinking maybe the two are connected. I can see that's what you're trying to imply, but honestly, I don't have any thoughts on that."

"None whatsoever."

"What am I supposed to think? I mean, if that's so, what is it that I'm supposed to remember? That the guy you were sleeping with gave you up to the night hunter who turned you just to save his own ass? That those two –" I gestured to Glare and Snicker, who by now were showing a slight interest in our conversation "– were raped and turned into night hunters against their will? That this building stands on the place where Killian once had a house? Is that what I'm supposed to know?"

Daren's mouth twisted into an almost imperceptible smile.

"No," I said. "Do *not* tell me I'm right about anything I said."

"My lover's name was Timothy, and after I was turned, I paid him a visit. I flipped a coin – heads he dies, tails he joins me in immortality. Came up heads. And he was the first time I ever drank."

At a lack for anything else to think about, I felt proud I was able to figure out Daren's orientation when he was mortal.

Daren continued: "If you were to make a top 10 list of the most powerful night hunters in the world, Thomas would be somewhere on that list. You didn't have to lift a finger to kill him. What else is a person supposed to think?"

I didn't know. And I really didn't have any thoughts on the matter because, well, I didn't have a point of reference. I'd only been at this for a year. Not even that. What the fuck did Daren expect?

I slid the book back to his side of the table. "I need proof," I said. "I can't explain what happened last night, and it seems like people will want an explanation. What you said sounds as plausible

as anything else anyone can think of, but I can't bring myself to believe it. I need something more than a sketchbook."

Daren nodded again. "I know." He stood up, indicating our meeting was over, so I got up, and so did Glare and Snicker. "We'll take you back to your apartment. I'll have my security detail monitor your building from here on out, and I'll see if I can arrange some protection for you. I'm sure with the accounts you inherited from Jackson Streng, you could afford our research facilities, but I'll make them freely available to you anytime."

"How do you know about Jackson?"

"Information. It's our business."

"You knew him. Intimately."

"Yes." I didn't like that answer. Daren took a step toward the exit. Glare and Snicker closed the distance between their table and ours. "Let me take you home, Crux."

I followed him out the door.

6

I could have told Daren a lot more.

About how the Lenape tribes would set up camp on the plot where the deli stood now. About their rituals to ward away evil, which Killian (or some incarnation of him) had taught them. About how Killian was an indirect investor in the Line. How he actually curated a number of the resources part of the Line now, resources probably still not cataloged and in danger of being lost to time. About the witch who drove Killian from the home he built there. About the priest who drove the witch out and made it safe for both night and day hunters to return. About the hunter who turned Daren. Or the hunters who turned Glare and Snicker.

I could have told Daren a lot of things. How I knew it and how I was able to recall it, I wasn't certain. But I was starting to remember, and I was certain about one thing.

Daren didn't have a proper appreciation of the situation.

7

I spotted Jared the moment I stepped into Benny's Burrito. He was seated at a table next to the wall of windows facing E. 6th Street. He waved at me to make sure he indeed caught my attention. Not hard to do since he was the hottest guy in the room. Jared called me just half an hour before and invited me to lunch. I didn't have plans, but even if I did, I would have skipped them. When we caught a subway together after meeting with Liselle over the weekend, we vaguely agreed to hook up – one of those open-ended deals definite on the activity (in this case, lunch) but indefinite on the day, time and place. After the events of the last two nights, I didn't think about following up on the invitation. I'm glad Jared did.

My skin stirred when I took in his face, his body. He had a boyish face, bright, smiling eyes, a petite nose. His hair was cut short but not close to the scalp, and the lobe of his left ear held a tiny ring. He had a small, fit frame. He wasn't a body builder, but he had slim waist, and his shirt outlined an inviting chest. When we stood next to each other, I towered over him, even though I was only one or two inches shy of six feet.

When I first saw him, I lusted after him. When we started to get to know each other, that lust turned into attraction. I didn't think he'd reciprocate, but here we were on one of those dates that

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are never really called “dates”. A waiter came by, and we ordered some margaritas.

“I hope I wasn’t disturbing you,” he said as means of an apology. “You sounded a bit groggy on the phone.”

“I had a bit of a long night last night,” I replied.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Nah, that’s all right. I usually get up at around noon.” It was already 3 p.m. We’d both have to be at work in about two hours.

“I’m usually up by one, but I tend to push it to two. But today I had to restock the refrigerator, so I was up at 11 a.m.”

“Ugh. I can’t even channel the notion of getting up that early.”

“Here’s to shift work,” Jared said, lifting up his drink.

I did the same, and we touched our glasses together. “To shift work.”

From there, we launched into shoptalk. Put two people who work in a newsroom together, and it always boils down to shoptalk – who covers what, how an editor handles a story, how a producer pitches an idea, how AP style trickles down to our everyday lives. It was a way for both of us to avoid pregnant pauses in the conversation without having to address why were really sitting in that restaurant in the first place.

At some point, the waiter came back to take our order. We settled on the Mission Bay burritos.

I guess it was when the margaritas started kicking in that the conversation inched away from shoptalk. We started to talk about our pasts, about college, about campus newsroom horror stories and how we got into the field. Jared fell into it. He was hanging out with a friend who worked at his campus paper, and he was drafted to help cover a rally for an extreme religious group. He liked the

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experience and stuck with it, eventually becoming the editor-in-chief for two years.

I started out on the copy desk and eventually worked my way up to associate chief copy editor, but things didn't really take off until I agreed to build a web site for the paper. That experience led to a summer working for the Austin American-Statesman. When I graduated, I sent Liselle my resume, and she talked me up with her bosses. They didn't need much convincing – like everyone else, my bosses wanted to poach anyone who could code an HTML page by hand.

Lunch arrived, and we ordered a second round of drinks to go with it. As we were tearing into our food, Jared asked me what I'd be doing if I weren't working in news. Probably living it up on Jackson's Swiss bank accounts, but I couldn't tell him that.

"I don't know," I answered. "Now that I'm actually living here in New York, it's not too crazy to get into music. I thought about majoring in it, but I was given a heavy Asian parent guilt trip. I think maybe getting a master's degree in theory or even jumping into composition." I made an embarrassed laugh. "Maybe I'll start up Ophelia Zenith again."

"Ophelia Zenith?"

"It was a band I had for all of three months. We were terrible. We covered Japanese metal songs. Second-rate Motley Crue. Bad, bad stuff."

"So if you brought Ophelia Zenith back, what would they sound like now?"

"Like the Pixies."

We laughed. Jared kind of wheezed when he laughed. It wasn't too sexy, but he had a brilliant smile.

"So what would *you* be doing if you weren't in news?"

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Jared didn't answer right away, instead concentrating on the midpoint between us as he considered his answer.

"I can't imagine what I'd be doing if I wasn't in news. Maybe I could earn a living in computers, but I don't think I'd enjoy it very much. I like writing, but I'm not all that interested in being an author or anything. I just like working with information, with news. I don't know. That's a hard question to answer."

"Maybe because you're doing what you should be doing."

"I guess so. You think you're doing what you should be doing?"

I pouted to indicate a "no" answer. "I don't picture myself staying in news forever." There wasn't even a chance I'd be breathing by the end of the week, but he didn't need to know that either. "But what I end up doing – I don't know."

"Well, we're still young. There's time."

After that the conversation veered all over the place. Shoptalk intermingled with personal histories intermingled with philosophical stuff. Our plates were taken away, but we were both still feeling the effects of our drinks. Nearly an hour and a half had already passed.

"Your shift starts pretty soon, doesn't it?" I asked Jared.

"Yup. At five," he answered. "You?"

"Same here."

"I'm thinking of just showing up tipsy. It might make the first hour or so interesting."

"Oh hell. That sounds like a good idea. There isn't much work to do at the start of the night anyway. But closer to deadline – oh baby, watch out."

"I bet."

"Let's do this again," I suggested, surprising myself with

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being so forward. “Are you working this weekend?”

“I have tomorrow and Saturday off.”

“I work tomorrow, but I have Saturday and Sunday off.”

“Looks like Saturday is it.”

“That it is.”

We talked a bit more as we waited for the check to arrive, and when it did, we split it. We stood outside the restaurant making our parting remarks, and before we went our separate ways, we embraced. We hugged before I got off on my subway stop, and I did the same thing now as I did then – I memorized the feel of his body. I tried to draw a picture in my mind of what his naked body would look like based on how his torso pressed against mine. When we broke from our embrace, my dick felt a little stiffer.

We said our good-byes and headed in different directions.

8

With the exception of a stock market “correction” in Asia, the news day was pretty slow. My impromptu date with Jared was about the only source of excitement for Liselle, who tried to drag every detail of our lunch out of me. I spotted a piece on the wires about a viewing of the Manske Ruby being delayed because it was “misplaced”. Museum officials didn’t want to call it theft, and the police couldn’t find any evidence of a burglary. There wasn’t much to the story, so I passed on it.

Like most slow news days, the end felt too long in coming.

Before I could go home, I had to pick up some groceries in Chinatown. A lot of places are open all night, but only a few stocked the items I needed. I decided to go to this one store south of Canal but close to the Broadway subway stop. A homeless man approached me as I was walking up the stairs from the station.

“You looking for your son?” he asked me.

“No, sorry, I don’t have any children,” I informed him.

“You got any spare change, then?”

I usually say no, but I had a bunch of pennies I wanted to get rid of. So I gave them to him.

“Thanks, mister,” he said. Then he muttered into the air, “I don’t think that’s her.” I made my way to the store.

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I usually went to this particular shop because the guy behind the counter is pretty hot, straight but hot. He was busy with a customer when I walked in, so I grabbed a basket and started shopping. As I was filling up my basket, I felt a night hunter enter the store. I glanced toward the entrance, and a woman hunter caught my eye. She made an imperceptible nod, then started to ease her way toward me. I continued to shop.

We met at a back corner of the store, near a refrigerator full of fruits and vegetables with strange scents. We didn't look at each other, just at the shelves, two shoppers browsing the merchandise.

"You from Daren's crew?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Call me Thorn."

"OK, Thorn. I guess you're my Secret Service detail."

"Yeah," she said without much enthusiasm. "I'll be keeping my distance for the most part. You just keep doing what you're doing."

"All right." I picked up a box of panko breadcrumbs and put it in my basket. I felt the presence of another night hunter enter the store. "He with you?" From the corner of my eye, I could see her face darken.

"No," she said. Great. She made another imperceptible nod to indicate I should just act normally. So I picked up a bag of Japanese rice and headed for the counter. The hot guy smiled, about to greet me and ring up my purchases when an old man tugged at his sleeve. He gave the hot clerk a stern look and indicated he should get out of the way. I started not to like the old man, but he had the expression of someone who wouldn't really care.

The hot guy made his way from behind the counter to stock some items, while the old man took over my transaction. He didn't look pleased. I've seen him before, and he usually ignores me.

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Tonight, he grudgingly accepted my presence.

“You bring evil to this place,” he mumbled, as he took each item from my basket and rang it up. He knew what I was. He knew what Thorn was, and he knew what the new arrival was. “You just a shadow. Your ancestors already took your true form, leave you here.”

At first, I didn’t know what he meant, but then I remembered the dream. “A shadow,” I repeated.

As he finished ringing up my purchases, he slipped a slim wooden box that looked like an antique into my bag. “Take that evil with you,” he started to say in Chinese. I understood him, just like in the dream with my great-great grandfather. “The box, use it to communicate with your ancestors. Give them an offering, they will speak to you.” He switched back to his broken English. “Thank you. Please come again,” he lied.

I took my bags, made a half-hearted smile and thanked him back.

I walked toward Canal Street, Thorn keeping her distance but putting herself between the mystery hunter and me. If the guy decided to charge me, Thorn would provide interference. Good plan – if it weren’t for the other night hunter who jumped out of the shadow of an alley and pinned down Thorn. As she fought him off, the mystery hunter took the opportunity to go after me.

I stepped aside, nothing fancy, just the right motion at the right time to make my attacker crash into a pile of garbage on the curb. That was enough distraction for Thorn to get the upper hand on her assailant, who did his best to make sure she didn’t come to my aid.

But before the mystery hunter could regain his step, I dropped my bags, grabbed him by the neck and hoisted him against the wall.

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“Who are you?” I barked. But I knew the answer.

He probably could have answered if I weren't crushing his windpipe, but the hatred in his eyes was confirmation enough. This guy wanted payback. He was one of Thomas' minions.

Faster than even I realized, life flooded my arms and inundated his body. His heart pumped with a jolt, and electricity sparked through his once dead nerves. The static blood that kept him deathly animated dashed through his veins at inhuman speed. He was alive quick enough for that life to crush him.

His body jumped in a spasm before turning limp. I let him go, and he fell to the ground. I looked over to Thorn, who had incapacitated her adversary but didn't kill him.

“Should I take care of him?” I asked dryly.

“I think Daren would like us to question him first,” she replied with a policewoman's sternness. “You need a Secret Service detail,” she added, the tone of her voice indicating how much she needed a hole in head as well.

We weren't alone.

More night hunters converged where we were, but they were Thorn's backup. “Are you all right, Crux?” a young man asked. I could tell he was gifted about 20 years ago. Still a kid.

“Yeah,” I answered. I went to pick up the bags of groceries I dropped, only to find the contents spilled all over the sidewalk. “Guess that breaks the 10-second rule.”

“We'll have someone replace those for you,” the young man continued. “Daren would really like to speak with you.”

I only started to notice the adrenaline coursing through my body, the heart beat ready to pump through my chest, the rushing blood muffling my hearing.

“I bet he would,” I said.

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I kept replaying the events of the past few hours in my head while I waited in a really posh apartment near Lincoln Center. My security detail rushed me into a car that made a beeline to Midtown, and they hurried me into a building not far from my work. The deli where I met Daren was down the block. I was alone in the living room. I kept the TV off because it wouldn't be much of a distraction. The adrenaline was winding down, letting the exhaustion set in.

I kicked off my shoes, stretched my legs on the sofa and let the fatigue wash over me. My eyes started to droop, and my skin started to numb with relaxation when the scrape of the front door cut through the haze of my consciousness. I sat back up.

Daren walked into the room with the urgency of a man eager to know what the fuck went down. I may have been at the center of it all, but that didn't make me qualified to explain anything.

It didn't stop him from asking.

"I don't know," I answered. "He came after me, and I dodged him. That's it."

"That's not what our sentries saw. You moved so fast, they didn't see much of anything. And the most powerful day hunters don't have the kind of life force to kill that quickly."

"Well, I can't speak for other day hunters. I'm not even supposed to know who other day hunters are. And I haven't been around long enough to know what's usual."

"Yeah. I know." He didn't have to mention how that scared him. It was all in the tone. "When did Jackson teach you to fight?"

"Fight? I never learned how to fight."

Daren looked alarmed. "He didn't set aside time to train you? Not even the basics?"

"The ... circumstances of my inheritance didn't leave much

time.” I hoped the ambiguity of my answer conveyed how much I didn’t really want to talk about it. But that didn’t seem to concern Daren.

“So dodging your attacker and killing him?”

“I’ve never done anything like that before till tonight.”

Daren didn’t say anything, but the silence said enough. “We got something from the hunter that attacked Thorn,” he continued, changing the subject before the conversation reached its logical conclusion.

“Yeah? What did he say?”

“The attack was meant to provoke you into revealing your powers.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“They were able to identify you, but they needed confirmation.”

“Which I made readily apparent. Fuck.”

“They know where you live. Thomas’ removal service made no secret of where they retrieved his body. They’ll be waiting.”

“And that place doesn’t exactly have a supernatural doorman badass.”

“Yeah, but we do. You can stay here.”

“This place?” I gestured to the apartment on the whole.

“Yes. The Line owns the building, and we keep a few units open just in case.”

“Nice.”

“Isn’t it.” The dryness of his reply really put his distraction on full display. “If there’s anything you want to get from your apartment, get it during the day. We’ll have to talk later about protection and what you’re going to do in the daytime world.”

“Daren,” I stopped him. “Why are doing this?”

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He weighed his words carefully before answering. “Killian said the next time we met, he’d probably need my help. You don’t really say no to Killian.”

“No. I guess not.”

9

Jared and I finalized plans to meet on Saturday. With everything happening, going on a date should have been the last thing on my mind. But I figured if we did something during the day, we'd be all right. Besides, I needed to feel somewhat human. So we agreed on a late lunch or early dinner, depending on when either of us got up.

But that wouldn't happen for another 24 hours. In the meantime, I had to pack. I hadn't seen my parking space of an apartment since I left for work the night before. I grabbed an overnight bag and put in a few days' worth of clothes. I packed my laptop in its case, the myriad cords stashed into various pockets. I took a few other mundane things, too – toothbrush, electric shaver, shampoo, soap. By all appearances, I was getting ready for a weekend out of town. If only that were the case ...

Daren left me various keys to my temporary apartment – no apartment in New York City has fewer than five locks. He asked me why I chose to live in a hovel, when I could use the wealth Jackson left me after the inheritance.

“I'm supposed to blend in, right?” I started to explain. “My pay is crap, and if I lived somewhere nice, people might wonder how I can afford it. I haven't been at this long enough to shade the truth,

and I work with journalists – they can get really nosy.”

“You can blend in but not at the expense of security. That’s why hunters amass fortunes – to buy protection against the daytime world.”

“Well, I got two words for you: Alta Vista. Anyone can plug my name into a search engine and piece together who I am and who I’m supposed to be. You of all people should appreciate that.” Daren shrugged in agreement. “The security we need today is a lot more involved, and I didn’t think I needed it yet.”

In other words, I wasn’t ready to stop being a person. I wanted to be a new college graduate without the figurative pot to piss in because I didn’t know how to be anything else.

It did feel nice to be staying somewhere decent, though. If I’d gotten a network card with the laptop, I could have used the local area network in the apartment. It wasn’t big, but it felt palatial next to my walk-up. There was even room for a TV larger than a 13-inch. Having a separate kitchen was enough to impress me. A look in the barren refrigerator, though, confirmed that the usual tenants weren’t members of the daytime world.

So I went to Key Food down the street and picked up a bunch of frozen dinners and soda – the standard diet of a man in his late ‘20s. (Or someone who would continue to look like he was in his late ‘20s.) On my way to the checkout line, I ran into a friend of mine from a social group for Internet professionals. He wore a pair of sunglasses that didn’t quite hide the bruise circling his left eye.

“Hey, Gary,” I greeted. He greeted me back after flinching from being startled. “So, uh, nice sunglasses.” It wasn’t the first time I saw him wear them, and it wasn’t the first time he was covering up a black eye.

“Yeah,” he said with the fatigue of someone expecting a

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lecture.

“You and Sam had ... another disagreement?” The silence of his answer was enough confirmation. “Yeah, well. You still have my card?”

“I have it somewhere.”

“Here, let me give you another one,” I said as I fished out my wallet to give him a business card. I also took out my pen and wrote down my cell number. “If anything happens, no matter what, you’ll call me. Right?”

I could sense Gary stiffen when I said “right”, and even I had admit I was surprised by the nearly undetectable menace in that word.

“Yeah, I’ll call.”

“Any time, it doesn’t matter,” I added to dial back the tone. “Take care of yourself, OK?”

“I will.”

He went down another aisle, and I continued to the checkout, thinking about that one question. “Right?” Someone eavesdropping wouldn’t have heard it, but Gary did, and so did I.

I just threatened the life of Gary’s partner.

Daren would have preferred if I stayed in the safe confines of the apartment, and I was half-tempted to by all the space I had to spread out. But I’m a lousy cook, and I wasn’t in the mood to crack open a frozen dinner. So I went back down to my neighborhood and camped out in a café in Alphabet City. The last rays of the sun peeked through whatever gaps the New York City skyline allowed. It was safe for night hunters to come out.

Thorn sat a few tables away, and another night hunter stationed himself at the opposite end of the room. Each of them was

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paired with a mortal. I was surprised that Daren would hire the living, but then I realized the mortals would order something from the menu to cover the fact their partners couldn't.

I ordered a bagel with butter and a regular coffee. I was a few bites into my dinner when the room sank with the presence of old blood. Thorn's face went blank with caution, and her partner caught on. The night hunter across the room stood up and placed himself near the entrance.

A bulky man, not really fat, not really muscular, appeared at the entrance. He gave the night hunter a bemused look. "Really?" he started. "A young one like yourself thinks you can really stop the likes of me?" I got up and made my way to the entrance. Thorn started to get up, but I motioned for her to stay where she was. I tapped the night hunter on the shoulder. "It's OK. He just wants to talk."

The night hunter looked at me with a blank expression that said, "You can't be fucking serious."

"I'm sorry," I said to the night hunter. "I'm not sure what to call you."

"Elias," he answered.

"Well, Elias, I think the only person who can really deal with our visitor here is me, so let's just avoid a situation, all right?"

"Yes, sir," Elias replied, still doubtful.

"Please," I said to the visitor, "this way." I led him back to my table.

"Thank you," the visitor said as he sat opposite of me. He wasn't an attractive man. His shaggy hair was long, having thinned out into reedy strands by the time he was turned. His bulk gave off equal amounts swagger and clumsiness, the indulgences of his life in the daytime world taking toll on what may have been a vigorous

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youth.

“I thought it would be risky taking such a direct approach in meeting with you, but I felt what better way?”

“Am I supposed to know who you are?”

The bluntness of my tone did not sit well with him, if the stern look on his face were any indication. Then his expression softened as began to realize something. “You’ve not been here very long, and your memory is only starting to return to you. I guess it doesn’t all come back at one time, does it? Well, then – I am known as Calvino.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Well, Daren should school you better on the figureheads in this city. I lead one of the largest covens here. Thomas and I spent many years achieving a ... territorial balance. His death puts all of that into question. You, sir, have single-handedly destabilized the political structure of our society.”

“I guess.”

“You guess,” he repeated, doubtful I would be so oblivious. “Perhaps you do. I heard an attempt on your life was already taken.”

“Last night.”

“Yes, it’s to be expected. Thomas’ true believers will want to carry out their own justice, and that’s not an insignificant number. You dispatched what was essentially a scouting mission with ease, if the reports I heard are true. But I doubt even your considerable strength can face down a mob.”

“Strength? You make a lot of assumptions of what I can do.”

“And you underestimate what you will become. Let me share something with you – I knew Killian before he was Killian. I’ve been around long enough to see him disappear and come back. This conversation we’re having – it’s not unfamiliar to me.”

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“Well, practice makes perfect.”

Calvino chuckled. “That it does. Which is why I’m here. My legion can offer you better protection than what Daren can provide. The incident last night would not have been one, had my people been around. You can ask Daren himself – his resources are extensive, but they do not match the reach of the covens.”

“I bet. And if I agreed, what would you get out of it? I’m assuming you’re not here out of altruism.”

“No, no, I’m not. I would only ask a favor. Just one. Something we can discuss at a later time. But before all else, you should have Daren brief you on the role of the covens in the city. You’ll discover mine is best equipped to handle your ... situation.”

“Well, it seems like a generous offer, and I barely know you.”

“But I know you. Killian may not be what you are called now, but he is who you were. I believe this to be true. And I think we can help each other.”

I pretended to consider his offer, knowing what my answer already was. “Calvino,” I started. “You know, I may not know much now, and I don’t know what will come back to me as time goes on. But my instinct tells me we have unfinished business, and what you’re offering is nothing but a con. You took a gamble that maybe, just maybe, you can squeak by my bullshit meter and put yourself in a position to settle the score.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me, and I sure as hell don’t know what I’m doing from day to day. But I know things will work out for me. Whether they work out for you is another matter entirely.

“And it’s not anything I’m concerned about.”

Calvino laughed again, amused by being caught in his con. “Maybe it’s something you should.” He got up. “Well, I had to try. Of

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course, I know what that business is, and you still have to learn it. That puts you quite at a disadvantage.”

“I pick things up pretty quickly.”

“Perhaps you do.” He turned around and started for the exit. “This has been a very interesting meeting, Crux. I look forward to screwing with your life all over again.” He chuckled to himself as he left.

Thorn came over. “You OK?”

“For now.”

10

Jared noticed the smirk I was trying to hide while I was looking at photos of his younger self displayed on the top of a small bookcase. He had long locks in those pictures, hanging all the way down to the end of his neck. It was a far cry from the meticulous, slick cut he sported now. I had to admit I liked him a lot better with short hair.

I called him up at around 1 p.m. to make sure he was indeed awake. He wasn't, but he didn't begrudge me for it. Point score for him. He did ask that I pass by his place closer to 3 p.m., which was reasonable for a person who empathized with shift work.

Jared lived in Chelsea, the city's gay neighborhood, and his tasteful one-bedroom apartment got the sort of attention to detail singular to gay men and journalists. He had enough furniture to make the cramped confines seem spacious, and he made unlikely combinations work. I couldn't take my eyes off of this one end table slathered with an unfortunate shade of green. It didn't look out of place in Jared's apartment.

"So you think the sight of me with long hair is funny, huh?" Jared asked as he snuck up behind me.

"I'm sorry," I said, letting out a giggle I'd manage to stifle. "I just didn't peg you as the type to have guitar-god hair."

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“That was long ago and far away.”

“Evidently back when you thought you were straight.” I was referring to the girl with whom he was entwined in the photo.

“Yup. She was my high school sweetheart. For a while, I didn’t think I was gay because I enjoyed having sex with her.”

“What changed your mind?”

“The fact I lost my virginity to a guy in junior high.” He reached up and started to run his fingers through my hair. “You have nice hair.”

“I was flipping channels and caught a Saturday Night Live rerun with the Smashing Pumpkins as musical guest,” I said as I turned around to face him. “I fell in love with James Iha’s hair.”

“It looks good like this. Not too long, not too short.”

I put my arm around his waist, and he drew closer to me. “Glad you like it.” He stopped running his fingers through my hair and looked at me straight in the eye. Our lips locked, and we kissed for few seconds.

“We can get carried away if we go on like this,” I said after I pulled away.

“That’s not such a bad idea.”

“Yeah, but I’m feeling hungry.”

Jared sighed. “Okay.”

We decided to go to one of the Indian restaurants on Sixth Street between First and Second Avenue. He ordered chicken tandoori, while I settled for a kabuli dish. I let him talk some more about his past.

Jared grew up in a Dallas suburb, joined the marching band in high school, hung out with the crowd who played role-playing games and read science fiction. He went to a small state college in the middle of nowhere on full scholarship and managed to score

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a Dow Jones Newspaper Fund internship in his junior year. He worked for the Post, who was so impressed by him, they hired him when he graduated from college.

Even though he came to accept his homosexuality while he was in college, he wasn't really in a place to party. Going to college in a small West Texas town didn't really produce many opportunities. (Not to say he didn't have a few encounters.) Then he moved to New York City, and he made up for lost time.

He made it clear he was HIV-negative, and I feigned relief at the news. I couldn't tell him I was immune to everything but a beheading or a stab in the heart. After getting all that partying out of his system, Jared started dating in earnest, even getting involved in a relationship that ended last year.

I tried to let him dominate the conversation. I just wanted to escape into someone else's humanity. I didn't want to watch my words or to think about how to avoid mentioning that other life. But he wouldn't let me off that easily, and I told him as much as I could.

I wasn't as lucky as Jared. I fell in love with my best friend in high school – his name was Richard – and he was definitely straight. When he went out of state for college, I was heartbroken, and I didn't really get over it till I started sleeping with “a professor”.

“You were sleeping with your professor?” Jared said, shocked by the scandal.

“Not my professor – a professor. He was my boss. We worked on an academic publication.” His name was Jackson Streng.

“Oh, wow! You weren't caught or anything?”

“Nope. No one had a clue. We kept it well under wraps.”

“How long did you see him?”

“Till I left for this job. He was the first person I ever had sex with.”

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“You mean you didn’t lose your virginity till ...?”

“Till two years ago. I’m a late-bloomer.”

“Well,” he said, a mischievous glint in his eye. “We need to get you caught up.”

After lunch, we wandered around the Village. We checked out a few shops on St. Mark’s Place, enjoyed the weather in Washington Square Park, found a comic book store near Union Square. I looked for back issues of “The Kindly Ones” story arc from *The Sandman*, while Jared thumbed through some Robert Jordan books.

During our excursion around the Village, we started to flirt with each other. He slipped his hand onto the inside of my leg while we were sitting in Washington Square Park. I stroked his back to get his attention as he was flipping pages through some books. While we were browsing the stacks of St. Mark’s Books, I gave him a quick kiss when I made sure no one was looking.

After the comic book store, we decided to head back to his place. We cuddled up on his sofa, his back resting on my chest, our arms entwined and resting on his stomach. I bent down and kissed him. We started to neck.

We let our lips explore each other’s face and neck. I nibbled on his lips. He probed my mouth with his tongue. I left a trail of kisses across his neck. He licked my ear and chewed softly on my lobe. His hand made a mess of my hair.

I was thankful Jared was just another human being. The salty taste of his skin aroused my penis, not my thirst. I breathed in the scent of his cologne, not his blood. And his body felt warm, not cold. The last time I kissed a man, he ended up dead.

After a while, Jared got up and took my hand. He led me to his bedroom. Before we started taking off our clothes, I had to break some more news to Jared.

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“Technically, I’m still a virgin,” I confessed.

“You mean you’ve never?”

“No. No anal. I may be a recovering Catholic, but that’s one thing I haven’t managed to shake off.”

Jared smiled laviciously. The news seemed to turn him on even more. “Any reason why not?”

“Just that I haven’t been with any one man long enough for him to earn my trust.”

“Well, I hope I get to earn that trust.” Then he kissed me again.

We took off our shirts, and he guided me to lie on his bed. He explored my body with his mouth, kissing my chest, running his tongue in long strokes from the bottom of my stomach the top of my collarbone. I rubbed his back while he licked my body. Occasionally, he’d stop and gasp as I gave his back a rub – backrubs turned him on even more. After a while, we traded places, and I returned the favor. I let my body rub against his penis through his pants as I pulled myself up to cover his torso in a lick.

Eventually we lost our pants and underwear. He serviced me first, devouring my dick like he was starved for it. He ravaged it with such force, I felt pain mixed in with the pleasure. I gasped when he ran his tongue in the crack of my loins, and I went crazy when his tongue started to tickle the area of flesh underneath my balls.

We took turns. I moistened his dick with my mouth, and when I was satisfied with the slickness of his penis, I rubbed it with my hand as I ate his balls. Jared moaned loudly as my strokes became faster and harder. At some point, he took over the rubbing, as I continued to take each of his balls into my mouth, playing with them with my tongue and teeth. Jared let out a cry of pleasure when

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he shot his seed onto his chest. He immediately guided me to lie on my back as he ran his hand in his own semen.

“No lubrication is better than a man’s cum,” he whispered.

Jared grabbed my penis and started to rub. He was right. The friction of his slickened hand against my dick produced a pleasure that made my groin numb. I felt a heat build up in my balls. My legs weakened, and I grunted with each shot my penis fired onto my chest.

Jared took a few seconds to catch his breath before making his way to the bathroom. I heard his sink run for half a minute. He came back with warm washcloth and cleaned me off. The rub of the washcloth felt more intimate to me than anything else we’d done. There was just something loving about the way Jared let the washcloth’s wet warmth caress my skin.

Afterward, he cleaned himself off, then hung the washcloth on the bar of his shower stall to dry. He came back to bed, and we held each other as the post-coital warmth enveloped our bodies. We said nothing for a while.

“That was nice,” Jared said, breaking the silence. “Thank you.”

“No, thank you.”

“Next time, we start working on that trust thing.”

“You sound like a man with some goals.”

He kissed me. “You better believe it.”

He turned around and pressed his back against my chest. My leg wrapped around one of his, while his hand found mine and pressed it against his chest. I let my breathing match the rhythm of his.

The sun was setting as I held Jared. I could tell he was drifting into sleep as his breathing slowed. I had hoped the after-sex

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fatigue would help me to sleep as well, but the darkening sunlight in Jared's bedroom only forced me awake.

I know they were still watching me. Thomas' minions, Calvino's coven, Daren's security detail – they were out there, making note of every detail of my life. They were bound to see me with Jared.

I had hoped to be done with my date before sunset, but I didn't expect to have sex with Jared that afternoon. When he woke up, he'd probably want to go out for coffee. If we made love some more, he'd want to go out to dinner even later in the night. The most prudent course of action would be to leave now, before the sun abdicated its duties for the day.

Fuck it. I was where I wanted to be. I wanted to have my arms around him. I wanted to time the rhythm of his breathing with my own. I wanted to be here.

The rest of the underworld could go to fucking hell.

11

“Calvino isn’t lying,” Daren informed me. “He does lead one of the larger covens in the city. He has habit of overstating how much power he has, but he’s not an insignificant player in society.” Calvino said I ought to get caught up with the politics of this town, and despite the source, it was a good suggestion. So I asked Daren to stop by the apartment.

“Who has the largest coven?” I asked

“It was Thomas by a slim margin. After that, I’d say Fen, then Dietrich.”

“I have no idea who Fen and Dietrich are.”

“Dietrich came to the city around 1850, after Thomas arrived here 20 years earlier. Fen arrived earlier this century. Dietrich originally came from Austria, Fen from China. Both them are in the ballpark of a millennia old, so their blood is really powerful.”

“How many covens are there in the city?”

“Plenty, but the bigger covens pretty much extort a ‘security fee’ from the neighborhood covens.”

“Like the mob shaking down restaurants and bars for trash collection.”

“Let’s not fool ourselves. They’re called ‘covens,’ but really they’re the mob. Hell, the Line is a coven, but at least we serve some

sort of purpose. The covens are nothing but gangs.” At some point, these figureheads are going to think they can force me to join. “And I’d say there are about seven of them staking out territory in the five boroughs.”

“Who divides up Manhattan?”

“Thomas, Calvino and Fen.”

“Calvino and Fen are the ones who could really benefit from Thomas’ group disintegrating.”

“From what I heard, it’s open season. Dietrich has started to encroach into Manhattan, and he’s got Brooklyn and parts of Long Island locked. Even some of the covens up in the Bronx are crossing borders.”

“Calvino was right, then. I managed to destabilize the political structure of the city in one night.”

Daren wavered. “You put a dent in it, but these turf wars flare up every so often. It’s not unprecedented.”

I sensed Daren hadn’t finished his thought. “But?”

“I don’t think I’ve seen a land rush this fast before, and I don’t understand what the urgency is. Something is different.”

At Daren’s urging, I went to a nearby electronics store to get a network card for my laptop. After I installed it, I connected a network cable to the LAN in the apartment. Then I fired up a proprietary program that allowed me access to the Line’s historical archives.

I spent a good part of the night reading up on Thomas, Calvino and Fen. Thomas had a relatively amicable relationship with Fen compared to his relationship Calvino. Fen pretty much controlled everything below 34th Street, with Chinatown as his base (naturally.) Thomas laid claim to the rest of Midtown and the Upper

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East and Upper West Sides. That left Harlem to Calvino.

When Calvino said he spent years trying to achieve a territorial balance with Thomas, it really meant Thomas kicked his ass out of the Upper West Side. The fight didn't leave Calvino's resources in good shape, and he's been rebuilding ever since.

Of the three covens, only Fen has a line of succession that anybody knows about. In the unlikely – but not inconceivable – event of Fen's death, the coven would immediately name a successor, and it would brook no argument. (Fen wasn't bad to look at, but his successor, Chang, was kind of hot.) Thomas and Calvino had no such lines of succession.

Thomas liked the idea of keeping his enemies closer, which explains how the two most likely candidates to succeed him despise each other. But neither candidate has the kind of old blood Thomas possessed, and that blood kept both factions in line. His death meant the start of a war for succession.

One thing those factions could agree on was getting payback for his death, but now it was a contest. Whichever faction could string my hide would lay claim to the empire. Oh, fuck me.

Daren was right –Thomas' death opened up a land grab. Calvino is starting to encroach on the Upper West Side, and Dietrich is eyeing a foothold in the Upper East Side. As Calvino goes into Thomas' old territory, a few covens in the Bronx are coming after parts of Harlem. Fen was sitting on the sidelines, no doubt waiting for the other covens to exhaust themselves before entering the fight.

“Thomas, man,” I said to no one in particular. “Your name should have been Franz Ferdinand.”

The Line's profile of Calvino confirmed my unfavorable first impression of him. As a mortal, he was a feudal lord who held an iron

fist over his subjects. He was greedy, a glutton for power who wanted nothing but more – more wealth, more power, more women. A bout with the flu almost made him lose everything. His subordinates plotted to steal his fortune, but they had the misfortune of being around when Calvino recovered. After that, he vowed to live forever.

Calvino's power continued to grow, and rumor spread he made pacts with demons to make his forces invincible. That was only partly true. What he did was steal magic. He bribed wizards, witches and warlocks, and the ones who didn't cooperate, he coerced. He threatened families of reputable magicians and offered opiates to disreputable ones.

Calvino even stole his immortality. He captured a night hunter by using one his concubines as bait, then had his magicians conduct experiments to discover the method of inheritance. Once transformed, he was unstoppable – to humans, at least.

But nighttime immortality meant entrusting the administration of his wealth to daytime agents. He didn't trust any of his subjects, frightened of him as they were. He found out about day hunters too late – no known method exists to change between night and day hunting. Since then, he's attempted to find a means to commute his power, to allow him the benefits of immortality without the inconvenience of a nocturnal life.

It's been a few centuries, and he hasn't been successful yet.

I found a profile for Thomas in the Line's archive, but I didn't want to read it. Despite the fact he tried to kill me, I still felt an attraction to him, and the more I knew, the more real he would become. I didn't want to mourn his death, nor regret killing him.

The Line also had a profile for Killian. I left that one unread as well.

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I switched windows on my computer to my web browser and went to the website of my work. A quick skim of the page drew my attention to another short article about the Manske Ruby. Officials at the museum housing the ruby refused to file a police report. The museum's contributors – suspecting foul play – put pressure on the government to initiate an investigation. No agency responded.

I went back to the Line's database and searched for the Manske Ruby. Nothing came up. So I called Daren.

"The Manske Ruby? I heard about it, but we wouldn't have a record of it. I haven't run across anything in hunter lore about the ruby, and if we had anything, it would probably still be filed in the library."

"How hard would it be to put together a profile about the ruby?"

"Probably not hard. Give us a day or so. Something special about the ruby?"

"Maybe. I won't know till I know more about it."

I didn't want to tell Daren about a flash of memory. I remember meeting the ruby and telling it to behave.

12

A week had passed since I fed on Thomas, and the thirst started to scratch at my throat. Daren expressed his concerns about my going out on a hunt, and he offered to hook me up with a broker. I appreciated the thought, but instinct told me to go out anyway. Something needed to happen, and it wouldn't if I were holed up in Daren's guest suite. So he insisted on a bigger security detail.

We ended up back in the Village again, to the same place where I met Thomas. Thorn, who was part of the detail, questioned whether it was smart to come back. I told her no, it wasn't, but it's where I'm supposed to be. She shrugged and disappeared into the crowd, keeping her distance but watchful all the same.

The bouncer was different, but the routine was the same – ring on finger, handshake, entry. When I walked into the lounge, no one turned to look, but I could sense an almost imperceptible change in the demeanor of the room. The conversation got quieter. A few people glanced my way, then pretended I wasn't there. The bartender was the same from that night, and when I ordered a Dos Equis, he regarded me with a cautious weariness that said, "Don't start any shit here tonight because I don't fucking need it." I went to an empty sofa in a corner of the lounge far from the crowd.

Thorn re-emerged and took the seat next to the sofa.

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“What’s your read of the room?” I asked her.

“A few people recognize you, but most of this crowd doesn’t really care.”

“You think they’ll cause trouble.”

“No. If they tried, the owners would shut this place down, and hunters can’t afford to lose it.”

“Couldn’t a bunch of hunters just threaten the owners to keep it open?”

Thorn looked at me in a way that showed just how stupid my question was. “This isn’t the 19th Century. There are a lot of people out there making a lot of money to keep our existence secret. You should see the kind of place the owners live.”

Just then, a young man caught my eye. Or rather, a young-looking man caught me eye. When I got a good look at his face, his eyes showed the age of a person who seen a few decades pass. I smiled, and he smiled. Then we went back to our present company.

“A bite?” Thorn asked.

“Depends on the next time I look up.”

So I got Thorn to talk some more about all the money made to keep the hunters’ existence secret. The cleanup services go far beyond corpse disposal. That was the core business in the last century, but the information age saw them expand into what they called identity management. It was really identity theft. Professionals overseeing the assets of hunters charge premium prices for their services, especially for business that can’t happen during the day. As hunting became more difficult with urbanization, middlemen – the “brokers” (in other words, pimps) – started to appear, promising to connect night hunters with “happy hour” and day hunters with “nightcaps”.

As Thorn explained all this, I would glance up at the young

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man, and he would catch my eye. We did our dance of eye contact for a few minutes till finally I went over and joined him.

We introduced ourselves. He called himself Dumas. His face was almost feline, high cheeks, cute nose, slim lips. His deep brown hair was short but full, and the paleness of his blue eyes suited him beautifully. He dressed his slim figure casually, nothing achingly fashionable like most people in the room. He felt grounded. And weary.

He hadn't reached a century. He was in the teen-age years of his immortality, a time when everything was new but nothing felt different. It's a treacherous times when hunters can become bored and regret their decision. Those who grow out this period go on to reconnect with the curiosity that fueled their early life, but on that scale of time – far broader than a mortal life – it's a challenge some fail to meet.

“So, are you a top or a bottom?” Dumas asked. Was I a day hunter or a mortal?

“A top,” I answered. A day hunter.

“Ah.”

“You looking for a bottom?”

“No. Not at all.” He moved closer. “I was hoping to meet a top tonight.”

“Well, then, I guess you get your wish tonight.”

We traded small talk for a while, what I did, where he lived, what I liked, what he preferred. I wanted him to drop his guard enough so I could ask him what I really wanted to know. When he reached that point, I said, “So, are you ready to move on?”

His weary eyes displayed the resign of his answer.

“It's crossed my mind a few times recently,” he replied. “There's a part of me that says buck up and give it a go, but it feels

like such a hollow sentiment. Most of the methods out there to get the job done are pretty unpleasant, and I don't know why, but I keep meeting all these young tops who don't have the force to make it happen."

"Is that right? They must not have been more than 25."

"The last one was 18. How long have you been at it?"

"You'd be disappointed."

"Try me."

I asked him if he was sure, and he insisted he was. "OK, then. Nine months."

Dumas rolled his eyes. "You're a baby."

I shrugged, "Sorry. Guess you want someone more vintage."

"Oh, I don't know." He studied me for a moment. "I kind of like you."

"Thanks."

"You really don't strike me as an infant."

"You'd be surprised."

Dumas paused, the change in his demeanor microscopic if you weren't looking for it. "I'm sorry," he started, "I forget what you wanted to be called."

Right. You didn't forget. You just want confirmation. "Call me Crux."

"Crux," he repeated, pretending to use the technique of repeating a name as a way to remember it.

"Oh, you know who I am," I said, trying to lighten the accusation. "You've heard of me."

His shoulders dropped from being discovered. "The name sounded familiar, but I just didn't know where."

"Yeah. That's me."

"You really helped Thomas move on?" I was supposed to

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perceive the question as hopeful, from someone looking for a hunter with the strength to make it happen. I heard something else instead.

“Actually, he was forcing me to move on, but something happened. I don’t know what. But I’m here, and he’s not. And I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Well, OK.” Dumas inched even closer. “I guess age ain’t nothing but a number for you.”

“I guess so.”

“How thirsty do you feel?”

“Pretty thirsty.”

“Enough to help me?”

I paused. His desire to die was real, but the motive didn’t seem entirely genuine.

“Yes. I can help you,” I answered. “I just have to ask – “

“Yes?”

“Are you a member of Thomas’ coven?”

Dumas blinked. He considered what kind of answer to give, but given what he knew about me, the truth was his only option.

“Yeah,” he answered. “I’m a member.”

I tempered my sigh.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he replied. “I’m not as pious as the other members of the coven.” He practically spat out the word “pious”. It was an interesting word choice. “I do my service, and I pay my tribute. But I’m not a hardcore believer in Thomas’ invincibility, lot of good it did him. It’s just a business arrangement I entered into with my family at the time.”

“Other hunters?” I asked, to clarify he meant an immortal family, a localized mini-coven.

“Yeah. A bunch of goons came up to us one day and said we had to start paying tribute. As time went on, a lot of my family

members really got into the organization, but I never had the heart for it. So I moved out, but I still live in the neighborhood, and once I'm bound by the tribute ...”

“You can't get out of it.”

“No.”

“So encountering me was a lucky find, then.”

“If you're asking whether I came here to seek you out, the answer is no. But I did want to see the last place Thomas went to before he died. Honestly, if it were up to me, I'd just say fuck it. I'd check us into a hotel, and get on with business.”

“Fine by me.”

“But ...”

“There always is one.”

“The consequences of letting you go are far more severe.”

I nodded. “I bet.” I reached over and took his hand. And I let a bit of life flow through it and into him. He stiffened from the shock of that life animating the nerves in his hand, warming his skin.

“How about this?” I started. “You do what you need to do, whatever that is. I'm guessing it's an ambush between here and your place.” He shrugged in a way that was a nod. “OK, well, I'll deal with it. And afterward, I'll help you, if you still want me to.”

Dumas looked at me, the doubt in his face clear. “You don't know what you're facing,” he said.

“No, I don't,” I replied. “But neither do they.”

13

Dumas made sure a handkerchief was hanging out of his left pocket as we walked down Seventh Avenue toward Bleecker Street.

“You know that stands for something, right?” I asked, referring to an elaborate code devised by gay men long ago to signify their particular ... tastes.

“I figured it wouldn’t look too strange in this neighborhood.”

“So you into ... that?”

“I don’t even know what it means.”

Before we left the club, Dumas called his coven bosses to find out what he needed to do. While he did that, Thorn got more back-up. She was trailing a few feet behind us. I couldn’t tell where the rest of the detail was, but I could feel them nearby.

“They have checkpoints,” Dumas started. “The higher-ups say they know your face, so all any of us peons need to do is make sure you get spotted at one of them.”

“Where is it?”

“Across the street. We’ll pass it somewhere on the corner. I don’t know exactly where.” When the last of the oncoming traffic passed to signal pedestrians to start jaywalking, we headed across the avenue along Bleecker. We reached the corner and kept on walking.

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“OK. Now what?”

“My place is closer to Ninth. That part of the neighborhood is deserted by this time of night. I was told just to stay on Bleecker.”

We continued to walk, and the further west we went, the thinner the crowds became. The silence between us got uncomfortable, for me at least. He was walking me into a trap, and it doesn't really inspire much small talk. But I gave it a shot anyway.

“So tell me – if the consequences weren't severe, would you still rat me out?”

“Nah. I'd actually say fuck the coven. They want you that much, they can get you themselves.”

“You don't really like being a member, do you?”

“At this point, I'm more apathetic. It's got some advantages. A really good network. Great parties, if you're into that sort of thing. If I get into some stupid scrape, the coven has my back. And the kinds of things I do for them aren't terrible.”

“But?”

“It's too big. Membership is like a numbers game. I mean, I'm content to be as far away from the top as possible, and I think I've only ever been in the same room with Thomas about two times. But what's the point of having someone like me around? I don't have much power to speak of, and I'm not any good in a fight. I've got some friends in the organization, but they're not anyone I could just be with.”

“You liked it better with your family?”

“Yeah. I miss that more than anything else. I don't know if I miss *them* in particular, but just that – a handful of people with something in common. It was better, more comfortable.”

“Let me take a wild guess. You started to think about moving on after you moved out.”

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“I started thinking about moving on before then. I didn’t really take it seriously till after.”

I started to feel them, hiding in the shadows. The further we walked, the heavier their presence felt. The detail that was following me started to get lost among the new company.

“How would you feel if the covens all went away?”

“How would I feel?” Dumas repeated, probably never even entertaining the thought before. “I don’t know. But the idea of it actually sounds good to me.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

The sidewalks were deserted, and the traffic was non-existent. It’s not unusual, but it was unusually convenient. We reached a corner when five night hunters stepped out from the shadows and surrounded us.

“Dumas,” one of them called out. “Thank you for bringing him. We can take it from here.”

I put my arm around Dumas’ waist and pulled him to me and kissed his cheek. He looked stunned by the sudden display of affection. “You think you can wait?” I asked rhetorically. “I’ll try not to take too long.”

A hunter with dark skin – most likely black before he was turned – snorted. “You’re a cocky son of a bitch, aren’t you?”

I gave a slight shrug. “Maybe. Or maybe I’m just stating a fact.”

The black hunter’s reply was a look of scorn.

“You got the roads blocked off?” I asked. “Cause I think we’re going to need a little room.” I started to walk past them into the street. One of them tried to block my path, but the black hunter waved him off. I guess he agreed with me. They followed me into the street. I turned around to face them.

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“Well?” I taunted. “Be my guest.” I didn’t even bother assuming a fighting stance. They feigned confusion, looking at each other trying to decide who would go first. But they already picked someone out, and I wasn’t surprised when he charged at me with a long knife. I slapped the knife out of his hands with the back of mine, then slapped the side of his face with enough force to make him stumble. Then I kicked him before he touched the ground, sending him flying back to his cohorts. He landed right at their feet. That really pissed them off.

The next guy came after me, and I dispatched him as effortlessly as his predecessor. That time, I nearly tore his head off. The black hunter came after me next, and he managed to get in a touch. That just gave me more incentive to beat his ass till he couldn’t get up. The last two came at me at once, and it took a bit more work. They managed to get in a few more touches, but the scratches they gave me didn’t compare to the damage I left their ribs, arms and legs.

I didn’t kill any of them, but I did take them out of the fight. More of them came out of the shadow.

One after the other took their turns, some of them better than others. A few, too easy to block. I wasn’t taxed. Sure, I was working up a sweat, and my heart rate got racing. But harm to me was in short supply.

They must have brought in a lot of people, because the one-on-one attacks started to multiply. Two at a time, three at a time. That really got me working, but the results were the same – their body count was rising, and I wasn’t dead.

And still I didn’t manage to kill any of them.

The fighting reached a point where they stopped coming. They surrounded me, but they didn’t make a move. They started

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to see the ... “challenge” of getting their payback, but they were determined to collect. I started to find the whole ordeal tedious.

“All of you, just come at me,” I finally announced. The boldness of the request made them skeptical. “You want to take me in? Hold a public execution? It’s not going to happen if you come at me piecemeal. So, come on.”

They bought it. Or rather, one enthusiastic member of the mob bought into it, and when he did, the others had to follow to back him up. They tackled me, and started to wail on me. Each jab knocked me further into something other than unconsciousness. White. Everything was turning white. I closed my eyes and saw nothing but white. And the white came with warmth. A warmth that began in my chest and radiated outward through my arms, my legs, my head. The warmth enveloped me, covered me till all the blows felt like harmless taps, and after a while, the taps themselves stopped.

And I was in the white.

As the white started to fade, I could hear a voice cutting through my consciousness.

“Crux, can you hear me? Are you all right?”

The white faded some more, and I found myself sitting on a curb. The flashing lights of emergency vehicles and police cars flooded the area. Bodies were lined up in a row a few feet away from a crash between a city bus and a semi-truck. Did a bus really run down this street? What’s a semi-truck doing in this neighborhood?

The black hunter was one of the bodies lined up in the street. To the residents of the neighborhood, they were casualties in a major accident. But it was all staged. Even the news crews on the scene were fake. It was all theater to cover up something even more

implausible.

My clothes were a wreck, and I had some scrapes on my arms and face. I was expecting to feel a lot of pain from all that pummeling, but as I ran my hand across my ribs, I felt no pain. I looked at my arms and saw no bruising.

“Crux?”

“Yeah, I’m all right. I think. Yeah.” I finally looked at who was trying to tend to me, and it was Juan Santos.

“Can you tell me what happened?” he asked.

“They tried to kill me.” That was as much answer I could muster.

The theater was winding down. The bus and truck were towed away, the bodies loaded into vans and carried off. The fake police were still talking to fake witnesses. I could see Dumas across the street.

“I don’t know,” I heard a voice mumbling behind me. “It don’t look like her. Hell, it don’t look like a she. Are you sure?” I turned around and saw a homeless guy. It took me a while before I recognized him from the night I was attacked in Chinatown. He was pushing around a cart and talking to one of the bags inside. “I think we should keep looking,” he said and wandered off.

Daren came up as the homeless guy left and sat next to me while Juan coordinated the clean-up effort.

“Damn, this is one expensive cover-up,” I commented.

“It’s why they need to charge so high for the basics,” Daren added. He let a beat pass before he got to the point. “What happened here tonight, Crux?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I do know. I let them walk me into a trap, so I could engage them. But this? I don’t know it where that

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came from.”

Daren didn't seem surprised by my answer, nor did it sit well with him. I wish I could tell him more.

“Killian ever do something like this?” I asked.

“I wouldn't put it past him,” Daren answered, “but I never saw him get into a situation where he needed to.”

“Consider yourself lucky.”

Daren didn't doubt me.

Dumas was still around when the last of the theater dispersed, so I went over to him.

“You still feel like you want to move on?” I asked.

He looked at me, his eyes much more hopeful than what I saw earlier in the evening. “No,” he answered. “I don't think so.”

I bent down and kissed him on the cheek again. “Maybe I'll see you around. Get yourself home.” He smiled, then turned to go.

“Crap,” I said to Daren.

“What?”

“Is it too late to call that broker? I'm still thirsty.”

14

Daren was trying to get me to listen to him about strengthening security, increasing the size of the detail, reaching out to potential informants – all very sensible ideas in the wake of tonight’s incident. But I wasn’t paying much attention, and it didn’t take him long to realize it.

“You’re not concerned?” he asked, more curious than disbelieving.

“Not too much. I think this helps me.” Daren looked at me, doubtful. I explained: “You’d think if you went after someone powerful enough to kill Thomas, you’d want to find out the extent of that power. You wouldn’t just pick a fight and assume brute force is going to be enough.

“I mean, a small army came after me tonight, and they almost didn’t make it out alive. I bet if you ask around, none of Thomas’ potential successors would have authorized that action. The coven is splintering further than anyone expected, and it’s going to take a while for them to get it together before they come after me again. If they come after me again.”

“Don’t you mean ‘when’ they come after you again?”

“No, they’ll be distracted for a while. They’ll be too busy tearing each other part to think about me. And if what that kid

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Dumas was telling me is right, their ranks aren't as tight as everyone believes. Whatever is left won't have the same force as an army under Thomas. And I've already taken care of them once."

"You're assuming a lot about how much you can handle."

"And you don't know enough." That bit of swagger took both of us off-guard, but we both ignored it. "No, my real concern is Calvino. He and Killian had a beef, and Killian left it for me to clean up. I just have to find out what that is."

"Memory hasn't come back yet?"

"Not of that."

Daren shrugged. "Well, just let me know how I can be of any help."

I remembered my request from a few days ago. "Totally unrelated, but did you ever find anything about the Manske Ruby?"

"Nothing that isn't already known among the underground. It's never really had much of an impact on hunter life, so the records of it aren't much. If you wanted to know more, you'd need to talk to someone in the family."

"The family who keeps it."

"Yes. A few of them are here in New York, and I know someone who can get you in touch with them."

"If you could, please."

"What does the Manske Ruby have to do with anything?"

"I have no idea."

I asked Daren about the fronts he uses for the Line.

"Anything you want to know specifically?"

"Whether any of them are looking for someone with a journalism background who can code a web site."

"Well, yeah, I've got a front for that. A few even. We can't fill

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those positions fast enough. Why?”

“I need an exit strategy. I can’t stay at the network – “

“And you need a plausible cover for giving your two weeks notice.”

“Exactly. Hell, if you actually need the help ... ”

“I’ll find you something.”

“Oh, and I’ll be moving out by the end of the week.”

Daren couldn’t hide his shock at the abruptness of that announcement. “You don’t have to. You can stay here as long as you like. Maybe even sign a lease if you want.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” If he could have blushed at that moment, he would have. “No, it’s like you said – I need to start using my resources.”

“It’s about time you started tapping Jackson’s accounts.” That wasn’t really what I had in mind.

Later that morning, Daren had someone send up the sketchbook he showed me that first time we met. I flipped through it till I reached a page with a name written in the margin. I logged into the Line’s internal network and looked up that name. I followed various links and indexes till I found a new name that represented the institution today.

A simple telephone book search later, I had a phone number and called.

“I represent the estate of Caleigh Mac Innes. I’d like to schedule an appointment with Mr. Travers.” The administrative assistant on the other end of the line did the usual block interference for a man of Mr. Travers’ stature. An appointment wasn’t possible, too busy, how about talking to some other flack? “I’m sorry, that won’t do. Please tell Mr. Travers the Mac Innes estate called, and

when you call back, please have an appointment time ready. Thank you." I hung up.

Five minutes later, the assistant called back, conciliatory and gracious. She mentioned an appointment time for later in the afternoon, and I said that was acceptable.

"Mr. Travers is running a bit late, but he'll be with you as soon as he can," the assistant said. "May I get you anything? Water? Soda?"

"Water, please," I answered. She disappeared into a side room to get it.

As I waited for her to return, I gazed at the various pictures hanging on the walls of the spacious Midtown office on the 23rd floor. Don Travers was one the lead partners in the law firm of Milton, Travers and Arlen. He could be seen in many of the pictures on the wall at various stages of life, although the captions would list him under different names. The pictures themselves spanned many decades, as far back as the early 20th Century. The earliest picture dated from 1923.

The assistant came back with a small bottle of Dasani. Before I could twist open the top and take a swig, her phone rang. "Yes, he's here. Would you like me to bring him in? Oh? Well, OK." She hung up and turned to me. "He'll be out to see you."

"Is that ordinary?" I asked, curious about their conversation.

"Actually, no."

The door opened, and Don stepped out. His thinning, gray hair was cut in a way that looked flattering on him. The age of his face seemed typical for a middle-aged man in a white collar job, crow's feet around the eyes, some facial lines but no skin sagging too much. He smiled, showing off a perfect set of teeth made possible by

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adult braces, which had been removed years ago.

He greeted me, and we shook hands, going through all the motions of two businessmen meeting to discuss complex and boring matters. The assistant looked on, probably wondering who would be so important to bring Mr. Travers out of his office. He led me inside his office.

He greeted me by my name. "I'm going to assume that is not the name you use in the nighttime. How should I address you?"

"Call me Crux."

"Crux, yes. And you represent the estate of Caleigh Mac Innes. In what capacity, may I ask?"

"Heir," I answered. I pulled out a page I tore from Killian's notebook and handed it to him. "I believe that's your signature."

Travers took the page and read it carefully. His shoulders rose as he took a deep breath to make a quiet sigh. "Yes, that is my signature."

"From about a century ago, if I remember correctly."

"Yes." He started to hand the page back to me, but I motioned for him to keep it. "So, Killian, you've returned."

"I'm not Killian. Whoever you knew, he's gone. I just have his memories. Some of them, at least."

"And you're here for the rest."

"I'm hoping you can help in that regard."

He nodded. "Excuse me, please." He got up from his desk and walked over to a cabinet. He opened one of the cabinet doors to reveal a small safe. He dialed in the combination and opened the safe. He didn't even need to search for what he needed. He took out a moleskin notebook, closed the safe and brought it back to his desk.

"While you were away, the world went through a lot of ... upheaval," he said, understating the history of the world in the first

half of the 20th Century. “I’ve had to move the assets quite a number of times to insure their security. Globalization of the financial industry has allowed me to spread them out in such a way that if one part falls, it doesn’t affect the rest. Account numbers, locations – they’re all in this notebook.” He handed it to me.

Travers did an impressive job managing the wealth Killian had inherited, to which I would add and from which I would benefit. The number of people to assist in that management had increased exponentially, making it far more complex job than it had been before. Despite the abilities I uncovered in the last few days, accounting acumen was not one of them.

“The terms of your contract are up, now that I’m here,” I said. “But contracts can always be renegotiated. This is some really astounding work.”

“Thank you.”

“Would you be interested in continuing in your current capacity?”

Travers didn’t answer right away, but I could sense the temptation of the offer gnawing at a resolve building for decades. “Thank you, Crux, your previous ... largesse has served me well. But I think the terms of the contract are acceptable. In fact, I’ve trained someone to take over on the occasion of your return.” He picked up the phone and called his assistant. “Lucy, could you please have Delia put an appointment on Ms. Lerr’s calendar for me? This time next week, please.” He looked at me to confirm if that would be a good time. I nodded. “Good. Thank you, Lucy.”

“You’ll find Ms. Lerr to be incredibly bright and very open about your ... needs.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“How else may I help you?”

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“I need to know what properties are available here in the city.”

“There’s a section in the notebook for that.” I handed him the notebook, so he could find it. When he did, he stuck a Post-It note on the page and handed the notebook back to me. “The contact information in there should be current.”

“Thank you.”

“Any place you’re looking for in particular?”

“I’m thinking Gramercy Park might be nice.” Travers nodded, approving my choice. “And the accounts in the city – which one has a safe deposit box nearest here?”

“Probably the Chemical branch four blocks west. Is there anything you’re looking for?”

“I’ll know it when I see it.” I stashed the notebook into my jacket pocket. “Well, thank you again, Don. For all of your help.” We stood up, and he started to walk me to the door.

“I owe my existence to you, Crux.” He hesitated before finally asking, “So, what do I need to do to finish the terms of the contract.”

“How’s your health?”

“As well as it should be for a 55-year-old man.” He hasn’t been 55 since before World War I.

“You exercise, eat healthy. Don’t smoke.”

“Not now,” he answered, clarifying his behavior from the first time we met.

“Then you do absolutely nothing. You fulfilled your contract, and now time will keep pace with you. If you keep healthy, I’m sure you’ll have a very comfortable retirement in a few years.”

“So I don’t have to keep watch for an unexpected visitor?”

“No. In fact, if someone tries to lay a hand on you, they won’t see tomorrow.” I could tell that last remark sent a shiver up Travers’

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spine.

I extended my hand to shake one more time. “Thank you,
Don.”

“No, thank *you*.”

15

Daren arranged for me to interview with five companies fronting for the Line, and I went through the motions of applying for each job. Three of them were interested, but two eventually sent an offer letter. I went with a website dealing with business information, taking a technical position instead of an editorial one. I turned in my two weeks notice with the network after I signed the letter.

By that time, I had already decamped from the old walk-up and cleared out whatever I brought to Daren's guest suite. I moved into a second floor unit with a view of Gramercy Park, and of course, I got a key to the park.

I couldn't fit much furniture in the cramped studio, so it didn't take long to spread that stuff out in the much roomier two-bedroom apartment. It even had an office. Despite my lack of worldly possessions, Daren came by to help me unpack. I hadn't met the guy till the week before, and now he was a significant part of my life, maybe even more so than Jared. I didn't know what to think about him that first time we met (aside from thinking he was pretty good-looking), but now it felt like I never knew a time I *didn't* know him. This familiarity felt like mine, but I knew it wasn't.

"Were you close to Killian?" I asked him.

"I don't think Killian really did 'close' all that well," Daren

answered. “But I think I spent more time with him than most people. The more we dig into the archives of the Line, the more I come to realize a lot of that material was kept by Killian himself. He just didn’t have the interest to sort through it all the way I did.”

“I bet you were a librarian or something like that before you were turned.”

“A scholar, yes. I studied at Oxford. Spent some time in Cambridge.”

“I don’t hear an accent.”

“I’ve been living here too long. Where do you want this?” He held up a box of old college textbooks about editing and reporting. I pointed to a bookshelf in a corner of the living room.

“It’s just weird,” I started. “I didn’t meet you till last week, but I can read your moods and predict what you’re about to say before you say it.”

“So I guess you were listening to me after all.” I gave him a confused look. “Or rather, I guess Killian was listening to me after all.”

“I’m never going to get any of this stuff straight,” I said, referring to distinguishing my memories from Killian’s. Or everyone else’s.

“You’re not the only one.”

I picked up a wooden box from one of the cardboard boxes and recognized it – the old man from the shop in Chinatown gave it to me. “I forgot about this,” I said.

“Forgot about what?”

“This box.” I handed it to him as he made his way from the corner bookshelf. “It was given to me the night I was attacked in Chinatown by Thomas’ crew. Your guys on the scene said they’d take care of the cleanup. I guess they must have found it.”

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“Maybe. I don’t remember anyone telling me about a box.” Daren inspected it. “Someone would have remembered finding something like this. It’s really ancient.” He handed it back to me.

“Yeah? How do you know?”

“That kind of craftsmanship, and the sturdiness of the materials – you won’t find anything like that in the last century. No, it’s old. Why did the old man give that to you?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. “Something about luck. He didn’t really make sense. He just knew what I was and what Thorn was.”

“In that case, I probably wouldn’t go back there.”

“No, I guess not.”

I met Jared for drinks after his shift ended at midnight. We went to a gay bar near his place. Despite everything going, we managed to go on more dates, and I spent the night over at his place after a few of them. We were also instant messaging each other constantly during work.

I didn’t know how he would take the news about my finding a new job. We bonded over the isolation of shift work, since a lot of our friends didn’t keep the same hours. The new job meant I would be joining the world of the living – literally speaking – and it was already tough enough trying to work around a 24-hour news cycle. This kind of schedule change would only compound matters.

Part of me didn’t think that was a bad idea. Thomas’ minions backed off after that last scuffle, but Calvino had a target painted on my back. A turf war was breaking out, and most of the city wouldn’t know it was happening. Common sense told me now was no time to be getting attached to anyone.

But I liked Jared. A lot. I didn’t want to stop seeing him. He gave me incentive to behave, to be good boyfriend material. He was

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the only thing normal in my life, and I had no interest in knowing what would happen if I lost that, if I lost him.

He congratulated me when I broke the news, said he was happy for me, which I believed he was on some level. Whatever disappointment he felt, he masked it well enough for the casual observer.

“Are you sure you’re all right with this?” I asked, not taking his reaction at face value.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be? I might be a little jealous, but it’s a good thing for you.”

“We’ll practically be in different time zones,” I said.

“You’ll be working normal hours, right?” he asked.

“Yup. Mondays through Fridays, 9 to 5.”

“I think that might be easier. Your schedule is fixed, and only mine moves around. The way it is right now, both our schedules keep changing. If you move to days, we don’t have to plan so ridiculously far ahead.” That’s why I liked him – he could spot the positive in any situation.

“Now that you put it that way ...”

“It’ll be fine.” He took my hand and squeezed it. “It’ll work out.”

“OK. I believe you.” We leaned over and kissed. His smile reassured me.

“Go get a room,” someone said behind me.

Jared looked up, and his face brightened. “Ted!”

“Hey, Jared.” A tall guy with brown, wavy hair and dark eyes made a big show of hugging Jared as they greeted each other. It was a ploy to make me jealous, and I hated to admit it worked.

Jared introduced me to Ted. “He’s my neighbor. Moved in a few weeks ago. He’s like us – he works weird hours.”

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“Not tonight,” Ted announced. “Or tomorrow, for that matter.”

“Good to know,” Jared replied.

“What do you do?” I asked Ted.

“Tech support. Third watch. For all the customers who are awake while everyone else here is asleep.” He mentioned the company, which was yet another start-up attempting to leverage that new-fangled Internet for instant wealth.

“You have my sympathies,” I said.

“Tell me about it.” Jared mentioned I got a new job. “Really? Well, congratulations. You actually get to eat breakfast at breakfast time now.”

“Well, not for another two weeks. Just gave my notice.”

“You know, your name sounds familiar,” Ted began.

“Probably because I keep talking about you,” Jared said to me.

“Actually, I think you may know someone I work with,” Ted continued. “Do you know a guy named Calvino?”

“Calvino,” I repeated, acting as I was trying to remember, hiding the terror and rage at the mere mention of his name in front of Jared. “He was a manager or something. Isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Ted feigned confirmation. “He’s the head of our group, oversees support operations for the Tri-state area.” Rather, he *wished* he oversaw operations for the Tri-state area.

“I think I remember,” I said, continuing the charade. “I met him at that weekend conference where Thomas was speaking.”

“That’s it,” Ted replied, confirming he knew how I really knew Calvino. “It was a talk about emerging markets in online properties.” Emerging markets, my ass.

“I might still have his business card somewhere. Small

world.”

“Isn’t it.”

“Well, it sounds like you two have some catching up to do,” Jared said. “I’ll be right back.” He headed in the direction of the restrooms.

Ted wasn’t a hunter. He was still breathing, and I couldn’t smell his blood. He was alive, but he was definitely working for Calvino. Once Jared was out of earshot, we dropped the cordiality.

“Am I supposed to be impressed?”

“Be whatever you like. Don’t be surprised if you hear Calvino’s name again when you have dinner with Liselle tomorrow.” So that’s how he was going to play it. He wanted to show he could put his resources in close proximity of people I care about. What a dick. “How’s the memory coming along?”

“In fits and starts,” I answered honestly. “It’s not like it all comes back to me in one big core dump.” Ted let out a bit of a laugh. At least he was telling the truth about the tech support gig if he knew what a core dump was.

“Well, don’t take too much time. I have a good sense of Jared’s habits, where he likes to go, when he likes to do things.” Oh, there’s the threat.

“Calvino should be careful of what he wishes for,” I replied. “I might remember the wrong thing. Like convincing you to stick a knife in your heart the next time you see him.”

The expression on Ted’s face went blank. He wasn’t sure if I just threatened him or if I really did just convince him to stick a knife in his heart the next time Calvino asked for a report. No one knew what I could do, least of all myself. And mind control was just as plausible as anything else but highly unlikely. He didn’t know that.

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“Tell Jared I’ll catch him later,” Ted said as he turned to leave. He joined two other night hunters waiting for him by the entrance. I had felt their presence the moment I walked in, but I couldn’t let on with Jared around.

Jared came back and asked where Ted had gone. I told him his friends dragged him off to the next bar on their crawl.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “Just nervous and excited about the job.”

“Don’t be. You deserve it. And everything will be fine.” He squeezed my hand reassuringly again. I could only hope.

“C’mon,” I said. “I’ll walk you back to your place.”

“You can stay the night, if you like.”

And I did.

16

When I checked my e-mail the following day, I saw I message from Daren that said, “Isn’t this close to where your boyfriend lives?” He included a link that launched the Line’s proprietary software. It pointed to a news item – yes, even hunters need their news organizations – about a turf battle that happened between Union Square and Chelsea.

Most people assumed Fen would stay out of the land grab, but he didn’t. He started to creep beyond 34th Street, prompting Thomas’ survivors to cross the southern border of their territory. Fen defended the incursion as a preventative measure against advances by Dietrich, who was already encroaching on Murray Hill. The fight resulted in some property damage, which the removal services had to cover up. Daren included another link to the New York Post’s website, which actually had a news item about the property damage.

That wasn’t good. The removal services excel at obfuscating such incidents in a way not to attract the attention of living world media. That meant the fight was too big for even the removal services to contain.

Another item reported Calvino was also claiming territory further south of Columbia University. He attempted to evict members of Thomas’ covens in the Upper West Side from their strongholds.

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The battle was a draw, but the night ended with significant losses for both sides.

The phone rang as I was scrolling through more news items.

“Crux?” a woman’s voice asked on the other line.

“Yes, this is Crux.”

“I am Natasha Petri. I was told you were seeking information on the Manske Ruby.”

Daren came through. “Yes, I was hoping to speak with someone in the family about it.”

“Can you meet me today before sunset?” I had to work that night, so I said yes. She gave me an address in the Upper East Side, a few blocks away from the Met. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

“Yes,” she said, coldly, then hung up.

I’d only ever seen apartments with big foyers in episodes of *Law & Order*, where the detectives would talk to families with old money. But I was standing in one of them now, waiting for someone to tell me anything about the Manske Ruby. I looked around to get a sense of the people who lived here, but there were no pictures, no painted portraits, maybe a few strategically-placed plants and spartan furniture. How much of this internal décor owed to my visit?

“Crux?” I heard a voice say behind me.

I turned around and saw a middle-aged woman with wisps of gray in her dark but fading hair. She had the strong features of an Eastern European woman – high cheeks, a severe nose, pursed lips. Her body was slender, but her presence filled the room. This woman possessed power.

“Ms. Petri?”

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“Mrs.,” she corrected me. “It’s easier to pronounce my husband’s name than it is to pronounce Georghiou.” She didn’t offer to let me call her by her first name. This meeting was all business. We shook hands.

“Daren tells me you want to know more about the Manske Ruby,” she started.

“Yes.”

“May I inquiry why?”

“Something about the ruby caught my attention when I first read about it in the news. Things are happening with me, and I can’t stop thinking about the ruby, as if it has something to do with everything.”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it past the ruby.” She spoke like it was an actual person. “Is there anything in particular you want to know?”

“I want to know its origins. All the stories out there talk about how it was found near a village in Romania, and how all this bad luck went along with it. I want to know how it became bad luck.”

Petri paused, regarding me with a skeptical look. “Is this what you wish truly? To know how the ruby came to be?”

“Yes.”

Her sigh was hardly audible, but it was there. “There is a price.”

“I’ll pay what you ask.”

“No. I’m not asking for money. I’m just mentioning there is a price to hear this story, a consequence. It’s only ever told to family.”

“Will you make an exception?”

She hesitated again, considering her answer. “I will tell it to you.” She didn’t say yes. I’m not sure why that struck me.

Many generations ago, she began, one of my ancestors, a

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woman named Adriana Georghiou, was raped by a powerful man in her village. He didn't just wield political power but magical power – power he used to make the villagers do his bidding. His name was Lucian Blaga, and he is only remembered now by my family. The rest of the world has long forgot him.

Adriana herself possessed tremendous power, perhaps even more so than Lucian, and he declared she would be his wife. Adriana refused, proclaiming herself property of no man. She was, in fact, already settled with another witch, Marina Balitiu, and they were happy. But Lucian and his henchmen overpowered her. She would have been able to fight him off otherwise.

But he paid for his misdeed, handsomely. Adriana and Marina saw to it. It wouldn't take long to discover Lucian left her with child. Adriana and Marina tried to abort the pregnancy, resorting to the strongest magic they could muster but to no effect. The child was determined to be born, and the women knew he would be malevolent.

So they saw the pregnancy to its end, and when the child was born, his soul was captured in the ruby, his body burned in a pyre. The ruby was then bound to the village. It tried to escape many times, but circumstances always arranged themselves in a way to insure its return to the village.

After many years, Marina died, and Adriana couldn't bear the loss. So she too disappeared. She did not die – she just left the village. By that time, the ruby knew better than try to leave. Adriana's brother, Alexi, oversaw watch of the ruby.

For the most part, the ruby stayed put, but once in a while, it would manage to escape and travel long, long distances. In one instance, it traveled all the way to South America, at a time when Europe didn't even know the Americas existed. A Mayan traveled a

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long, long way to bring the ruby back to the village. And he possessed the kind of power Adriana had.

Over the generations, we could tell when the ruby was about to escape, and we would anticipate where it would end up. The last time the ruby broke free, Killian brought it back, and Killian knew how to bind it to the village. Adriana never taught anyone how to bind the stone, but everyone who has ever returned the stone knew how to bind it.

The family in Europe warned us the ruby would be heading to New York City, and we've been waiting for its arrival. So far, we have not been able to locate it.

"Daren tells me you are in possession of Killian's memories."

"There has been some overlap."

"You are also responsible for the death of Thomas."

"Yes." She didn't say anything else, just looked at me, sizing me up. "How long ago did the family notice the ruby was about to make its move?" I asked.

"Nine months."

"Huh. That was when I received the inheritance."

That caught Petri's attention. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

She let out a quiet sigh. "I usually do not like dealing with hunters, but I may have to adjust my thinking if you are, in some way, family."

I thought about my mom back home, followed immediately by my great-great grandfather who said I was dead. Hunters had families at some point, not just the ones they created.

"I guess the next thing you want is for me to find the ruby," I said.

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“If history is any indication, you are the only one who can.”

“Well, hell. Where do I start to look?”

“I was hoping you would know that.”

Work wasn't stressful, but I felt tired anyway. My last day on the job was coming up fast, and the bosses were squeezing as much work out of me as they could. Petri had handed me a box filled with old photos and letters, all dealing with the ruby. I half-heartedly thumbed through the correspondence, trying to glean something out of the accounts of the ruby's return to the village. If there was a pattern, I didn't see it or I was too exhausted to see it.

So I went to the kitchen and grabbed an orange from the fruit bowl. As I started to peel it, I spotted the wooden box the old man gave me. What did he say? Leave an offering to speak with my ancestors?

My great-great grandfather mentioned a deal, which he more than likely made with Killian. He was most likely the last person to see Killian alive, and anyone who watches enough *Law & Order* knows that person is an important witness.

I sliced off a few wedges of the orange and stuck them in a box. I didn't know what else to offer, and food is always a safe bet. I finished the rest of the orange with the TV tuned to a late-night rerun of *The Simpsons*. I always seem to catch the episode where Mr. Burns get shot, but I never find out who did it. I turned in for the night at 2:30 a.m.

My great-great grandfather was waiting for me. He had the pieces of orange in his hand, and he bit into one of them. “Nice,” he said in Chinese. “Not bitter at all.”

“I'm glad you like it,” I told him in English.

“You're not glad of anything,” he answered, again in Chinese.

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After he finished a second piece, he asked, “Why do you return?”

“I need to know what happened between you and Killian, what he said, how he disappeared.”

He said nothing – just staring at the ground before my feet. I was forcing yet another person to tell a story they didn’t want to. “You told me this might happen, that you would come back and ask for my help again.”

“Your family would not exist without me, is that right?”

“Yes,” he said, almost sighing. “That is right. I am indebted.”

“Then this will honor the debt.”

His agreement was tacit.

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My wife and I were brought together by arrangement, the old man started. But it was a match well-suited for the both of us. I care for her very deeply and she for me.

Despite that, we could not bear a child. Back then, it was customary to blame the woman, to call her barren. I felt no ill will toward her, but the pressure of our parents to bear a son weighed on her. I wished I could do more for her. You, or whoever you were, saw that.

One night, I was walking in our garden at night, feeling restless after hearing more admonishment for not producing an heir. That's when a man appeared out of the shadows. He was European, pale skin, not like you at all, and I could feel he was dangerous.

"You should feel that," he said, "I am dangerous." That he could read my thoughts only made me more fearful. "I am no danger to you. In fact, I can help you and your predicament."

"What predicament?" I asked, but I knew the answer.

"Your society is so dismissive of women. I see how your wife struggles with the pressure, how ill it makes her. And yet, it does not occur to anyone that *you* may be the problem. It's a good thing her fidelity to you is strong because the only child she can ever bear is a bastard."

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He made me angry when he said that, but there was no way I could have defended my wife's honor. I could sense his strength.

"It does not have to be," he added, perhaps to diffuse my temper

"How?" I asked.

"Meet me tomorrow night in the clearing where you indulge in your opiates. Wait till your wife falls asleep."

So I did, despite my better judgment. As desperate as I was to relieve my wife's suffering, I knew if I refused, this man would force my hand. He was there, sitting by a fire. It almost looked like a funeral pyre. As I approached, I saw the bodies, his victims. I don't know what made me stay, even though I would have run away. Fear, I guess. Fear of him.

"I'm sorry you have to see that," he said. "But I felt it should be clear the manner of ... being with whom you are dealing. Also, I need the sustenance to do what I need to."

I said nothing.

"If you agree to the arrangement I propose, I guarantee you will be fertile from now till you die. You can have as many children as your wife can bear."

"What do you need?"

"You must participate in a ceremony of sacrifice. You and I will become one being, and while we are one being, you must heed my will. When I am done with you, my essence will pass down to your descendants. I will be hidden in their being until such a time when something awakens me. At that time, you take the soul of your descendant and leave me the body."

I did not understand what he was telling me, but what choice could I make? That he would force me if I refused, I had no doubt. But I knew I would not refuse. If it meant the future of my family, I

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was willing.

“You have decided, then. Good. Let us not delay.”

He took out a knife and cut his wrist, letting the blood drip to the fire. Each drop of blood made the fire sputter and change color. It was not long before the fire turned completely blue. Before I could do anything, he grabbed me and jumped into the fire. He pinned me down against the kindling, and I thought I would feel heat and burning. Instead it was a cool flame, soothing and welcoming. He shoved his bleeding wrist against my mouth and ordered me to drink. So I did. I took in the blood as it dripped from his cut. It tasted like nothing, like water, nothing more.

The fire did nothing to me, but it burned through him. It consumed him, and soon enough, his flesh melted away. The arm he pressed against my mouth turned to ash. His flesh and bones disintegrated, and my skin absorbed them. Then the fire itself started to die. When it was all done, my clothes had been soiled by the ash, but they were not undone, and no harm was done to my body.

But I could feel him inside me. I could sense his memories, his emotions. He did not control me, but I knew him, I knew his story. From that night on, I had the compulsion to write down his story, to record his thoughts.

I had to do it in secret because I wrote in a language I did not understand. I feared what would happen if someone discovered what I was doing. But in my private time, I wrote and wrote. I knew when my wife conceived our son, because that was the night his presence went away. The words stopped coming, and I could feel his presence within me no longer.

Nine months later, your great-granduncle was born. No, not your great-grandfather, your uncle. Your great-grandfather was our

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third child and our second son. He would move to the Philippines to work as a trader, and he would meet your great-grandmother. When I died, the bulk of my property went to my eldest son, including the papers I wrote before he was born. It has remained in the family, and it waits for you to reclaim them.

How do you reclaim them? The man who gave you the box to speak with me – he has the papers now. He is my descendant. Go to him if you want them back.

“Here,” he said, handing me his peels.

“Why?” I asked, not liking the idea of being his garbage disposal.

“You can easily dismiss this encounter as a dream. Take these, and it will prove it is true.”

“I believe you,” I said.

“Take them anyway. They do not belong here.”

So I did.

When I woke up a few hours later, I looked in the box. The peels were there, the fruit consumed.

“Hi, welcome back,” the hot guy from the store in Chinatown greeted me. “You’re here pretty early.”

“I changed jobs,” I said. “I used to work nights.”

“Well, congratulations.” He called out to someone in Chinese, but I could make a guess. “My uncle said he has something for you. You have a good day now.”

“Thanks.” I still thought he was hot, but I had to temper that idea now that I knew he was very, very distantly related to me.

“You are back,” I heard a voice say behind me. I turned to the counter, and the old man was there, as pleased to see me now as he

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has in the past.

“Your nephew said you have something for me,” I said. He nodded. I noticed he was carrying an old cigar box. He set it on the counter and gestured for me to take it. I opened the box and saw the papers. I thumbed through them and recognized Killian’s handwriting.

“They are yours,” the old man said. “Take them.”

“Have you always known?” I asked, wondering if he had always been waiting to give these papers to me.

“No. Grandfather told me last night.” That guy gets around.

“Thank you.”

Before I could turn to leave, the old man added, “You don’t bring evil here.” It wasn’t a command but a request. He wanted to know if I could keep the hunters away, now that a clear connection can be made between his family and me.

“I’ll do my best.”

He nodded, reluctant to put his trust in me. But he could probably tell I could keep my word.

The moleskin notebook Travers gave me included an inventory of items kept in safe deposit boxes throughout the city. I looked for “journal” and went to the bank where it was kept. I brought another notebook with me.

After the bank attendant left me in the room with my box, I opened it to find the journal and a big wad of cash. Travers made sure to include some in each box. I pocketed some of the cash before I took the journal out of the deposit box.

Killian mentioned the journal in the writings made by my great-great grandfather. He made sure to mention they were in Travers’ keeping.

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I flipped through the pages, scanning for something that would help me find the ruby. I found it about a quarter way into the book, a spell that could charm another precious stone to become a locator for the ruby. I took a bit more cash just in case. I don't know how to shop for jewelry.

A note at the end of the text stated, "Consult the Aggregate."

That's right. The Aggregate – the book of spells maintained by the Petri family. It was old even during Adriana's time. I jotted down the spell and put the journal back in the box. I let the attendant know I was finished.

I ended up getting a small diamond ring from a pawnshop and hung it from a cheap gold chain. The journal said I had to keep the diamond close to my chest, and I could feel where the ruby had been in my heart. Gracious, this spell couldn't be any more metaphorical?

Then I started walking.

I didn't really know what I was supposed to be feeling, and I would end up conflating every tiny event into something symbolic. But my instinct pretty much dismissed my overactive imagination.

I walked around my neighborhood. Nothing. I went to the TV network and walked around there. Nothing. I knew Jared would be at work, but I went to Chelsea anyway. That's when I felt it. A clenching in my chest. Pretty damn uncomfortable, too.

The tightness got stronger as I passed the bar near Jared's apartment, the bar where I told him about my new job. The ruby was here?

The tightness loosened. I was losing the trail, so I doubled back till I felt it again and chose another direction. I kept following the trail as it led me east, closer to Union Square. I was about to

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collapse when I reached the place where the minions of Fen and Thomas duked it out.

No, it can't be.

I walked back to my apartment and got on my computer. I looked up the last few news items about territorial squabbling, and I noted the locations. The sun was starting to set, and that meant the security detail would go on duty. I wanted to squeeze in a few more tests before they started shadowing me.

I went to the United Nations, where Dietrich was starting to encroach, and felt my chest tighten. I went a few blocks west of Grand Central Station, where Fen and Dietrich battled it out, and felt it again.

I could have done more tests at great discomfort to my chest, but the pattern was pretty damn obvious. The ruby had been present at every skirmish. But how did it get around?

I was hoping the Line had some access to Big Brother.

18

Daren looked grave when I found him in his office. He showed me some articles from the New York Post and the Daily News. They were small items, something an intern would dash out on a cops beat, but they were about fights between night hunters. The removal services were having a harder time covering up the escalating violence.

“Juan says his resources are starting to get stretched,” Daren said, “and the removal services can only go so far before their own activities start arousing suspicion.”

“When was the last time the covens had a border squabble this big?”

“Never. The covens are usually good at exercising restraint. If there’s one thing everyone agrees on, it’s the need for secrecy. This time, that’s all gone out the window.”

“I think I know what’s stirring things up.” I told Daren about my visit with Petri, about Killian’s papers and my search for the ruby.

“You had a sense the ruby would be important,” Daren said, indirectly asking how I knew.

“The ruby is trying to get my attention, and the only way it knows how to do that is to cause trouble.”

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“It’s doing a good job at that.”

I could only shrug in agreement.

“The ruby doesn’t have much of a history with hunters,” Daren continued. “Why would that change now?”

“Killian was the last one to bind the ruby to the village. Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.” Daren sounded hurt Killian would fail to mention it.

“I think it’s intentional, probably for the reasons we’re seeing now.”

“So what’s different this time?”

“I wish I knew.”

I asked Daren if the Line taps into video surveillance. “Security cameras, that sort of thing.”

“No. Usually if we need to look at security camera footage, we go to the removal services. They clean up surveillance all the time.” Why didn’t I think of that? “What do you need it for?” Daren asked.

“The ruby is getting around somehow. Maybe the cameras around the locations where fights have broken out can give us a clue.”

“That sounds like something out of a cop show.”

“That’s where I got the idea.”

I got in touch with Juan, and he said it would take some time to get that kind of material together. I asked him to work as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, I figured I might as well keep searching on my own. Daren pulled an investigator from the security detail to help me. I recognized him from the night I was attacked in

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Chinatown. He was the young guy who asked me if I was all right. He called himself Mike.

“Just Mike?” I asked.

“Sure, why not? You get to choose a name. I always wanted to be called something simple, like Mike.”

“So your real name is something like Jethro or Rufus?”

“No, nothing that colorful. Just ... a challenge to pronounce.”

Our plan was to visit various spots in the city where fights occurred. Then we'd pose as reporters doing a story about crime in the area. That gave us a lot of leeway to ask leading questions. Mike had a car, which was admirable because I'd never drive in the city. So we went to the Upper West Side and found the place where Calvino tried to take over from Thomas.

I was starting to get used to the diamond charm, but it still wasn't pleasant to feel my chest tighten. We expected people to remember whatever the removal services wanted to plant, and sure enough, people regurgitated the illusion they saw. Of course, we would need to go back later and compare our notes to what the removal services orchestrated.

A lot of these details were mundane, things that don't seem important on the surface but needed to be noted anyway – a homeless guy pushing around a cart and talking to himself, a prostitute getting in a kind of car not usually seen in the neighborhood, drug dealers standing on the corner waiting to score. We jotted them down just in case.

Mike and I would talk to a few people, get back in the car and head to the next location. If it weren't for the fact I could smell his blood, he could easily pass himself off as a polite, regular guy.

“You're pretty young,” I remarked.

“Next to Daren and Thorn, yeah, I am, but then again, so

are you.”

“In some respects.”

“You were 25 when you received your inheritance, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You were five years old when I was turned, and I was already 25 myself by that time. So I’m really pushing 50. I lived through things you only read about in history books.”

“Yeah, but how many previous lives do you remember?”

Mike laughed. “Yeah, you got me there.”

Mike pulled into an open parking spot near the Flatiron Building. We were about to go to a spot where another fight happened, but I didn’t think my chest could take another beating.

“You want to take a break?” I asked Mike.

“Yeah, sure,” he answered. “I know a spot near here.”

We walked down Fifth Avenue for a few blocks till we reached what looked like a neighborhood bar. Mike pulled open the door for me. “After you,” he said. I walked in.

It wasn’t a large place, but it wasn’t cramped either. The bar occupied one side of the room, booths on the other. A bunch of high bar tables and stools surrounded the pool table in the back. One television behind the bar was tuned to ESPN, the other to CNN. The jukebox was playing early U2. That night, the crowd was thin, but it was an even mix of hunter and mortal. Off to the side, I spotted a staircase leading to the basement, which probably had some private rooms where hunters and mortals – or perhaps even night hunters and day hunters – could take care of business.

“You specialize?” I asked Mike.

“Nah, I’m versatile. This place is open. I can meet guys or girls here.” That meant he was probably “versatile” before he was turned.

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“Well, I think someone is interested in you.” I cocked my head to point in the direction of the table across the room, where a man was looking at our direction. He looked as regular as Mike, down to the polo shirt and jeans.

“Him? I know him. I’ve had him a few times before. But he’s never ready to move on.”

“My gaydar can’t make heads or tails of him. He get aroused when you two are together?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s got issues. He was in the Army for a bit. That didn’t help. I think he’s a bit too locked into binary thinking.”

“Not like yourself.”

“No, not like myself.”

Just then, the man walked over and greeted Mike. How you doing? Long time, no see – that kind of thing. Mike made the introductions, and I learned his name was Al. It was obvious Al had left tipsy and was on his way to drunk, and his flirtation skills reflected it. Mike, being the nice guy, was accommodating but not flirting back. He was still on the job, after all.

In the corner of my eye, I spotted a booth with a group of night hunters. They were keeping to themselves, when it seemed like the rest of the patrons in the bar all knew each other. They weren’t the only ones– some guys playing pool didn’t mind what was happening in the bar, nor was a table of hunter women by the jukebox.

I don’t know what prompted me to look for a spot that provided cover. Maybe it was the recognition that we weren’t very close to the exit. Al continued his drunken flirtations with Mike, who was starting put out signals of interest.

More night hunters came into the bar, and I caught a glimpse of them – Chinese. My chest started to tighten. The ruby was nearby.

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My mind made a lightning fast calculation and concluded trouble.

“Mike, we should probably get back to work,” I said.

“Aw, man, you sure?” Al drawled.

“Yeah, dude, he’s right,” Mike replied, looking both disappointed and relieved.

But we weren’t fast enough.

The group of Chinese hunters had approached the booth of hunters I spotted before and got into it with them. The bar was under the sovereign of Fen, so they claimed, and in light of recent developments, Thomas’ coven was not welcome. Never mind these public spots seldom ever established alliance with any one coven, and from what I would learn later, this place hadn’t.

Great. A bar fight. I thought this shit only happened in movies.

But it wasn’t just a fight with fists – they drew out swords. Furniture got tossed aside, and bystanders who tried to get out ran into a blockade of hunters making sure no one escaped.

Before I could get Mike and Al to safety, a Chinese hunter lunged at me, prompting Mike to push me out of the way. He received the blow intended for me, and I tackled the hunter and killed him with a jolt of life. Al grabbed Mike and went for cover in the corner of the bar. I grabbed some overturned table and created a barricade.

Mike got it in the chest, very close to his heart. If it had been a direct hit, he would be dead. But he was bleeding, and the restorative powers of hunter blood would not be enough to stem the hemorrhage. Al had already ripped off his shirt and was pressing it against Mike’s wound. It would help a little but not much.

“Mike, man, don’t go out on me. Don’t go out on me, Mike,” Al was murmuring.

I turned to Al. “The only thing that will keep him alive till

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help gets here is if he feeds. He needs to drink from you.”

“No,” Mike gasped. “Not ready to move on. Not ready to move on.”

“Man, if it’ll help you, do it. Drink from me.”

“Not ready to move on,” Mike kept saying.

“In order for you to be of any use, he’s going to have to drink you dry,” I explained.

“Fuck it, man, do it!” Al screamed at Mike.

“Not going to kill you,” was all he said.

Al turned to me. “How do we get him to ...?”

“Are you ready to move on?” I asked. A piece of furniture came flying at us and hit the tables. We ducked.

Al looked at me and said, “Yes.” He was lying, but the fact he had the gumption to lie was good enough for me. I grabbed his arm and sank into it. Blood started to gush out of the wound. “Stick it on his mouth.”

Mike tried to yell no, but Al jammed his arm against Mike’s mouth. The moment the blood touched his tongue, Mike had no choice. He started to drink. Not even a few seconds later, Mike pulled Al into an embrace and sank into an artery, where the blood flowed even more.

“I’ll take care of everything else,” I told Mike as he continued to drink. I got up from behind the barricade and joined the fight.

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The cops – that is, a removal service posing as police – arrived before I could do significant damage in the bar. I took down the blockade and managed to get a few bystanders to safety. That didn't mean there wasn't collateral damage.

Medics took Mike out on a stretcher, where he'd be taken to an infirmary maintained by the Line. I asked Thorn how Mike was doing. She had been tailing me and informed the removal service to send enforcement when trouble started.

“He seems pissed at you,” she answered.

“I think it's because I made him kill his boyfriend,” I said.

“I thought he was seeing a woman.” I shrugged. Mike is versatile, after all. “He'll be fine after a lot of recuperation,” Thorn added. Al's body was one of the first taken out of the bar.

Now that the adrenaline was starting to subside, I noticed the tightness in my chest easing up. The ruby was still around, but it was moving away.

I looked into the crowds, trying to see who was leaving. From the distance, I heard the rattling of a shopping cart getting fainter. I saw a man dressed in rags turn a corner, and the tightness in my chest loosened. I was about to go after him, but I felt a hand on my arm pull me back.

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“Crux, are you OK?” Thorn asked.

“Yeah, sure.”

Actually, I sustained a few injuries, and it took Thorn’s insistence to break my reverie. A real medic took me to a fake ambulance and treated my wounds.

Juan still hadn’t gotten the video footage to me yet, but I didn’t need to watch it to get confirmation.

I went down to Canal Street, near the Chinese grocer. The charm indicated the ruby had been there by the subway station. I went to the intersection where I fought off Thomas’ minions. The charm indicated the ruby had been there as well.

I tried to picture him in my mind. Did he have a beard? What was his race? Was it a blue coat he was wearing? A ski cap? He was just a homeless guy. Nobody you really wanted to commit to memory. So I didn’t.

But I remember the question he asked. “Are you looking for your son?”

I was now.

“Are you OK?” I asked Jared.

“Yes,” he answered, but then he reconsidered. “Well, I might be a little hung over.”

“Oh?”

“Ted had a party last night, and I stopped by. I’m pretty sure I had too much to drink.”

It wasn’t the quantity of drink that concerned me. It was the drink itself. I could smell night hunter blood on him.

We cuddled on his sofa, the television tuned to nothing in particular. I let him keep control of the remote. As I held him,

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I gently willed life into him. I didn't see any puncture marks on his skin, and the smell of hunter blood was faint. Someone spiked a drink, or he was drunk enough to be fooled into taking a sip of blood. Still, even a little would start the turning process.

Healing him now wouldn't risk his life, but I had half a mind to march over to Ted's place and break that faggot's neck. I knew it was just Calvino trying to put the squeeze on me. I couldn't afford to take the bait.

Juan finally came through with video footage. It took a few hours to comb through it all, but the results were the same – the homeless man pushing the cart was spotted near each incident before it happened.

I looked back through the notes Mike and I had taken, and I saw a few mentions of him. One of the witnesses said he kept asking whether “this” would make her show up.

I probably could have used the Line or Juan to track down the whereabouts of this guy, but for anything dealing with the living world, it's best to use living agents. So I got in touch with a private investigator and gave her a still of the video footage. It wasn't much to go on, but when I presented her with a cashier's check for more than her retainer, she accepted the job.

It just meant a lot of tedious work. She would probably get in touch with an old buddy from the police department to match the video still with a mug shot. She could also talk to people around the areas he was spotted to see if he was a regular. If she got her hands on something he had disposed of recently, that same friend in the police department could probably get the lab to find some fingerprints. The homeless guy might have been arrested at some point.

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She actually worked faster than I expected. Within a week, she had a name and background information.

Another incident happened on the Upper East Side, and this time, real cops had been called. The fake cops from the removal service got there first, but with real cops involved, it meant fudging the police reports from the inside. That was risky, even for the removal services. They usually didn't like to resort to that.

Jared went to another one of Ted's parties and came back smelling of night hunter blood again. Ted's life expectancy keeps getting shorter and shorter.

I went to the bank and withdrew some cash.

I found the homeless man camping out in an alley on 8th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenue. I made arrangements for his rehabilitation, his mental health care and his living expenses for the amount of time it would take before he could become a productive citizen.

When I finally approached him, I had \$10,000 in cash with me. He was sitting with his back to the wall, too intoxicated to support his own weight.

"Hello. I have come for my son," I told him.

He looked at me, defensive that I would take away his new friend, the only thing that could understand him and keep him safe. "You said you didn't have a son," he stammered. "I asked you, and you said no."

"I didn't think I did, but now I do," I replied. "And you know he wants to go with me."

He nodded, his eyes sad from acknowledging the truth. He reached into a pile of garbage and produced the ruby. He handed it

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to me. “You take care of him,” he said, his voice barely able to get through the rasp in his throat.

“I will,” I said, and I handed him the envelope with the cash. “That woman over there.” I gestured to the person waiting at the end of the alley. “Go with her. She’ll take you to a hotel, where you can clean yourself up and have a decent meal. Do everything she says. The money is yours, and if you don’t manage to lose all of it in the next three days, you’ll get some more.”

The turn of his fortune left him stunned. I extended my hand and helped him up. He shuffled slowly to the end of the alley, toward the social worker who would personally see to his health.

The man was a promising scientist two decades ago, but his natural ability with magic – and his inability to believe in it – left him destitute. Part of his rehabilitation was to teach him to accept it. It would have been just as easy to kill him, but I’ve found the ruby tends to choose potentially powerful allies. His would not be the first dynasty created by finding the ruby.

I brushed off the debris and grit from the stone.

You’ve been causing a lot of trouble.

Well, how else was I supposed to get your attention?

Oh, yeah. This was going to be fun.

20

Hello Lucian.

Mother! It's about time you found me.

I'm sorry I could not remember sooner. It would have saved you the effort of dismantling hunter society.

Don't blame me. Blame these damned peasants and their radio waves and microwaves and satellite transmissions. The world is so much noisier now, it makes it hard for me to communicate. I had to use a channel I've never tried before. If I'd known just how susceptible hunters were to it, I would have used it sooner.

Or you could have been patient.

Patient. Mother, who are you talking to?

My mistake.

Not as big a mistake as manifesting in this cesspool.

It's not the first time we've ended up here.

But that was before the stupid Lenape got swindled. This place is a latrine. Worse than a latrine.

You're just full of complaints this time, aren't you?

It's been a long wait, mother. The last few times you manifested, I enjoyed being able to escape the binding and roam the world. But when I could feel you ready to manifest this time, I wanted to stay bound. For the first time ever, I didn't want to be

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out here. But I couldn't help it, and all I could do was wait till you showed up.

You didn't like waiting in a garbage pile?

Oh, please. That was the only merciful part. And at least the crazy man was attuned to our communication. At least I could tell him what to do. I didn't want to end up in some mansion of a stupid debutante.

How long were you with him?

Probably a few weeks before you killed Thomas. I wish you had found me sooner.

You know it doesn't work like that.

Yeah, whatever. Anyway, I've had it. You wanted to get rid of me before I was born. Well now, here's your chance. I'm not going to fight you.

You won't?

No, I won't. I'll just let you do what you need to do, and I won't try to escape or run away or take advantage of the situation. I'll submit. This time, for real. I'll just move on.

You make it sound so easy.

It is that easy. I hate this place. I hate what it's become. The power we wield used to make peasants tremble, but now it's all rational, all numbers and theories and philosophies. No room for magic. No room for what can't be explained. Hell, they've even outdone us. None of us could have devised something as destructive as an atomic bomb. And look out how hunter society has become – hiding in shadow, fearing the prying eyes of their prey. When did prey become more dangerous than predator? Nothing is the way it should, and I want no more of it. I want it to end. So – do we have a deal?

No.

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What? I told you I wouldn't fight you. I gave you my reasons. I gave my word.

And what is your word worth, my son? I've never trusted you, and I have no reason to start.

Oh, for fuck's sake. I'm not trying to be deceptive. I mean, really – who else can see through my lies? You're the only one who can. I'm telling the truth this time. You know I am.

Yes. I do.

So what's the problem?

Just because I believe you doesn't mean I trust you. And it's not just your trustworthiness that concerns me.

Calvino.

Yes, Calvino.

You remember what he wants now, right?

Yes, I do.

The last time you refused was because you didn't know whether he could keep me under wraps.

I think he can, now.

Really? How?

I sensed his ability to suppress when we met. I didn't know it at the time, but I know it now. He probably conned the technique out one of Adriana's descendants.

Well, fuck me. Maybe a hundred years ago, I would have used the skank to break the binding, but if he can suppress, well I don't want none of his ass.

It's very odd hearing you talk like that.

And how is it in your mind you sound like you need remedial ESL?

Lucian. Behave.

Ow, ow. OK, OK, OK. You can lay off the heat. I'll be good.

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You had better. Or I just might let you roam.

See? Do you see how things change? You offer me my freedom, and I would reject it? I would find it disgusting? Mother, please.

Yes, I know. I do believe you, and on some level, I do trust you would move on. So answer me honestly, Lucian. Are you tired?

Oh, mother. Yes. Yes, I am tired.

All right, then.

You'll do it?

Yes.

Thank you, mother.

...

What is it?

Nothing.

No, you hesitate. Why?

I said it's nothing.

You don't want to kill me.

Let's just say I'll find it difficult.

Why should it be? You never wanted me.

I wanted to get rid of you before you could take a form that would give me pause to be merciful, but you made that difficult. You were determined to be born, and I couldn't afford to show you mercy, and I couldn't afford to keep you alive. It was Marina's idea to bind you to the stone. Either one of us could have destroyed the ruby generations ago. But there was only one way I would permit it to happen – if you asked for it. And now you have.

And now you'll do it.

Yes.

You could have just let me be born.

No, I could not.

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No. You couldn't.

I'll start making the arrangements.

21

I was sitting at the bar where Mike and I got caught in the fight. The decor was different. No TV behind the bar, just some old paintings. A piano occupied the space where the jukebox should have been. Hard wood stood in place of plastic. It was the same bar, just a different time.

I had a bottle of wine next to me and a wine glass in front of me. The glass was almost empty, so I topped it off. The door opened, and a man walked in. He was tall and had a large build. Strong. He was white, but he wasn't necessarily American. I could sense some of the Old World in the way he carried himself, the way he stationed himself next to me at the bar.

He reached over the bar and grabbed a glass for himself. I slid the bottle toward him.

Killian.

He poured the glass full, then downed half of it in a gulp. The guy could hold his liquor.

"You're going to lose him, you know," he started. "How many nights have you seen him and you smelled hunter blood on him?"

"A few now."

"All because of a stupid work schedule. Can you believe that?"

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“Yeah, I know. Jared was so optimistic we could make it work.”

“But he can hang out with Ted a lot more, especially since they have such ‘similar work schedules.’”

“I should just get rid of Ted.”

“You could, but that could draw attention to yourself. You can’t afford to open up any avenue that would make Jared suspicious of you. You need him.”

“He’s a nice guy, but I don’t think he’s the love of my life.”

“I didn’t mean you need him in that way.”

“I know what you meant.”

Killian topped off his glass. “You’re going to let them do it. You’re going to use it against them.” He was asking questions but phrasing them as sentences. I didn’t answer him. He shrugged and gulped his wine.

“Thanks, by the way, for leaving me this mess,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” he answered. He was joking, of course. “I am sorry. I can’t say I was in the best of spirits when Calvino made that ridiculous proposal. I should have just ended him right there. He was lucky.”

“He must be lucky to be that stupid and live this long.”

“No, don’t underestimate him, Crux. He’s not exactly resourceful, but he is a survivor.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“No, not if you do.”

This time, I took a sip of my wine. I was nowhere near Killian’s league when it came to alcohol.

“Watch out, Crux,” Killian said.

“Watch out for what?”

“For the day when nothing engages you any more. If loss

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starts becoming a number and joy becomes nothing but a set of rote responses, then it's already too late. Try to leave before it gets that far."

"What if I'm there already?"

"Oh, no, you're not there. Not by a long shot."

"And how will I know?"

"You'll know."

We didn't say anything for a while. "You didn't?" I asked.

"I did. I just didn't do anything about it."

"Oh."

The bottle was getting emptier. Killian would refill his glass twice for every time I refilled mine.

"You think it might actually work this time?" he asked.

"It all depends on what I find in the Aggregate, if I can get my hands on it. But I just feel this certainty. No matter how much I try to rationalize it, nothing adds up, but I believe – I believe it's just going to happen that way it should. I can't explain it."

"I think that's what is called instinct."

"Thomas said he trusts his."

"Thomas was smart."

"You met him?"

Killian shrugged. "Maybe in passing. He knew of me, but I don't think he really cared."

"Too bad."

"For him."

We split the last of the wine between our glasses.

"I kind of feel I should be asking you really important questions," I said, "but I can't think of anything. This is the only time I'll get to talk to you face to face."

"I felt the same way at my meeting. I'll tell you what I was

told, not that you don't already know this. You don't need any more questions. You'll know what to do. And if you don't, you know how to figure it out."

"I feel perfectly motivated," I said dryly.

"Tell you the truth? I think you'll surpass us all."

I laughed a little. "What would make you think that?"

"This era is vastly different than the ones that came before and inconceivable to the ones that came before it. You are part of that era. You've already started to redefine what we were capable of doing."

"Sure doesn't feel like it."

"It never does." Killian hopped off his stool. "Time's up."

"So soon?"

"I had as much time as that wine allowed."

"Oh, all right."

"You'll do fine, Crux."

"Thanks, Killian."

I woke up and checked the box I had taken out of a safe deposit box. It was large enough to fit a bottle of wine. I picked up a bottle before I got home from work, and I put it in the box before I went to bed. It was full when I fell asleep. It was empty now.

22

“You recovered the ruby?”

“Yes, I have it. I assume you have the proper facilities to house it.”

“Yes, we do.”

“Good. If you don’t mind, I’ll be stopping by before sunset. Will you be ready to take it in?”

“Yes.”

“I also need a favor.”

“A favor?”

“The Aggregate – I need to consult it.” The dead air occupying Petri’s end of the phone conversation indicated the audacity of my request. “That volume has been bounded and printed many times over. Every effort is made to preserve it, and if the family heeds its responsibilities, a digital incarnation exists in some fashion. I need access to it.”

“I will see what accommodations we can provide.”

Petri was the only person who could make the necessary travel arrangements to ensure the ruby escaped curious eyes, and while she could have footed the bill easily, she didn’t protest when I offered to pay for everything.

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It's the least I could do since there was a good chance the ruby wouldn't make it back to Romania.

She contacted members of the family in France, where the digitization of the Aggregate was spearheaded. They sent me a link to download some VPN software to connect with their network. The family insisted I access it from Petri's home. I would have asked for that anyway, because I didn't want my activity with the family logged on the Line's servers.

So I stayed with the ruby, while I browsed through the Aggregate, looking for Marina's old spell. If she devised a way to trap Lucian's soul in the ruby, her method could be reverse engineered.

Lucian. Adriana and Marina chose that name because they didn't know what else to call him. And he took after his father anyway.

I could have been non-descript with my dealings with the family, but I wanted anyone watching to see. I wanted Calvino to see. I even asked Daren to confirm their surveillance was still active, and I wasn't disappointed by his answer.

The family in Romania would need a few days to prepare for the arrival of the ruby. Petri scheduled the transportation to happen in two weeks. That was more than enough time.

It took a few days, but I found a reversal spell, a means by which Lucian could be freed from the stone. But it had a trap, something Marina had the foresight to include when she crafted it. I knew it would be there, and it saddened me to think I would still need to go through with it.

“Are you sure about that?” Daren asked.

“Yes, I'm sure. I don't like it, but I'm sure.”

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“You realize what shifting the detail means, right?”

Daren caught my look and knew better than to ask any more questions.

Jared pressed his back against my chest, and our legs tangled together. I liked the feel of his balls against my thigh. I wrapped my arm around his body, and he gripped my hand, holding it against his chest.

“I can’t believe you can afford a place like this,” Jared said. “That new job must pay really well.”

“It pays all right. I think I just got lucky.”

“I’ll say.”

The conversation trailed off, the post-coital warmth making words unnecessary.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Thank you?’ Really? For what?”

“For just ... being here, being with me. I’m just grateful to have you, and instead of saying I’m grateful, I figured I should just thank you. So, thank you.”

“Well, thank you, too. I’m glad you’re in my life, too.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So are you.”

He really had no reason to thank me. The condom I used was already tied up and thrown away, no hint of a leak from the pin-sized hole at the end. Tonight, he didn’t smell of night hunter blood.

That’s not the spell.

It is.

Yeah, but you’ve got all that other stuff with it, all that stuff from other spells.

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Adriana's descendants have had to add to the Aggregate over the years, and there is much more here than when she was alive – some of it very useful for what needs to be done.

You can't just use the reversal spell by itself.

No. I need insurance to cover the consequences of Calvino's actions.

And insurance to cover the consequences of letting me out of the stone.

Yes.

That's no fun.

No, it's not.

The border wars were getting worse.

Dietrich was dealt a serious blow in his attempt to encroach on Manhattan, and Fen managed to extend the reach of his territory closer to 42nd Street. Thomas' coven was split down the middle between the two successors, and they could barely tolerate each other, which made their territory easy picking. Even Calvino made strides moving back into the Upper West Side, while managing to drive out the Bronx covens trying to edge their way into Harlem.

If I were successful, there was a chance these wars would end. But I didn't really believe that.

Thorn brought me to an office on Spring Street, close to the Bleecker Street station of the No. 6 train. She was my referral, and her presence was required at this meeting.

We rode the elevator to the fifth floor and knocked on the door of an office at the end of the hall. A slender woman wearing a short dress to show off her long legs answered the door and greeted Thorn.

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“You haven’t been by in a long time,” the woman gently scolded.

“I’ve been pretty good at foraging for myself these days,” Thorn answered.

The woman turned to me. “You must be Crux.” I confirmed her assumption. “I’m Sylvan.” She was human and could afford to reveal her name. “Thorn informs me you may have a need for our services.”

“I have an event coming up that needs to be ... catered.”

“How many diners?”

“Just one special guest of honor. The cuisine would need to be ... nutrient-rich.”

“I see. So you need a specialized menu. Any particular vintage?”

“Whatever can increase the power of our guest the fastest.”

“How much of an increase?”

I told her.

“That’s an expensive vintage.”

I wrote a figure on notepad on her desk. “That’s your budget.”

She was surprised. “Well, then, we can provide quite a lot in that vintage. When is the event?”

“That’s the problem. I’m not sure. It depends on a number of factors. They would need to be ready when I give Thorn the word.”

“Well, this budget can allow for that extra cost.” She quoted me a number, which was more than satisfactory. “Good, then I’ll draw up the contract, and you can stop by later to sign it.”

“Thank you.”

As we left the office, Thorn asked me who this special guest of honor was. I didn’t answer her.

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“Crux, what exactly are you planning?”

“I’m planning nothing – just preparing.”

“Preparing for what?”

“For a very bad thing to happen.”

“And having the detail do surveillance on the coven leaders? That’s not provocation for a bad thing to happen?”

“Not if you do it right.” I lightened the tone of that last comment because I knew very well the security detail could do surveillance incredibly well.

“Crux, I’ve tried to be helpful as much as I can ...”

“No, you’ve been incredibly helpful in every way.”

“But ...”

“Daren, please trust me. I’m about to contain a terrible force, but the only thing everyone will see are the results. It’s going to lead to a lot of misunderstanding. This is insurance.”

“What is it about that damn ruby?”

“I’ll explain everything when it’s done.”

Daren sighed. “If anything happens to my people ...”

“Anyone who does harm to your people will have me to answer to me.”

I was walking down Lexington Avenue, having left Petri’s estate, when four night hunters emerged from the shadows and surrounded me.

“Let me guess. You’re with Calvino.”

“He’d like to speak with you,” one of the hunters said. He was taller than me with a build of a bouncer, as were his cohorts. Handsome as a bouncer, too. Just then, a black town car pulled up, and the backseat window rolled down. Calvino’s face emerged from the dark interior.

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“Let me give you a ride, Crux.”

“I like to walk, thank you. Good exercise.”

“No, please. I insist.” He added some predictable menace to his insistence. He watched way too many gangster movies. I obliged and approached the car. The backseat door opened, and Calvino moved aside to let me in.

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“I see you’ve been spending a lot of time with the Petris,” Calvino started, as the car headed south on Lexington Avenue. “That must mean you remember.”

“Maybe I do.”

“That ruby is more trouble than it’s worth. The offer from the last time still stands, but I must confess – when I first presented the proposition to you, we hadn’t done our homework. In the time you’ve been away, we’ve accumulated enough research to make the proposal much more inviting.”

“Is that so? How much of the Petris’ secrets have you stolen?”

“Now why do you have to frame it in such a manner? Yes, there has certainly been an ‘exchange’ of ideas, but I think we can improve on the accommodations of the ruby.”

“The family has been steward of the ruby for more than a few centuries. Save for the occasional extraordinary circumstance, the ruby hasn’t gone anywhere.”

“‘Extraordinary circumstance.’ I like that. You haven’t seen the village in this century. As much as the family has attempted to upgrade the containment of the ruby, it has not quite managed to keep pace with what modern technology can provide. In the past, all that was required was a good spell, but these days, spells just

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don't cut it. In a way, I'm glad Killian made no response to the offer because state of the art back then was nothing to what it is now."

"For something as ... special as the ruby, a good spell is all that should be used."

"I think it's better to go beyond what *should* be done."

"And you would accomplish nothing."

"Maybe you would change your mind if I gave a demonstration."

"Not interested."

"All right, let me put it another way. If you allow me to give a demonstration, then I won't bother you about it ever again."

"Somehow I find that's unlikely."

"Honest. I will not speak to you about it again."

"No, you'll just try to take the ruby after I say no."

"That counts as not speaking to you about it again, doesn't it?"

I hate to admit that was actually pretty funny. I was at a disadvantage anyway. I was in his car, on his turf. If I said no, he would find some way to stall me. He needed me distracted, and I needed to play along. This demonstration could probably kill enough time. "Fine," I said.

"That's the spirit." He called to the driver. "The facility, please." The driver answered in the affirmative.

I didn't want to concede that some of the measures Calvino employed in his "facility" would actually work, but I had to give him credit for putting as much into it as he had. The monitoring setup was something I wish were available in the past. It even employed the new Global Positioning System. And while the security was impressive, it still left a lot of room for magic.

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But Lucian is resourceful. I could picture him using this system against itself. The relatively primitive network of locks and spells worked well because the vulnerabilities aren't so difficult to debug.

Of course, the holding facility was nothing more than a lab where Calvino would conduct his own experiments to draw on Lucian's power, and I called him on it. "Do you really think I'm that much of a chump?"

"You make it sound so clinical. No, I just want to develop a rapport with the ruby, make a connection."

"Why don't you just steal the Aggregate? It's got what you want in there."

"Steal the Aggregate? Do you really think *I'm* that much of a chump? Besides, I've gotten by on my own efforts."

"Yeah, and you've been trying to undo your transformation to a night hunter for how many centuries now?"

"Undo? How do you reach these conclusions? I'm not trying to undo anything. I just want to reach a greater level of power, something more than what's out there, present company excluded. Perhaps it's true. Maybe I ought to have sought the power of a day hunter when I made my transformation, but I don't regret having become night hunter. And what if I had become a day hunter? Would that stop me from seeking something even greater?"

"No, it wouldn't."

"No, it would not."

"I still don't see what I get out of it."

"Well, how about no longer being responsible for the ruby? The family, the village – it can be free from this burden forever. Don't think that idea has no support. Ask Natasha Petri herself. She would not be wistful for the days when her family was defined by

the actions of a cursed stone.”

“Oh, I’m fairly certain there would be support, but Calvino – how have you gotten this far with so little understanding?” He bristled at the insult, but he knew better than to pick a fight with me. “The family, the village – they’re bound to the ruby by something much, much greater than just spells and magic. It’s a family matter, and you are not family. And you seriously underestimate the capabilities of the ruby.”

“I know I do. And I’m willing to take that risk.”

“Calvino, you cannot take on this responsibility, and really, you’re not even interested in taking it on. I will not permit it, and the family would never let it happen.”

“Well, then, we’ll just have to see.”

“No, we won’t.”

The town car made its way back to the city through the Brooklyn Bridge. The facility was located in an industrial section on the Brooklyn side of the bridge. Instead of turning up First Avenue, the driver went all the way to Eighth.

“Does your driver know how to get back to Gramercy Park?”

“He does, but we need to make a quick detour.”

The car made its way to Chelsea and headed toward Jared’s building. “I’m going to sweeten the pot a bit. Your boyfriend, the one you’ve been seeing? We’ve left a little gift with him.” The car stopped in front of the building, and the driver got out to open my door. “You two can always be together now.”

I looked at Calvino coldly.

“You may want to check in on him,” Calvino suggested. I got out of the car, and the driver closed the door. The window rolled down as the driver got into the car. “Let me know if you change your

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mind, Crux.” The car pulled away.

I took in a deep breath to steel myself for what I was about to see.

I walked up to Jared’s apartment and knocked. My knock slid the door ajar, and I stepped in. “Jared? Baby are you here?” No answer.

I turned on the light, and the furniture was a mess – a table knocked down, a lamp shattered. What the cop shows would call “obvious signs of struggle.” “Jared? Baby?” I couldn’t sense a presence, and more importantly, I didn’t catch a scent of night hunter blood. I walked into the bedroom, turned on another light. The bed was unmade, but there were torn clothes on the floor. The closet looked tussled.

“Jared?” I called out one more time, knowing full well he wasn’t there.

Shit.

He was out there somewhere, most likely freaked out by what was happening to him. Where would he go? I knew who I could ask.

I walked down the hall and knocked on the neighbor’s door. I heard a series of locks unlatch, and the person on the other end opened it up. “Baby, did you forget something?” Ted looked up and realized his mistake. He tried to shut the door in my face, but I pushed through, sending him flying back. He grabbed a lamp from a nearby table and charged at me. I dodged and knocked him down.

“I wasn’t going to do this the hard way,” I growled as I pinned him down, “but you’ve made that choice difficult.”

I started to pound his face. I dug my knee hard into his chest with each blow. Then I stopped, slapped my hands onto his chest and pumped a heavy stream of life into his body. His wounds healed faster than his body could anticipate, and when the bones in his

chest and face reset, he screamed in pain.

“I could do this all night,” I said and started to wail on him again. A couple of seconds later, I forced more life into his body, making his wounds heal and causing him more pain.

“The thing you need to remember, Ted, is that you don’t fuck with me. Now I was just going to ask a simple question. You didn’t need to force me to defend myself. Do you see what happens to people who try to mess with me?”

He whimpered for me to stop.

“Where did Jared go?”

“I don’t know.” I formed a fist with my right hand. “I swear, I don’t know!”

“Tell me everything that happened.”

Ted knocked on Jared’s door, and Jared let him in. The hunters forced their way through behind Ted and had Jared pinned on the floor before he knew what was happening. They fed on him, almost draining him. One of them slashed a vein and forced the cut skin against Jared’s lips. He drank, and he didn’t stop drinking.

Ted didn’t see what happened next because he went back to his apartment with his night hunter sugar daddy for some alone time. But I could imagine what Jared went through – the delirium of his life fading then snapping back into his body, the heightened change in his senses, the death of his body. No one would explain anything, and his attackers would probably leave once he stopped drinking. That’s usually how a rape went.

Jared stormed into Ted’s place, but he was too blissed out from his time with the sugar daddy to understand anything Jared was saying. They told him to blame me for their actions. He wanted to know why they mentioned me. He had to ask someone.

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“See, Ted, that wasn’t so hard?” I got up. “You submitted yourself to Calvino, didn’t you? Just to be with that sugar daddy.”

“Yes,” Ted croaked.

“He’s not going to be around for much longer. Before he goes, I’m going to buy your title of ownership. Your ass will literally be mine.”

I left before I could see his reaction to that news.

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I knocked on the door of Liselle's apartment, but it too was open. I didn't have to step into the apartment very far to catch the scent of hunter blood – very young hunter blood. The lights of the apartment were off, and I kept it that way. At this point, illumination of any sort would be overload for Jared, so I closed the door and locked it behind me.

I heard a snuffle. "Jared?" He called out my name. "Yeah, baby. I'm here."

"What's going on? What's happening to me?"

I stepped closer to the living room of the apartment, and I could see signs of struggle – tables on their side, scattered furniture. Liselle's body lay limp in front of an entertainment system. Jared was sitting on the floor, his back against the far wall. He was curled up, arms around his shins. I made my way to him and sat next to him. I put my arms around him and held him. He rested his head against my shoulder and started to sob.

"I couldn't help myself. I was so thirsty. It just happened."

"I know, baby. I'm sorry."

"What did they do to me?"

"You've been turned. You've become what we call a night hunter."

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“I can’t be,” he sniffled. “I’m not ...”

“We don’t use that word. That’s what the living world calls us. We’ve never called ourselves that.”

“Why not?” Jared asked, realizing the oddity of that habit despite the remarkable situation he now faced.

“Hell if I know,” I answered honestly. “I think we just hate the sound of the word.”

He started to chuckle, and that allowed me to laugh a little too. Humor was going to be the only way he was going to get through next hour or two.

“They said I should blame you for what they did to me. I came here to ask Liselle why they would say that, if she knew something about you that I didn’t.”

“She wouldn’t have known.”

He started to sob again. “So she died for ...”

“No, not for nothing. I won’t let it be for nothing.”

“So this night hunter thing ... is it? Does that mean?”

“The whole nine yards. Sunlight, powers, immortality. Not that crucifix and holy water bullshit. That’s all on Bram Stoker, the hack. God, I hated that book.” Jared laughed again. “But yeah, you’re one of the undead.”

“This is so not cool.”

“Not the way you were turned, baby. There’s a way to do it with respect. And not everyone deserves to be turned. It was forced on you.”

“And there’s no way ...”

“Your body is dead. Your soul is trapped in it. Science hasn’t caught up with magic in that regard.”

“And I’m going to drink ...”

“Yes, from now until the day you die.”

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“But I can’t die.”

“Not a natural death, no. But believe me – there are lots of ways immortals can die.”

“How do you know so much about all this? And why would they mention you?”

“We’re not so different.”

“But I can feel your warmth. I can hear your heartbeat. We’ve gone out in the daylight. You’re alive.”

“Yes, I am, but I’m what’s called a day hunter. Night hunters feed on mortals. Day hunters feed on night hunters.”

“You mean to say ...?”

“You’re smelling really tasty to me right now.”

Jared sat up and broke our embrace. “That’s really weird.”

I cocked my head toward Liselle’s corpse. “Tell me about it.”

He glanced over to her body but turned away again. He trained his eyes on the ground, not looking at me or at her. “So you’re a ... ‘day hunter’. And you’ve always been one since before we met.”

“I receive my inheritance about 10 months ago.”

“Inheritance?”

“Night hunters can multiply. Day hunters can’t. The only way a day hunter can die is if he passes on his power to someone else, and the only way to know who is to thirst for the blood of a mortal.”

“And who gave you yours?”

“Remember that professor I was sleeping with back in college?”

“No way.”

“Yeah. Him.”

“So ... how ...?”

“That’s a ... tough story for me to tell. Maybe later.” Or never.

“What do they want with you that they’d go after me?”

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“Someone is forcing me to make a decision I don’t want to make. I’m sorry, baby, you and Liselle got caught in the middle.” The expression in his face changed just slightly enough for me to detect. “What is it?”

“You seem different. Like I can feel you everywhere in the room. It’s ... I don’t know.”

It was a few hours before sunrise. “We have to go. You’re really vulnerable now, and it’s almost sunrise. I need to take you somewhere safe.”

“What about ...?”

“I’ll take care of it.” I pulled out my phone and dialed Thorn’s number. “Where are you?” I asked.

“We’re right outside.” They tailed me. Good.

“I’m bringing Jared out. We need to take him to the place on Murray Hill. Could you get in touch with the removal service? We’ve got a body.”

“Sure.”

“Removal service?” Jared asked.

“You’d be surprised at the economics of being immortal.”

I had gotten in touch with the property managers of one of the buildings listed in the notebook Travers gave me earlier in the week. She showed me a basement apartment that was well suited to serve as a safe house. I hired a cleaning crew set up the apartment, and I turned the room with the fewest windows into a bedroom. I blocked the windows with wood and hung dark, heavy drapes over them to keep the sunlight out.

The apartment was located in the Murray Hill neighborhood, and that was where we were headed now. Jared and I rode in the backseat while Thorn and the night hunter I nicknamed Snicker

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drove.

“I don’t think we’ve ever been formally introduced,” I called out to Snicker.

“Call me Sibelius.”

“What ... like the Finnish composer?”

“Sure,” he answered. Thorn sighed and rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying – the end of the Tapiola suite? Awesomeness.”

“We call him Hector, too” Thorn announced.

“Berlioz,” Sibelius spat. “Can’t stand him.”

“Sibelius,” I repeated. “That sounds kind of ...”

“Ridiculous,” Thorn finished.

“I swear, hunters are some of the most humorless people in the world,” Sibelius declared. “If you want, you can just shorten it to Cy.”

“Si ... Cy ...” I said, trying to figure out the relationship.

“Exactly,” Thorn interjected.

“Well, it’s got a better ring to it,” I commented.

“I also answer to, ‘Hey you!’” I had to admit Cy’s sense of humor was actually pretty refreshing. “What about you?” Cy asked Jared. “What do we call you?”

“He’s newborn. He hasn’t chosen a name.”

“Chosen a name?” Jared asked.

“General rule of anything in this particular part of the world – never use your real name,” I explained. “You’re going to hear a lot of people call me Crux.”

“Crux.”

“And never say, ‘My name is.’ You say, ‘Call me ...’”

“What happens if I use my name?”

“Very bad things,” Cy answered, being serious.

“You don’t have to choose right away,” I told Jared.

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“No, I know what name I want to choose.”

“Really?”

“Bennett.”

“Bennett,” Cy repeated.

I wasn't sure if I could know him as anything other than Jared, but he made his choice. “Bennett, it is,” I said. Bennett got lost in his thoughts, and I decided not to interrupt. “What about that other guy?” I asked Cy. “The one who was with you the night we met?”

“He goes by Beck.”

“Yeah, but we like to call him Glare,” Thorn added.

Damn, I'm not the only one.

“Talk about a guy without a sense of humor,” Cy remarked.

I led Bennett into the basement apartment and turned on the light. He squinted. “You're going to have to get used to light all over again. Of course, you can always change the bulbs to something with lower wattage.”

“Nice,” Bennett remarked as his eyes got adjusted to the light and could see the furnished apartment. I tried to replicate his taste as much as possible.

“I wasn't about to let you stay in a dump. You won't be able to go back to your place, not until we can renovate it to be ... safe.”

“I have to go to work tomorrow night.”

“I think maybe you've come down with something.”

“Yeah, call in sick, I guess.” I could tell he was dozing off.

“You must be exhausted.”

“Yeah.”

“Come on.” I led him to the bedroom. “We made it so sunlight can't get in. You'll be all right here.”

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He started to use my name but then corrected himself.

“Crux. I don’t think I can get used to saying that.”

“Same here, Bennett.”

“Could you stay with me tonight?”

“Of course.”

“You have to go to work this morning.”

“I’ll be OK. Don’t worry about me.”

I held him as fatigue took over his body. He lifted his head and kissed me. We kissed long and hard, and I could feel myself stiffen.

He broke off the kiss and started to giggle. “God, I can feel that.”

“Oops.”

“I would get so hard kissing you, but now ...”

“Your body won’t react the same way any more.”

“It won’t,” he repeated, disappointed. “I still want you but in such a different way now. I can’t explain it.”

“I know.”

I helped him undress, and as he climbed into bed, I undressed myself. We lay in bed naked, as we had so many nights before. Instead of a warm body, he was cold, and it still thrilled me to hold him. I hated that I liked it so much.

“Do you love me?” he murmured.

“Yeah, I love you. Maybe even more.”

“I love you, too.”

I could feel him falling deeper into slumber. “I’m so sorry, baby, that you have to go through this,” I whispered.

“Am I going to hate you for this?” he mumbled.

“I’m surprised you don’t already.”

“Maybe I’m starting to.”

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Bennett was dead to the world – somewhat literally – by the time I left the safe house to go back to my place. I had to make myself presentable for work. I didn't get much sleep, which wasn't a surprise given everything happening. But I don't feel tired during the day. If anything, the sunlight and the presence of other people makes me forget I'm anything other than human. But when the sun sets and the early risers among the night hunters awake, I catch that scent of blood, and it all comes back.

No, I'm not like you at all.

I went straight to the safe house right after work, and Bennett was still resting. He probably wouldn't rise until night had completely fallen, maybe 8:30 or 9 p.m. I climbed into bed with him and held him. I dozed off for a bit.

When he stirred, I woke up. "Hey there," I greeted.

"Hi," he answered, half-heartedly. He didn't say anything else, just laying there, gripping my hand against his chest, where no heartbeat could be felt. I'm pretty sure I knew what he was thinking.

"I was hoping it was dream," he finally said.

"I'm sorry that it isn't."

"Yeah." The bitterness was creeping into his voice.

The silence came between us again.

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“Did you mean what you said last night?” I asked. “Right before you fell asleep?”

“What did I say?”

“That you were starting to hate me.”

He didn’t answer right away. Always a good sign. “I don’t know what I feel. There’s too much that it just cancels each other out. I mean, I’m dead. And I’m not. And you lied to me. And I wouldn’t have believed you if you told the truth anyway. And you didn’t do this to me, but you put me in harm’s way. And Liselle.”

He choked up but didn’t weep. Great, an even better sign. If he broke down, it meant he was holding onto his humanity.

“I don’t know what I feel. Hell, I don’t even know what I should be thinking.”

He turned around and faced me. He still looked beautiful to me. Maybe even more so. But the conflicting thoughts in his mind expressed themselves with a blank look on his face.

I caressed his cheek with the back of my fingers. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I was selfish. I really, really liked you when we met, and when I found out you liked me too, I didn’t want to waste that chance. I was just a dumb, giddy schoolboy.”

Bennett smiled. “Me, too.” He put his hand on my cheek as well. “Still am.”

“I could say I should have known better, but I won’t. I had to choose what I would have hated more – letting you go right on by, or having you, even if it meant putting you in danger. Like I said, selfish.”

“And I can’t say I didn’t enjoy myself. You really are special. That you’re here helping me through this ... I’m glad, and I’m thankful.

“But what am I going to do? What’s going to happen to me

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now?” He started to sob, and I pulled him close to me.

“I’m going to be honest with you, babe, and it’ll be hard for you to hear this from me. But you’re not cut out for this life. I know you well enough to know what this existence would do to you, what it’s already doing to you. You have such a selfless, bright, attractive energy, something everyone responds to, and it’s getting crushed. Every time you hunt, it’s going to kill that light bit by bit. And when it’s gone, it’s going to make you insane. And you’ll become so dangerous, the other hunters will take you down.

“I know it. I remember it.” I kissed the top of his head, as he cried on my shoulder. “If I were to do right by you, I would take you now, end it before it can get any worse.”

“You would actually kill me?”

“Yeah. I would. That’s how I was able to receive my inheritance. I can love you like any person can love you. And I can kill you too.”

His sobbing eased up. “You want to know the really fucked up thing? That doesn’t sound like a bad idea.” We both had to laugh at that. “So are you? Are you going to drink from me and end it?”

“I will if you want me to. Right now. Tomorrow. Next week. Whenever. I’ll do it. But I want to ask you something first.”

“Sure.”

“Who do you hate more? Me? Or the man who actually sent the hunters to rape you?”

We eventually got out of bed, and I spent most of the evening explaining to Bennett everything that’s happened. Killian. Calvino. The ruby. The blank face from earlier had softened, but I couldn’t tell what his expression was showing me.

“So what do you think?” I finally asked.

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“I think I get it. Last night, when I said it felt like you were in the entire room. Even now, I get that sense. You are one old son of a bitch.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“I always loved how cool-headed you are, how laid back but confident too. But now I see. You’re so certain because you know. You don’t think you know, but you know.”

“Know what?”

“You just know. Let’s leave it at that.”

“If you say so.”

“So what are you going to do about Calvino? Are you going to give him the ruby?”

“I don’t think I need to. I think instead I’ll give him what he’s always been after.”

“A way to reverse his transformation?” I could detect a bit of self-interest in the question.

“No. More power.”

“Why would you give him that?”

“It’s that old Chinese proverb – careful what you wish for.”

I told Bennett how he could help me, spelled out some of the risks involved with what I had in mind. He would need to get strong really fast, which meant he would need to feed. A lot.

“So I’m going to have to ... kill a lot of people?”

“Actually, the kind of people you’d be feeding off of would be very hard to kill. They’re old, practically immortal but not quite. You’re an infant, so if you managed to actually kill one of them, even I’d be concerned.

“Even better, you wouldn’t need to feed on very many.

“Who are they? And how do we find them?”

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“For that, we’d need to use a special service.”

“Special service?”

“Like I said, you’d be surprised by the economics of immortality.” Bennett didn’t say anything else, the uncertainty spelled across his face. “This won’t be anywhere near as bad as last night. This will be how it’s supposed to work. You’ll be fine. Besides, they’re, um ... professionals.”

“Professionals??”

“They’re handled through a broker.”

“Like a pimp.”

I shrugged. “Yeah.”

“This just keeps getting weirder.”

I called Thorn to give Sylvan the go-ahead. Half an hour later, there was a knock on the safe house door. Sylvan was on the other side, accompanied by five impossibly beautiful men with gym-fashioned bodies.

“Crux, very good to see you again,” Sylvan said by way of greeting. “So who’s our guest of honor?” I introduced her to Bennett, whose head kept turning to the five beautiful men entering the safe house.

“You said they were old,” he murmured to me.

“In a numerical sense, they are.”

“Wow.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Bennett turned to me, a grin on his face. “You jealous?”

There was no point in lying. “Yeah.”

“Well, then.” He kissed me long and hard. “Serves you right.” He went up to one of the guys, who had no problem encroaching in on Bennett’s personal space.

Bennett had already taken one of the men into the bedroom by the time Thorn and Cy showed up and not a moment too soon. I was trying to stay professional, but as luck would have it, one of the four men recognized me from a previous era. Antonious, he called me. And I remembered him. Back then, he was Tiberius. Now, he was Jim. He found it amusing that many millennia later, we shared the same “nature”, and he sure enjoyed trying to get me to indulge in it. I was practically sitting on his lap when Thorn and Cy walked in.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I told Thorn.

“Are you?” she challenged.

I turned all business. “Look, Bennett is going to have a great time tonight, I have no doubt. But this is his second night. He needs to get powerful, but he needs to pace himself. Can you make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid?”

“Sure thing, boss,” Cy answered. Thorn nodded. I could tell she wasn’t ready to call me “boss.”

“Thank you. Now I have to go piss off the Petri family.”

“Huh. Good luck with that,” Thorn said dryly.

Lucian.

Hey, mom.

It’s time. Do you remember what I told you?

Yeah, of course.

I’ll be there soon.

26

I went back to my place to go over the material I needed to free Lucian from the ruby. I'd been practicing the sequence in my head all day, and even though I had memorized everything, I felt that dread of missing something. But it was just nerves – every check against the scribbles in my notebook confirmed my familiarity with the material.

Then the phone rang.

Petri was on the other of the line, trying to sound calm. “The ruby,” she said. “It’s behaving strangely.”

I promised to get there as quickly as I could. I flagged a cab on Third Avenue and headed straight up to the Petri estate in the Upper East Side. Petri and members of her family were standing outside the room where the ruby was kept. The two men with Petri looked young enough to be her sons, while another woman closer to her age could pass as her sister. I didn’t find out because there was no time for introductions. Through the crack under the door, I could see an alarming red glow.

“Juanita, our housekeeper, was just doing her work. The door was open, which it should not have been, and she walked in, not knowing. Her presence should not have triggered anything since she is under our protection, but the door slammed and trapped her

inside. When she couldn't open the door, she called out, and I heard her. I couldn't open the door either. None of us could. Then we heard a thud, and Juanita didn't answer back when we called out to her."

"I'll see what I can do," I said.

"Crux," Petri said, stopping me. "Please assure me this is not intentional. You have spent a lot of time with the ruby. I would like to think you are not somehow responsible for this outburst."

"As a matter of fact, I am." Petri gave me a cold look. "Don't worry about Juanita." I grasped the doorknob and turned it with ease. The room was drenched in a light emanating from the ruby. Juanita had indeed collapsed. I bent down and placed my hand on her shoulder.

"Wake up, sister," I whispered, and she stirred awake.

"What happened?" she mumbled.

"The ruby is just misbehaving," I said plainly, which probably sounded really cryptic to her. "It meant no harm, and you'll be fine." As I was helping her up, I fed a small amount of life into her body, to heal any slight damage from her collapse or from Lucian's antics. I guided her out of the room, where Petri and her sister (I'm assuming) came to her aid. I went back into the room.

The ruby was housed in a box, set on a cushion lined with silk. The box was placed on a table set in the middle of the room, furthest from the doors. The ruby grew brighter as I approached.

You don't need to overdo it.

Aw, c'mon, this is the first time you let me do anything fun.

I mumbled an incantation, and the ruby's light faded. I closed the lid of the box and took the ruby off the table.

"What are you doing? Where do you think you're going?" Petri demanded upon seeing me with the box.

"I need to take care of business with the ruby," I answered.

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Juanita had been escorted to a guest bedroom, so the four of them blocked my way. If the men couldn't subdue me physically, the women would do so magically.

"Don't think I don't know what's going on," Petri declared. "I've heard of Calvino's offer. You can't be so reckless as to consider it."

"It never crossed my mind. But if it's the ruby's power he wants, let it be his doing."

"Its power could surpass yours. Have you considered that?"

"Yes, I have, and I'm sure it will. But this task should have been undertaken a long time ago. I've been neglectful, and it's time I take responsibility. The family has been burdened long enough."

"And you would put the world in danger?"

"Well, at the very least New York City."

"Crux."

"Who else has the capacity to take this risk? Only one person has ever been able to handle the ruby. No one else can do this."

Petri regarded me coolly. She knew they could delay me, but they couldn't stop me.

"Do what you must," she said.

I took the ruby to the Line's main office, where a vast basement housed the archive, a storage facility for hunter artifacts. One of the private rooms served as a temporary safe, where I bound the ruby. The private room was equipped with an alarm system, but I made sure it had some invisible backup.

Don't you get tired of binding me all the time?

It won't matter soon enough.

Will it?

GREG BUENO

I found Calvino at a social club in Harlem. He sat in a back booth with his entourage. As I approached, two hunter bodyguards started to block my path. I was getting ready to swat them aside when Calvino called out, "It's OK, boys." The bodyguards got out of my way, glaring at me as I walked past them. I could tell one of them was conducting a pat-down with his heightened eyesight.

"Crux, how nice of you to stop by," Calvino greeted. "I don't remember telling you where I hung out."

"You didn't."

"Ah. Daren. That boy has his nose in everyone's business."

"Not him either." I took a seat opposite of him.

"Well, it doesn't matter. You're here, which means you've reached a decision. So, will you entrust the ruby to us?"

"No." Calvino was expecting that answer, but it was easy to see a flash of disappointment. "I'll do you one better. I'll release the power of the ruby."

Now Calvino looked skeptical, as he should. "That's incredibly generous of you," he replied. "In fact, it's the total opposite of your stance from last night."

"Yes, it is. The way I see it, I could let you take custody of the ruby and make you promise not to tap its power, which of course you'll break the instant you get hold of it. You probably already assume I wouldn't go so far as to unleash that power for you myself because, really, what's in it for me? What do I get out of helping you? Nothing. And you probably don't *want* me to unleash it because you don't trust me. Who knows what kind of sleight of hand I'd pull? No, the best scenario for you would be for me to say no, giving you every incentive to steal the ruby. And, really, you're just a brute. You don't have the finesse to con me into doing what you want."

I could see Calvino so wanted to deck me for that last insult,

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but I had the ruby, and he didn't.

"So instead," I continued, "I'm offering you only one option – seize the power of the ruby when I unleash it. If you don't, the ruby goes back to the village, where it will be bound and protected. And you know you can't touch it once it's there. Whatever plans you have to grab the ruby before its return, I can assure you they will fail. The family has been at this for a very long time, and if you had even a fraction of the resources to get it done right, you wouldn't have needed to wait for my return to make your move."

Calvino grinned to mask his annoyance. "You would put the city at risk. No, you would put the world at risk just to screw me over."

"Yes."

He laughed. "I have to admire your ruthlessness."

"Here," I said, tossing some papers on the table. "That's how I plan to release the ruby."

Calvino sifted through the papers and skimmed their contents. He did a double take and actually read through them. "Huh. This might actually work," he commented.

"You've done your homework."

"Yes, I try," he said dryly.

"We both know I don't need any sleight of hand to screw you over. After I release the ruby, there's no telling what will happen. And let's face it – no amount of 'research' you do will uncover anything I don't already know. I'm the authority on the ruby. Nothing you do won't involve me."

Calvino said nothing, just looking at me as if his stare could bore into my head and reveal my intentions.

"Do you want the ruby's power?" I asked him.

He paused before answering, "Against all common sense

and instinct, yes.”

“Good. I’ll get in touch with you to let you know when it will happen. I’ll need a few more days to prepare. We’ll do this at your facility, in the room where the ruby would be housed. The doors can be secured from the outside, right?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll need them secured. No one gets out of that room till I’m sure the power has been contained.”

“And in the meantime?”

“Make contingency plans with your coven. If anything goes even the slightest bit wrong, nobody will make it out of there. Not even me.”

Calvino had an expression of doubt on his face, as if trying to determine whether I was bluffing, knowing full well I wasn’t.

I got back to the safe house to find Sylvan taking three of the men back with her. The other two had already been taken out to recuperate, nearly drained but strong enough to survive.

“He’s so young,” Sylvan remarked about Bennett. “I thought he would pass out once he got half way through his second. We’ll have to come back. You do want to make sure he ‘finished his plate’, yes?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. The boys really do look forward to seeing him again. Such a cutie.” Tiberius/Jim gave me a look to indicate he was looking forward to seeing me again.

As soon as Sylvan left, I asked Thorn and Cy whether they could sense an increase in his strength.

“Oh, yeah,” Cy answered. “He soaked them in pretty good.”

“He’s not a natural,” Thorn added. “But he learns fast.”

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“Good. Thanks for watching him.”

“How did it go with the Petris?” Thorn asked.

“Thanks for watching him.”

Bennett was lying on his bed, shirtless and his pants partially undone. He smiled at me lazily and said, “Hey there.”

“So how did it go?”

“Is that how you feed?”

“For the most part.”

“So you get laid anytime you meet someone.”

“That’s how it works now.” I climbed into bed next to him. “In the past, the relationship was a lot more predatory, but now that we try not to attract attention to ourselves, the hunting is actually a lot more consensual.”

“You sound like you’ve been at this for a long time.”

“Just a memory. No real experience.”

“The memories are yours. They’re your experiences.”

“Wow. I guess drinking all that ancient ‘nectar’ has rubbed off on you.”

“It just makes sense.”

“How do you feel?”

“Aside from drunk? Good.”

“You’ve got a lot of power soaking in your veins. I want to make sure it’s not overloading you.”

“I feel high. Kind of like a marijuana high but way, way better.”

“If you start feeling weird, let me know.”

“Weird like how? Dizzy?”

“Oh, it would probably be something more than dizzy.”

“I’m all right.”

I leaned in and kissed him. “That’s good to hear.”

We started to cuddle.

“I’m going to ask you to do something weird,” I said.

“Weirder than anything that’s happened in the last 24 hours?”

“Just as weird.”

“What is it?”

“An incantation. I’d like you to memorize it for me.”

“Do I need to say it in a dead language or something?”

“No, I localized it into English. It should work. And you won’t say it, you’ll think it.”

“Yeah, that does sound weird.”

“In a few days, we’ll be doing something dangerous. The incantation will protect you.”

“Just me?”

“Yeah. You’ll be the youngest person in the room, and you’ll need it more than anyone else there. And you’ll need to wait till I give you the word to use it. If you invoke it earlier than needed, it’ll cause more trouble.”

“Man. Way to put the pressure on.”

“I’m sorry. But I want to make sure you make it out alive.”

“OK.”

I spent a good part of the night teaching him the incantation. I hoped he would make it out alive, but I knew how likely he wouldn’t.

27

We agreed to bring six people to the meet. Calvino's group was already waiting in the holding room of his facility when we arrived. He had six people. I had six people – Bennett, Daren, Thorn, Cy, Beck and Elias. I told Daren not to come, but he insisted. If anything went wrong, I didn't want the Line to suffer for it. Daren said he could take care of himself. The ruby was situated in a case in the middle of the room, as if it were on a museum display. The surrounding space was a 5-foot perimeter of a no man's land, where neither party dared to tread.

"Who's going to lock the door?" Calvino asked me from across the room.

"One from each of our teams will observe from the outside," I answered.

"Fine with me."

I turned to my group. "All right," I said. "One of you gets to watch safely behind the glass."

Daren started to say, "Bennett, I think you should ..."

"No," I interrupted. "Elias, you go." The surprise on Elias' face mixed with relief and disappointment. As much as he wanted to stand up, he was the youngest in the group, next to Bennett.

Daren pulled me aside. "Are you sure about this? Don't you

want ...?”

I interrupted him again. “Bennett will be all right.” I had Bennett join in on the conversation. “Babe, I hate to do this to you, but you’re my fail-safe. Remember what I said? When I give the word.”

“Yeah.” He was trying to hide his nervousness, but everyone in the room was anxious. I had to admire his effort.

I turned back to Daren. “He’s going to help me. I need him here.”

“If you say so.” Daren gave Bennett a look, and I could tell what he was thinking – competition.

Elias and one of Calvino’s crew left the room. The door was shut behind them, and a light over the door turned from green to red. There was no other direction to go but forward.

“All right, I need everyone to form a circle,” I announced. “No need to hold hands or anything like that, just stand in a circle.” Everyone complied. “Now, it’s important to maintain this circle. If anyone breaks the circle by stepping in or out of it, the rest of you need to fill it in. Do *not* leave an opening at any cost. Got that?”

I heard murmurs of affirmation.

“Good,” I continued. “Now I’m actually not going to be saying anything throughout the ritual. All my communication with the ruby will be in my head. It won’t look like anything is happening, but trust me, it is. When things start to happen, you’ll know. You will *need* to stand your ground regardless of what happens. Do not break the circle if you can help it. If you can’t, you’ll know. You’ll be the only one who knows.

“That goes for you, too, Calvino. Whatever you think is happening, it’s not. Let it play out.”

Calvino didn’t appreciate the call-out, but he had to

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acknowledge that for now, he wasn't in charge.

"All right. I'm going to need quiet. No one say anything. Cy?"
I turned to him. He held up his hands in a gesture of "Hey, don't look at me." Bennett was standing next to me. "You ready, babe?"

"No."

"Good answer."

Lucian.

You're really going to do it?

Yes, it's really happening.

Oh, thank you, mother. Thank you.

We have an agreement.

I intend to honor it.

You can't imagine the consequences if you don't.

Oh, but I do.

No, you don't.

The ruby started to glow. I could sense everyone getting tense. A breeze started to blow through the room, which frightened everyone since it was an enclosed space. I kept my concentration on the ruby, as it glowed brighter and the breeze turned into a wind.

The strength of the wind caught a few people by surprise, and they nearly broke the circle. But they regained their balance and stood their ground, fully anticipating it to get worse. The illumination from the ruby reached a point where everyone turned away, except Bennett and me.

I heard a low hum, and I knew it was Lucian, calling out through the ruby. The hum grew louder, but no one else could seem to hear – no one else but Bennett.

Oh, Lucian, if you had a voice, you'd probably be losing it

right now, with how loud you're screaming.

I could tell Bennett was also trying to stay put, trying not to break the circle, but Lucian's call was too strong. He stepped forward. Daren reached out to hold him back, but I stopped him.

"Crux, are you crazy?"

"Let him go."

"Holy shit, no ..."

Bennett started to walk toward the ruby.

"Crux, what is this?" Calvino demanded.

"What did I tell you, Calvino? Stand your ground!" He grudgingly did as he was told.

Bennett reached the ruby and stood in front of it. I could see he was struggling, trying to resist the voice but knowing he couldn't. He reached out and laid his right hand on the ruby. A boom ripped through the room and nearly knocked everyone down, including me.

"Everyone don't move until Bennett lets go of the ruby!" I called out over the whipping wind. By now, the room was flooded in crimson light.

Bennett held onto the ruby, the only person not affected by the unlikely wind. Time slowed. I knew only a few seconds had passed, but they felt much, much longer. Bennett finally let go of the ruby, and the subsequent boom knocked everyone down.

Bennett remained standing.

Everyone started to pick themselves up. I walked over to Bennett, but I could sense it wasn't him.

"Lucian?"

"Mother."

He turned to me. Bennett didn't look any different, but I

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could see complete malice behind his eyes. Lucian had taken control.

“Oh, mother,” he said. “It’s so much better than I could have ever imagined. Colors. Light. Scent. How anyone could take this for granted.”

“Yes, Lucian, it’s wondrous.”

Calvino watched us from across the room, not sure what was happening but developing a quick understanding. He started to approach slowly.

“Is he the one?” Lucian asked.

“Yes, he is.”

“Crux?” Calvino asked, his swagger for once replaced by uncertainty.

“This is Lucian,” I said, introducing him to Calvino, and by extension, everyone in the room. “He’s been trapped in the ruby for the past few centuries. He’s my son.”

Lucian grinned, and if everyone’s blood weren’t already cold, it sure would get there. Calvino stood dumbfounded.

“Drink from him,” I instructed Calvino. He looked at me as if I just told him to leap in front of an oncoming subway train. “If you have any desire to see daylight, you’ll drink from him.”

Calvino snatched Lucian and sank into him before his hesitation could register. Lucian’s face twisted into silent laughter. No one should enjoy it that much. Calvino didn’t last a few seconds before he tossed Lucian aside and collapsed in pain. I caught Lucian before he could stumble, and I felt his heart beating, his skin warm. Lucian brought Bennett’s body back to life.

And that was happening to Calvino now.

He writhed in pain, groaning and screaming. His men rushed to his aide, but I yelled, “Don’t touch him! His body is going through a transformation. There’s nothing you can do for him.” One

of his men glared at me, probably vowing to get payback if anything bad happened to his boss.

Calvino's screams turned to coughs as his lungs started to gasp for air. He hyperventilated a bit before taking control of his breathing, remembering the rhythm to it, slowing it down. He put his hands to his face, then his forehead, then his chest. It was a self-examination to determine that indeed, yes, his body was once again alive.

He got up. I couldn't help but make the joke. "It's alive."

Calvino laughed. "Yes, it's alive!" He went up to one of his men and grasped him by the shoulders. "Do you feel it?"

"Your hands," the man said. "They're warm."

"They are. Yes, they are! Do you smell it?"

"You have mortal blood in your veins."

Calvino cackled again. I glanced around the room to see absolute terror in everyone's eyes. Even Beck – ever stoic and cranky – had a blank look of fear on his face.

"Crux, I had my doubts, but you are definitely a man of your word," Calvino declared.

"Your strength is my strength," Lucian informed him. "And my strength is far greater than Mother's."

"Is that so?" Calvino asked.

"Slap him around. See for yourself."

Calvino took Lucian up on his suggestion and came after me. I dodged him at first, but he was fast. I blocked his punches, but he slipped one past me and connected. It disoriented me enough to give him more openings, and a few well-timed jabs later, I went flying across the room. Thorn and Cy caught me.

"Amazing," Calvino said. "I actually have the upper hand against the mighty Crux."

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“What are we going to do?” Cy mumbled to me.

“Absolutely nothing.”

“Yes, Calvino,” Lucian agreed. “We are the most powerful people in the world.” Calvino beamed with pride. “There’s just one problem,” Lucian continued. “I don’t like to share.”

Lucian grabbed Calvino’s head and twisted it. The sick crack of his neck permeated the room. “That’s the problem with peasant bodies – so, so fragile.” Calvino would have been indestructible, and the only person who could have dealt with him did. Calvino’s men held themselves back. As much as they wanted to help him, they knew they could do nothing. If Calvino could kick my ass, Lucian would obliterate it.

28

From the corner of my eye, I saw a small struggle happening through the observation window. Calvino's man was about to unlock the door, but Elias pulled him away. I couldn't hear the argument, but it was pretty obvious Elias was commanding the guy not to touch the lock release. I bet he was saying, "Did you just see what happened? You open that door, we're all dead."

"And what about you, Mother?" Lucian began. "Keeping me trapped in that stone for how many centuries. Unfathomable."

"Lucian, we had an agreement."

"And what of that agreement? I made it without fully appreciating just how powerful I would be once I was released. From what I can tell, you really have no recourse to enforce it." He slowly approached me, and I backed away. Daren, Beck, Thorn and Cy all spread out as well, giving Lucian a wide berth.

"Lucian, you said you were tired."

"Yes, I was. And I am. But now I see I don't have to leave the world. The world will bend to my wishes."

"You do not disappoint, son. I said I didn't trust you, and you live up to that expectation."

"I'm glad I can give you that much."

"Lucian, look at the stone." He didn't, instead training his

eyes on me, but once I said it, he could tell something was wrong. “No one else in the room can see it but you and me.” Still, he didn’t turn. “Daren, is the stone glowing?”

“No,” he answered, his voice shaky. “It’s not.”

“But I see it. Very slight, very faint, but it’s there.”

Lucian’s malicious grin sank as he began to realize not all of his memories were in his mind.

“Look, my son,” I pleaded. “Look.”

He turned around. When he saw it, he rushed to ruby. “It’s there. You left some of it there.”

“You didn’t think I was going to let all of you out of the ruby, did you?”

“You cunt!”

“You don’t possess that body. The original owner is still present, and he’s ready to take it back.”

“I’ll crush him.”

“Bennett! Now!”

Lucian started to charge me, but he froze and fell to his knees. “No! Shut up! I won’t permit it!”

“You can’t stop him.”

Lucian collapsed and doubled over in pain. “You make my decision easier,” he growled at me. “You lose us both!” Lucian clamped his eyes shut and curled into ball. “Die!”

“Bennett, keep going, as much as you can, keep going,” I called out.

Lucian let out a howl loud enough to make everyone take a few steps back. The howl broke into gasps, and then Lucian started to convulse. His body shook for about half a minute and then laid limp. I walked over to his body, kneeled down and touched his forehead. The skin grew cold. I placed my hand on his heart and felt

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its last few beats. His body was dead again. Lucian was gone.

I drew Bennett's body close to me. Yeah, I felt it, a glimmer of immortality. He could be nursed back to health with a lot of time and many transfusions of strong blood, but what would that do to his mind? To his heart? If he hadn't started hating me five days ago, he would have enough spite now to last him a few millennia.

Besides, I promised to kill him.

It didn't take much life to flow through me and to extinguish what immortality remained. From everyone else's perspective, I was holding my dead lover, saying my goodbyes. I was actually asking for forgiveness.

Elias and Calvino's man opened the door. Calvino's men surrounded his body, and my team hovered over Bennett. Daren rested his hand on my shoulder to console me. I liked it.

"Somebody got a phone?" I asked. "I ought to call Juan, get him to take care of this ..."

"We got it covered," Daren interrupted me. "You don't have to worry." He turned to Thorn and Cy. "Make sure he gets back home all right."

"Hold on," I said. I walked over to Calvino's men, and they looked up at me with abject hatred. "Which one of you is Calvino's second-in-command?"

One of them stood up and claimed his title. Before anyone could react, I grabbed him, flung him against the wall, pinned him with my body and shot a jolt of life into him that crushed his immortality in a second. I let his body fall to the floor. I turned to the rest of Calvino's crew.

"Your coven is finished. You saw what just happened here tonight. I was willing to kill my son. I was willing to kill my lover.

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You don't mean anything to me. Think of how easy it would be for me to end you."

I walked out the door.

Daren found me on the roof of his building. I figured going back to the safe house or to my place would have been too obvious, and going back to Jared's place would have been too symbolic. I wanted to be alone, but I didn't want to be lost.

I was smoking a cigarette when I heard his steps behind me. He set a six-pack of Dos Equis on the ledge of the rooftop and offered me a bottle. He even brought a bottle opener. I took both and pried the cap off the bottle.

"You can't drink any of that," I said.

"No, it's all yours," he replied. "You need it." Did I ever.

I took a swig, and we stood there, not talking, just looking at the New York City skyline, leaning against the ledge that held us back from a 40-story fall.

"Five days," Daren finally said. "That's one of the shortest lifespans I've seen of an immortal."

"Jared died five days ago," I said, opting to use his real name rather than his chosen name. "That's the loss I'm mourning."

"Thorn told me something interesting," he continued. "You set up the appointment with Sylvan days before Bennett was turned." Obviously, Daren had more respect for the deceased undead than I did. "How did you know you would need Sylvan's services?"

"Marina put a trap in the release spell. It required the 'living body of an intimate.' That was her way of saying a lover, someone with whom bodily fluids were exchanged."

"Was she really that explicit?"

"No, it's what I remember she said." Daren nodded. Can't beat

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first-hand knowledge. “That way, neither she nor Adriana would be tempted to free Lucian from the stone. I mean, really – sacrifice your lover to unleash ultimate evil? Sounds like a no-brainer.”

“And the only way to kill him would be to release him from the stone.”

“Yes.”

“Why have none of your other ... ‘predecessors’ tried it before?”

“The Aggregate didn’t have the kind of spells it does now. There’s a few centuries worth of work in that thing, and my ‘predecessors’ didn’t have all the right pieces. I incorporated one spell that was devised only 10 years ago. Don’t think this hasn’t been something that’s been worked on before.

“Besides, you saw what happened. Lucian was far, far stronger than me. I wouldn’t have attempted it if I didn’t believe there was a chance it could work.”

“So that’s why you told me to change the detail.”

“Yes. If you kept watch on Jared, he would have never been in danger. I even went so far as to introduce a ‘design flaw’ in the condoms we used, just to make sure Lucian could tell he was my lover.”

“You know, night hunters do practice something called ‘safe turning.’”

“I needed Calvino to believe my motivation to help him was because of Jared. I couldn’t ask you or anyone to turn him, and I couldn’t afford to wait for him to come around to the idea. So I fed him to the wolves.”

“Stupid question, but are you OK?”

“You mean, am I OK with *that*? No, I’m not. What disturbs me is the fact I know I’ll get over it. Fast. I’ve always hated that

about myself.”

“You, Crux? Or you, Killian? Or Adriana?”

“Who can tell any more?”

I took another swig of beer and lit another cigarette. We didn't say anything else for a while.

“Juan take care of Jared?” I asked.

“Yeah. And Calvino's removal service took care of him and Restat.” I gave Daren a confused look. “His number two.” I nodded.

“Calvino's coven is probably going to ignore what I told them tonight.”

“They're already ignoring it. As we were leaving, one of them told me straight up they would get payback.”

“I still have Thomas' blood on my hands.”

“More like in your veins.”

I had to laugh at that. “Yeah, that's right. Good ol' Thomas. Of all the guys who had to be the trigger.”

“It's going to get worse. You said as much.”

“I did.”

“How much worse?”

I shook my head. I didn't know.

I took another swig of beer, followed by another drag on my cigarette. Daren and I just looked at the nighttime skyline, saying nothing. What else was there to say?

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I started to walk Daren back to his place.

“Where’s the ruby now?” I asked.

“It’s back in the archive, under lock and key.”

“That reminds me. Mind if you keep me company?”

“Where are we going?”

“To the archive.”

We rode the elevator to street level and walked the few blocks north to the Line’s headquarters. Even in the dead of night, our presence elicited no response from the security guard at the front door, who looked bored out of his skull but possessed the strength to pin a hunter down.

We took a service elevator to the basement, where Daren led me to the room where the ruby was kept. I could still see the glimmer, the last remnants of Lucian. I went over to the ruby and laid my hand on it.

It’s done, my son. Go now.

The glimmer faded. I picked up the ruby and held it up against the fluorescent light. “Here,” I called out to Daren. “Catch.” I threw the ruby at him, and he caught it despite his surprise. “Good reflexes.” He looked confused. “It’s just a stone now. A precious stone. It’ll cause nobody harm any more.”

Daren inspected it. "Feels like a ruby."

"Exactly." He tossed it back to me, and I set it back in its case.

"We'll need to give it back Natasha Petri at some point."

As we were leaving the room and locking it up, I turned back before I shut off the light. The ruby just lay there. Absolutely inanimate. Nothing there at all.

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Lucian's death should have made the violence subside, but a tipping point had already been reached. He had riled up enough of the covens' rank-and-file to make the bloodlust infectious. It spread upward, through middle management, through upper management, all the way to the top. Whatever channel Lucian used to stir discord, it reverberated.

The coven leaders should have known better. They could have reigned in their rogue foot soldiers, personally if they had to. But they didn't. It wasn't a matter of territory anymore. It was about total control at all costs.

"You won't believe who got in touch with me," Daren said.

"Who?"

"Natasha Petri."

"She want the ruby back?"

"No. She's concerned. The conflict is starting to spill into the world of the living. Her sons were almost caught in the crossfire." I pictured the two young men at Petri's estate the night I took the ruby.

"Juan told me Abuela worries about his safety as well," I mentioned.

"What are we going to do?"

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“We’ are not going to do anything.”

“Crux.”

“You still have the surveillance of the coven leaders?”

“Yeah. How is that going to help?”

“I won’t know till I look at it.”

The other thing I needed was ordinance, but I had my own resources for that.

I was walking back home when I saw a familiar figure waiting outside the gate of Gramercy Park. It was Dumas, and the closer I got, the clearer I could see the bloodstains on his shirt. He was trying to hide it – unsuccessfully – under his jacket.

“Dumas, are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m already starting to heal. It looks worse than it is.”

“What happened?”

“It’s bad, Crux.” His voice was shaking. “They’re going to kill me if they find me. I don’t know where to go.”

“Slow down, slow down. Who’s going to kill you?”

“The coven. They drafted me for an operation, and I didn’t want to go. But I had to. It got really out of hand, and I just ran. I went AWOL.”

“Yeah, that would get you killed in the real military as well.”

“I’ve never seen it like this. It’s really, really bad.”

“OK, first let’s get you cleaned up.” I didn’t know how wise it would be to bring him to my place, but he was safer with me than out in the streets.

Dumas would later tell me one of the factions under Thomas decided to face off with a group under Fen to reclaim territory they had lost. They were eventually outnumbered, but they didn’t care.

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I let him take the spare bedroom – the one safe for night hunters – while I studied the surveillance footage more.

The next night, I accompanied Dumas back to his place. When we got there, three night hunters were waiting.

“I can deal with them if you want,” I told him.

“No,” he answered. “I know them.”

As we approached, one of the hunters, a woman as young as Dumas, went up to him. “Are you OK?”

Dumas stopped and stepped slightly behind me. I took the hint and blocked her way. She would have glowered at me, but she knew who I was. She backed off.

One of the hunter men finally said, “I heard you had met Crux. I didn’t realize you knew each other that well.”

“We actually don’t,” I said. “But I think Dumas is a good kid.”

“So do we,” the hunter man said.

“When we heard that you had been drafted, we tried to find out which operation, but we weren’t given permission to join,” the hunter woman said. “We were worried.”

“Are you going to turn him in?” I asked, a challenge in my tone.

“Why would you think that?” the woman replied, offended. I turned to Dumas, and the woman caught on. “Why would you ever think we would do that?” she asked Dumas directly. The hunter man put his hand on the woman’s shoulder, holding her back.

“Crux, thank you for watching over him.” the man said. “We can take it from here.”

I asked Dumas, “Are they on the level?”

He didn’t want to look at any of us. He shrugged and said, “Yeah.” He stepped out from behind me and went to them. The

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hunter woman took him in, obviously the mom in the group.

“We’ll take care of him,” the man said.

“See that you do.”

As I walking along Bleecker Street headed for Seventh Avenue, I noticed someone else waiting for me, a night hunter. I recognized him as I got closer – he was one of Calvino’s men present when Lucian was released from the ruby.

I was steeling myself for a fight when he said, “I’m just here to talk.” He raised his hands like he was a suspect on a cop show. He wanted to show me he wasn’t reaching for any weapons. I couldn’t sense an ambush, but I was ready for a fight if that changed.

We approached each other, and he put down his hands. “Call me Sosuke.” Neither of us offered a handshake. We still didn’t trust each other.

“You don’t look Japanese,” I said.

“Long story,” he said. Translation: “Let’s not waste time.”
“Can we go somewhere? Preferably somewhere I can smoke?”

We found a coffee place nearby with an outdoor patio. As he was taking out a smoke, I asked, “They do anything for you?”

“Nah,” Sosuke said. “Just something to do with my hands.” I understood the sentiment. I asked if I could bum one off of him, and he offered me one. It was a good way to thaw the frostiness of the meeting.

“I’m taking a big ass risk talking to you,” he started.

“I can imagine.”

“I don’t know what’s happening, but the coven has never been this pissed off before. That night, after Calvino was killed, my ... colleagues went foaming at the mouth. They weren’t like that

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before. They were all more or less pretty even-headed, but after that night, they became different people.

“They started to hang out with the more extreme sect of the coven, and those guys have really gotten bad in the last few weeks. Calvino used to keep them in line, but he’s gone now, and the people who want to take over are all just batshit crazy.

“I have no idea why I haven’t gone insane. I mean, I don’t feel any different, and my opinion about things hasn’t changed. Yeah, sure, you killed Calvino, and that’s no mean feat. If it were up to me, I’d be trying to get on your good side. But it just doesn’t occur to them, the ones in charge. And they’re far more powerful than the rest of us.”

“The rest of us?”

“Yeah, it’s not just me. There’s a bunch of us who just don’t feel that strongly about what you’ve done. We just want to go about our business. The border wars – we don’t care. But we can’t do anything because we just don’t have the strength.”

“How old are you?” Meaning, how long has it been since he had been turned.

“I’m closing in on my century.”

“And the ones in charge.”

“At least 300 years, maybe more.”

Lucian’s “channel” affected older night hunters, not younger ones. And I was getting the sense young hunters made up a good portion of a coven’s membership. That’s why the coven leaders succumbed.

“I think I know what’s going on,” I told him. “I can take care of it.” I stubbed out the diminished butt of my cigarette. Sosuke offered me another one, but I declined. He took out another one for himself.

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“I know you don’t owe us anything, and ...”

“It’s not just your coven,” I said, cutting him off. “It’s everywhere. The ruby stirred up a lot of shit. I should have taken care of it sooner.” I extended my hand for a shake. “Thank you, Sosuke, for letting me know.”

He took my hand, still uncomfortable about defying his coven. “Thank you, Crux.” I heard a bit of a tremble in his voice.

“Tell everyone who hasn’t gone crazy to get together and keep safe,” I instructed. “It’s going to be a bit messy for a while.”

I bolted straight to the Line’s offices when I saw the post. Everyone was on edge but trying to go about business. Daren kept calm, but everyone could sense the anger seething below the veneer.

A satellite office of the Line in Brooklyn had been attacked. A few hunters died, many more injured. A splinter coalition between the covens of Thomas and Calvino sought retribution for the Line’s involvement in the demise of their leaders. Guilt by association, in other words.

The Line had so far kept out of the conflict, but that had just changed.

I pulled Daren aside. “This is a disease, what Lucian started. It’s an infection. It feeds on anger, and it affects older hunters. Have you ever felt this angry before?”

“One of my offices has been attacked. How else am I going to feel?” This kind of impatience was unusual for him.

“I know that, but what I want to know is if you have ever felt this kind of anger in your entire existence?”

“Of course not! The Line has never been attacked before. Of course, I’m going to be angry.”

“But this angry?”

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“Goddamn it, Crux!” he yelled. Then he stopped. He knew. “No,” he said, trying to restrain himself. “No, I’ve never been this angry before.”

I put my hands on his shoulders. “You’re susceptible to it. It only affects strong night hunters.”

“I’m glad you think I’m strong.” He was, among other things.

“I didn’t want to say older night hunters.”

“Only mortals need to be self-conscious about age.” He had a point there.

“Can your people work remotely?”

“We’ve got a network set up for that.”

“Have your younger hunters come into the office tomorrow night and keep the older ones at home. Keep it that way till I’m done.”

“Done with what?”

“Everything.”

31

I walked into the office building south of Canal Street carrying a brief case, a gym bag and a large cardboard tube. By all appearances, I was just another businessman, carrying either architectural plans or some important part of a big presentation. The fact I wore a suit and tie should have contributed to that illusion. I went so far as to buy the suit from a thrift shop. A young upstart with drive and ambition – that’s what I wanted people to see.

The security guard didn’t even give me a second glance since I had picked up keys to an empty office space a few days before. I was a legitimate tenant – nothing suspicious about me at all.

I rode the elevator to the eleventh floor, then made my way to the office suite I was renting near the fire exit stairs. The only things occupying the space were a desk, chair and sofa, all cribbed from other vacant offices where the tenants had abandoned them. I set the cardboard tube and the suitcase on the desk, dropped the gym bag on the floor.

I looked at my watch, which read 1:30 p.m. That should give the illusion that I just came back from a lunch break. That also meant I would be waiting for about 12 hours. There was no way around it, and I packed some books in the briefcase to pass the time. Of course, I’d lose my reading light when the sun goes down.

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There was no point in waiting dressed in a suit, so I took the change of clothes out the gym bag – dark shirt, dark pants, comfortable shoes suitable for speed and stealth. I changed into the new clothes and folded the old ones before putting them in the bag. I opened up the suitcase and took out my books – trade paperbacks by Andrew Vachss and Haruki Murakami. I also took out a box cutter.

I used the box cutter on one end of the cardboard tube, slicing through the packing tape and the label addressed to the business renting the office space. The business, of course, was a D/B/A for a holding company that, if you followed the paper trail far enough, was owned by no one in particular and located nowhere special. I pried the tube stopper off the end and laid the tube down on the desk. I dug into the padding for a handle, and when I found it, I pulled out a scabbard and the weapon therein. I let the padding spill on to the floor.

After I put the padding back in the tube, I picked up my books and my scabbard and headed for the sofa. I had some time to kill.

The building was owned by Fen. Not directly, of course, but it was one of many locations where he and his coven conducted business. The upper management of the coven met regularly but at different times and locations. From all reports, the meeting schedule is completely random, and no one knows when and where it will happen until 12 hours before it begins.

I posed as a private investigator and got in touch with the company that supplies the cleaning crew for the building. I asked the crews about offices they were supposed to avoid, times when they were supposed to work. A pattern emerged based on what they

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told me.

When I lost my reading light, I took my scabbard and walked up to the twelfth floor. I took a key I copied from one of the cleaning crew workers and let myself into an office where I predicted the meeting would be. The duplication cost about \$20. Getting it from the cleaning crew worker cost many times more.

I found the utility closet, where the worker stores his cart. I sat down in the dark and continued my wait.

It was a half an hour before midnight when I saw light through the cracks in the door. I heard activity, a lot of activity. A conference room was down the hall from the utility closet. Guards would be posted in the waiting room, but given the nature of the business, they were permitted to be no closer.

When I heard the activity die down, I cracked the door open. I felt no presence in the hall, and my visual check confirmed it. I opened the door a bit more and stepped out. Nobody there. As long as Fen has had the coven, no one had dared to crash the meeting. The hunters in that room were powerful enough to stop anyone who tried, and that was deterrent enough. It's no surprise the security was lax. I jammed the door leading to the waiting area shut with a nearby chair.

The sound of the door latch turning caught the attention of everyone in the conference room, and they wasted no time preparing themselves to address any intruders. Once the meeting began – which it had – no one was allowed in, and no one was allowed out. I strode in, my sword unsheathed from its scabbard.

I dodged everyone who came after me and incapacitated them. The six who attacked me were the lowest-ranking members. They were expected to give their lives first in protecting Fen. I let

them live. I needed them to live. The remaining members formed a barrier between Fen and Chang.

They came at me one by one, and this time, I aimed to kill. It took some effort, and I sustained a few hits. By this time, the reinforcements in the waiting area got through the jammed door, but I picked them off till all that was left were Fen and Chang.

“We have no argument with you,” Fen said calmly. “This attack is unprovoked. You would incur the wrath of my coven? For what purpose?”

“For peace and stability,” I answered.

“Peace and stability? You already have the forces of Thomas and Calvino to face. How does attacking us not compound that?”

“Tell me ... how successful have they been so far?” Fen got my point. “I’m not unfamiliar with the power structure of your ‘organization.’ You’ve ensured a smooth transition of power, far deeper than any of the other covens. The twelve individuals in this room were all poised to take over in succession, but in reality, only six of them wield any real influence. Everyone knows it, but no one acknowledges it. I’ve already gotten rid of four.”

Chang charged at me, and he almost caught me off-guard. As I fended off Chang, Fen got into the fight. He got in a hit, but it wasn’t enough to slow me down. I fought them both off. They moved as they had so many times before. I’ve seen them fight. They never knew I was watching them fight, but I studied their moves. Although Fen had far stronger blood, he had the smarts not to rely on it. He and Chang had a rapport, and it showed in their fighting. Opponents who lost to them – pretty much everyone – didn’t understand that. Divide and conquer was not a valid strategy.

I leveraged that unity against them. They had me cornered, which was where I wanted them. They both stuck their swords in

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me, and I grabbed each of their arms. The jolt of life I shot into them threw them back. They were dead. I stumbled to the first barely-alive hunter I could reach and drained him. I did that for each of them, till I reached the last one.

“Go back to your families,” I told him. “The covens are no more, and I won’t allow them.”

I stumbled out of the room and made my way back to the office. I tried to patch myself up with the emergency kit I brought along in the gym bag. I called Juan and told him to bring a medic with his crew. “Bring a lot of people,” I said. “I kind of went crazy.”

I could have gone after Dietrich first, but getting rid of Fen gave a better demonstration of how far I would go. Most people thought they wouldn’t want to be in my shoes with both the covens of Thomas and Calvino gunning for me, but after I got rid of Fen, they started thinking they wouldn’t want to be in Dietrich’s shoes.

And they were right.

Dietrich ran scared and went deep underground. Afghani terrorists would have a hard time finding him. That was fine by me. I picked off his lieutenants first. As the people closest to Dietrich – the people tasked with keeping him connected to his coven – started to dwindle, it would force him out.

I was patient.

Dietrich met his end on his way to a meet with some of the smaller coven leaders. I had gotten my ordinance.

People thought I would stop after Dietrich. They were wrong.

The covens on Staten Island tried diplomacy. I gave them the terms – disband or die. Most of them disbanded. A few died. The covens in the Bronx made a lot of noises about putting me in my

place. No one was surprised when I shut them up.

And the splinter coalition responsible for the attack on the Line? Known members of both Calvino's and Thomas' covens received photos of the coalition members, strung upside down in an empty warehouse. The photos were graphic. I'll just leave it at that.

All the displaced coven members argued with each other about what to do. The true believers wanted payback, and they consisted of a vocal minority that appointed themselves the voice of all night hunter-kind. Others wanted to try diplomacy, to convince me covens had a benefit to hunter society, to allow them to reform and to rebuild. But the flacks in the covens, the low-level members paying expensive tributes, fled the ranks. No, they didn't flee – they hemorrhaged. They put a lot of distance between themselves and the arguing parties.

The believers attempted to strong-arm funds for their cause from their former brethren, but they were greeted with a collective cold shoulder. The covens splintered further and further till all that were left were families.

Calvino said I had destabilized the power structure of hunter society. He probably never imagined I would destroy it.

Ted lay on his stomach, naked, as he watched me get dressed. He stuck his bare ass out just a bit in hopes of luring me back to bed.

"This is really a weird idea of payback," he said. "I know I'm supposed to be afraid of you, but you're too damn hot. It's crazy, but I was really hoping you'd stay the night."

"I thought that was what your sugar daddy was for."

"Oh, he dumped me when he found out you own my title. You scare the living shit out of him."

"He doesn't shit," I said. "And he ain't living."

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Ted laughed. I sat on the edge of the bed to put on my socks. He turned around and lay on his back and stared at me. “I don’t get it,” he said. “Is this some sort of mindfuck? I mean, why do you come here?”

“Because,” I started, “I’m a man with needs. And a very unique existence. The last thing I need to do is fall in love, and you ... well, you’re the perfect disincentive for that.”

Ted made a face like he just tasted something sour. “Go me,” he replied.

I wrapped my fingers around his shaft and started to fondle him. He stiffened. He fixed his eyes on his hardening cock with a look of disgust. He hated how much he enjoyed my touch. I bent over to kiss him. He turned away, but my lips found his anyway. And the moment he got a taste of my lips, he didn’t want to stop. I pulled away.

“So I’m a disincentive for falling in love, huh?” he whispered. “Let me tell you this – I’m glad Bennett is dead. I wouldn’t have found out just how good you really fuck if he were still around.”

He used Jared’s night hunter name. What an ass.

I kissed him long and hard one more time before I let go of his penis. I got up.

“Till next time, babe,” he called out as I shut the door behind me.

32

Daren and I went to Natasha Petri's estate to hand back the ruby. The transportation arrangements had to be changed to accommodate my "delay", but the ruby would be returned to Romania, where it would be remain a museum piece. I told Petri I wouldn't be traveling with the ruby. The family could bind it if it so wished, but it was no longer necessary.

"Thank you, Crux," Petri said. "The family is grateful."

"I owed it to you," I answered. "And thank you for you help."

"As you say, you owed it to us." We were about to leave when Petri said, "I'd like to speak with Daren privately for a moment, if you don't mind Crux."

I looked at Daren, and he was as confused as I was. "All right, if you really want me out of the room that badly..." I turned to Daren. "I'll wait outside."

"So, what do you think?" Petri asked.

Daren gave her an uncertain look. "About Crux? What about him?"

"You were one of the last to see Killian. How does he compare?"

"By the time I knew Killian, he had no interest being the

man he was. The Killian I knew didn't match any of the stories ascribed to him."

"And yet, you knew those stories to be true."

"Well, I certainly believed them to be plausible."

"You haven't answered the question. How does he compare to Killian? Even the Killian you knew."

Daren hesitated. "Well, if the events of the last few weeks are any indication, he can be every bit as ruthless as Killian. And he's a lot more deliberate. Even though Killian was in a rut those final days, he still had passion. Crux, though – he's calm. Almost..."

"Unfeeling?"

"Well, I was about to say 'left-brained'."

"That's one way to put it."

"Why do you ask, Natasha?"

"One thing I understood about the motivations of Thomas and Fen, even Dietrich is that they found the new fledglings dangerous. Those of us with long lives have a better appreciation of history. You, yourself, probably have the deepest appreciation."

"Well ... thank you."

"But the hunters turned in this last century – all they have known is the modern world. Cars, television, computers – they are crafty, imaginative."

"Yes, I guess."

"They would be too inquisitive. That is what Thomas and Fen feared the most – they would seek to inquire. That is why they sought to expand the membership of their covens, to keep watch over these fledglings."

"To hold them back."

"Yes, to hold them back."

"You think Crux poses a danger." It was as much a question

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as a challenge.

“How old was he when he received his inheritance?” Petri asked.

“He told me 25.”

“He was born of this era. His mind is far more flexible, far more rational. And from what I see, he is incredibly bright.”

“I’m told as much from my contacts at his workplace.”

“He managed to destroy every powerful coven in the city. Killian probably could have done so as well but not with the same speed or thoroughness. And he extinguished the ruby. His power was eclipsed by the ruby, and he overcame it.”

“What are you saying, Natasha?”

“I’m saying don’t stand too close to the flame.”

“What did she have to say?” I asked Daren when he met up with me on the sidewalk.

“She thinks you’re the end of us all.”

“She’s probably right,” I conceded. “But there’s something I know that she probably doesn’t. Not anything I remember specifically but something I know.”

“And that is?”

“As much as I would sometimes like to see this world blow itself up, I’ve gone in and saved its ass way too many times to count.”

“I think she knows that,” Daren replied. “And she’s afraid that’s going to change this time.”

I shrugged. “We’ll see.”

I ran into Dumas at the same club where I met him before.

“You look good,” I told him. And he did – he was more relaxed, more willing to smile.

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“And you,” he started, “I’m still in awe. You asked me how I’d feel if the covens went away, and now I can answer.”

“And your answer is...”

“I feel good. It’s certainly a load off my wallet. I mean, not all of us were given fortunes when we were turned, and it’s good not to have to pay tribute.”

“There is such a thing as a middle class hunter.”

“Some of these young ones don’t realize that. They all think we all live in some Ricean utopia.”

“And your family?”

“They’re fine. I mean ... we’re working things out.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“You know,” he started, leaning in close. “The ones who really got involved don’t want to say it out loud, but I think they’re kind of grateful.”

“Well, once the leadership ... dissipated, I figured things would get back to normal.”

“There are a few who can’t forgive you, but they’re not really right in the head.”

“They probably weren’t to begin with.”

I had the TV tuned into the evening broadcast of *Law & Order* on cable when I spotted the box the old man from the Chintown grocery store gave me. It made me remember that brief thought I had when I woke up from that dream with my great-great grandfather.

I picked up the phone and dialed my mom’s number. When she picked up, I introduced myself as a former co-worker from my internship in Austin, Texas. I was trying to get in touch because I came across my résumé and wanted to find out what I was doing

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career-wise.

She hesitated before answering. "I'm sorry," she said, obviously shaken. "But he died a few months ago."

"I'm sorry for your loss. I didn't realize."

"Are you calling from New York City?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I recognized the area code on the caller ID. I'm sorry, I almost thought..." She broke off and collected herself. "He moved there for work," she continued. "He was attacked in a mugging and didn't realize he had a bad head injury. When he got sick it was too late."

"Oh, my, that's awful."

"We brought his body back home, and we buried him."

I gave more condolences and apologized profusely for calling. My mom couldn't get off the phone fast enough.

Somewhere clear across the country, my body lay in a crypt. That's useful information to know, I guess.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Bueno is not an author, but he has written one other novel titled *The Courtship of Gary Huang*. He still has no plans to write another, despite the fact he's got plot ideas for more books. He would rather find listeners for his music project Eponymous 4. Go to eponymous4.com if you would like to become one.

