

A Murder of One

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A MURDER OF ONE

*All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.
Ecclesiastes 1:8-11*

CHAPTER ONE

The Final Kill

My Dear Girl,

It occurs to me that I do not know what name you are living under these days. My instinct is to use one of your old names, but that feels wrong, as though I could not do so without the subtext of accusation. My old names accuse me, and I do not allow myself to use them anymore. I am not writing to accuse you. I am coming to you in love. You are not that girl, and I will not accuse you of your past any longer. Our past is dead.

Being dead has its advantages of course. No one expects you to show up for meetings anymore. Whatever you borrowed is considered lost and you don't have to pay anyone back. It's a bit like retiring, I suppose. Whoever you thought I was is now dead, and will not return. And yet I can look forward to looks of astonishment when those who remember me see me again. The reports of my death have

not been at all exaggerated, and yet, I am coming back just the same.

My journey back is a strange one. All around me, people wander to and fro- lost souls, or maybe working stiffs. Maybe families on vacation who've stopped here to rest.

None of them see me. I sit here in the sun, feeling its warming glow fight with the breeze, and no one marks me. I walk through this world like a ghost. I can make these people see me if I want to, but otherwise I am only a shadow to them. I suppose most of them are merely shadows to each other. To you, I am sure, I will be far more real.

My expectation is that you will not be surprised at receiving this letter. I hope that you will welcome it, and that someday soon you will welcome me. I will be coming to find you, and when I do, I hope to see in your eyes the welcoming joy of one who loves me, and not the hopeless terror I saw when last you looked into my eyes.

My eyes are the same, but my heart is not. I have been made new.

I believe you would be more open to my arrival if you knew my story- the whole story. The truth for once, and all of it. I feel I need to tell you the whole truth so that you can know why I am coming to you; so you won't be afraid of me as you once were. You once had cause to fear me, and I know that now as I did not then. You don't need to fear me any longer. But I need to confess. I need you to be my priest and hear my sins so that, at the very least, I do not have to shoulder the burden of carrying them alone. Also, I don't want there to be any lies between us anymore. Please, let me remove the masks, for we will not meet face to face until we have faces.

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My story starts at too many places to be certain where to begin- like a spider web of interlinked stories, most of them lies. At every point there will be questions that can only be answered by going to a different part of the story. Though, as you are reading this, you will come to see that my story has not ended, only that I have succumbed to a kind of death which I am confident you also know- not death OF the self, but death TO the self. For my story was anchored in death, but it was not until I reached the end that I knew there was more than one kind of death. I had spent so much time in the kind we both had known. The killing kind. Theft. Murder. Now I've known another.

The end of my story is not the chopping of a tree but the planting of a seed. The end only makes sense once you know the beginning, but the beginning will only be clear once you have heard the end. This is why I have chosen to begin my story with the end of another- the beautiful, dark haired girl I took to the forest whom I simply called the Tall Girl.

I cannot tell you the beginning of her story. I was only there for the end of it. To be more accurate, I was the end of her story. I know that the tale I am about to recount will not shock you. You already know a piece of it. I only begin here because the end of her story is the beginning of the end of mine.

I remember my actions as though a story once told to me by a stranger, but nonetheless I own the responsibility for those actions. I was the end of her story. I am guilty of her blood. From where I stand now, I can assure you that if sinners had a tribe, I would be their chief.

You will already know much of this story, as you are a central part of it. You will quickly notice that there are important details I did not share with you. I was afraid that you would think less of me. It amazes me now what I used to think was important. When you were hearing this story for the first time, black was white and white was black.

Somehow, none of us ever noticed. We once were blind, but now, you and I, we can see.

Enough apologies. I have a confession to make.

This is how I killed the Tall Girl.

It had been a month of subtle hints, choreographed “accidental” encounters, and the kind of late night phone calls that are made of whispers because of who is in the other room. You know this game well. I admit that I learned much from you. Even in this encounter I was aware of the things I said and did that I had gleaned from your example. I admired your seduction like a dancer might envy the graceful moves of another. You were an artist.

It was many hours after sunset when I approached her door. The world was asleep except for those like us. I took notice of the few lights still burning in apartment windows as I walked her street. Not yet the weekend, most of those people would be waking up early to go to work in only a few short hours, and at this time of year, most would rise before the sun.

It was a careful orchestration that left her alone during the week. She lived with a man in a small city apartment on the third floor of a yellow brick building- a building which had clones spread over many blocks in this neighborhood. The man was not here. She was alone on this night, and waiting for me. As I approached I saw there was the light of candles flickering gently in her windows. Candles, and scented no doubt. I was cynically unsurprised.

I could hear her heart racing even as she buzzed me in. “Come on up,” she said through the intercom. I silently ascended the old wooden stairs. At the top she stood in her doorway, her tall form resting against the door frame, her hair, make up and clothing carefully orchestrated to betray the hours she probably spent perfecting them. The light from a room full of candles escaped into the hall, flickering over

her light skin and unnaturally dark hair and eyes. I could smell an open bottle of wine. "I've been waiting for you." Her words smelled like wine too. Had she been completely sober, I thought, perhaps she might have come up with a more original opening line.

The look in her eyes betrayed the thoughts in her head- thoughts I had been cultivating in her mind for weeks. I smiled as I saw that betrayal in her eyes, shining at me. She was the kind of girl who would dream herself into novels- the kind that made it very easy to place thoughts of romantic passion in her head. The seeds of those thoughts were already in her mind, her memories and desires. All I had to do was find them and subtly suggest that those pages she pored over could be lived in me. Forbidden nights of pleasure, passion and romance with candlelight and red wine. Watered with wine and passion, those seeds promised to grow into the thing she imagined to be love.

*Forbidden love. Stolen moments.
Forbidden fruit. Stolen hours.*

Her eyes betrayed her mind; *Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!* I smiled at her, amused at how easy it was to lie to her. Of course it was. She had been telling herself these lies for years. She believed them enough to move in with the last man who told them. She had looked for that storybook romance in him, and now, in his apartment, she looked for it in me. For years her books had sung her a lullaby and she hungrily closed her eyes to dream their lies, but she kept waking to real men in real places. She had a bookshelf full of them that stretched the length of the room. I couldn't even take credit for it. I had lied, but I almost hadn't had to. She was already full of the lies I was going to tell when we met. It made me feel even more vindicated for what I planned to do.

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No sooner was the door locked behind me that she had pulled me onto the couch under the window. She grabbed my tie and pulled me toward her with a move she probably rehearsed in her mind, having seen it in too many bad movies. A trite and cute move that was more awkward than passionate, and completely expected. Continuing the choreography, she fumbled to tear my jacket off as she kissed me. I could hear her heart rate escalating. The sound was like a dinner bell to Pavlov's dogs.

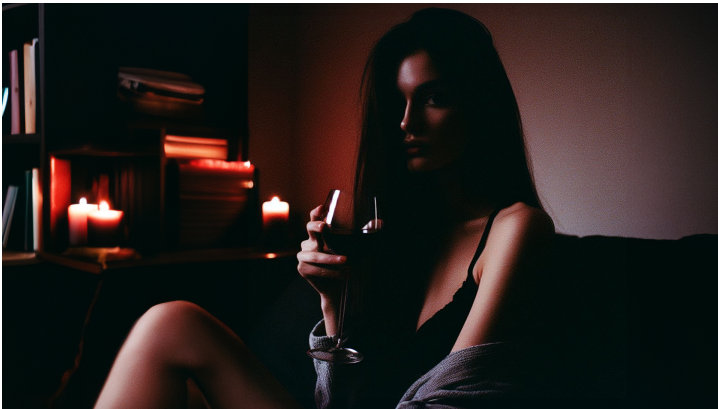
She couldn't have been aware of it, but her couch smelled like her lover- his skin and overpriced, name-brand cologne. Much of the apartment's atmosphere was the battle between the scents the two of them bought by the bottle. He wasn't in the apartment with us, but he was not absent from the room.

She kissed me passionately. I noticed that she had soft jazz playing in another room. *Typical*, I thought. *Amateur. Cliché*. She wrapped her arms around me and held me tightly, which I could not help but think ironic. For this brief moment, she was afraid I might escape. I reveled in her blindness.

I told her she tasted like wine.

"Would you like some?" she asked.

"No," I answered. "The only thing I want to drink tonight is you."



She giggled, excited by the double meaning. She kissed me hard and emitted a hum which was almost a purr. "Oh, Lane," she whispered loudly. "Lane, I want you to devour me."

I laughed. It was a mocking laugh, but how could she possibly have known? I was certain that her dialogue could be found in every novel on her shelf. "I will," I said. I took her head in my hand as I kissed her shoulder. "I will devour your flesh," I growled as I worked my way up her neck. "But I want more than just your body," I crooned soft and low. I wrapped my fingers into her long, black hair. She breathed in suddenly, a mouse in a trap. So desperate. So insecure. Somewhere in her mind those novels anticipated my next line. Something about her heart. Something about her soul. Something about love. "I want to tear into your jugular with my teeth and drink your blood," I said.

She froze. "What?"

Clearly, I had gotten the line wrong.

She searched for the double meaning, but even in her present state she found it impossible. "Drink my blood?" Not yet fear. Only confusion colored her voice. Her mind was racing to find the movie or song reference that would make my statement something about love. There wasn't one. "What does that mean, Lane?" Her tone conveyed her attempt to convince herself that I was trying to be funny, or maybe somehow obscurely erotic.

"It means," I said as I tightened my grip on her hair, "that I want to tear into your flesh and drink your lifeblood the way you have been sucking down that cheap red wine."

Her heart was beating quickly now for a different reason. I tugged her head to the side.

"Until your veins are empty and you are dead."

"Lane, let me go. Lane!" Her fear projected itself as anger. I turned her head to stare her in the eyes. The shock made her immobile. A mouse in my claws. I smiled a mocking smile.

"I thought you wanted me to devour you," I said coldly.

She pushed against me, struggling to free her hair from my fingers. She began to tremble. "Let me go."

I released her and I stood.

"You should go now," she said as she awkwardly got to her feet and backed away. I saw her groping on the dark shelves for something to use as a weapon. There was nothing but the thousands of pages of sweet lies about secret trysts in dark houses when someone was away. Stories of stolen kisses and entwined bodies. I had never read one, but I could imagine something she would consider a happy ending. In the moment, as she tried to live her fantasies, she found she had lost the plot. Her shelves didn't hold the one thing that she really needed- salvation.



She found a dull letter opener on the shelf and grasped it tightly. I reached into my back pocket for my switch knife. "Please," I said as I opened it. "Borrow mine." I held it out to her by the blade. She recoiled in self-defense, and then she grabbed the handle. I could tell by the way she held it that she didn't know how. I put my hands out, one on the shelf and the other on the window her back was against. She held the knife close, as though it was a shield. "Go on. Use it." I leaned in and whispered harshly. "Kill me."

She was fighting back tears. I used to enjoy the way that women would be angry and frightened at the same time. I enjoyed her fear. It was an appetizer. "I just want you to leave," she said.

"But your lover is gone. You've told the right lies to send him away and leave yourself here for me to devour. And I will devour you. I will drink you dry."

"Why are you talking like that?" she shouted, choking out the words.

I hushed her. "You don't want the neighbors to hear, do you? Do you want them to know that you're a liar and a cheating whore?"

"Shut up!" she hissed. She pointed the knife at me. She was more willing to wield it against me out of anger than self-defense. I smiled at her murderous hate, but I knew she wouldn't do it, even though she wanted to. "You're crazy." Hot tears overcame her self-control and washed her heavily darkened eyes onto her face.

"No, my sweet. I'm a vampire. And you are my prey. Give yourself to me and I will drink your adulterous blood." I leaned in even closer and whispered in her ear. "Your lover doesn't ever need to know." I felt the point of the blade in my chest. I smiled.

"Get out," she demanded through her tears. "Get out, or I will. I swear I'll do it."

"DO it." I ordered her. "Or do I need to call you a whore again?" She gritted her teeth. I could feel her hate. The betrayal. The fear. They had both turned into hate. "So quickly," I said, "romance turns into hate. But what is one fire next to another? The burning passion in a liar's kiss isn't so different from the burning passion at the end of a betrayed lover's knife."

She wouldn't do it from hate. Left to grow, her fear and anger would blossom into a garden of bitterness, but I did not see it ever leading to her being a murderer, and I didn't wish to wait long enough to find out. That was another

game. This game ended with feeding. And I wanted to feed on a sinner capable of murder. My hand lashed out at her. I grabbed her by the throat and squeezed. "Do it," I hissed angrily. She rammed the blade into my chest as hard as she could.

I released her, staggered backwards staring down at the blade. I held my hands just beyond the knife and let them tremble, just for dramatic effect. Slowly I pulled my gaze up to look at her. "Murderer," I whispered. She started to shake her head. I didn't know if she was protesting the label, or the fact that she had just done it though the evidence was before her eyes. "Murderer!" I growled again, and I began to laugh. Her eyes widened as I filled the room with a cruel, mocking laugh. "Murderer! Liar! Adulteress!" I tore my shirt open to illustrate her handiwork. She stared at the knife that was sunk into me shallowly, but firmly.

"You're not bleeding," she observed in a trembling whisper.

"Vampire," I whispered back to her. "I don't have any blood of my own. That's why I want yours." She sank to her knees. Her fear was intoxicating to me, as the wine was to her. "And I like my blood dark," I ranted loudly in malicious glee. "Darkened by your sin. Darkened by the sweet bouquet of your lies. All the lies you told to your lover. Darkened by the delicious betrayal of having me here, in his home..." I barked out her litany of sin.

She wasn't listening.

"Oh, God," she was saying. "God help. Jesus save me. Help me, Jesus. Please..."

She was praying. **Praying.**

I was instantly filled with a hateful rage for her. How dare she pray to another while the god of her death stood over her? Were our kind not the gods of this world, or the gods of hell if we so chose? And here she sat, the mouse in my claws, calling to another for help! I was overcome by my rage and my hands were controlled by my anger.

I didn't even think. I let the hate move me.

I grabbed her by the throat, raised her off the ground, silencing her. She knocked the books off the shelf as she struggled, but of course she could do nothing. A man twice her size couldn't have pried my grip from her. I pulled the knife out of my chest and plunged it into hers. In mere seconds she was dead, limp, and silent. I lowered her to the ground. My rage was silenced as well. There was a brief torment inside me of anger, confusion, disappointment, and fear. I silenced that as well. Like most of our kind I had perfected the flick of the switch that would silence all feelings into a comfortable numbness. Cynical and bitter, I surveyed the scene.

Emotionless I stared down at her and said, "It's a shame it is you didn't let me finish my soliloquy. I was comparing you to wine. I think you might have appreciated the poetic imagery if you had let me finish."

I stared down at her lifeless body. Even in the light of candles and the streetlights outside I could see the coldness begin to creep over the still, lifeless form. I could almost feel her blood turning cold.

I was repulsed, and wanted to be away from it. I told myself to just create a fake break-in and go. Leave the police evidence of an intruder and be gone. I ordered myself to run from that place as fast as I could. As we all do, I hated the dead form. I hated the cold, unfeeling, breathless, dull, lifeless body. It would not be until much later that I would understand that this hate is the hate that comes from fear. I was afraid of her dead form. We always enjoyed the idea of death; it was a dark and beautiful ideal. We despised the dead- death in the cold flesh.

I decided with conviction to leave immediately.

I would not feed.

But I had smelled the blood.

My conviction, firm in my mind, was weak in my body. The desire for blood pushed my conviction to the back of my mind until it could only become a subconscious disgust with myself. I touched the blood, looked at it on my hand.

No, I thought. It's dead blood. No. I will just leave.

I wanted to leave. I screamed at myself in my mind not to taste it. *No!* I shouted in my mind. *Just go! Leave now!*

My mind screamed to my body to leave and to get away from her. My mind fought with itself as my hand came nearer to my lips. *NO!* I screamed inside. *I don't want it! This is dead blood! Cut your losses and go! Wipe off your hand and leave! No!*

I tasted the blood on my fingers.

The word "no" repeated over and over in my mind until it faded under the desire-the Thirst. I tried to stop myself until I was overcome from within, until I simply gave in to my justification of slavish desire. I couldn't yet think of a reason to stay and feed on her. I only wanted to run from there. Yet, I watched myself disobediently drink her like she had drunk from the bottle of Merlot, which still sat on the coffee table.

I fed.

My mind was a bitter conflict between the satisfaction of the lust for blood and the disgust for having done it. Could I have stopped myself, or was I simply too much a slave of the thirst for blood to ever have control? These thoughts too were silenced. The only true strength I had was the ability to silence my own thoughts and feelings. Not enough to control myself. Only enough to silence my mind.

Quickly I packed a small bag of her lover's things. Just enough that a close inspection could conclude he had

taken them. And just of the right kind to imply he might be planning not to return.

I left by the backdoor, leaving behind the necessary damage to lead whoever would care to believe it was a break-in gone badly. I had done it sloppy enough that it could be discovered that it wasn't really a break in. If the police did dig enough to find these subtle clues, they would go looking for the man who lived with the Tall Girl.

He was being unfaithful to her that night. I knew that to be true. I knew also that he would not be coming back. The police would never find him.

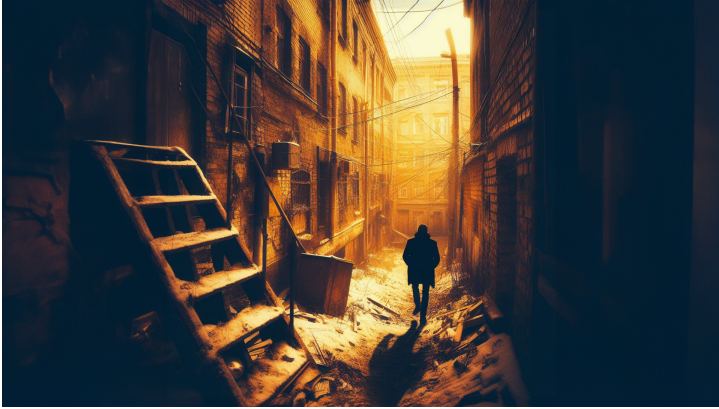
I descended the creaky old wooden stairs and headed down the cold, litter-strewn alley between the yellow-brick buildings. Walking through the shadows in the alleys between her building and those around it, in the yellow humming of the blazing street light, I tried not to think of what had happened. I considered where I might go. I knew I could not go to The Club that night. I could not face the others knowing how it had gone. They could not know the truth. I did not know what they would think, but it would not gain their respect. I went home and tried to sleep off the day.

I would like to say I had regret. Shame for what I had done. The best I could claim is self-pity. I chose to feel vindicated for feeding on a liar, an adulteress, a woman so capable of hate. I had led her into adultery and then called her a whore. I had betrayed her and made her hate me, and then I punished her for it. This is how I viewed my actions. Feeding was necessary to our species, if that is what we were, and I was vindicated because of her sin.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I needed to justify my actions. I couldn't just be a killing machine like Rage, a highly evolved Predator like Skin. I needed my prey to be guilty so I could punish them. That was the benefit of living in the city. If you were looking for someone to accuse, you could just toss a rock into a crowd and you were sure to hit someone guilty. That I could accuse sinners of their crimes

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was an act of acrobatic hypocrisy that I accomplished without pulling a muscle. My blindness was complete. If sinners had a tribe, I would be their chief.



*For her house leads down to death
and her paths to the spirits of the dead.
None who go to her return or attain the paths of life.
Proverbs 2:18-19*

CHAPTER TWO

Monsters

This story will probably be like looking into a mirror for you. It is for me, though sometimes it is a funhouse mirror. More often it's seeing clearly for the first time, as though I've been blind for many years. For all practical purposes, I have been. That said, I need to tell you about a girl you knew in the old life. Pretend for a moment that you were not there, and hear this tale as if for the first time. Seeing through my eyes will tell you everything you need to know about who I was, and what I have become now that it's over.

Her name was Tragedy. When I came to the city, she was already part of the collective on the North Side. She was already a photographer who did freelance work for various small indie news papers. She was a Goth, dressed usually in black and lace like the parody of a celebrity wedding mixed with a Victorian funeral. She was a magnificent work of art.

Tragedy enters my story long before the Tall Girl, but those stories intersect in my memory on the night my band played our last show. Fittingly, it was at the Unorthodox. We

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were almost the headliners, and that night we sold nearly a third of the close to two hundred shirts we would sell in our short career.

Tragedy had come to see us play. She seemed rather excited about it- as excited as she was likely to get, anyway. Tragedy was not one who often expressed excitement about events or anything else. She enjoyed being. She lived in the moment, but the gloom of the coming dark was always about her. Nothing lasted forever.



We knew that better than anyone, since our kind did last forever, which meant anything and anyone we enjoyed would someday be taken away from us. Nothing lasted. Everything would be ripped from our grasp no matter how hard we held on. This was the tragedy after which she had named herself. For even if was she was the object being grasped, no one could hold onto her forever. Not even she would be able to do that in the end. She was once someone else, and someday soon she would be forced to move on and again become someone new. It was our way. Nothing lasted forever, not even our selves, though our kind never died. Someday we would lose us as well. She knew it, and it colored her world from behind her eyes.

I suspected that this might have been why she was excited about seeing us play our last show. The end of something does last forever, in a way. It will forever be the

last, the final, the end. When you watch something die, you have seen something that will always be, or will never be again. From where we stood, there was no difference. For her, the thrill was in watching it die. The moment, living at the point of the end, was her glimmer of light. She collected them like an entomologist. The experience of something dying was pinned into her mind and labeled for future enjoyment. That night, we were being pinned.

The band was called The Savage Patch Kids, and it consisted of two humans and three of our kind: myself, Party Girl and Brash. Party Girl looked like a fourteen year old Asian girl and called herself Dahng Con Gai. Brash passed for her older brother and was usually covered in charcoal gray leather like a cheap couch. He played the drums, which fit his personality well. I had started a band with them early on after I had moved to this city. It had evolved into this one. Even the short time we were together had been too long.



Nathan, our guitarist, was getting married early the next year, which was one of the reasons the band was breaking up. Another was that Ashley, vocalist and keyboard, was finally starting college and would be moving to the far side of the country. Any reason was good enough for me. I had tired of the lifestyle. Too public. Too showy. Too much time with Brash.

What Ashley and Nathan couldn't know was that our many public appearances with them had made them off limits for us. Had we consumed them, we would be easy suspects. There would be too many people taking notice if they died. We couldn't bring that kind of attention to ourselves. Since then, they've probably looked back with dismay at how little our success amounted to, but it was that little bit of success which ensured they would survive knowing us.

After the show, Party Girl, Brash, and I went to the offices on the second floor to collect our part of the ticket sales. Our human counterparts, Ashley and Nathan, were working the merch table. The door was kept and doled out by the owner. He was known as Mr. Williams to the human public. To our kind, he was known simply as Rage.

Rage let us into his office and sat himself behind his desk. Rage was a stocky built man with an imposing presence. He had short, spiked, white hair and a white goatee.

He pulled out a stack of money from his desk and started counting. Money wasn't as much of a priority to us as it was to the culture around us, but it made living among them easier. I had an apartment, as did Brash and Party Girl. Someone had to pay for that. Much of the normal trappings we could steal- food (which we didn't eat), clothing, even furniture. But often it helped to have a normal place to live. It made the humans feel more comfortable. It helped us blend in. It was one more part of the game we played with them before they became our prey.

Rage tossed a pile of money to us across his desk. Brash picked it up and counted it quickly with a look of disgust on his face.

"What's this?" he asked sharply. Brash's voice was always pitched up as a challenge. His words were always looking to pick a fight.

"That's your part of the door," answered Rage. His voice was rust- gritty and dangerous.

"This is from, like, seventy people," said Brash, waving the handful of cash around as though he was shaking sewage off of it.

"Seventy five," said Rage.



Brash slammed it on the desk. "We had easily twice that many out there! We had two hundred if we had a one!"

"You had seventy three. I rounded up," Rage said in a low growl. "Most of that crowd you played to had come to see Sloth and Vengeance. That's why they're still here."

"Fogetchew man!" shouted Brash. "You trying to rip us off! This is our last show and I ain't going out like this!"

For a moment Rage was silent. I took a step to the side, away from Brash and out of the way of the door. Just in case.

Rage stood. "Brash, Brash," he said. "I understand that you feel you should be walking out of here with more money." He crossed to the other side of his desk. Brash instinctively stepped back. "You think I am a liar and a thief." Rage picked up the handful of cash and then tossed it back onto his desk. "This, you feel, is unfair. Perhaps you would like to renegotiate our deal?"

"Yeah. Yeah!" said Brash with faltering confidence. "I ain't goin' out like that." He pointed to the money. "Not with that!"

Rage chuckled quietly and put his hand on Brash's shoulder. "No, of course not," he said. "Here's how you're going out."

Rage's hand gripped Brash's neck and slammed his face into the wall. With a terrible force Rage retracted and violently slammed Brash's head into the wall over and over until there were a series of holes in the plaster revealing the wood frame underneath.

When Brash went limp, Rage turned his stance and threw Brash's body through the still closed window behind the desk.

When the glass had finished falling, Rage turned to us. "Dahng," he said to Party Girl, "before you go out and pick him up off the sidewalk, go to the ticket booth and tell Rus that my office has been vandalized again. He'll know what to do."

Party Girl ran out of the office without a sound or a glance behind. Rage looked at me, still standing in the corner. "Lane? Would you like to express your displeasure as well?"

"No," I said quickly. "Of course not. I've been meaning to do that to him for weeks. It's just that," I stammered.

"Yes?" said Rage.

I pointed at the cash, most of which was still on the desk. "I would like to go out with that. That is," I quickly added, "if you're still willing to part with it."

Rage smiled. "You're ok kid," he said. "Yeah, take it all."

I grabbed the stack that was still on the desk, slightly bracing myself in case he chose to send me out with Brash. He did not.

At the front door, under the marquee, was Tragedy. "I just saw Party Girl run out of here like the place was on fire," she said to me. "What did I miss?"

I kept walking as I talked. "Brash mouthed off to Rage about how much we should have got from the door." I stopped at the alley next to the Club. Party Girl was on her knees, next to the flat form of Brash, brushing shattered glass off of him where he lay. I could hear his voice. "I said I'm fine!" he was saying from his position on the ground. "Just give me a minute."

Tragedy stifled a laugh as she surveyed the scene. "Rage's office got vandalized again?" she whispered to me.

I nodded. "With Brash's face," I replied. Tragedy walked off laughing, unable to suppress her response. As Party Girl picked the glass out of Brash's hair, we walked to the blue line stop a few blocks to the south and rode it until we found ourselves at my apartment.

I turned on the television to see what might distract us until we became bored with it. I stopped on the news. It was the rerun of the live evening news program which they played when they ran out of material for the broadcast day, just before they filled the empty morning hours. Global news was wars and rumors of wars to come. Local news was the liars and thieves who ran the city, distractions and entertainment, and the various deaths that littered the streets.



There was a story about a family of five killed in a drunk driving accident. The drunk man had hit them at almost eighty miles an hour when he lost his way in the glare of headlights. He couldn't tell that the road curved, and he reacted by swerving the wrong way. His airbag, and the sheer size of his vehicle, had saved his life. The passengers in the minivan were all dead before the police arrived on the scene. In the chain reaction that followed, more than two dozen people were hurt, several of which, they said, may not survive the night.

"You know what I have always found funny about them?" said Tragedy from her place slouched over on the other end of my couch.

"What's that?"

"Whenever we're depicted in their culture, movies and books and things, they see us as this big scary monster of death. But I've never killed a whole family all at once. Have you?"

"Hmmm... No. Rarely more than one at a time."

"Me too. But this bozo slams a few shots and look at the wake of death behind one drunk human! Five dead, dozens injured!"

"Makes you feel like you're a slacker, huh?"

She crawled over to my end of the couch and leaned in close. "That's not what I meant," she said with a scowl. She turned herself and planted herself with my lap as her headrest.

"Am I more comfortable than the couch?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "What I mean is, why fear one mosquito when a barfly kills so many more? I mean, what kind of monsters are we when the massive body count is always a result of them? What percentage of human deaths do you think we cause?"

"I don't know," I said. "Not as much as drunk drivers."
"Or smoking," she said.

"Or fast food," I added, pointing to the commercial which had come on.

"Exactly! We may use a few for food here and there, but it's free for them! The creepy meat clown charges them for the heart attacks he serves them!"

"So, your defense of redefining vampires from monsters to just another cause of urban fatalities is the cost?"

"You have to admit it's a persuasive argument. No one lives forever. They're going to die anyway. When it's us that kills them, it's far cheaper than death by cigarettes, fast food, drugs, or any of the hundreds of causes of death that show up on the news every night."

"We're really doing them a favor."

"My point exactly. You, my dear, are not a monster. You are a public servant."

"Thank you," I said.

"And so am I."

I laughed. "That reminds me," I said. "I'll be tending my civic duties tomorrow night. Gaia has asked me to come out to her weekend gathering in the woods."

"I'm sorry," Tragedy said.

"Would you like to come?" I asked. I had spit it out before I could think about it.

She leaned back and looked up at me. "Camping?"

"Yeah."

"Why would I want to go camping?"

I searched my mind in vain for an answer. "Why not?"

"I'm going to need a better reason than that if you expect me to go enjoy the great outdoors."

"I'll be your best friend," I sang quietly.

"Really? BFF's? Throw in some candy and I'm in."

"OK," I replied, "but it's going to be candy corn."

"Candy corn? I'm sorry, but you're still going to be the loneliest kid on the playground."

"Can I sit with you at lunch?" I asked.

"Mmmmmmm. Ok. But only because you're cute," she said with a giggle.

"So, will you come with me?" I asked.

"Camping? With Geo and all those freaks?"

"I'll share my tent with you."

She sighed as though she was going to continue arguing, then stopped. "Yeah, fine. Why not? It'll give me a chance to get away from Chain for a couple of days. Or, Darwin as he's calling himself lately."

"Nameless Freddy is going by Darwin now? Isn't this his third name since he moved into the city?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna buy him a stack of those 'Hello, My Name Is' stickers."

"What happened to being called Chain?"

"He stopped using that one last week. He's Darwin now," she said with a layer of annoyance.

"Is he teaching Biology at the local community college?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "I tried to get him introduced to Newton's set. Newton was more than alright with bringing on another white kid. He hasn't got that many as it is. I thought it was going well. I actually went three days without hearing from him this week."

"Three days! He's beat his old record," I observed.

"It was all for nothing," she said. "Apparently Trash was giving him a hard time. I always thought some good verbal abuse was the way males bonded. But Chain, uh, Darwin, shows up at my apartment a couple of days ago saying he was done with all of them. 'Newton doesn't need me and Trash hates me' he says. So I was all, 'suck it up and be a man!' For crying out loud..."

"Did you really say that to him?" I asked.

"Uh, well, not verbatim," she replied hesitantly.

"I didn't think so."

"Well, he was already pretty upset."

"Please. You're way too soft on him."

Tragedy sighed and turned over onto her side. "I know I am. It just seems like everyone else is so hard on him."

I put my hand on her arm. "Maybe they need to be. He needs a thicker hide. We all have to fight to be accepted. To fit in. I don't know what he expects."

"Maybe he wants a nice comfortable lap to curl up in."

"Oh, well then," I said. "When you're done with me, bring him over."

"Stop," she laughed. "I know. You're right, darling. It's just... he's like a little lost sparrow, and I'm his momma bird."

Her naiveté stabbed at me. It made me angry, though I couldn't have said what or who I was mad at. "I've seen him look at you," I said. "He doesn't think of you as his mother."

"What else then?"

I looked down at her. She looked up at me. "What?" she asked.

I remained silent.

"Oh, come on. He's one of us! Our kind doesn't..." She sat up and turned to face me. "You think he, what? Wants to date me? You're crazy!"

"Have you asked him?"

"Asked him what?"

"Have you asked him what you are to him? What he wants your relationship to be?"

"No. But it's not that. He's one of us. Our kind. Cosa Nostra."

"I know he is," I said. "But he follows you like a puppy. You're his favorite subject for photos or drawings. He's written poems for you."

"So what? He went through an artistic phase. He needed help and I taught him how to use the camera."

"Ask him."

"I don't need to."

"Yes, you do. Ask him."

"I will." She laid back down with her head in my lap again. "Yeah. Next time I see him."

"Do you remember my last prey?" I asked.

"Heather?"

"Yeah. Wait, no. I think Heather was the one before her. This one was..." I tried to recall the name. It had only been a few weeks. "Liah? Lisa? Something like that. The thin blonde one."

"I remember you destroyed your answering machine because of her."

"That's my point," I said. "That loony girl was always calling me. Desperate and needy makes for an easy prey, but she was trying to make a prey out of me!"

"I hate that! When the mouse thinks he's a cat."

"But that's what the nameless wonder reminds me of."

"You think he's like that girl? Come on Lane. He hasn't started talking about how attractive our children would be."

"Not yet," I said. "But she didn't start doing that until the second week."

"Madness."

"I'm just saying, if you find him sitting on your doorstep when you get home, he's probably getting close to buying the ring and popping the question."

"You're crazy. He's one of us."

"Has he been leaving you lots of messages on the old machine?"

"No. None for weeks," she said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Not since I threw it out the window two weeks ago."

"You've already killed your machine? I wondered why you stopped calling me back."

"You haven't left me a message in a couple of weeks either. He just needs a hobby or a job and he'll forget all about me."

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“Too bad you can’t consume him like I did... what was her name? Was it Lisa?”

“That sounds right. Yeah, that would solve a few things.” She sighed again and laid back down with her head in my lap.



These conversations we had when we were alone were the kind we could never have in a public setting. Not only because we were hiding what we were from the humans around us, but because Tragedy had a public mask which was built of sarcasm and coldness. She wielded words like a blade, and her targets never escaped unmarked. Her biting wit was cruel and brilliant, like the dance of a tiger bringing down its prey. I admired her abilities, and as long as they were not aimed at me, we could tear apart the world around us together. We were the voices of self loathing in everyone’s heads, out loud and merciless.

Alone, with no audience, she put the blades away. The claws retracted, and she was softer, more gentle. With her head in my lap, so off guard, without a word or gesture of attack, she was a different creature. She was the tiger after the kill. Even bloody claws couldn't keep her from being a thing of beauty- awe inspiring, fascinating, and all the more so because of the danger she possessed within her. If vampires could bleed, she would cut them with her words and make the blood flow with only her tongue. Having that kind of threat resting quietly in your lap is beyond intoxication. It is terror and triumph rolled into one, with the shy and quiet pride of living to tell the tale.

And more importantly, it let me see something few had ever seen. I saw the paws behind the claws. I heard the purr behind the fangs. At the time I could not have said if it was the danger or the rarity which made me crave it so. At the time I could not even admit to myself how much I desired that experience. But I did.

We finished watching the news and made plans for the following day. There was a train that went from the heart of the city to the town right outside the forest preserve that was our destination. She went home to gather the things a normal human would need while camping, and we would meet at the train station.

I spent the hours between watching her walk out of my apartment and the rising of the sun by packing for our trip and packing up all remnants of my rock and roll lifestyle. All the fliers, posters, demos and headshots went into a box and into the closet. I felt nothing as I put away that part of this life. I would not allow myself to. I would not accept remorse. I wanted it to be over.

Brash was a hothead and hard to work with. Party Girl was unreliable and showed up late for gigs and rehearsals. The humans were flighty, or so we thought, and nothing to us but props used to maintain our public appearance as human. We always felt they were stupid for

not guessing what we were, yet we went to such great lengths to make sure they never would. Despising the humans was part of our norm. They were prey and could never be anything better than pets.

The next day I found myself standing at the station alone with two tickets. Tragedy had not arrived when she said she would. Only minutes before the train was to depart I saw her. A dirty white Jeep Wrangler stopped at the main entrance of the station and I saw her yell at the driver to go around the block. Her eyes were wide as she approached me.

"We're selling those tickets," she said as she snatched them out of my hand.

I began following her to the ticket window. "Why are we selling them?" I protested.

"Because I'm an idiot," she spat back. "Hi there," she said to the woman behind the bullet proof glass, "We're not taking the train today, so we need to refund these."

"Why aren't we taking the train?" I asked.

"We're taking Darwin's new Jeep," she said to me.

"That was Darwin out there? Why are we..." I sputtered at her. "Why is he even coming with?"

Tragedy let out an exasperated sigh. "He was at my apartment when I got there this morning. Shut up."

"I didn't say..." I began.

"I know what you're going to say, and no. But I will! OK?"

"I didn't say..." I tried again.

"He was there. I tried to tell him I had plans and I didn't have time for him, and he went on about how he could get a Jeep real cheap and take us down himself."

"We had planned to take the train."

"Oh, for... You know I hate taking the train!" she said.

"Does he know that too?"

“Yes, he knows that, which is why when he offered to drive us in his new Jeep I couldn’t find a reason to shut him down.”

“How about the fact that it’s a convertible and the cloud cover isn’t thick enough to do the job of the enclosed metal and tinted windows back there?” I said, pointing to the trains.

“He’s been checking the weather. It’s only going to get heavier the farther south we get. And when we roll up in a vehicle with no top it will immediately cover our tracks.”

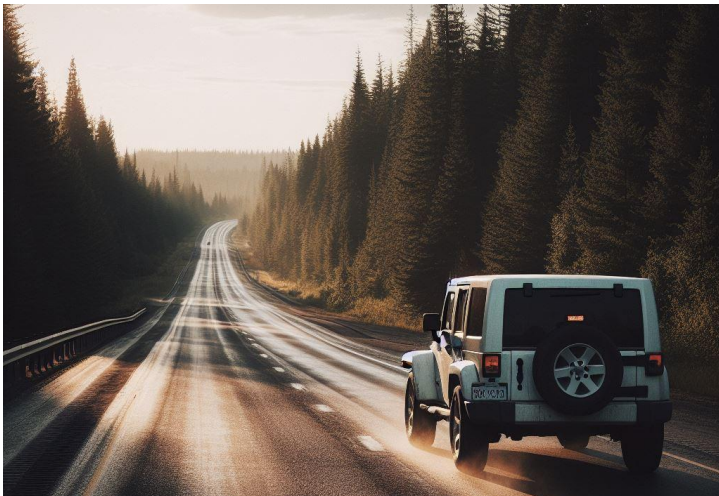
I hated to admit it, but seeing us arrive before sunset in a convertible with the top down would instantly give us big points in the “not vampires” category. The boy wasn’t entirely stupid. “Huh. OK, he gets a point for creativity,” I offered. “But you could have told him he wasn’t invited.”

“You are smarter than a fifth grader, aren’t you? Strangely, so am I. So I tried hinting at the fact that we were guests and couldn’t just invite our friends along for the sleep over. It turns out he was invited.”

“Who?” I demanded.

“Diana,” she grumbled with a hint of venom. “Apparently she offered him some standing invitation not long ago, and he’s chosen this weekend to cash in on it.”

“Perfect.”



“Like the H Bomb.” Like two resigning themselves to the gallows, we walked toward the waiting white Jeep.

Most of the drive down was spent in awkward silence. Darwin tried to talk to Tragedy as though I wasn't there, and she took every opportunity to include me in their conversations to remind him that they were not alone. Somehow I knew that he blamed me for the fact that Tragedy was not glad to have him along. To him I was the third wheel. I was the killjoy.

Gaia greeted us at the campsite with the usual fanfare. The goddess and her high priestess were in costume and character. There was the gathering near sunset, the meditation, the hallucinogenic drugs. We were sent into the woods to be alone and become one with the spirit of the earth.

I didn't go far, and neither did Tragedy or Darwin. I could hear the two of them talking quietly in the darkness, though they were hidden by the trees. There was a loud exasperated sigh from Tragedy, followed by Darwin's voice saying, “Where are we going?”

“We need to talk.”

“We're alone here.”

She sighed again. “You are dense, aren't you? Lane?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Lane?” he said in surprise.

“Go back to the fire circle. I'll find you there later. Chuck D and I need to be alone for a few minutes.”

“OK,” I replied, and I headed back to the bonfire we had started from.

I sat in the shadows, listening to the crackle of the fire. In the distance were the quiet voices of Gaia and Phoebe whispering the usual spiritual propaganda to their disciples. Gaia was spending a long time asking personal questions of a balding man in his early thirties. Around the

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fire pit I noticed him- soul patch, gold chain around his neck, hat on backwards labeled with his alma mater. His backpack contained a six pack of his favorite cheap domestic beer, a fact which he was far too eager to share with the others. He was an old frat boy who never grew up, never found anything else to be. He was now making good money at a job he was comfortable at, drinking away his paycheck with his live-in girlfriend.



Just as he was beginning to describe his girlfriend, Tragedy came storming out of the thick underbrush near the path into the woods. Even a ways off I could see the expression on her face. It had not gone well.

"So," I said carefully, "how did it go?" Of course I already knew the answer, but I couldn't think of another way to say it which didn't sound like, "So, how right was I?"

She silently marched past where I was sitting, kicked a good deal of the bonfire out of her way, and continued to the path up the cliff face beyond the camp site. I decided to follow her at a safe distance. After a few minutes climb, she found a cliff overlooking the rising stars and sat down.

I let her speak first, and eventually she did. She told me that she had finally asked him. She gave him an easy out, and almost coached him to the right answer. He had spilled his heart all over the night, and it was worse than either of us had guessed it would be. Tragedy was angry, but understandably wasn't sure why. Our kind didn't love. We didn't attach ourselves in emotional, romantic relationships. We used those human customs to make prey of them, but we did not experience it. We did not love, or desire, or want or need each other. It was a weakness of the humans and a tool we used against them. So when one had suddenly professed his passionate love and desire for her, Tragedy was unprepared, angry, and confused.

"He said he loves you?" I asked when she had indicated it was safe to sit with her. "Just like that? He told you that? What does that even mean?"

"It means he's a fool," she spat through clenched teeth.

"Maybe he never wanted to fit in," I surmised. "Maybe he thinks he's one of them."

"Human?"

"Sure. They obsess over love. It's the subject of all their stupid songs and movies and books. They crave it. It's their... blood."

"Shut up, Lane."

I obeyed.

"What does it mean?" she asked, not necessarily to me. "What does he want? Does he think he is physically attracted to me? Does he want to touch me? Am I supposed to want to touch him? Bloodless fool! Why would I want that? Why would I want to touch someone I can't consume?"

"We spend a lot of time acting human," I said, "trying to fit in. Maybe he's started to blur the line between what he is and what he pretends to be." I realized that it seemed as if I was defending him. I was torn between the desire to encourage her bitterness at him, and the desire to soothe her anger for her own sake.

"It does us no good. Out here, what good would it do to pretend to be human? What does he want? What does he have to gain?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Maybe he's started to see you like the humans do. It's more than a few men who have noticed that you are beautiful."

"Shut up, Lane!" she shot at me. "So help me..."

"No, I didn't..." I realized that I was failing at making her feel better. Sensing that I was only going to convince her to share her wrath with me, I got up and began to leave. "Maybe you need some time to be alone and think about all of this."

"Lane!" I paused and waited for her to continue. "I don't want to be alone with him if he finds me," she said. "Can you stay?"

"I'll send someone," I offered. "I'm sure Diana's free by now."

"No," she said. She sighed deeply and hung her head. "I want it to be you. Please."

The word 'please' stuck in my chest deeper than her claws ever did. I had rarely heard her say it, and I had never heard her say it like that. I wanted to keep walking, but she had anchored me to the spot. "It seems I'm only aggravating you," I observed.

"Only when you talk," she said with the hint of a smile. "Can you please just be here? Just... shut up and be here? It makes me feel better."

"It makes you feel better when I'm not talking?" I asked for clarification.

"Sometimes."

"Like furniture," I said with half a smile.

"Like a couch, but better," she replied.

"All right," I said, reclaiming my spot next to her again. "But after all of this, I'm not letting you share my lap with him."

"Shhhhhh."

"Sorry."

We were alone for nearly two hours when Gaia finally caught up with us. She sprang up the cliff like a gazelle and sat on the other side of me. Darwin had been set to busying himself with helping Diana rebuild the fire and watch the disciples. She didn't say so, but I was certain Gaia knew to keep Darwin away from Tragedy.

Gaia launched into the story that would involve me. The old frat boy was new to the city. He and his live-in girlfriend were career people with no strong connections to family. While they had been in the city for better than half a year, neither had formed any meaningful relationships better than casual friends among co-workers. They were an island, and they were growing tired of being trapped together. This tension and growing sense of isolation was what had brought the old frat boy out to the woods. He was looking for meaning, connection, and the chance to cheat on his live-in girlfriend.

Gaia was certain that the tall girl that lived with the old frat boy would be as anxious for emotional connection as he was, if not more so. She was ready for the winds of romance to blow a whirlwind around her until she came crashing, heart first, into the web of my embrace. Like a fly to a spider. And I was ready to use love for the one thing it was good for-

bringing the fly into the web,

to be consumed.

*The people rise like a lioness;
they rouse themselves like a lion that does not rest
till he devours his prey
and drinks the blood of his victims.
Numbers 23:24*

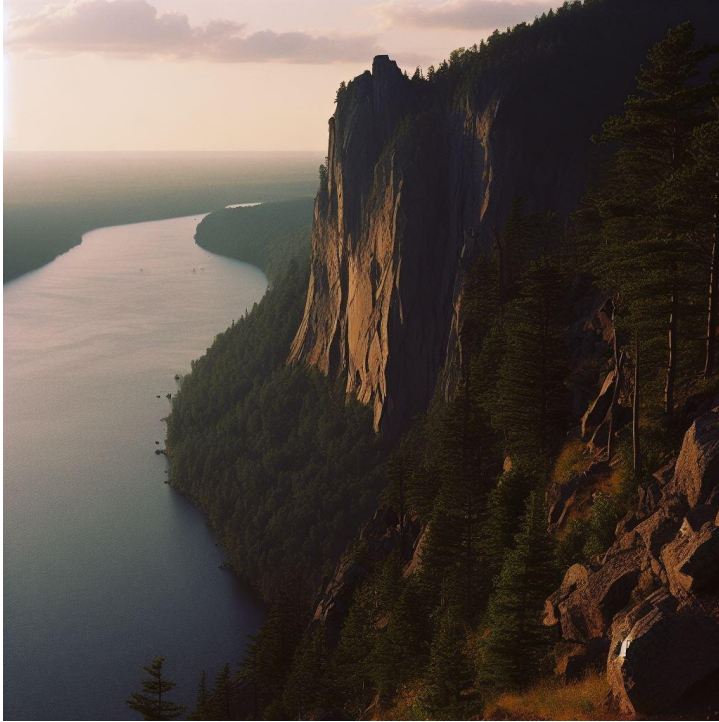
CHAPTER THREE

Devil's Lake

There is a forest preserve only a few hours from the city where climbers would go to test their metal. There was a sheer and jagged wall of rock nearly twelve hundred meters high that the climbers called Demon Rock, overlooking Devil's Lake in the center of more than 10,000 acres of forest preserve. Demon Rock had claimed half a dozen lives in the past decade, yet the climbers continued to come. There was a certain shared madness in those men and women that I could not understand. They knew that the climb could cost them their lives, and it made them all the more eager to attempt it. They had more zeal and determination and passion for the climb than any of the shoddy, makeshift hippy-Nuevo that would join Gaia had for the journey into spiritual enlightenment.

The men and women who joined her spiritual gatherings in the isolated wilderness were already half dead, both in the heart and in their wills. Climbing off of their couches to drive out of the city was the most passionate

most of them would ever be. They were the perfect worshippers for a goddess like Gaia.



I do not doubt that you remember her. I am sure you remember more about her than I will ever know. However, I do doubt that you ever really knew how I saw Gaia. I wonder if our memories would be so different, though I know the point is moot since she is now dead and gone forever. I don't mean to color your memories. I only mean to show you the world that I saw through my eyes.

She would never admit it to me, but I believed Gaia chose this forest preserve because of the names. There were plenty of other places, and some of them closer to the city, where she could establish herself as a nature goddess, yet this was her home away from home. Devil's Lake. Demon

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Rock. In the city she was just another one of our kind. She worked for a small independent newspaper writing environmental poetry under the name Geo, which we assumed was meant to be Italian or Greek. That was in the city. Out there, at Devil's Lake, she was the goddess Gaia. In the city she was just another thin, longhaired brunette in earth tones. Out there, she was one with nature, and often adorned herself with leaves, flowers, or sometimes mud and mosses. Sometimes nothing but leaves and flowers. She was a reed growing in the earth soaked with spilled blood. She was the goddess over the devil and under the demon. There was a poetry to it that I believe she could not resist, sophomoric as it may have been.



At her side, as her daughter or the high priestess of her own worship (depending on how her mood flowed at the time) was Phoebe.

Phoebe also worked for the indie newspaper in the city, The Pythian Oracle, but in less defined ways. In the city Phoebe was known as Diana Lanotte. In the city, as Diana, she wore a sharp pair of glasses and some form of business or business casual attire. Her straight, dark hair would be as confined as her speech and almost as matter of fact. She spoke little and was spoken to mainly by Gaia or the one of our kind who owned and ran The Pythian Oracle, who was known as Essence.

Diana was much shorter and more curvaceous than Gaia. She was still and stable when Gaia flowed like wind blown grasses, silent when Gaia waxed eloquent to no one about nothing. She was the Yin to Gaia's Yang and followed her like an obedient altar boy behind a priest. The wilderness was their cathedral, and they gathered the chosen few to take part of the elements, and eventually to become the sacraments. The worshippers were the bread and the wine, and we would partake of them.

I don't know what had compelled me to come to Devil's Lake, as I greatly preferred the city and I had little respect for Gaia. She seemed to me to be a wispy fool dedicated to speaking in poetry even at the very real risk of being the worst mocking parody of herself. Her eyes were strong and widely formed, but never seemed to be focused on anything in particular. Even during most of a conversation, she would talk to another as if he was just one of the voices in her head that she happened to pick to listen to for the moment. Occasionally she would make eye contact, and perhaps it was because of the rarity, or perhaps it was her eyes themselves, but her gaze could be somehow softly penetrating. On those rare occasions when she looked into my eyes, she would look as if she had suddenly seen into some secret I was hiding, taking it in with her eyes as if she recognized something hidden. Her attention was fleeting. Just as quickly as she stopped to gaze at me, she would look away as though she was either not reading my secrets clearly or she was simply not paying them any mind. I had chosen to believe that she stared at me that way only because she was searching for her next words and thought I might have them. It would not have been out of character for her if this had been the truth.

I had come on this particular occasion at Gaia's request, conveyed to me through Phoebe/Diana. I had agreed to Gaia's invitation because we had the opportunity to be mutually benefited by the experience. There was, in her

most recent collection of worshippers, a couple from the city who showed promise. The man was open to experimentation with drugs, meditation, and other rituals of the cult. He had also shown a great interest in Gaia and would almost certainly be open to experimenting with her. His live-in girlfriend was not so quick to assimilate to the religious experience, and was also very unlikely to agree to share her lover with Gaia, but she might, Diana felt, share herself with me. The girl was tall, beautiful, and fond of wine and romance novels. She was primed to be prey, ready to be seduced and consumed.

There would be two weekend worship experiences when we would meet. On the first, we convened in the shadow of Demon Rock as the sun sank into the horizon. The small group of city dwellers were waiting for us, as they were not affected by the sun as we were, and as they were eager to begin whatever rituals might take place. Nothing was spoken, but there was in the sales pitch the unspoken promise of sex and drugs. For those like us, sex and drugs were the norm, not because they held any real interest for us, but because a man with an addiction has very little sales resistance. Then again, this has been the basis for most advertising for the past century. We were just using the dogma of marketing to get what we wanted. Blood is like money. If you have it, the vampires will come.

Our job was easier when they were blinded by chemicals. It mattered little to us if those chemicals were smoked, injected, or produced by their own bodies. A sober man might notice the subtle things: the way we moved, the way we avoided direct sunlight, the fact that we rarely had last names. An addict, whether to drugs, sex, or ego, was an easy sell and rarely discovered the truth before it was too late. It was commercialism. It was marketing. It was a religion of self-destruction and self-worship at the same time. In a culture so dedicated to self-worship and self-destruction, it was a wonder Gaia's cult was not more

popular. She must have worked hard to give it an air of exclusivity. Only the chosen few could know the secrets of the Goddess. Only a select few would be right for the sacrifice. Only a select few would not be missed when they went into Devil's Lake never to return.

She addressed the waiting worshippers with the theatrical drama I expected of her as we entered the clearing. "Greetings, my children!" she sang with her arms raised to the sky that was mostly obscured with a canopy of trees. "I am glad to see you chosen, you few, you blessed worshippers here in the embrace of our mother, the earth." She gave a lingering look to one man in particular. Playing the part of the goddess of the woods, she radiated sensuality with her every move and word, but I could see her honing her sensuality onto this little man with purpose and malice. "It gives me much pleasure to see you in her embrace," she said, slowly, before breaking eye contact with him. She was a needle in his veins. His heart was pounding. Pleasure. Embrace. He was high, and she hadn't given him any drugs yet.

He was a dumpy little creature in his mid thirties with what was already a committed comb-over. This little bit of eye contact affected his entire body, and he shifted in child-like glee and awkward discomfort. He was a man unfamiliar with getting attention from a woman he was not paying, whether waitress or stripper.

I could guess his entire life from the fact that she had brought him here. He was insecure and covered it with arrogance in whatever field he considered himself an expert. He would remember all of the people he went to school with (people who never accepted him) with superior disdain and bitterness- especially any pretty girl he ever got the nerve to talk to.

He lived alone in a small city apartment where he would dedicate his time and money to entertainment and other escapes from the real world. He was addicted to

pornography- and while he would arrogantly reject religion and traditional morality as archaic, unscientific, and weak, he would still criticize and condemn anyone who shared his addiction. He would still feel the shame. He would still hate himself for it.

He worked a job that allowed him to not interact with people very much. Even when he did, he didn't feel like he was liked or accepted, which would lead him to be anti-social enough to make these fears a reality. Gaia would have approached him, perhaps at his place of work, maybe in the subway, and flirted just enough to hook him. Just a few compliments that sounded sincere. Tiny lies that he wanted to believe. Unspoken promises. Insinuation and invitation. He was not here for the religious experience she was offering. He was here for the religious experience he hoped she would be. His eyes followed her hungrily and desperately.

"As Phoebe starts the fire, I want you all to close your eyes and release the negative energy of the city, the pollution of your soul. Just breathe and feel yourself breathing." The Tall Girl was sitting next to her boyfriend, the old frat boy, and I saw a slight roll of her eyes before she obeyed Gaia's directions. Phoebe lit a fire in the midst of the small gathering with choreographed movements, graceful and steady. She poured something from the tall metal pitcher she had been carrying into the pile of wood at the center of the clearing. I could smell the chemicals. One match and the blaze would flare and soar. I wondered for a moment how theatrical they could get before some of these people lost respect for the proceedings.

Gaia continued her spiritual lullaby, "Your lives in the city are a subway train, racing toward oblivion. You live in a dark tunnel. The view out the windows is only the blur racing past you or the places where you have already been. And you live knowing there is a sudden stop at the end of the line." There was a collective hummed murmur of agreement and nodding of heads. Undoubtedly she had spoken the words

their own emotions were trying to communicate. She had reached into their minds and read their souls. How hard is that, I thought, when it could be said of anyone in the city? They ride that train to work and back every day. That could be where she had found them.

She danced slowly through their midst as she continued. "Here, in the embrace of your Mother the Earth and I, her goddess, you will expand your mind. Your mother and your goddess will give you the organic remedy to free your mind of the spiritual smog- to clear your mind of the blur. You will get off the train for a moment, stand on the tracks, and experience the world as it is right now, unconcerned with where you have been or where you will be going. Phoebe, my daughter, please administer the elements."

"Yes, goddess." From a small decorative vile stored in her robes, Phoebe shook some small pills into her open hand. "Receive this medicine of the mother," she said. "It will expand your mind until you are only here and only now, and the wind in the trees becomes your prayer to the goddess, and the sound of the forest becomes the meditation on the Earth Mother."

One by one she went to the gathered few and placed a pill on their tongues. I watched the Tall Girl. When Phoebe reached out a hand with the pill toward her mouth, the Tall Girl leaned away, slightly off balance. Unlike the others, she took it in her hand. Her boyfriend let Phoebe place a pill on his tongue and watched her walk gracefully to the next worshiper.

After some consideration, and after looking up to see that Phoebe was not watching her, the Tall Girl placed it in her pocket. Her boyfriend was watching Phoebe in the manner that I have seen drunk men watching a waitress. He was neither self-controlled nor subtle. Phoebe had told me about him and she was correct. It was the same hungry look I have seen some of our kind give to our prey. A lustful

glance intended to be unnoticed. The Tall Girl had not noticed, which told me volumes about their relationship.

She looked up and saw me looking at her. I caught her eye. I smiled at her. I held my pill to her, nodded, and placed it in my pocket also. She smiled back. We had connected.

"The only way to know, to truly touch truth," said Gaia, making an elaborate show of taking her own pill, "is to touch and feel your world. What you experience will become your truth. Anything less would be speculation. Pollution. And you will see and touch and taste your own truth, for truth is personal. It belongs to you as you belong to me. The belief that there is only one truth, and that you alone possess it, is the root of all evil. Of this veil too we will free ourselves." She sat in the circle with them, next to the dumpy little man, and exhaled deeply.



“Let us gaze into the fire, and watch its dance. As the wood burns, it will release the nature spirit within, and give off a light more pure and true than the sun.” Again I caught the eye of the tall, beautiful girl. I shrugged my shoulders slightly, and she smiled sheepishly. We were two kids in the back of the class, making jokes at our teacher’s expense. We had connected again. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, smelling the trees and the animals. The darkness had come out of hiding and the stars began to take their places. The seduction had taken its first steps.

The drugs were starting to take effect in the minds of the gathered. Perhaps the wind was taking on colors. Perhaps the ground was waving like an ocean. Whatever they were seeing, it was their truth, and they were touching the dream. Wordlessly, Phoebe and Gaia rose, walked to the fire, and reached in. They lifted their still burning pieces of wood from the edge of the fire, the flames licking their fingers. They looked, for a moment, like two miniature Statues of Liberty. I thought of Tragedy, wishing she had been with me. I wondered which of us would have mocked them first. I could almost hear her voice sarcastically singing “America The Beautiful.” Tragedy was the kid in the back of every class, mocking teacher, student, and subject alike. She was an artist of scorn.

“The time has come,” said Gaia, looking past them into the forest, “to go to the Mother. Each of you will go into the trees until you are alone with your Earth Mother. There you will sit, touching your truth, alone. Phoebe and I will come to you and touch it with you in turn. Now, go, find your place to commune with her until your goddess comes to you.” They held their fires in both hands now, and nodded to the watching congregation to indicate it was time to rise.

The worshippers rose and staggered into the darkness, their footsteps crunching over leaves and sticks. Between the fire and the stars I could see each of them long after they could no longer see each other. The Tall Girl tried

to follow her boyfriend into the shadows and tall trees. I saw her try and ask him how they were able to touch fire. "She is a goddess," was all he said before slumping off into nocturnal obscurity. She scowled at him and headed off in a different direction. I followed her.



Not far into the woods I caught up to her. I purposefully walked like a human, stepping on sticks and brushing up against the stiff and brittle grasses so she could hear me approaching. I saw her turn around and search the darkness for me. She was squinting, probably just starting to be able to make out my form between herself and the glow of the fire back in the clearing. She whispered her boyfriend's name toward me with an edge of nervousness.

"Excuse me," I said quietly. "I know we were told to go off alone, but I had to know. Who is that tall, beautiful girl?" She blushed.

I told her my name. She told me hers. We talked about the fact that neither of us had taken the little pill. "Probably acid," she said.

I let her talk, and I agreed with her. How very much alike we would turn out to be when I let her talk first! We walked further into the darkness, the dim glow of the fire behind us making the forest a darting wall of shadow. Of course, I could see everything, but I could see her eyes searching the way before her for a path. More than once I

kept her from falling when she stumbled over a log or a rock. It gave me good excuses to touch her.

"One thing I don't get," she whispered. Even though the lilting voice of Gaia and the dim glow of the fire she carried with her told us she was far off, we still kept to whispers, like naughty children out of bed on Christmas Eve.

"What is that?" I asked.

"How did they grab those sticks out of the fire?" She spoke with her hands, even though she thought I couldn't see her. "I mean, I haven't been camping many times, but I know enough about fire to know that it should have burned them really badly. I burned myself roasting a s'more once. Was it, like, a trick or something?" Her speech was a string of run on sentences and stumbling self-interruptions.

"Of course," I replied with confidence. "I had a room mate in college who did magic tricks like that all the time. Really theatrical stuff. There's a ceramic piece at the end of the stick which looks like wood that they put on there before they even light the fire. It doesn't transfer heat. And when we were supposed to be staring into the fire, they put this fire retardant cooling gel on their hands, like professional stunt men use." I was impressed with my ability to invent a good lie. It sounded so plausible. Something like that probably existed somewhere. "It's all smoke and mirrors," I said. "if you'll pardon the pun."

"More like smoke and jelly," she laughed.

I laughed too. When you want someone to believe you like them, and when you want someone to like you, you laugh at their stupid jokes, no matter how dreadful they are.

"That's funny," I lied. "You are a witty girl. Wouldn't you know that, living in a city of five million people, I'd have to get lost out in a dark forest to meet a smart, beautiful, witty girl like you?"

"Lane," she replied hesitantly, "I have a boyfriend. I live with him."

I replied with a dramatic pause. "Perhaps," I added, "I have said too much. You're just," I paused to search for the right romantic movie dialogue, "different than other girls. You're tall and beautiful and witty. Don't blame my mouth for what my heart makes it say." That was laying it on thick. I had added just a hint of waver to my voice, to imply a deep emotion just below the surface. I watched her to see if she would bite at the hook. Her face told me she thought I was sincere. I felt a tug on the line.

"I'm sorry Lane, I didn't mean..." And she had bitten the hook. Beautiful. "No," I interrupted, "I'm sorry. Perhaps I will just go off to find my own spot to meditate."

"Maybe we should do what Gaia asked us to do." She was trying to reassure me a little. Perfect. I had admitted an attraction to her. I had laughed at her jokes. I had shown her how much we think alike, and now there was a slight tinge of empathy. If I could inspire any amount of lust in her she would be mine. That would wait. I would let it simmer and grow in her imagination.

"That's why we're here. Enjoy your embrace of mother earth. I hope I see you again, somewhere with a little more light. You are the most beautiful thing in the woods. It's a shame not to be able to see you." I began to walk away.

"Lane." I stopped and turned to watch her. She fought to find the right words. "Thank you. You're very sweet."

That was perfect.

"Thank you." And I walked off to be alone in the woods. Behind me stood a wide-open doorway leading to an affair. I was almost disappointed that it had been that easy.

Some time later Gaia found me sitting alone on a felled tree. We saw each other a long way off, but stayed silent until she was close. Her hands were empty. She had already been to visit the others and did not need the fire to see me in the woods. The starlight was more than enough. There were fewer colors, but except for the normal contrast

when there are lights and shadows that can be seen by human eyes, the difference was hard to notice. The world looked the same in the dark as it always did.

Except our eyes. They glowed just slightly in an environment this dark, like a cat. Gaia's eyes were the perfect image of a predator's eyes as she approached me in her casual sway. "Greetings my child."

I nodded. "Goddess." She smiled. "And you can't tell Tragedy I called you that." "Do not worry, my brother. What happens at Devil's Lake, stays at Devil's Lake."

Great, I thought, out here I was her brother. I guess that made sense, what with mother earth and all. "Will that include the dumpy little guy you've been giving the sensuous looks?"

"Ah, yes. He will be given a special chance to become one with the nature spirit. It will be the climactic conclusion to the story of his life, the crescendo to the song he has barely sung. But what a glorious zenith. To be chosen for an intimate connection with the earth and her goddess. For his blood to run through the veins of not just one beast of prey, but several. I almost envy him."

"Yes, me too," I said with obvious sarcasm. "If only it could be me instead." She ignored me.

"How did your conversation with the tall and beautiful girl go?"

"It was brilliant. I was the cliché dialogue from a bad novel. A scene from her favorite film." I paused to bask in my own accomplishment and considered that it had in fact been too easy. "I never understand it, but bad lines always work much better in the dark."

"It is because, as good as you are, Lane, they can read the lies on your face, the untruth in your eyes. In the dark, your eyes can't give you away." She stared me in the eyes, and again she got that look, like there was something she could see. "There is something about your eyes, Lane."

Maybe there was a lie in my eyes I was telling her.

Like usual, she shrugged it off, gave up trying to find it and twirled away.

"What about the Tall Girl's boyfriend?" I asked.

She stopped twirling, danced back over to me, leaned in very close and whispered, "I am afraid the goddess has seen the future of their love. He is destined to be untrue." She smiled at me. "If my vision is correct," she placed a finger on my chest and narrowed her eyes, "she will be unfaithful to him as well." Gaia sprung gracefully away from me and continued her monologue to the trees as much as to me. "Drawn in like a moth to the flame; though the flame is merely the glow of her own heart. Both, succumbing to be consumed by passions they cannot control, only to be passionately consumed. Another romance that ends in misfortune. A love that began like the commencement of a tempest. Flashes of light and a thunderous boom. Promises, romance, kisses and whispers in the dark, and all of them to end in the same cold silence of my... dumpy, little friend." She turned to look at me again. "Isn't it beautiful?" And she danced into the trees toward her next devoted worshiper.

Somewhere long past midnight, the group was reassembled and dismissed to one of the forest preserve's many sanctioned campsites. They crawled into their clean, unused tents, most of which had been purchased within the week at a store near their homes in the city. They may have had previous ideas about how the night would be spent in the embrace of the earth or each other, but sleep fell on them like a dead horse on an injured cowboy. The ride had come to a sudden stop and their bodies permitted only that they be allowed to recover. They were trapped under their dormancy now to face whatever dreams their altered minds could conjure. Several of them would wake up screaming in terror, quickly to then see the world around them and gain enough clarity to resume sleeping. Only one was still awake.

Phoebe had given him a pill the others had not received, but if any of my guesses were correct, he did not

need it. His heart rate would have tripled on its own because of his fantasies and anticipation. If my guesses about Phoebe were correct, she was enough Diana out here to know that. She probably had given him a caffeine pill.

He had been told, during his session of meditation with the goddess, that she would come for him in the night. She and her spiritual daughter, Phoebe, would take him, and only him, into the woods to join with them in an embrace of the earth and her goddess. The language was no doubt flowery and poetic, for that is the only way that Gaia talked, especially when she was away from the city, being Gaia. If there were no direct statements made, there was most certainly the deep insinuation. She would have touched him as she spoke to him, his hands, his face, his chest, purring in slow sensuality until her words didn't matter. It was the kind of sales pitch a snake makes to a mouse. Come into my embrace. Let your body be wrapped in mine. Now, die.

She would tell him that he would give his body to them as a sacrifice to the goddess, and they would receive his body. He was special. He was chosen. It was their little secret. And he would have no idea what the truth was until it was too late.

They came to him in the night, dressed in wispy white robes, Phoebe living up to her name's sake with an old lantern in her hand to light his way in the dark. They found him still wide awake in his tent. He didn't even need to be spoken to. He had opened his tent and jumped out of it as soon as he heard their footsteps and saw the dim light that Phoebe carried. I stayed silently a dozen yards off, far enough that he could not have seen me in the candlelight.

They didn't speak much as they walked deep into the woods, toward the lake. He didn't ask where they were going. He only asked how far. He was like a child in a car. He was anxious to get wherever they were going and did not care where it was, because he thought he knew what he would receive when they arrived.

When they did arrive, it was far from the camp, at the base of a cliff near the edge of the water. A low growl was heard somewhere on the path. He asked if they had heard it. Gaia assured him they had. She and Phoebe took him by the arms and led him onward. He asked what it was. They told him it was a cougar. He said maybe they should stop and go back. He could not yet see it, but the cougar was with her cubs under a small overhang in the cliff. I saw its eyes as it saw him. It growled again. He said they should go back. He tried to stop walking toward it, but they tightened their grasp and continued to walk, slowed only the slightest by his struggle.

Gaia, ever dedicated to her part, reminded him that she was his goddess. She repeated his promise to her that he would offer his body to them as a sacrifice. She told him how a tribe of Native Americans believe the cougar to be associated with the god of the sun and storms. Spirits of the earth. He begged them to let him go. He struggled. He kicked. Eventually, in the dying flame of Phoebe's lantern, he saw its eyes brightly reflecting the light.

The cougar stood between him and her babies. She warned him with her cry. Gaia and Phoebe held him, arms behind his back, and pushed him to his knees. He cried out in pain and terror. Gaia offered him to the cougar and to the earth with bold poetic prose. He cried like a lost child. They dragged him closer.

The cougar finally attacked, lunging for his neck. She sunk her teeth into both sides of his neck and crushed it. All three of them released him at the same time and he slumped to the ground.

Gaia waxed eloquent about how he was now one with the spirit of the earth, one with nature, and now his blood would run in the veins of the strongest beasts. Even had we not been there, he would have had only minutes to live. With us there, the process would be well expedited. Gaia prattled off some poetry which was, in her mind, a

benediction and last rights. The goddess will protect you from evil. The goddess shall preserve thy going to the eternal embrace of the Earth Mother. Be received as a sacrament. Amen.

We drank his blood as the cougar went back to her cubs. She took no notice of us. We did not smell human. She ignored us as she may have if three trees had wandered down from the forest above the lake. Considering how we differed from real humans, those like us may as well have been trees. We had no beating hearts. We had no blood in our veins. As predators ourselves, we knew we did not smell like humans. Those like us were not the human life our surface pretended to be.



After we had fed, we washed off the evidence of our deed in Devil's Lake. Its name indicated to me that it was the perfect place to hide the evidence of our deed. Gaia and Phoebe seemed to have an elaborate ritual of purification, though I assumed that it was more choreography than spiritual symbolism. With only a quick dive or two I was confident that my exterior was cleansed of my actions.

I stood in the water as the other two washed themselves piece by piece in careful repetitive movements, and I watched the sky begin to brighten. While the other worshippers at the camp would not wake for several hours,

we had to consider moving on if the sky was not heavily clouded, and at the time I could not tell if it would be. Our bodies' response to sunlight was not so violent as to be a cause of panic and apprehension, but it was a matter of concern.

It was not like the movies. We did not burst into flames when we were touched by sunlight. The sun burned those like us the way it burned humans. First it was simply warm, and then our skin would get hotter and hotter until it felt like we were on fire. We didn't turn red with our burn. We would lighten the way a wet newspaper gets lighter as it dries. The way bones bleach in the sun. It might take several hours before it did much damage, but it would. Our skin would dry, crack, and splinter. The water in our bodies would boil away painfully until we were brittle and arid. From what I had heard, even this might not kill one of our kind, but it make it much easier to kill us. Were anyone wishing to destroy us, we would be weak and already suffering. We would offer little resistance. Cutting through our bodies would be much easier, so I was told, like breaking limbs off of a dead tree. Burning us, after hours of direct sun, would be easier than burning dry grass. The stunt the girls played grabbing the wood out of the fire that night would have destroyed them both in a quick surge of flame that would engulf their bodies down to their bones.

I knew these things because Rage had told me. I imagined that, because of his confidence and knowledge of details, that he had seen it happen. He did not tell me that he had witnessed it, and if Rage did not offer information like that, he did not wish to share it. It was best not to ask.

Gaia waded up to me as I stood observing the sky. She draped her long, thin arms around me and watched the sky as well. Phoebe sat in the water at a distance, half of her soft, rounded form submerged, her legs tucked neatly beneath her. I could feel her watching us, waiting to be called like an obedient dog as she pretended to continue washing,

pretending not to notice the attention I was receiving from her goddess.



Gaia purred at nothing and put her chin on my shoulder. I would have objected, but I couldn't think of any grounds for my objection, so I chose not to voice it.

"Have I made you a believer, Lane?" she asked listlessly. "Do you worship your goddess? Do you feel the spirit of the earth as the world spins beneath your feet? Do you feel the embrace," she squeezed me gently and pulled me closer, "of your mother the earth?"

"Can I ask you something?" I asked, still watching the dim haze of the horizon. "Of course, my brother. Your goddess is here for your quandaries." She lay her head down on my shoulder, her long hair cascading over my shoulder and down my back.

For a moment I caught Phoebe's eye, and she knew I had seen her watching us. She quickly looked down and her face became the emotionless blank I knew in the city as Diana.

"This religion you teach," I said, trying to control my cynical tone, "do you, do either of you believe any of it?"

"Are you doubting that I am a goddess? Have you not just seen us join with nature herself as she claimed a sacrifice? Did you not see that, in the blood that is taken by us, I and the mother are one?"

"I saw you do what those like us all do. Tragedy will seduce a man like you did. Rage will give them drugs to dull their awareness. Skin will use their dedication to a cause or a belief to make them his servants and eventually his prey. How are you different than any of the rest of us? How is this different from what Tragedy, or Rage, or Skin will do, except for your... exceptional theatrics?"

She purred a quiet laugh, pleased at the sly and only faintly sarcastic compliment.

"Oh, Lane," she sighed. "Don't you see that, to know the truth, you must believe it?"

"But what is the truth, Gaia? You say you're a goddess. Skin says we're just the most evolved predators on the food chain. Which is it? Are you a goddess or just another animal with a killing instinct?"

"You must experience the truth to know it Lane. If you feel the earth holding you, she is. If you worship me as your goddess, I am your goddess."

I looked down at her, still resting on my shoulder. "But are you? Are you a goddess or are you just a predator like Skin says?"

She looked up, thoughtfully. I could not tell what the look in her eyes meant, but it was a new kind of ocular inquisition. After a moment, she looked away, down at the emerging reflection of light on the water. "I don't know," she said. "Would it matter?"

"I guess not." I watched the sky as the sound of the morning birds began to slowly overtake the sound of Diana moving purposelessly in the water.

*So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords
and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.
Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying
until the time for the evening sacrifice.
But there was no response, no one answered,
no one paid attention.
1 Kings 18:28-29*

CHAPTER FOUR

UNORTHODOX

The club was called the Unorthodox, and those of us who were regulars called the staff “heretics,” though none of us could remember why. Because it was on the city’s north side, the name had been conceived as the U-North-odox, and until twenty some years ago this form of the written name could still be found in the printed advertisements. Some of the better ones were behind glass backstage as wall decorations.

For a brief period after a new wave of management realized that no one knew how to pronounce U-North-odox, it was known as Club Unorthodox, but for most of the past two decades, and to those of us who frequented it, it was known simply as The Unorthodox. When those like us spoke to each other, we called it simply The Club if we named it at all, which we rarely did, as it had come to be the place we meant when we didn’t say what we meant the way that the answering

machine had become “the machine” during the 1990s. If we were going anywhere else, we would refer to those places by their given names.

The Unorthodox was our home away from home, our town hall, our courtroom, and anything else we needed it for. There were times that many of us would sleep away the daylight in the basement, in the green room, or in an unused office.

For the one of us we called Rage, it was a source of income. He had worked on creating not only a legitimate and completely legal source of income, but a respected and feared public persona. He was a part owner of the Unorthodox and served as crowd control, PR, and a host of other faculties. Because of his influence, no city inspection had ever been made, though the official records all said flying colors.

I came to the Unorthodox, to forget my date with the Tall Girl. My fit of dreamless sleep wasn't even enough to ignore the sun outside my heavily covered windows. I knew it was there, mocking me. I didn't leave my apartment until it had been dark for a few hours.



I took the blue line to the stop just south of The Club. In the flickering yellow lights I watched my reflection as the

cars did their dance across the third rail. Blonde hair gelled in place. Black suit, casually worn, Black shirt, monochromatic tie. I enjoyed my reflection, not out of a sense of vanity, but simply because it was there.

Those like us had created most of the mythology that surrounded our kind. It was one of us that invented the vampire's inability to have a reflection or cast a shadow. It was one of us that invented the myths about how to kill us—holy water, seeing a crucifix, a moment of sunlight. No one knew his name, but we all knew it was one of us. The silver screen myths were our own design, and we wore that like a badge of pride. These myths were wonderful for us, because if someone suspected that, maybe I really was a vampire, all I need to do is tolerate a few minutes of sunlight, check my hair in the reflection of a window as I pass, and I have undone any suspicion.

We created the mythology to hide ourselves. We told the stories to make sure the truth was obscured. We made sure the mythologies could not be accepted as anything but mythology. We didn't need to hide our existence; we simply needed to make belief in our existence implausible by attaching the implausible to the basic fact. Somewhere in our past we realized that the best way to hide was to erase the line between fact and fiction until nothing could be believed. We wrote the stories. We spread the myths. We eventually created the movies and wrote the novels about our kind. The favorite authors of vampire stories or directors of vampire films would never themselves be vampires, and we would be careful not to reveal ourselves to them. We wrote the obscure books on the mythologies, which would inspire the novels and screen plays. We created art works in the form of paintings and poems supposedly based on the mythologies. By keeping a single degree of separation, we were able to tell the humans what to believe.

Vampires? If you believe they exist, then you believe there are people who sleep in coffins. They turn into bats.

They burst into flames when sunlight touches them. They all come from some part of north-eastern Europe. Their eyes glow red and they can read minds. If you believe in vampires, you must be quite a fool. They are folklore. They are too supernatural to be real. They are the stuff of movies and novels. In this way, we were all able to hide out in the open. Until someone saw us actually drinking the blood from the body of a human victim, they would never believe the truth, even if we told them.

There were even humans who pretended to be vampires and rented themselves out for parties. A local radio station was advertising the fact that they had hired just such a man to be featured at a Halloween event where he would drink blood for the crowd like a freak-show act. Some humans were so open to our existence that they would pay to see a fraud so that, for a little while, they could believe in us, never suspecting that the real thing might have been at their elbow watching the same freak show phony.

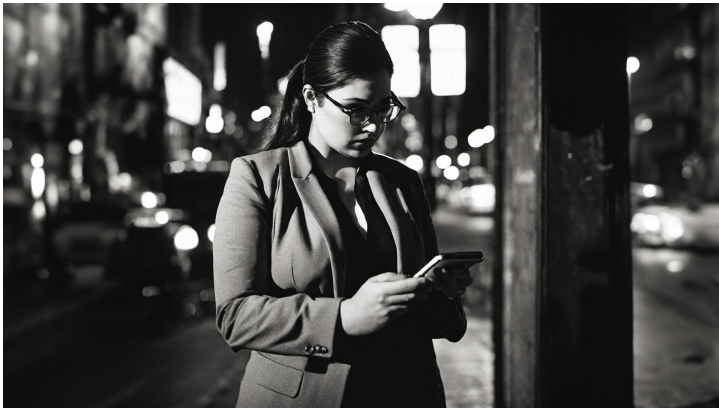
When I departed the train car, I was confronted with a poster advertising next summer's highly anticipated vampire movie, based on the popular book. We were not just able to hide in the open- we were popular. We were sexy. We were famous. There were a minority of us who wished the vampire stories could be relegated back into folklore, like the boogie man or pixies. For the rest of us, it fed our vanity. We agreed that hiding our kind was beneficial to our easy lifestyles, but secretly we all believed that the only thing worse than being famous would be not being famous. Any stroke soothes an ego like scratching a mosquito bite.

It was a short walk from the station to The Club, past the townie bars and the fluctuating roar of cars passing just a few feet from the sidewalk where I merged, unnoticed, with the human population. The trucks and the buses would kick up a wind that blew my coat and tie well off of their intended places. The blue tint of the headlights blended with the green and blue glow from the neon bar signs as pop music

escaped through open doors to punctuate the post-modern symphony of traffic.

The Unorthodox was a flat, three story building that attached on one side with the bars and apartments next door, and stood apart on the other side only because of a narrow alley. Just beyond it, another bar was crowned with tiny city apartments. There was a bottleneck of pedestrians under the marquee as some traffic flowed past the Unorthodox, and some tried to enter from both directions, while some was trying to come outside for a smoke or a phone call. Impeding all of the traffic were small groups of people huddled in clumps, most of them smoking, all of them talking over the traffic and the other conversations.

One of the people not smoking was Diana, Phoebe in her city persona. Her hair was flat and controlled, and her coat and skirt were a simple pattern of black and gray and did nothing to show off her form. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say it took calculated measures to not show off her form. Her glasses, purely for show, as though she needed them for reading, were narrow and dark-rimmed.



Diana was standing with the woman who ran the indie-newspaper for whom Gaia, under the name Geo, wrote poems. Her name was Essence- a name which, as Tragedy

was quick to point out, clearly showed how she took herself much too seriously.

As I entered the yellow glare of the marquee over the sidewalk, Essence did not turn to acknowledge me, though I noticed Diana alerting her to my arrival. Essence was elegantly self-important. She was standing prominently in front of a set of glass double doors having a cigarette. I wondered if it was still an act of effort for her to be a smoker. Of course, as one of our kind she was addicted to nothing but the blood of the living, but she still smoked constantly to keep up the normal appearance of addiction. The cigarettes gave her a connection to the humans around her who smoke as well. It was her point of continuity with them.

Her sunglasses were the wall between her eyes and theirs. I could see her eyes of course, but most of them never would, and if they would judge by the tilt of her head she never looked at anyone she spoke to. She dressed sharp, always to the top of some appearance of fashion, though possibly only she knew whose. Yet, even in the darkest night in the darkest room or alley-way she never took the tinted glasses off. Of course she didn't need to. Her eyes were built for hunting in the dark or the light. They didn't hinder nor protect her eyes. They simply served to separate her from the humans around her.

As I approached, I tried to remember if she had been a redhead the last time I had seen her. For some reason, I thought she had been a platinum blonde, and she may have been. Ultimately, it didn't matter.



“Good evening, Lane,” she said, still not looking at me. She took a drag.

Everything she said sounded like a command, as though she was not offering me a good evening, but telling me I was expected to have one whether I liked it or not. Like Tragedy, I took great pains to never acknowledge her commanding tone. We hoped it would bother her terribly to be treated with an unceremonial indifference. Diana obeyed the bark of her employer, and we were certain she expected the rest of the world to do the same.

“Hello Essence. Diana.” I replied casually, looking off to see if I could discover what it was that held her gaze, if anything. “How’s the show tonight?”

"Simply Gastly, Lane. There's some sophomoric local band playing some song about picking up girls at a fast food restaurant. It made me need a cigarette quite badly."

Whenever Essence said a band made her need a cigarette, it meant she took any excuse to leave the building. I could hear the music escaping from the open doors behind Diana. "Would you like one?" Diana, taking her employer's cue, quickly fished a cigarette out of her handbag and held it to me.

"I'm trying to quit." I took it anyway and stuck it behind my ear.

Essence smirked. "I've been trying to quit for more than forty years now, but the music doesn't get any better with time." To anyone passing she would not have looked as old as forty if not for her office-adult fashion. Most of us did not. Most of our kind would appear to be in our twenties with a few exceptions. Apparently I did. But who knows how old we really were? Not even we knew. If you had asked me what my origins were, or when I appeared on the earth, I could not have said. But I gave it little thought. Looking back never did us any good, and it was forbidden by our social customs.

"Is Tragedy inside?"

"Oh Yes. Our favorite pair of glamorous lovers is playing the second set. You know she wouldn't miss the chance to mock them in person." I looked at the poster behind her. Sure enough, Blood Sacrifice was the second band of the evening. If there was anything Tragedy enjoyed, it was an act that was easy to make fun of, and Blood Sacrifice was almost nothing else.

"I think I'll go join her. She's always better with an audience."

"Wonderful. I'll walk with you," Essence said as she flicked the remains of her cigarette into traffic.

"Will you be staying for the second set? I'm sure the girls will be expecting you to write a glowing review of their performance if they know you were here for it."

"I brought a whole pack of unfiltered just for their performance."

I laughed and held the door as she led me to the balcony, her solid heels clacking across the old, blue tile floor and up the metal rimmed stairs. Essence was one of very few of us who made noise when she walked. I enjoyed the arrogance she displayed with the announcing of her arrival anywhere to everyone.

Up the first flight of stairs a mass of humanity was filtering in the doors to the house, which was almost all standing room, and gathering for what would be a violent third and fourth set. The acts that came here encouraged fighting in the house and drug use on the stairs, which suited all of us very well.

As we ascended the next flight into the balcony Essence stopped and turned to me. "Lane, I'm getting a drink. Can I buy you one?"

"I don't want a drink."

"A beer? A gin? Something?"

"I don't need a drink."

"Don't you? Well, here's something equally shocking. I don't need to smoke. Now, what am I buying you?" I began to protest but she waved me off like I was a mosquito. "Never mind. You'll have a martini of some kind. Go make sure I have a seat."

And because I could not think of a reason to argue I did as she said.

"Darling!" Tragedy looked up at me from her seat and raised a gloved hand up to me.

"Tragedy," I said, kissing her hand. She was draped in silky black fabrics, leather, lace and chains. Her black hair had streaks of an intrepid purple in it. The streaks frequently changed, and her accessories would change with them. She

was a gothic piece of art like the wreck of an expensive Italian car- all leather and chrome and a beautifully painted finish. "The purple is a nice touch."

"I got sick of the blue. Too many people were trying to find a meaning in it. I haven't had so many stupid questions about my highlight color since the time I tried adding greens to my ensemble. Even Geo asked me if I was making an environmental statement. Honestly, if I wanted to make a statement I'd start wearing bumper stickers. Did I see you walk in with Essence?"

"She's buying me a drink." I tried to convey my lack of willing participation in Essence's generosity.

"How sweet. Did you start drinking?"

"No, but I've always meant to."

Tragedy glanced to the bar where Diana was watching Essence bark orders at the heretic behind the counter and then leaned in toward me. "You know what occurred to me recently? Her name is like half of a perfume. Essence. We just need to find an *of what*."

"You mean, Essence of ashtray?" I offered.

"Essence of verbal manslaughter, perhaps."

"Now, her writing has won awards," I reminded her.

"Yes. She has mentioned that."

"About a million times." We both noticed her walking toward us with a drink in her hand. Behind her, Diana carried my martini of some kind. "How's the opening band?" I asked as Essence set herself down.

"Amazing," said Tragedy, her compliment dripping in sarcasm. "They may rival Blood Sacrifice for sheer awfulness. Essence, you missed the song about the fast food chicken romance."

"Yes," she said, setting herself down gently with her drink balanced in her hand. "I missed it like I miss disco and a good sunburn." She noticed Tragedy's stare. "What?"

Tragedy smirked cautiously. "What is that you're drinking?"

"It's a Bloody Mary," answered Essence, unaware of Tragedy's subtext. "Why?"

Tragedy looked at me. "Subtle," she said. I laughed, but chose not to make eye contact with either of them at this time. Looking back at Essence she added, "I'm starting to see why you enjoy Blood Sacrifice so much. I think it's the *almost undetectable* nod to your alternative lifestyle."

"It has always been my favorite drink," Essence retorted curtly. "I see no reason that those of our kind have to avoid these normal cultural references out of a paranoid fear of revealing ourselves. I knew a fool once who refused to acknowledge Halloween out of fear of revealing himself to the alert eyes of the world. Honestly, half of the city is dressed as vampires and he's hiding in his closet trying to fit in. And while I would be hard pressed to find any living thing that would name Blood Sacrifice as their favorite band, I see nothing wrong with their overt use of the genre as long as it's played as a gimmick. It's not like they're wearing t-shirts that say "I'm a Vampire" on them."

"Actually," I interjected, "they plan to start doing that soon." They had told me so recently, though I was always cautious about believing them, even when they thought they were being sincere.

"Really?" exclaimed Tragedy. "That's great! Now we can call a Quiet Group on them and silence them for good."

"My dear," said Essence with a shake of her head, "there are some things we don't joke about." For Tragedy, this was not true, but she traded her reply for an insinuating smile. In the awkward lack of conversation that followed, Essence remembered the drink in her hand. She raised her glass and sipped in anticipation. She hummed her thoughtfulness as she tasted it.

She swallowed, and her shoulders drooped. "It's never as good as I remember it," she said to no one in particular.

It never was.

Perhaps we had lost the sense of taste- now our taste fitted only the blood on which we survived. Or perhaps it really was better once. Alcohol gave no pleasure in taste or sensation, but we continued to drink it when we could be seen so that our kind would blend into the background of humanity without seams. Some of us held distant memories of a pleasure enjoyed. Was it possible that we had once enjoyed the pleasures of humans? Essence believed that she had. The drink in her hand was no more than another accessory, as were her loud shoes and bulky jewelry. Still, she allowed herself the hope that it might be as good as she remembered. Somewhere in her memory she had enjoyed it, and so she continued to order it, hoping the pleasure she recalled in dim memory could be hers again.

Maybe the experience was once delightful and without disappointment, but pursue it as we may, it was allusive. We had no worry for money, permission, access, or even repercussions, and yet pleasures of every kind slipped through our fingers. Even the pleasure of a flavor other than blood. We could have any pleasure the world could offer. There were no restrictions on our lives. From greed to lust to vengeance, we could satiate ourselves with the pleasures of the world. Tragedy was desired, Geo was worshiped, Rage was respected, Skin was feared, and Essence was wealthy beyond any need she would ever have. Yet, in all our conversations, I never caught the hint that the hunt had yielded fulfillment.

We would occasionally give ourselves to the gluttony of a particular offering of the world to see if we could attain whatever it was that caused the humans to sacrifice at their altars. We saw men lose their families and careers for sex. We would use and consume prostitutes. We would see them destroy their bodies with drugs and alcohol. We would indulge or prey on those who had. We saw them let themselves be consumed with religion, so we became a

religion, the gods of this world, or the gods of hell to prey upon them.

Eventually the hunt would grow tired, and we would abandon one vein of pleasure for the only one that offered any gratification of our true desire- blood. Still, in our collective conscience was the idea that Essence admitted to, the idea that it once was good enough. And maybe once it had been, but if anything other than blood had offered us any pleasure it was a very long time ago. Stubbornly we pursued it, for what else were we to do? What was our purpose for existing if not the hunt of the allusive pleasure? Even our hunt for blood was the hunt for a pleasure that would finally, truly satisfy, or so we believed. For all of our stubbornness and arrogance, we were merely chasing shadows.

The band on the stage, which the majority ignored, was thanking the crowd for being there and told them to stick around for Blood Sacrifice. The light but enthusiastic response came mainly from young female voices.

"Blood Sacrifice, honestly," laughed Tragedy. "That any of our kind would publicly go by such a name begs for..." she looked at Essence, who was preparing to scold her again for her irreverent mentioning of the Quiet Groups. "Intervention. Well, you must admit that it's a bit... glaring."

"It's meant to be a historical reference," offered Diana. "We published an article about their recent self-titled EP, and they said it was a reference to the Aztec religious ceremonies involving human sacrifice."

Tragedy was incredulous. "Aztec? Are they meant to be an educational supplement? Will we be seeing their music on public television soon? Or in schools?"

Diana remained matter-of-fact, despite Tragedy's intentional sarcasm. "It comes from one of their first songs. It's about offering your heart to someone who simply puts a knife through it until all the life drains out of you. Metaphorically."

Tragedy rolled her eyes. "Right. Metaphorically."

"The metaphor doesn't really work for those like us," Diana continued. "For obvious reasons. It's just about placing yourself on the altar of a person you worship and giving everything you have until you're empty."

"Touching," sneered Tragedy. "I for one could use fewer epic poems about giving one's self to another and getting nothing back. I still have mine in my pocket."

"You wrote a poem?" I asked, surprised by the insinuation.

"No, I didn't write it," she snapped at me. "It was written for me." Tragedy saw the lack of comprehension on my face. "You were late in getting here, Lane. It was open mic night before the bands went on."

"Why would I want to come to open mic night?"

"You wouldn't. Normally, neither would I, but Nameless Freddy had asked me to come. He said it was important. And to be honest, I had nothing else to do."

Nameless Freddy had first come to The Club around four months before this particular night. He found some of our kind there, and Rage took him in, as he had taken in the rest of us.

Rage was a goodwill ambassador for our kind. He oversaw us, providing us with direction, connections to those like us or humans who can be of service, and in turn we are asked to do him favors. There was nothing official about his position. He was the most dominant personality among us, and we respected his powerful presence. He was a part owner of The Club, and we were welcome there. He did us favors and we did him favors in return.

Nameless Freddy got hooked up with a place to live, but he was unable to find a place within our social circles. He didn't know who he wanted to be. He didn't know what he wanted to be called. And he didn't have any idea where to look.

As our kind moves from place to place, we reinvent ourselves. Essence was someone else a few decades ago, with a different name and probably a different persona.

If we didn't change and move, eventually someone would notice that we didn't age. So we moved. Some years ago, in another city, I had called myself Blaze Pascal. I was an overnight DJ at a tiny radio station just outside of the heart of the city. It gave me the opportunity to have a life that kept me up all night and let me sleep away the daylight. As Lane, I vaguely remembered the plaid shirts and heavy boots I used to wear when I was Pascal. When I came here, I modified myself. I became Lane, an Emo rocker. For a while I had been in a band, but eventually I tired of the work and retired to a life of observation. Like many of our kind, I funded my life on the money I took from my prey or I had Rage pay the rent. With plenty of legitimate income and very little in the way of necessities, Rage always had plenty of money, and all it cost us was an occasional favor, and our unwavering, obedient loyalty.

Nameless Freddy came to us as Chain, and he tried to find a place in Skin's white supremacist entourage. It didn't take because it was not long before all involved, himself included, realized that he didn't innately differentiate between the races. All humans were the same to us, even to Skin who played the part well. A human was merely something to eat, and they all tasted the same on the inside. Their blood was red, no matter the color it was wrapped in. If you cut them, they will bleed. And if they could bleed, we would feed on them.

When that failed he called himself Darwin and tried to join the collection of poets and writers, but there too he failed to find a place. I was never sure if he was really rejected or if he simply perceived a lack of acceptance. In the few times I had talked to him, he didn't seem to know what acceptance would have looked like, only that he hadn't found it. I think if he had turned his attention outside of himself for

a while he would have found the same disconnection between most of us. There were perceived connections, but these were shallow and superficial, and often short lived. I think he simply never sat still long enough to observe this about those like us. He floated around us like a leaf on a flooded stream, never sure of his name. By the time he tried calling himself Finch, we had already been calling him Nameless Freddy.

There was always a certain hive mentality among our kind. We were an us versus them. We knew there were vastly fewer of those like us than there were of the humans. If there were a few thousand of us in the country I would have been greatly surprised, but of course none of us really knew. Even in the cities, to find a few hundred was rare.

Because of this, we felt the connection that comes with isolation. We also tried to think of ourselves as a group, a people. We were citizens of a secret nation. It was reinforced by the way we referred to ourselves as "Us," "Those like us," or "Our Kind." We like to talk as though we were ravens, a murder of the sleek, dark hunters of the sky, feeding on flesh.

When the humans left The Club in the very early hours of the morning, after the heretics had cleaned up and gone home, sometimes Rage would lecture us about our dependence on each other. He would preach to us our superiority over the prey we lived on, and the need we all had for each other as a pack of the greatest hunters of the world. In those moments, we all nodded in agreement. We were superior. We were the rightful rulers of this world, made so by our place on the food chain. We were the most evolved predators. We were the gods of this world. We were a murder of crows, dark, sleek, and feasting on flesh and blood.

I don't know if the others ever convinced themselves. Maybe they had, or maybe they simply learned to speak the jargon convincingly. I never did. I was not in the warm embrace of those like me as Rage orated nor of the earth as

Gaia had believed. I did not feel it. It was not there. Yes, the feathers matched, and maybe we were the same breed, but I was not part of a family. I was a murder of one.

Nameless Freddy got lost in his empty sky, searching for a murder in which to belong. Between those of our kind, there was a spoken ideal of community. There was the attempt at a hive mentality as we taught each other our propaganda. There was even the illusion of desire, even though we all knew that our only physical desire was for the blood of humans. There was little in terms of actual affection, and almost no talk of love. We simply did not believe it existed. It was not a facet of our existence. It was a part of the human experience that we used against them. What bonds we formed with those like us were shallow and short lived.

Eventually, everyone would move on. We all knew it.

Tragedy was different because, while she talked like the others, I began to see that she did not believe our propaganda. She knew we lied to ourselves and each other. While she had no truth to replace the lies, she still knew they were lies. She could see the inexplicable, esoteric void where others had placed their lies. They believed that they had built our propaganda into a doctrine, but she could see the emptiness. When we were alone, when she had no audience to play to, she had let her true feelings slip with unguarded words.

"I don't see the world Rage lives in," she had said to me. "He talks like he's founding a nation, with liberty and justice for all, but I see no promised land. He has no compass, and he has no map. And neither do any of us."

I found her uncertainty refreshing, and her unguarded personality more than fascinating. There was a layer of her that most would never see, and I had begun to see it because she allowed herself to stop hiding, as if sometimes she could forget that I was another person. As if

she could see being with me as being alone. As if, I feared, she felt I wasn't really there.

This was why she was so different. She was not just a two-faced play actor like so many of us, like Gaia/Geo, like Diana/Phoebe, like even Rage/Mr. Williams. She was layered. She had depth. Among the hive, she spoke our dialect, but she didn't look to our doctrine for direction.

She spoke our propaganda fluently, but uncertainty was her guiding light.

Because I knew this, I understood when Nameless Freddy had become drawn in by her. To any of us not staking a claim in Rage's beautiful new world, her uncertainty glowed like the warm hope of truth. She seemed, not like an island, but like an iceberg.

We knew she drifted, and we knew she was cold, but when you finally find a way out of the black, swirling waters, you cling to it.

Namesless Freddy simply didn't cling carefully, and there was nothing Tragedy hated as much as someone who wanted to be with her. He fluttered around her like a moth around a light bulb. All he could do was get close enough to smack his head against the glass wall. He would never touch her light. She was an artist of sarcasm as much as seduction, but there were tiny chinks in the armor where her light bled through. She set a bold public face and I never saw her falter, but alone she could be honest. Somehow, there is nothing as seductive as watching someone remove their armor. It was rare, but when the cover came off of her light, it was blinding.

As much as I hated the idea, I knew I was not the only one who had seen it. Somehow I knew he had too. Maybe she felt sorry for him. Maybe for a short time she had accepted him. Maybe she had simply forgotten that he was there, as she had with me. But to one so desperate to be accepted as Nameless Freddy, being given this glimpse into her must have been intoxicating. He made himself her slave.

He worshiped her as none had ever begun to worship Gaia. Tragedy felt his adoration. She was awash in his worship. And she had begun to hate him for it.

He wrote her poems. She would quote Shakespeare back to him.

"I would rather hear my dog bark at a crow than hear a man swear he loves me."

As a huntress she would often use seduction to draw in her prey. She had a certain respect for lust, for it was a desire like our desire for blood. We even called it blood-lust, and so we felt it was the one thing that made humans *like us*. When her prey would allow their emotions to be involved, when a man would say he loved her, make promises, ask for commitment, she would despise him bitterly. She hated the men who desired her, but the ones that claimed they loved her, she hated the most.

Nameless Freddy believed he loved her. She grew to hate him most of all.

And yet, I could not help but notice that, when invited here by him, she had come. He wrote her a poem, and she listened to it. I wondered if she was aware of her inconsistency.

She took the folded piece of paper out of her pocket and handed it to me with no ceremony. Handwritten, black pen.

"He read this tonight?" I asked as I scanned it.

"I was standing down on the floor, watching this train wreck," she said. "When I got here, I asked what was so freaking important. He said he had written a poem about me that would convey a decision he had made about us. I told him, 'There is no us! There never was an us! Why would I want to listen to another one of your stupid poems?' And he said, 'Because it will be the last one.' I said, 'For that I'll stay.' And he hopped up to the mic and read this."

It was called "Waiting for the Quiet Group." My instinct in reading it was to agree with Essence. There were

some things that should not be joked about. A Quiet Group was a dozen of our kind gathered for a single purpose- to destroy one of our kind because he had begun to call attention to our existence. When Rage warned one of us that we were "making too much noise," it meant we were not protecting the secret of our existence.

We were doing something that needed to be silenced so that no one would look at us and see what we really were. If we refused to stop, the last alternative was the Quiet Group. Their job was to force silence by destroying the source of the noise.

Essence read over my shoulder.

*"Vanity, all is vanity- I have nothing left to trust
I loved you without Hope, desired you without Lust
I'm just your bloodless lover, like a hundred men before
Another heart that's drained of life, a body on the floor
No more will you hear me, will I answer when you call
A Quiet Group of demons comes to chop me like a tree
And silent I will fall until I won't be heard at all
Till my body lies in ashes and there's nothing left of me.
My comfort is not seeing when the silence comes for you For
someday soon you'll join me and there's nothing I can do
The gods of hell must understand before it is too late*

*Consider this my warning, for you won't have long to wait
My final masterpiece will be your picture on the wall
While demons that surround you are all busy with debating
I'll bathe us all in blood- like a red rain- like a flood
I'll be waiting for the Quiet Group-
Just tell them I'll be waiting."*

His meaning had not been hard to guess, but how serious was he? I hoped he was trying to be shocking. I hoped he would simply fade into another city and this poem was only a farewell. But what if it wasn't?

"Was Rage here for this?" I handed the poem back to Tragedy.

"Rage showed up just after Nameless Freddy left," she said, putting the poem back into her pocket. "I guess he hates the open mic night too."

"Surely you told him..." Essence began.

"Yes," Tragedy interrupted. "I showed it to Rage as soon as he got here. He said he was looking into it and that was the last I saw of him. He's probably in his office making phone calls."

"Well, I wouldn't worry dear," said Essence. "I'm sure the boy won't do anything rash."

"Who's worried?" said Tragedy a bit defensively. "If he winds up on the wrong end of Rage's wrath, that will be no one's fault but his own."

"I'm just concerned that you would blame yourself as the object of his love and poems," said Essence. I wasn't sure if she had intended it to be confrontational, but it was.

Tragedy uncharacteristically ignored it, and instead opted to quote some Shakespeare. "Love is a smoke and is made with the fume of sighs." She took a moment to get back into character and turned to me. "Speaking of love, Lane, how did your date with the Tall Girl go?"

I had just gotten to the point where I was not afraid it would come up. It blindsided me for a moment and my stomach sank as I tried to control my emotions. "It was everything I thought it would be. Candles, wine, light jazz."

"You don't sound pleased, Lane," said Essence. "Did it not go well?"

I pretended to care what was happening on stage while I looked for my words. "It was the romance novel cliché I live for. I for one can never get enough of... light jazz." Essence looked at me. "What?" I asked.

"You didn't answer my question. Did it not go well?"

"Yes, Lane," added Tragedy, enthusiastic to be talking about someone else's misery. "We want juicy details. Did you, Consummate your relationship?"

Consummate was the word we used in public for feeding. "Did you seal the deal?" she added, following the cultural metaphor.

"Oh, Tragedy, don't be crass," chided Essence. "Let him talk."

"Yes," I replied reluctantly. "We consummated the relationship. It just wasn't... very satisfying."

"Oh," moaned Tragedy in mock sorrow. "I thought she might have been, the one." She leaned in closely and whispered loudly, "Your perfect prey."

I laughed bitterly. "No, not the perfect one. Far from it."

The perfect prey. More a metaphor for the ideal than anything we believed to be real, The Perfect Prey was that one drink of blood that would be so good that it would satiate the thirst for blood completely. It was the one that made you never want another, so of course we likened it to the human ideal for a mate. The way they talked of a lover was very similar to the way we talked of the perfect prey. In public settings we would use the same language. The One. My one desire.

Sometimes one of us might be so enthralled with their hunted prey, the smell of their skin, the promise of their blood that they would use this language, almost certain that they had found the one that would remove from them the desire to need another prey. In the end, we and the humans were usually the same. They would taste the consummation of their desire, and their dreams would shatter and die. The difference was, our prey rarely lived to be the dream of another.

"What could have gone wrong?" mused Essence. I didn't like her tone, and I certainly didn't want to talk about it,

especially the way it had ended. "She seemed so smitten by you from the sound of it."

"Yes, exactly the problem," I spit at her. "Smitten. Some of these fools are so full of love songs that they go from being the prey to trying to trap you. I don't mind the lust. We can mutually desire to consume each other. I can respect that. This girl probably wanted to move in with me."

"She didn't propose, did she?" asked Tragedy, only half serious.

"Yes," I lied. "Got down on one knee and everything, but I hated the ring."

Tragedy smiled at my lie. "Always a bridesmaid, never a bride."

"Gastly," said Essence. "Marriage, love, the whole thing. They own each other like pets."

"Still," added Tragedy, "Desire can be a useful tool of the hunt."

"Of course my dear, but that doesn't make it any less pathetic. Their kind is so weak. They are slaves to a dozen different desires. If it's not sex or love it's food or drugs or sleep. We have only one need, one desire which beautifully combines them all into one clear and simple motivation."

"One which controls us more than all of theirs combined," I observed. "I've seen them choose to ignore their desires. I don't know that we can ignore our thirst."

"Just because we smell it doesn't mean we have to drink it," Essence chided. "We can walk away when we have to."

This was true, but I never knew it to be so without a public place with too many witnesses and the threat of a Quiet Group if our self-control failed. Somehow, I didn't see self-control rooted in the fear of oblivion to be true self-control.

"They are the weakest of animals," she continued, irritated at my insolence. "Killing them is like crushing a

moth. I've taken a bullet to the chest and all it did was slow me down."

"But it did slow you down," I noted. "Two bullets would slow you down even more. How many before you stopped moving all together?"

Essence glared at me. Then she grabbed the drink she had bought me and tossed it in my face. Without another word she headed out to have another cigarette. Diana quickly followed.

"Nice one, Lane," said Tragedy in a smooth blend of sincerity and sarcasm. "There are few pleasures in life as comforting as seeing a woman who takes herself that seriously being made that angry."

I looked at the puddles dripping off my tie. "Glad I could make your day."

The angst-filled, brooding, dark sound of Blood Sacrifice began to the heartfelt cheers of part of the audience. Their wall of sound filled the room as the two lead vocalists walked to the microphones and swayed, trancelike, to the music. They were two of our kind, and they called themselves Magenta and Crimson.

Because they were musicians, they didn't feel the need for real names, and so didn't have any alternatives to their stage names.

Tragedy and I had created nicknames for them. We called them Thing One and Thing Two.



Magenta (Thing one) had flat, dark hair and a medium build. What she lacked in talent she made up for with too much eye makeup and a wardrobe that looked like she had robbed a thrift store. She was mass-produced plastics and anything shiny with touches of silk, satin, and glass.

Crimson (Two-ey) was thinner and more elegant, like a Victorian doll. Her skin was porcelain and her long brown hair cascaded from her high forehead down around her in gentle curls. She dressed like a girl who had been transposed from the 1880s to the 1980s without any warning. She was ribbons and lace, with the kind of lips painters put on pictures of baby angels.



Rage had taken a liking to Crimson. Perhaps he liked the way men reacted to her. Perhaps he saw her the way Essence saw a Bloody Mary, as a distantly remembered pleasure which might be recaptured. Maybe he liked her for the reason Tragedy and I appreciated their relationship- it made Magenta very unhappy.

The girls would sing their love songs to each other as much as to the audience. They were affectionate to each other on stage and off, unless Rage was with them. Rage had adopted Two-ey like a stray cat, and she purred for him like the same. The two things would go from the stage, where they would sing their last tormented, unrequited love ballad into the same microphone, hip to hip and face to face, arms wrapped around the other's waist, leaning back to keep the proper distance from the mic, looking like a capital letter Y, to the green room where Crimson would purr and circle Rage, and he would stroke her hair and call her pet names. He only stopped short of giving her a bowl of milk.

Because Magenta and Crimson were not truly lovers, in the physical sense, it did not matter to Magenta that Crimson and Rage probably were not either. What mattered was that Magenta felt that she owned Crimson. Her jealousy was openly transparent. On more than one occasion, Tragedy suggested to her that she change her name to some

variation on Green instead of red. I would laugh, and Magenta would show no indication that she had understood the joke. The only thing we were unsure of is if she was jealous simply because she wanted to own Crimson alone, or that she also wanted to be owned by Rage. It was more than a little profitable to be Rage's pet.

Crimson and Magenta played their stage show as though they were lovers. Lesbians made for popular stage personas in the music world. It was a hook that took the pressure off of their music to be any good. Of course, as our kind had no innate sexual desires, they were not really lovers, but they knew how to play the part to the audience, many of whom were actual lesbians. The girls had found a niche audience among lonely, bitter lesbians who felt isolated and alone. They wrote their lyrics and their stage banter to target the hearts of these lost and hurting girls.

I could see them in the house during the shows, the girl who had no connection with her parents. She hasn't had a pleasant conversation with her parents in years. Her mother's voice is made of criticism and rejection, and she can hear it in her head as she tries to sleep. Her father is absent or simply has no interest in her. He only wanted a son. Maybe her brother molested her when they were younger, or an uncle or a cousin. The scars are deep, and buried right under her skin.

Because of her attraction to other girls, she feels isolated from the norm and rejected by most of her peers, even though she hides it from them. She can feel them reject her even though they don't know. Out of this sense of isolation, she begins to identify herself more with her sexual attraction than with any other facet of her personality. Most of the other facets of her have been dulled by time and neglect until she is unsure of most of them anyway. Maybe she is addicted to drugs and alcohol which she uses as medication, to forget and to stop feeling. Her life is lost in the

ocean at night, swimming against each wave that falls on her, waiting without hope for a ship to pass and save her.

And then, this girl discovers Blood Sacrifice.

Their lyrics speak to her. They speak of her heart, her hurt, her desire to be desired by someone beautiful. She comes to the show, and there, below the balcony where Tragedy and I are mocking them, she sees two girls who have already seen into her soul. They tell her story in their songs. They are the strength she wishes she could possess. They are the beauty that she can never find in herself. They become for her an idol of perfection. They are the ship passing in the night, and she gets up the desperate courage to shout for help. Out of lonely desperation, she writes a letter to them, telling her whole story. She thanks them for understanding. She admits her attraction to them, physically and emotionally. She feels she is reaching out for love to the two people she feels might be willing to reach back. Eventually, they do reach back. She has written a love letter, seeking salvation, like a message in a bottle. To Crimson and Magenta, it is the perfect obituary for a girl who won't be missed.

They invite her to a show. They invite her backstage. They invite her back to their place. It is she who is truly the blood sacrifice. She is never heard from again.

And the band plays on.

We leaned over the railing and scanned the audience, trying to guess which of the girls in the crowd would be the next blood sacrifice. I pointed to a girl close to the stage.

"That one. She has Blood Sacrifice written all over her."

"Well, yeah," replied Tragedy, "She's wearing their shirt. Are they really going to make vampire shirts?"

"That's what they said," I told her. "But, of course, they're liars."

"No kidding. What about that one? With the real buzzed hair and too many ear rings?"

"No way," I said. "Not their type."

"She's perfect," argued Tragedy. "She's butch, and she totally knows their music. She's singing along with all of it. A real fan girl."

"She's in the front row," I pointed out. "And she's not alone. She was talking to the girl next to her before they started playing."

"Maybe they just met in the crowd."

"They don't go for the outgoing type. Any girl who would either talk to a stranger in the crowd or be bold enough to stand in the front row is not their next pick. The girl we're looking for will want to be in the front row, but won't be brave enough to be that close to them. She will know all of the words, but won't be extroverted enough to stand there and sing along where others can hear her. Most likely she'll have bangs that cover her eyes, and will also be a little underweight or a little overweight. Either way, she'll dress to hide it."

"What, are you on their mailing list? How do you know all of this?"

I shrugged. "I'm just observant. Watch the girls they take backstage, or the ones they talk to the most at the merch table. You'll see I'm right."

Tragedy got a devilish smile on her face. "OK, smart guy. Let's see if you can guess which one of tonight's patron's I'd like to take home tonight."

I looked into her eyes to see if I could find a clue to her ever-diverse tastes. My instinct was to find a guy who was overtly masculine. Open shirt, no shirt, too many tattoos, maybe a lot of jewelry. She liked a guy who was willing to use violence as his main argument. She liked the guys who beat their girlfriends or wives. She would seduce them, aggravate them, and then let them hit her a few times. She would play the part of the victim for just a moment, and then she would

turn on them like a wounded animal. She enjoyed giving pain to those who gave pain. She enjoyed beating down a bully until he was reduced to tears and begging. She enjoyed the fear of those who enjoy the fear of others. Like me, she enjoyed feeling vindicated as she punished the guilty.

I was ready to make a few guesses, but our game was cut short by the approach of Rage. His presence could be felt as he entered a room, like a sudden change in the temperature. Like Essence, he looked older than we did. One might guess him to be in his 40's. Like Essence he often wore sunglasses, and like me he most often wore a simple black suit designed to not draw any attention to the wearer. Rage didn't need a flashy outfit to draw attention to himself.

Rage stopped near the top of the stairs, by the hallway that leads to the bathrooms and phones. He pointed at me and motioned me over. Rage had two settings, "orator" and "speak softly and carry a big stick." He was clutching his metaphorical stick. For just a moment I thought he might have been sent by Essence to scold me for the way I talked to her. Thankfully, Rage had little respect for her outside of the utilitarian purposes she served.

I approached cautiously, trying to look casual and nonchalant. "Rage. What's going on, man?"

"She told you about Nameless Freddy?" He nodded toward Tragedy.

"The poem? Yeah, she showed it to me."

"We've found him. We don't even have to chase him. He's waiting for us."

"Waiting for us?" I didn't know what that meant. Was he going to fight us? Was it a trap? Were there more of us with him waiting for us also?

He shook his head. "I don't like it either. He knows he's been spotted. There will be police cars there by the time we arrive. We have to get there before the press. You're going to be part of a Quiet Group tonight, Lane. Can you handle that?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "I can handle it."

"You've never been part of a Quiet Group before. It's important that we work together. Are you going to be able to follow my command the moment I give it? I only ask because, I was never sure if you and he were friends. Is this going to be a conflict of interest for you?"

I snuck a glance at Tragedy. She was scanning the floor again, trying not to pay attention to our conversation. "No. I'll do what you tell me."

"Be out back in three minutes. I'll have what you need." And with that Rage departed silently into the crowds that were casually wandering up and down the stairs.

A Quiet Group.

I'd never been part of one before. They were rare. Or maybe they weren't and we simply didn't get told. Our kind disappeared all the time, for all kinds of reasons. We moved on. We created new lives. We got too close to being blamed for something- left a witness, a surveillance video. Sometimes we just got sick of being where we were or who we were.

But sometimes someone would snap. To kill a human, you have to have some kind of hate for them. If we grew to respect them, we couldn't feed on them. We would get conflicted. Sometimes this would manifest with one of us deciding to become one of them. We called them Hermits. A Hermit left the city where the ability to hide in the millions of people made it easy to feed without anyone being missed. They would take up residence in a small town where everyone was always accounted for. They would try to blend in, but of course they could not work out in the fields all day under the sun. They would be reclusive members of a small culture.

Even after turning their backs on the lifestyle, they were still one of us, but could no longer live among us. They had to be hermits. They hid from the humans, and for other reasons, they hid from us. Once they had chosen to be

human, a hermit could not live among our kind. Our hate for the humans would too easily overflow into hate for them as well.

Hate was an accepted part of our way, but it had to be controlled. Skin, for instance, was a leader in a militant white supremacist group. He channeled his hate into a form of husbandry. He viewed the humans as a biology experiment, and by instigating racism, he felt he was ushering the next stage in evolution. His goal was the conflict between the races. He and a black member of our kind, called Newton, were working together across the city to someday start a race war. The survivors, he reasoned, would be a better breed of human. His hate for them was channeled into a form of science. It was controlled, like an intentional brush fire.

We used hate like nations used their flags and patriotic songs. It united us. But hate is like cancer. There remains the risk that hate can burn out of control. It spreads and it grows and it consumes. Some like to think it is like a lust whose fire would die down once it consumed its object. This was never the case. It was a fire that only grew hotter the more it consumed, until it grew into madness.

When one of our kind became consumed by his hate for the humans, it made it much easier to feed. They didn't need a reason. They didn't need to justify it. They didn't have to pretend their prey was guilty of some sin worthy of their death. They would condemn the humans simply for being human. Eventually they would begin to enjoy killing them. They would feed more often.

For a vampire of this kind, we had borrowed a name from the Mafia- we'd say they had a bloody mouth. Only, our use of the word was more literal. What we meant was, they would kill so often that there was always blood in their mouth. They would become reckless, understanding how hard it was for the humans to stop us even if they became aware of our existence. I had heard of some who dropped all

pretenses and attacked their prey publicly, taking bullets from the police and calling for more.

This was a threat to the rest of our kind. At this point they were usually beyond reasoning. They had become a predatory animal driven by hate and blood lust. As soon as we knew this was the case, the Quiet Group was no longer an option. The Quiet Group would come as soon as they heard the noise.

A dozen or so of our kind would surround the offending vampire. They would cut him down like a tree, with axes. The few stories I had heard were unsettling to say the least. One of our kind being cut to pieces by his own kind, thrashing and screaming like a diseased animal, turning on his own kind in an attempt to either survive, or simply take as many of them with him as possible. I could not picture Nameless Freddy like that. I did not see the mindless hate and animalistic blood-lust I pictured in those scenes. I did not know what we would find, but I was not looking forward to it.

I joined Tragedy on the railing. "I have to go."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" she asked with a smirk. She knew better.

Plenty of times she had scolded me for being overly cautious.

"It's a Quiet Group."

"Really? Is it for Things One and Two?" she said, enthusiastically, motioning to the stage. "Is it time to break up the band?"

I knew she knew better. I waited until her smile faded. I think she was slightly taken aback by the fact that I did not smile at her joke. There were some things we did not joke about, more so now than a few minutes back. "It's Nameless Freddy. They found him. He's waiting for us. I guess he meant what he said."

She searched for a witty reply and found none. "Oh, yeah. Well, yeah. He said... OK. That's what he gets for writing bad poems, right? Well...I'll see you when you get back." She turned back to the stage and pretended to watch.

I turned and began to walk away. Only a few steps later I heard my name.

"Lane." Tragedy walked over to me. She looked to the stairway where Rage had long since walked away. It was safe. Aside from the humans, we were alone. As she searched for the words, she placed a hand on my tie, pretending to fuss over the stain Essence had left on it with her dramatic departure. She leaned in close and spoke in hushed tones.

"Lane. Just... I know you have to do this, but, if you can..." she paused to find the words. She looked up into my eyes with an expression I had rarely seen. One I was certain almost no one had ever seen. Under the roar of the music, it was barely a whisper.

"Promise me you'll make sure they do it quickly."

I nodded, turned, and walked away.

*For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even the memory of them is forgotten.
Their love, their hate and their jealousy
have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that happens under the sun.*

Ecclesiastes 9:5-6

CHAPTER FIVE

THE QUIET GROUP

When I reached the parking in the back of the Unorthodox, Rage was standing at his long, black, American car with the engine running. I was about to apologize for being late until Skin came out of the club behind me. Skin was a thin, short man who was one of few of our kind who looked almost as old as Rage, but it was an age that looked more as if it had been from hard weathering as from the passing of time. Skin liked to live hard. He had no interest in slinking through shadows and letting the world simply pass around him as though he was a stone in a river.

I watched him start a fight in a small, dirty townie bar once with a big drunk (the kind that gets angrier the more he drinks). The guy was twice Skin's size, which was not too hard considering Skin's small frame. Skin just mouthed off a

little- challenged the guys manhood and moxie. The guy beat on Skin's face with his fists and a bottle until Skin was covered in blood. Then, Skin laughed, a wicked and building laugh just short of a scream, and the guy realized too late that the only blood was his own. He looked down at his bloody hands in confusion, and they both disappeared out the back door. By the time the cops showed up, Skin had fed on him and stuffed what was left in a dumpster.



In his public life as the head of a local gang of white supremacists, he wore glasses and published under the name Helmut Weisskampf. The name well matched his white supremacist diatribe, as it meant 'White Struggle.'

He burst out of the door followed by the last roar of Blood Sacrifice as they ended their short set. The sound was muted by the heavy metal door swinging closed behind him.

"Right," Skin said to Rage, ignoring my presence. "They'll be there when we arrive." I noticed he was carrying a guitar case which, held next to his short and wiry frame, looked like the case for a bass guitar. While this was the norm for anyone coming and going through this entrance, it was unusual for Skin, since he didn't play. He tossed it in the back seat and hopped in next to Rage. I hopped in next to the case. Skin slammed his door and said, "One of them is for you."

When I didn't answer, he turned around. "That comment was for you, Lane."

"One of them is for me?" If there had been a context, I had missed it.

Skin cocked an eyebrow and took off his fedora. With his hat, he pointed at the guitar case. "One of them. The case is full of axes."

I muttered an "Oh," and looked out the window to see if I could figure out where we were headed.

Skin took off his glasses, placed them in his hat, and set them on the floor in front of him. "Mr. Williams tells me this is your first Quiet Group. That right?"

"That's right." I was noticing that we were headed to the north.

"First one's the hardest. I ain't done a lot, if you catch my meaning. I remember my first though. Here's all you need to know. Hold your axe tight. We don't want to hand one over to 'im. Keep an eye out for anything. They don't give you much warning. Mr. Williams, here, is the man calling the shots. When he says go, you go. Aim for the trunk. Rage and I will take his head off. If you can, take off an arm. Reduces the chance of a fight. Don' let the sound get to you. Tune it out. Swing this thing," he indicated the guitar case again, "pull it back out and swing again till Rage says stop. Then, we put all the pieces in a nice little pile and start a cozy fire to ash them by. You got all that?"

I nodded. My thoughts were blurring past me much like the view out the window.

I'd never killed one of my own kind before. I'd never even seen it done. I've always heard you never forget your first, but I couldn't remember ever having heard that it was something anyone wanted to remember.

Rage drove like a man who could disregard not only the rules of the road, but the consideration for his own safety. Both were probably true. I could not conceive of the car crash it would take to kill him. As for the rules of the

road, he had enough influence in the police force in this city that he could disregard most laws, let alone the speed limit. We headed into the upper class neighborhoods north of the city, full of starter castles and well manicured trees. We drove through several divisions of long, three story houses, all set back on the lawn to allow for curving driveways leading up to three and four car garages. Some of the houses were on enough land that they were surrounded by walls and iron gates. Unlike the houses that surrounded the Unorthodox, or my apartment, these were all brick and stone in browns, whites, and tans, and occupying enough land for four of those colorful, vinyl sided houses.

While we were still more than half a mile off, I could smell smoke. A quick look around showed the faint glow of fire before us, flickering off the low laying clouds. Somewhere in the distance behind us I could hear the fire trucks approaching. We would beat them to the scene.

The block was ablaze. I counted five houses burning, and each one had two or more police cars in front of it. In the flickering light of each lawn was a small huddled group consisting of several police officers and what had to be the families from the burning houses. The women and children were being escorted quickly away from the fires, while the men were arguing with the police for the right to stay and defend their homes. I could hear one police officer shouting at a man that his garden hose would do little good, trying to order him off of his own lawn. In the center of the street was a house that was not on fire, but it was set ablaze by the light thrown on it by half a dozen police cars. One of them had a smashed windshield and was dripping fire.

"A Molotove Cocktail," I observed. "Is that your recipe, Skin?"

"Probably," he said. "I did teach him a good recipe. By the look of this neighborhood, he's used up all their stores of gasoline and vodka."

The car came to a sudden stop. Skin grabbed the case and headed toward the house in the shadows of the wall of hedges that lined the neighbor's driveway. Rage walked to the line of police cars. I lingered to watch him.

One of the police ran to stop him from approaching, but before he could give a full sentence worth of orders, Mr. Williams was asking for his superior officer. The sergeant approached, addressed him as Mr. Williams, and began to explain where the superior officer was. He never got a chance to finish.

"It doesn't matter," Rage was barking at them. "When he gets here, tell him to wait for me. In the meantime, my men and I are going in. Your job will be to keep the press away, and to keep all of these people from talking to the press. You got that? Make sure the fire trucks focus on the other houses first. This house is either on fire or soon will be. It will not be put out until I give the order. Is that clear?"

"Yeah, we'll keep the press off, but... You want us to let the house burn? Mr. Williams, if you're inside..." the officer was again unable to finish a thought.

"No water touches this house until I come out and give the order. That's all you need to know. Get to it."

"Yes, Mr. Williams." The officer quickly went to relaying orders and trying to explain that he had no explanation. Rage simply walked toward the house. Skin followed, with me close on his heels.

We hopped the short brick wall that separated the yards and walked toward the back of the four car garage. As we approached the house, I could see nine more of our kind in the shadows of the back yard. They were moving silently toward Rage, each holding an axe just below the blade. Rage gestured at them and made a motion toward the far side of the property. Half of them quickly disappeared around the other side of the house. Several of them joined us and stood behind Skin and myself. Skin already had the case open. He thrust an axe at me, and I grasped it with both hands. He

handed one to Rage, and took two for himself. I held the axe close to my chest and waited for instructions. None would come.

Rage kicked the locked door off of its hinges. At the same time I heard glass shattering through the house. The others had entered. No sooner had the door settled in the foyer than we all smelled it- blood. Fresh blood. And lots of it. I fought off my instincts. The smell made me crave a feeding, and my mind and my will faltered slightly. It was like vertigo. For a second I forgot the axe in my hand and the job we had come to do. The thirst called to me, and I closed my eyes as it drowned out the rest of the world.

There was a sudden impact in my side and my eyes popped open. Skin had jabbed me with the handle of his axe and when I opened my eyes he was staring at me with a dark look. "Stay focused," he whispered. I nodded and strengthened my grip on the axe handle.

Rage walked into the house as though he knew where he was going. We followed. Rage stopped at the entrance of the main living room. The walls were smeared in blood. On one wall was a portrait of a woman. I did a double take. Not just a woman.

It was Tragedy, painted in blood.

Standing before it, admiring his own work, was Nameless Freddy. He wore only boots and a pair of black jeans, his hair matted to his head. He was soaked, covered head to toe in blood. Though we were quickly filtering into the room and surrounding him, he stood motionless, hands behind his back, like a man in an art gallery. I was waiting for him to explode into violent attack, or maybe to run and force us to pursue him. Somewhere outside the sound of a fire truck arriving reached its apex. There was shouting and the sounds of hurried activities. The sounds outside were a ticking clock. We all knew that we had little time. He must have known it too, yet he was standing still, as if we had

come by invitation and he was just waiting for us to join him. Perhaps that is how he felt. In a sense, it was the truth.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" He looked to me as he said it, as though he expected me. He looked at me as though I was the only other person in the room. "I was hoping Rage would bring you, Lane. I thought you would be able to appreciate my work more than the others. Though, by the fact that you're all here, I've finally written a poem that has gained an audience." His voice didn't carry hate, or madness, or anything else I would have expected. He was calm. His words were the slow burning of a fuse, but when did the bomb go off? I held my axe to my chest and continued talking, as if the conversation could defuse the situation.

"I read your poem," I said to him. The others encroached like spreading shadows, silhouettes against the windows. "You got our attention, but you can't want this."

"Can't I? Why would I not want oblivion? Can it be worse than this existence? You will know soon enough. Oblivion is already coming for you. I would stay to watch it take you, but there is one thing I cannot bear to watch destroyed." He looked up at her face, painted in dark red on the wall. "The look on your face tells me you don't yet know what I'm referring to. Or who. Maybe you should read my poem again. I think you missed my subtext."

I could not respond. What did he mean? Was he trying to tell me he thought I would want to be destroyed someday like he did? Or was this the countdown to his explosion? Had he chosen me to die with him when the Quiet Group finally came to the destruction for which it had come together? He was jealous of the attention Tragedy gave me. If there was anyone he had cause to hate, it was me. I imagined him turning suddenly from this conversation into a violent attack to not only die, but to take me with him. I gripped my axe tighter and held it close like a shield.

"What do I want Lane?" His question snapped me out of my thoughts. Still he stared at me as though the others weren't there.

What did he want? I thought it was obvious, and I could think of no reason to lie.

"You want to find some place where you belong. You want to be noticed. You want some kind of home. We can still find that. Rage has connections. He can cover this up." I glanced down at my axe, then back to him. I lowered my weapon. "It doesn't have to end this way." I was afraid to see the look on Rage's face at this point, so I kept my eyes locked on Nameless Freddy. I could only imagine that Rage was a moment from ordering me to be silent, but for now he stood motionless.

Nameless Freddy looked back at his portrait. "You know what I want, do you Lane? You're very observant, but you have missed a few things. You have missed the way she talks about you when you are not around."

He must have seen an expression flash across my face, for his eyebrows went up as though something had pleased him. "Did you think you were immune? Did you think Tragedy would have no criticisms of you behind your back? I think you did. I think you imagined you were special to her." I made no reply.

He turned toward me. "I've seen how you look at her. You look at her the way I did. Some day she will notice, and she will hate you for it, the way she hates me. The difference between us, Lane, is that I already know what I want, and I know I can never have it. You're still learning that. But there is one thing I do get to have. I get to be noticed by even the great Mr. Williams."

He looked at Rage, who made no motion. He then peered at the rest of the ring around him. "No. More than that. I have been able to control you. I have brought you here-against your will. You had no choice. For once, everyone must do as I arranged. You have come to me. You have

noticed me. You must focus your attention on me and me alone.”

“There are other ways,” I began to argue.

He did not let me finish. “What is my name, Lane?” he demanded. “TELL ME MY NAME!”

I shook my head. “Darwin? Finch? I don’t know. We call you Nameless Freddy.”

“Nameless.” He smiled an ironic smile as he glanced casually around the room, the sudden explosion over as soon as it had started. Or maybe it wasn’t anger. Maybe it was desperation. As I thought back on it, I couldn’t decide if he was demanding or pleading. But as I gripped the axe, tighter when he said it, that was all that mattered in the moment.

“Nameless,” he said again. “So I am. At least you will have some way of telling this story when I’m gone. I am nameless, but I am noticed. I am an artist with a command audience. I am the director of these events.” He gestured widely at the audience which circled him. “This is what I wanted. This is what I want, and nothing more.” He looked back at the wall. “Almost.” It was a whisper, meant only for himself.

“In this moment, I am not powerless or obscure. I even have a name that you all know me by. You will all finally know my name.” His voiced trailed off and he was silent for a moment. I looked to Rage, but Rage’s eyes were locked on the bloody orator in the center of the room. He was right. He had the attention of even the great Mr. Williams.

“I will not go back,” he continued. “If you do not finish it, I will not be quiet. The word Vampire will be on the cover of every newspaper in the city by morning if I am still alive. I will have attention or I will have oblivion.” He locked eyes with Rage. “I have brought you here for a purpose. It is time you fulfilled that purpose.”

He returned to the casual pose he had when we entered and stared at Tragedy’s face. “Do it.”

Rage had not given the order. Nameless Freddy had given the order, but when we looked to Rage, he nodded his approval.

We obeyed.

The Quiet Group sprang into life and lunged toward their target like a dozen cobras striking for the same prey. A dozen axes cut through the air. For just a moment there was silence between the sounds surrounding the house. Then the room was filled with the sound of metal being driven into wood. The Group lived up to its name. There were no battle cries. There was no name calling or threats or even utterances of physical strain. The Quiet Group moved silently, effortlessly. It was like he was being cut down by a room full of shadows. The percussive sound of the axes hitting their target punctuated the air. Then it was covered by the sound of his voice screaming in pain and fear.

The sound was not the triumph of only a moment ago. There was no underlying laugh of victory. There was only suffering and despair. Perhaps he hadn't realized what it would really be like. Death can seem so romantic when it's a thought, but in the real here and now, the romance is replaced by suffering. For a moment, Nameless Freddy screamed in pain, shrieking his suffering and despair. His hopeless cries were silenced by the sound of Skin's blade clanging against Rage's somewhere in the middle of his throat.

In less than half a dozen swings of my weapon, we were finished and he was no more.

"That's enough." It was Rage's voice, but somehow distant from the event before me. Pieces, like a splintered mannequin sat before me in a pile, now unrecognizable. The feeling of vertigo had returned, but for a very different reason. I was not distracted, but I could not reconcile the reality before me. Nameless Freddy was gone, and I held a weapon of his death. I closed my eyes tightly and flicked the internal switch that silenced my emotions. When I opened

my eyes, Skin was already starting a fire underneath the splintered pieces with one of his recipes. He had brought a flask of it in the pocket of his long coat. The floor under the killing was wet, but not with blood. It was the water draining out of Nameless Freddy's body, as from a cracked cup. He hadn't fed on his victims, but only used them for her portrait.

Around me the Quiet Group was silent, waiting for Rage to give a command. He said nothing, but swung his axe into the ground and left it there. We did the same. We buried them into the floor, creating a makeshift fire pit for the remains of Nameless Freddy. Somewhere in the house were the victims who had supplied the media for his portrait in the first place. Their remains, like his, would be destroyed in the fire. It was the only thing we would leave behind- a circle of a dozen axes around a pile of ash. Only our kind could possibly know what it meant.

As the fire exploded into life, Skin stood and backed away from it. The fire blazed hotly and began to spread across the floor, riding the liquid it was consuming as everything around it caught fire as well.

Rage turned his attention to the vampires around him. "We're done here. Don't be seen." And they were gone. He looked to us. "You too. Go over the wall in the back. Head south four blocks. I'll pick you up there."

With that, he turned and walked down the hall toward the front door. By the time he was through the door, the living room was engulfed in flame and spreading quickly. We hopped the wall in the back and began walking south.

"Isn't Rage taking an awful chance walking out the front door?" I asked. It seemed very unwise to be seen anywhere near that place. I assumed that someone would try and arrest him immediately. What else would a cop do when he sees a man splattered in blood walking out of a burning house?

"Rage doesn't really take chances," replied Skin. "He's going to tell the cops what happened, and what to tell the press."

"You mean, he's inventing a cover story?"

"No, genius, he's going to tell them that a dozen vampires just whacked one of their own. Then he'll show them his Vampire Membership card."

"Alright," I said. "I deserve that. I just didn't know he had that kind of influence."

"Rage has influence," Skin said with certainty. "He's been building that influence for many years now. I suspect there are a few unrelated but very powerful people to whom he has revealed enough of the truth to frighten them into being cooperative."

"The real truth? Doesn't that get you on the wrong end of a Quiet Group?"

"Nah. Cuz he's real quiet about it. Look, if you're the chief of police and some dude says he's a vampire and you do what he says or he'll drink you dry, at first you think he's wacky in the head. But then maybe he proves it. Maybe takes a bullet to the chest and doesn't even bleed. What do you do? Do you call your cop buddies and say, hey! We gotta go get Dracula! Or do you do like the cops in Chicago gangland always done and just cooperate so you and your loved ones don't disappear in nasty ways?"

Suddenly some of Rage's lectures on our ability to control our world started to make a bit more sense. It would be a balancing act, but one I felt Rage could do without falling off. He was keeping us a secret while betraying our existence. He was weaving his truth with his lies. He was a true city politician.

In a few minutes we spotted the headlights of Rage's car approaching. I figured I wouldn't want to talk in the car. I was still afraid that I talked too much in the house, and that Rage was on the verge of letting me have it.

"Skin? Was this what it's usually like? The Quiet Groups I mean."

"Nah. Never seen anything like it. This wasn't a Quiet Group, Lane. This was a suicide."

The ride back to the Unorthodox was spent in silence.

Rage drove the speed limit back to the club and the return trip took more than twice the time it took to get out there in the first place. As the night grew late the traffic was thinning. We all stared out the window in silence. There was nothing to say. Certainly Rage knew as well as Skin that this was not one of our kind succumbing to the madness of hate. He wanted to be destroyed.

My head reeled from the entire event. My first Quiet Group. More than that- this was the first time I saw one of our kind die. This was the first time I had killed one of our kind. At least, it was the only time in my memory. It was rare that we searched our past. When your existence requires that you constantly move from place to place and leave behind everything and everyone you know, including yourself, you don't tend to be really sentimental. Our normative culture discouraged it. We had our fake histories. I had a story to tell the Tall Girl when she asked about my family. Typical enough that she could relate, and a touch of heartache so that she would empathize.

Parents? Sure, I had them. They live in the town I grew up in, somewhere far across the country. I was named for my mother's oldest brother, Uncle Lane...

Usually it made it easier to create these stories in advance so our lies didn't cross each other too badly.

But where had I come from? Had I seen one of us die before? Had I killed our kind? After a few decades back my memory became a tangle of lies and history. The stories I told weaved themselves into a web until I couldn't see anything but a thicket of stories, names, and places that might never have actually been. Usually it didn't matter.

At this moment, watching the cars and the streetlights racing past with the smell of smoke and blood fresh in my senses, I wished I could untie them all and lay them end to end. Was there something familiar in the sound of an axe hitting the chest of a vampire beyond the sound of the campers at Devil's Lake collecting firewood? Had I heard that sound before? Had I held the axe? How many lives had I lived? Was it possible that I had killed vampires before? Not in this life, I knew that. Not in the life before that, I was fairly sure. What about in the life before that? How far back did I reincarnate? And if I could ever untangle the history from the lies, if I could see back into my regressions until I saw my birth, would I like what I saw? Or do I not remember because I don't want to know?

I tried to remember the song that was playing when I had fed on the Tall Girl, and I could not. It was jazz, and for some reason I was sure that, at the time, I knew the song. Now it was a blur with everything else. As we turned into the parking lot behind the Unorthodox, I decided it didn't matter.

At the club, the final band of the night would already be well into their set when we arrived. We stayed with the car until the music stopped. Rage changed into another suit coat that he had kept in his car. Rage had said nothing thus far, so I figured punishment would not be coming. However, if he was stewing, I figured it best I know that sooner than later.

"Rage? You mad at me?" I asked. I was afraid of what he might say or do, but amongst our kind you needed to show strength, especially when you didn't have any.

"No, kid," he said toward the wall of the club. "You did what you were supposed to."

"I did kinda run my mouth back there. Maybe talked too much."

He nodded in agreement, but chose not to look at me. He was watching the handful of roadies who were taking their last cigarette breaks before they had to break down the stage and reload their trailer. "You did. But there was nothing

typical about this one. Usually, it's like putting down a rabid dog. This one... I dunno Lane. But if I take you out again, you won't say a word. Usually, if we're there, they're long past talking."

Rage went inside as the members of the band began to come out between their roadies. I decided to follow and climbed the steps back to the balcony. The last of the crowd was filing out into the city streets as the heretics scurried to get cleaned up so they could go home.

Tragedy was sitting where I had left her, holding an almost full martini, twirling the liquid around in the glass. She sat, watching it. I wondered how long she had been doing that.

"Welcome back, Lane." She continued to twirl her drink and did not take her eyes off of it. "Did you boys have fun?" She had pronounced the word 'fun' as if it was an obscenity.

"It's not the most fun I've ever had, but it sure beats bowling." I watched her for a moment, but she made no indication that she was going to share her attention. "I kept my promise."

"Hmmm? Oh, right. Good." She did her best to express no emotion. It was something she was quite good at. I sat next to her and watched the heretics sweeping the main floor. In less than an hour they would all be gone.

Crimson and Magenta joined us while the last of the heretics was sweeping up the last cigarette butts. Tragedy growled out a sigh as they approached and rolled her eyes.

She didn't enjoy talking to them as much as she enjoyed listening to their music. They approached in sputters and starts and giggles as I turned to acknowledge them.

"Lane. Tragedy. How did you like the show tonight?" I could tell from Magenta's tone of voice that this was an introduction to her real concern. Tragedy shot me a look, which told me I would be speaking for both of us. "We, uh... well, I had to leave early. So, I missed most of it..." I was

trying to think of a non-confrontational way to say "Buzz off you tools," but nothing came to me, and after the night I had, I didn't want to fight with anyone.

"So it's true," gasped Magenta. "You were part of it."

I didn't actually know what the protocol was for the aftermath of a Quiet Group. I had never been part of one before. Rage never told me not to talk about it, but then he never talked about them that I could recall. I decided to play it safe. "I think it's best you girls direct your questions to Rage. I've already done too much talking tonight, and I'd hate to do it again."

"Oh, come on, Lane," purred Crimson. "You don't have to tell us everything."

She kneeled at my feet and leaned on the armrest of my chair. Tragedy rolled her eyes.

"Just give us a hint. What was it like? How many of you were there?"

Tragedy stood rather abruptly. "I think I need a drink." She walked to the bar, hopped over, and began taking mouthfuls from every bottle, one at a time. With each one she made a face that clearly indicated that it was not her favorite.

"Rage asked me to do him a favor, and I did. That's all there is to say about it."

Crimson was still sitting at my feet. I looked to Tragedy for help and she was still giving the various decorative bottles a turn at becoming her least favorite.

"You were there. You were there when one of our kind," Crimson leaned in a bit further, "died."

Magenta sat on the arm rest that Crimson was not occupying. "You saw him die?" She gasped, very dramatically, and opened her eyes in a sudden realization. "You were part of the group that killed him!"

"OK, that's enough." I stood and looked around for Rage. He was standing at the stage below us, talking to Skin.

"Rage!" I yelled over the balcony. "Can you come up here for a minute?"

"What is it?" He didn't bother to yell. The place was empty, and apparently he had just sent home the last of the heretics.

"The girls here have lots of questions about the night's events, and I would much rather they talk to you about it." The girls had joined me at the railing.

Rage folded his arms across his chest. "Girls?"

"Please Mr. Williams?" purred Crimson. "We just want to know what happened. He was part of our community, and so this affects all of us."

I looked to Tragedy where she still stood behind the bar. She was holding a large knife and looking back and forth from it to the girls. I gave her a subtle shake of my head. She smiled wickedly.

"Crimson makes a good point," said Rage thoughtfully. "The heretics are all gone. Why don't you all come down here. I think we need a town hall."

The girls immediately jumped the railing. The distance would have shattered the legs of a human trying the same stunt, but they landed, like cats, on their feet. Crimson rushed to Rage's side and wrapped her arms around him. He ordered Skin to get the lights.

I turned to Tragedy. She was standing with a bottle in her hand, staring at the label. "Any good?" I asked her.

She shook her head slowly. "No. The humans must be mad. They pay good money for this stuff."

"And you will too if you keep drinking it!" scolded Rage. I turned to see him and he waved us down with a subtle motion of his hand. He didn't need elaborate hand gestures.

"Come on," I said to her. She hopped the bar, and together we jumped the railing and stood with the others on the floor in front of the stage. Once on the floor I spotted

Essence, Diana, and Geo on the stools around the bar in the back between the floor and the stairs. I gave them a nod.

Sitting near the bar, at a table by themselves, were Party Girl and Brash, my old band mates. Skin killed the lights and the building was, for a moment, lit only by the exit signs and a single lit cigarette in the hand of Essence. Skin pushed another button and the stage lit up yellow, a golden flood in the darkness that filled the rest of the building.

All around Rage was the remains of what used to be a magnificent proscenium. A hundred years ago, this floor would have been covered in decorative seats, and that proscenium would have been the most exquisite of hand carved wood, gilded, and framing a bold red curtain and its teasers and tormentors. The gilding had long ago been replaced with white interior paint, which at places was chipped and peeling. The seats were gone with the curtain, and the only teasers and tormentors that remained were us.

Under the lights, though, the proscenium sprang back to life, gilded with the yellow glow of molten gold. In this framing, Rage stood like the statue of a Greek god. He was Zeus, the father of us all. He was Mars, the god of war. He was Hades, the god of the underworld. On his stage, he was all of these things.

"Tonight was a reminder of the way our kind must be," he boomed at his small audience. We were few, but we were tentative. "There are ways and there are rules. We are not islands. We are not alone. Tonight, one of our own was destroyed by a Quiet Group. Lane is right. There are things that should not be talked about as though they hold no weight. This was not a feeding, where we come together to rejoice at our good hunting and the fulfillment in the feast. This was the loss of a brother. One of our own is dead. Gone forever. When he came to us, I took him in as I took in all of you. I found him a place to live. He even worked here for a few days as a heretic. He called himself Chain, Darwin, and

Finch. Most of you called him Nameless Freddy. And he died at our hands tonight.

"You want to know what happened tonight. I won't lie and tell you that tonight was a typical silencing by the Quiet Group. He wanted to be destroyed. He told us to do it. Lane can attest to that, as can Skin.



"He had set fire to half of a wealthy, north side neighborhood and killed an entire family in their own home. When we found him the police were already there. It was one of my men in the police that had informed me to his location. They thought they were looking for a junkie. They thought he was insane and pumped full of drugs. While I have told them to keep it out of the papers, it is inevitable. The world will read of a criminally insane drug addict, killing a family and then taking his own life before his body was consumed in the fire he started. The police will attest to having found his remains in the fire. They will create a false history of a man in and out of insane asylums, in and out of drug rehab. There will be a little paperwork, and it will be buried as a single, catastrophic incident. Soon this noise will fade back into quiet.

"Let this be a reminder to all of us, that the choices we make can affect the others of our kind. We have spent the better part of the past two centuries building for

ourselves a world where we can hide out in the open. We have convinced the world that we do not exist. No one can threaten that balance and be allowed to live. No one can threaten our way of life and our safety and be allowed to continue existing. For all of us they must be silenced.

"But just as we cannot tolerate the threatening of our way of life, we must cling to our need for each other. We are a family. We are one breed of the night living on the blood of our prey. We must never forget- we need each other, and we must always act in the best interest of the whole, or the noise we make will be silenced. For the good of the whole, it must be silenced.

"The human public, if they know anything, will know that there will not be a repeat of the event. They are safe. Because they believe they are safe, we are safe. Our kind will not be implicated. That is what the Quiet Group is for. It is for your protection.

"One of our kind is dead, but because of his death, we are safe."

For a moment there was silence. We nodded to ourselves in understanding of the almost heroic nature of this death. He was a hero for dying, and we were heroes for killing him. The silence was broken by the clacking of high heels on the wooden floor.

"Rage, daring," said Essence as she walked. "I appreciate more than anyone your considerable influence in the human world. Politicians and policeman and what have you." She stopped in the center of the floor and held her drink up to look at it. "But could you tell us how you have earned such an influence without revealing the nature of who you are. Or have you? Are there humans who know you are a..." She paused and then spat the word out as if it was a profanity, "vampire?"

In a chillingly calm voice, Rage replied, "This isn't a challenge, is it, Essence? You aren't questioning me, are you?"

Essence remained flippant. "Oh, darling, of course not. It's just that, it occurs to me, and I don't see how I could be alone here, that the easiest way to make them do as you command is to make them fear you. And the easiest way to make them fear you, Mr. Williams, would be to let them know what you are. The thing is, I do not see how you could inspire the fear you would need to control members of the police if they saw you merely as the owner of this charming little club. But of course, if you had revealed yourself to them and let them live with that knowledge, would that not mean you yourself should be facing the Quiet Group?"

Rage bristled slightly as he read her subtext, which I was not entirely sure was there. If anyone could put out a layer of subtext that thick without knowing it, it was Essence. Certainly she should have known that he would have read it into her words, but perhaps she was simply taking the opportunity to show us that she was not afraid of him.

If there had been a smile on her face, none of us would have blamed him for putting her through a wall. As it was, she was not accustomed to smiling.

"This charming little club," Rage replied coldly, "has amassed a sum of money greater than all of the advertising your quaint little newspaper will ever get." He was also implying, I assumed, his cut of the illegal drug sales that took place almost nightly. "If there is any motivation that can enslave the human heart, it is greed. Money in the right pockets can be a powerful tool. When those pockets belong to the powerful, they will create the fear in those under them that I need to get the results I desire. I don't need to make my own fear when I can use greed."

"An excellent business tactic," said Essence, "but you have not entirely answered my question."

"And I don't intend to," said Rage curtly. "When you hear from the humans that they know what I am, then you may come for me. When I make the noise that threatens our

way of life, you may quiet me. Until then, I am a man of influence.”

“But what interests me,” she said, unable or unwilling to take the hint that the conversation was over, “is that you alone are a man of influence. We’re lucky to have you, of course darling, but how do we share in your considerable persuasive power? Might I be able to give to your bribery fund and yield a little power for myself?”

“You don’t need any power as long as you have me.”

“And what happens to us if something were ever to happen to you?”

“I should hope you would have the sense to protect me. For the good of us all.”

Essence raised her eyebrows and her glass and nodded. She might have even given the hint of a smile as she gained a deeper understanding of the power and influence he had, not just among the humans, but among us. He was Zeus. He was Mars. He was Hades. He was, seemingly untouchable, and above us all.



As the night waned, I found myself on a stool at the main floor bar with Skin, Tragedy, Geo, and Diana. Essence had left shortly after her dramatic conversation with Rage. Crimson managed to talk Rage into opening a case of Champagne and going driving. They took his long black business car to his condo to get his convertible, and would

spend the hours until the sun rose driving well over the speed limit to the far reaches of the suburbs. From what I could tell, Crimson spent their nights together making Magenta feel like a third wheel as a form of pecking order or simple torture. Magenta would spend the night in the back seat alone, and Crimson would spend the night in the front, on Rage's arm or in his lap.

Geo was waxing eloquent about the various emotional highs and lows of the evening. "The fact is," she was saying while waving her champagne flute like a person conducting an orchestra, "we always imagine ourselves as being immortal. I don't think I've ever seen one of us die, and so I come to believe that it doesn't happen. That it cannot happen. But why should it not happen? The story of creatures on this earth is one of a cycle of life and death. We live on the death of creatures that live on the death of other creatures, some of which live on the death of other creatures, most of which live on the sun- which would kill us. Is not death a natural part of life? Should we be immune to the cycle of living and dying? Perhaps we too are reborn."

"As what?" spat Tragedy. "Bats? Sharks? Or something poetically opposite, like bunnies, so we can spend time on the food chain just slightly higher than grass and below almost everything else."

"I'm sure I don't know," said Geo, watching the dance of the glass in her hand. "What does it matter what we become? Can't we just cycle without judging? What I'm saying is, maybe Nameless Freddy... what did he call himself?"

"Finch was his most recent name," Diana informed her.

"Yes, Finch. Perhaps Finch was enlightened to the cycles of life and death and found a way to ride the wave of living into the next cycle. He called a Quiet Group. He used the cultural norms of those like us to move his existence into the next level, whatever it might be. To be reborn, you have to

die. And for those like us, calling a Quiet Group is the only form of suicide we have, isn't it?"

"There's another way." Diana said it, seemingly to herself. Talking to Geo was a lot like talking to yourself while she talked to herself. "I have to be in the office in a few hours and there is much to do before our gathering tonight. I'll see you there, Geo." Diana walked off with no further ceremony.

"Do you understand?" continued Geo.

I looked up to see she was looking at me. "What?" I asked.

She put her hand on my face and ran her fingers down my cheek. "It's not your fault. You can't blame yourself. He wanted to be reborn. You were just a tool of his rebirth." She stopped and stared at me. She cocked her head to the side and squinted slightly. She spent a moment looking from one of my eyes to the other and back again.

"Hmph." It was all she said. She grabbed the bottle off the counter with her free hand and danced slowly toward the door. As she twirled and waved away from us, she continued to monologue. "Maybe I'll write a poem about it. Finch's flight into the new life beyond death. Back into the egg..." Her voice trailed off as she descended the stairs and headed out into the early morning.

"Return of Finch," said Tragedy at the voice trailing down the hall. "Or, my life as a bunny."

"What bothers me about the whole rebirth business is the lack of direction," I said. "There seems to be no leadership, does there?"

"What," said Tragedy, "like a board of directors or something?"

"Someone to be accountable for what happens. I mean, what if Finch, sick of being one of us, did in fact arrange for his end to be reborn but winds up reborn as one of us again? Who's to say you would come back as anything else? What if you get the exact same life over and over?"

Tragedy considered it for a moment as Skin and I both took a mouthful- me from a bottle of champagne, Skin from a bottle of Whisky. "Now that you mention it, it does make sense. If being born got you in one place, why would being reborn get you anything different?"

"That's what I'm saying. They say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result."

"Who says that?" asked Skin.

"Uh, I don't know," I admitted. "Somebody."

"A scholarly answer, Lane," he said with a smirk.

"Another thing, though. If you can be reborn as our kind, that would mean you were born as a vampire. To who? Vampire parents? Have I got a mother out there somewhere?"

"Why?" asked Skin with a laugh. "You wanna send ya mum a bouquet for mother's day?"

"I'm just saying, we must have come from somewhere. Do I have parents of our kind? I don't remember them. Do I not remember them because I just can't remember anything that long ago, or because they don't exist? And if they don't, where did I come from?"

Skin rubbed his almost hairless head. "Ah, boy. Don't be takin' trips down memory lane."

Tragedy laughed. "Memory Lane. That's funny. Maybe we should call him that from now on." She smiled at me and I smirked back with a good dose of sarcasm.

"There's nothing in the good old days worth searching for, Memory Lane."

Tragedy nodded. "That's right. I've heard humans and our kind saying, 'Why were the good old days better than these days? Why can't it ever be as good as it used to be? It's not like it was.' It's not smart to get caught up in the past. It's past. And maybe it's not as good as we think we remember it. Maybe it was worse."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She means," interjected Skin, "that we're evolving. Things are getting better with time. More efficient. Time is progress, mate."

"Do you ever dream?" she interjected.

"Dream?" I replied, surprised at the sudden change of topic. "No. I think I used to, but I can't remember them. Do you?"

She nodded. "Not often. But there is this one recurring dream I have. It's really bizarre. I'm a human. Just weak flesh and bone. In a dress. Something is chasing me. I don't know if it's a demon or one of us. All I know is, I am the prey, and I have to run. Something in me says I have to protect someone. My family or something like that. Then it catches me, and when I see it up close, I recognize it. I stare into its eyes. And it drains my blood and makes me hate whatever or whoever I used to want to protect." She paused to swirl the champagne around in her glass.

"Then what?" asked Skin after she refused to go on.

"That's it. I wake up, feeling like... I don't know. Like I've been buried alive. After that I usually don't sleep for a week."

"It's just a dream, doll," said Skin halfway between comforting and patronizing. "Dreaming's rare, but it don't mean nothing."

"I know," she said. "But what if it was something more? What if our dreams were old memories trying to claw their way back up from the past?"

"Ignore them," he said.

"You mean, like myths and old movies," I said. "What if we were once human and you're remembering being made into one of us by being bitten?"

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed Skin.

"Myths and legends often have their root in reality," I reminded him. "Why not the myths around us?"

"Have you ever made a vampire?" Skin asked pointedly. We both admitted that we had not. "You ever seen

a human bitten and left alive? Why would a vampire even do that?"

"Maybe he was lonely," I surmised.

Skin sighed and rolled his eyes. He sat up straight and took a lecturing tone. I'm sure he felt he was educating us, and I was even more certain he had given this lecture before.

"We are obviously the top predator on the evolutionary food chain. We have evolved into the perfect hunting machines. We can see in almost pitch darkness. We don't need sleep. We don't need food or drink. We don't even need sex or a herd to belong to." Skin paused, looking down for just a second.

Considering the conversation I had with Nameless Freddy that night, I thought I knew what made him pause after that comment. Some of us felt we did need a herd. I chose to let it go.

"We are the product of Nature creating the answer to the human problem. They have taken over the planet like a disease. They've spread like roaches for tens of thousands of years. Nature created us to solve the dilemma."

"That was sweet of her," said Tragedy with no small sense of irony. "When there are too many deer in the woods, Nature gives them wolves."

"Which are us, my dear," said Skin.

"The gift that keeps on giving."

I smiled at her comment.

"If we were Nature's gift to mankind," she said, "she had no love of mankind."

"Evolution has made a better hunter," he continued. "A top predator. And we are a tool in the system to create a better breed of human. A better humanity. We take those bits an pieces an cut away the ones that need to go. Like lions on zebras. Eventually, our work will have created a better human kind, like a sculptor chipping away at a stone. It's a process of elimination."

"Still," I said, "if we are the product of evolution, does that mean we are evolved from a single human or first vampire? Or do humans occasionally have vampire babies to curb the breeding tendency of their own kind?"

"What d'you mean?" asked Skin.

"Well, here we are," I said, overstating the obvious. "If we evolved like the rest of the species, that means we came from parents. Either vampire parents, or human parents. Or something else. I've never seen a vampire baby."

"Lane has a point," agreed Tragedy. "I've never known any of our kind to have a baby. Hmmm... Vampire Baby. That would look good on a t-shirt. I should work out a deal with the rock star Bobbsy twins."

"Well, it don't matter who has the baby. What matters is we are the top predator. We are the top of the evolutionary ladder. That makes all the rest for our use and consumption. That's what matters!"

"Don't you ever wonder where we come from?" I asked Skin. "I can't remember back that far, and we've all agreed that we've never made one of our kind nor had a baby."

"Come now, Lane. Haven't you ever read Dracula?" laughed Skin. "He was a rich guy who had a bad day, cursed God, and was cursed back by God to be the walking undead. The living damned."

"And yet still a snappy dresser," added Tragedy with a smile.

"Do you think there might be a God?" I asked. Skin was immediately annoyed with my refusal to join the mirth.

"Don't be ridiculous, Lane," he replied sharply. "The wake of science is the record of dead religions. The humans might not be as sharp as our kind, but their sciences have done a fine job proving the lack of God's existence."

I shrugged. "It's also done a fine job proving there's no such thing as vampires. Yet, here we sit."

Skin leaned back and laughed as Tragedy shook her head. "You're just a mass of contradictions, aren't you?" he asked.

I smiled too. "I am. I really am."

And without another word, Skin rose from his stool and walked off. We watched him climb the stairs to the stage and disappear behind the proscenium, laughing quietly to himself.

I was alone with Tragedy.

Nameless Freddy's words had stuck with me. I began to observe my behavior. Now that we were alone, I was still. Was I afraid to move? I had a dozen questions or conversation starters in my mind, but I sat silently. Was I afraid to talk to her? Was her approval of me that important that I froze up in her presence? Yet, there was something more. I was glad they had left. I wanted to be alone with her, but I couldn't get myself to admit why. Surely there was a reason. I stared in silence as I became more self-consciously self-aware.

She must have read my emotions on my face. "Lane?" she said softly. "You ok?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Fine." Something in me stirred. I became aware of the fact that I wanted her to keep asking about how I was doing. I wanted her to show concern for my well-being.

"You sure? You look like there's something heavy running around in your head right now."

I smiled without looking up. "I think it's the Finch," I admitted. "I think he's left some footprints up there."

"What did he say to you?" She waited for me to answer for a moment before she decided, correctly, that I wasn't going to. "You told Thing One and Two-ey that you had done too much talking tonight. That means you had words with our little Finch before his last flight, doesn't it?"

"You'd be easier to deal with if you weren't so intelligent."

"I'm a real pill. Tell me. I kind of started this," she said holding up the original poem. She unfolded it and placed it down on the bar, smoothing it with her hand as she spoke. "I think I deserve to know how it ended."

"He..." I collected my thoughts for a moment. "He thought he loved you. But I think you got that from the poem."

"It is sort of implied," she said, looking down at it.

"He thought you hated him because he loved you."

"And he didn't appreciate that? A poet can't ask for better irony." I smiled at her. Her smile fell and she twirled her glass again and watched her champagne swirling. "He failed to be one of us, and he tried to be one of them," she said, half to herself. "The humans are so addicted to their love. Needy. They destroy themselves for what they call love, which is rarely different from what they call lust. I can respect their lust. At least it's a desire to consume another."

"He didn't have that. Lust? None of us do. So, what did he have? Did he want to own me or be owned by me? We can do that. Look at Rage and the Bobbsy twins. Fools on leashes letting themselves be dragged around. I have no desire to be owned. He talked like them with their inflamed emotional needs- the kind even Shakespeare mocked."

"I couldn't feed on him. So, what good was he to me? Passionate desire without blood? Pointless. I prefer my romances to have a consummation of blood. Otherwise, what is the point?" She picked up the poem off the bar, shook off the puddle of someone's drink on the bar she had inadvertently placed it in, then folded it and stuffed it back into her pocket.

I nodded. Sometimes I wondered why humans had the word 'love.' What did they think they meant? Or was it just a polite way of saying 'lust and ownership,' the way 'passed on' was a nice way of saying 'dead'?

"I don't know what to think," I admitted to her. "Rage talks like his death was a heroic means of protecting our way

of life. Geo talks like he's graduated from high school and gone off to college. All I know is, I watched one of us die for the first time, and my hands were on the axe handle. I didn't picture it like that. Death seems a bit more potent when it's one of our own."

She nodded, stood, raised her glass, and recited a poem to the empty room.

"A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.

"It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man- even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place? And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive."

I gave her a round of applause on behalf of the audience that wasn't there. She bowed to the empty room, then grabbed my hand and walked me out of the building into the first rays of the new day. We went our separate ways, me to a dreamless sleep, and her to hope her sleep was dreamless.

*This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs,
and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind?
All his days he eats in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.
Ecclesiastes 5: 16-17*

CHAPTER SIX

RUMORS

I slept the day away in my tiny, near south side apartment. When I woke, it was well before sunset, but a massive storm front had moved in, so I sat on the old wooden porch and watched the black clouds rolling over the city. The rain came down in sheets and the streets flooded to the point of capsizing. There was something enjoyable about watching the human life on the street below trying to outrun the torrent. Humans spent so much time trying to outrun the inevitable even as it was overtaking them. The thunder rattled the old windows in the building and the wind roared like a passing freight train. I enjoyed the show.

Somewhere behind the wall of rain and noise came a small tapping. Then I realized, not behind the rain, behind me. Someone was at my door.

When I opened the door I saw Tragedy, holding an umbrella that clearly had failed her. Her hair was wet and tangled around the stiff collar of her button shirt, and small rivets traveled the length of her pinstripe vest and pants. Her trademark boots were bubbling out the water that had sneaked its way inside while she was wading through the city streets. She looked like a drowned rat in a sewer drain. Although with the classy touch of pin striping, she looked like a drowned rat that was on its way to a job interview.



“Hi,” I said. “Do you want a towel or something?”

“No,” she said as she entered. “I’ll just throw myself in the dryer when I get home.”

I closed the door behind her and struggled to think of the proper etiquette for one of our kind having one of our kind over to his home. Nothing came to me, but I was glad she was there, even though I couldn’t imagine why she had come. “So what brings you to the south side?”

“I’ve been dreaming. It was a new one.” She was shaking herself off and wiping her hands on my couch. “You remember that dream I told you about. I don’t know if it’s because I talked about it. I never talk about it. But last night I had a new one.

“I was the hunter this time. I was just me, and not in a dress. I was doing the chasing. I caught a man, long hair,

wearing a hat. Like Skin but bigger and not so ragged looking. I had him in my hands, I pushed his hair away from his neck so I could sink my teeth in, and all of a sudden I feel my chest cave in. I looked down, and he'd plunged a railroad spike into my chest. Suddenly I realize, he wasn't the prey. I was the prey. He was human, but he was more than that."

She hesitated, her mind still in the haze of her recent dream. "He was a hunter."

"Vampire hunter? Like the legends? A... Van Helsing? You think this is another memory surfacing?"

"No, no," she sputtered. "I thought so, but then, for some reason I decided to take another look at this," she held up Nameless Freddy's poem. "I set it in someone's drink on the bar last night. It stained the paper, and look," she turned it around so I could see the back. "The little weasel had written it in white crayon."

I took it from her. "He must have been a grade school art teacher." I looked it over and the scrawled text in white was clearly peeking out from within the dark stain.

"Oblivion," I read. Great, another poem. "I thought last night's was his last one?"

"He's a liar," she replied, clearly annoyed with me. "Maybe we should kill him. Oh, wait... Just read."

*"The masterpiece before my last is on the bedroom wall
Oblivion for all your kin- comes silence for you all
This Hound of Heaven hunts for one,
you cannot save your friend
He's Death within our city walls, You'll join me in the end
This flock of ravens, one by one, will fall till there are few
But this time, lovers, here's the catch- the hunter isn't you."*

I read it over again. He had told me that I missed his subtext. He had told me to look at his poem again. Now I had, and I was unsettled by what I was seeing.

"I don't think this city has ever had walls," I said, "but the boy had a way with words." I handed it back to her.

"Yeah, he was a real poet Laureate," she snapped. "What if my dream was a warning? What if he's telling the truth?"

"Tragedy, relax. There was no real Van Helsing. Hunters are a legend."

"So are we! There was no real Count Dracula, but his legend was based on us. What was Van Helsing's legend based on?"

"The Finch is playing a game with us. His deepest desire was to be noticed and remembered. He's just found a way to get some attention after death. This is just his way of being remembered- his life after death."

"Did this come up at your little chat last night?" she held it up to me, somewhere between panic and anger.

I hesitated, but I knew I couldn't lie to her. She was able to read me far too easily. "Yes. He said oblivion was coming. I thought he was just being poetic. I thought he was saying that none of us are truly immortal. The heat death of the universe. That sort of thing. Or maybe that I was like him and I would be destroyed someday too. I wasn't sure. I didn't think he was sane enough to know himself.

"He said I didn't know what was coming. Or who. He said, he would stay and watch but that there was one thing he couldn't bear to watch... destroyed." I had said too much. I paused and caught her eye. I didn't want to tell her, but she figured it out.

"Me. He thinks the hunter is coming for me?" She stared at the message again.

"It's probably just a game. There is no hunter!"

"What if there is? What if he meant to warn me? He thought he loved me. What if he wanted to be destroyed so he didn't have to watch me die? That fits the genre. That might explain his sudden desire to be destroyed."

"It doesn't say the hunter asked for you," I pointed out. "If there is a hunter, the message says he asked for one of us. He knew you would share this with the others. It's meant for all of us. If it was you, he would have said so. It's your poem after all."

This made sense to her, and for the moment it calmed her. "We need to tell Rage. Even if this isn't true, it might still mean something. It might be code for some other threat."

"He threatened to go to the press. He said if he was still alive today, the word 'vampire' would be on the front page of all the papers."

"He's dead," she said, stating the obvious.

"We're still talking about him. Until we bury this," I said, indicating the message, "we haven't buried him. Maybe this is what he meant by alive. His little game is keeping him alive for the moment."

"Call Rage."

I dialed Rage's personal phone. I could hear from the noise in the background and the way he spoke that he was not at the club.

"I'm handling the paperwork from last night's event," he said to me.

I relayed the message to him, leaving out the part about Tragedy's dream.

"I'm still tying up loose ends that need to stay tied. I'll be a few more hours. Call Skin. Tell him I said this was a priority. We don't want any loose ends. Handle it." And he hung up.

Skin was at my apartment within the half hour. We climbed into his old pickup truck over rivers of deep running water just as the last of the rain was turning into mist and wind. Tragedy gave directions to Nameless Freddy's apartment. Despite the publicity of the previous night's events, there was no way to trace Nameless Freddy back to

his apartment. There was nothing left of him or of the house he died in.



Skin and Rage had made a false identity for him by using the name and description of a man one of them had recently fed on. It had the convenience of solving one more disappearance, and once Rage was done fabricating the right history and paperwork for him, all the pieces would fit.

Skin parked his truck around the back, in the narrow alley between identical brick apartment buildings. We ascended the rickety wooden fire escape. When we reached the right door, Skin stopped us and had us stand clear of the door.

"I taught him a few ways to rig a door," he said. He squatted and punched the door in. As it swung in, three crossbows went off, two flying over his head and one landing in Skin's chest, just under his neck. It knocked him over, and when we got to him he was laying half way down the stairs, a thick green arrow sticking out of him.

"I taught him pretty good," he said, genuinely impressed. We helped him up, and he yanked the arrow out

of his chest with one hand and tossed it aside. "Just be careful in there. I don't remember what else I taught him."

We stepped past the ladder rigged with crossbows, which took up most of the tiny kitchen floor. I smelled dirt, paints, the stench of old cigarettes, and blood. Not fresh blood. It could simply have been his unwashed laundry.

We stepped in slowly as we looked around the cluttered interior. Nameless Freddy's apartment was furnished like an average, tiny south side apartment- old couch, tv, a couple of lamps which didn't match. Every surface had been used, including the walls. There were stacks of books and magazines on the coffee table and couch, photos stapled to the wall, drawings spread over every surface and a few unfinished paintings scattered about. Some of the photos I recognized as various locations around the city, one of which was the Unorthodox. At least three of the unfinished paintings and dozens of the drawings were of Tragedy. He had practiced for his swan song.

Over his television were two shelves full of jars. In the jars were specimens of plants and animals native to the city and surrounding areas. There were half a dozen jars on top of the fridge that extended the collection. I figured that had been from his Darwin phase. Perhaps he was trying to live the role as well as borrow the name.

Wedge between the jars were a few notebooks. I grabbed one and flipped through it. He had begun a rudimentary set of observations. After a few pages I noted that one of his observations was how much their blood tasted like human blood. Every couple of pages, something was written in verse, some rhyming. Nothing more than half a page. Someone would be burning all of these notebooks soon, I thought. It was just as well, as it seemed his science was no better than his poetry.

Skin was checking out the bathroom and the kitchen to see if there were more traps. Most likely they would do us no lasting harm if there were, but since Nameless Freddy

was one of us, he might have spent some time figuring out ways to make his traps more potent. I walked into the bedroom first, with Tragedy close behind me. The smell of blood was definitely coming from here, but there was something else. Something worse.

In the glaring yellow street light coming through the windows, I could see that he had experimented with wall art before the previous night. Over the bed was scrawled the word 'oblivion.' It was dark red. Blood again. Then I saw the medium he had worked in laying in the closet. She had been a young black girl, a heroine addict by the tracks up her arm. Probably a prostitute. There was nothing unusual about our kind feeding on prostitutes. It was, however, unusual to leave one in the closet.

Tragedy looked in over my shoulder. "I don't make it a habit of being around the dead," she said, "but I'd guess she's been dead a few days. Two, maybe three."

I was about to agree when I heard Tragedy gasping for air and grabbing at my shirt. I stood and turned to see what had overtaken her, and I saw it. The wall by the door had been painted in blood as a mural. It was a landscape, one of the public parks in the city. Standing in the middle of it was a man in a long coat, long hair and wearing a hat.

"It's the one from my dream," Tragedy whispered. "It's him. It's him. It's him."

His face was a blur of shadows, but her original description had been right. He was like a larger version of Skin. His features were hard and lined, his face partially covered by a beard, and a fedora like Skin wore. The masterpiece before his last.

Skin walked in and saw our focused attention. He looked at the closet and thought a dead human had freaked us out. "What's with you two? It's just a dead whore." Then he looked at the wall we were staring at. "Oh. More wall art. This kid was a flippin' Rembrandt." Skin walked in and stared at the image. He took off his Fedora and fumbled with it in his

hands. He looked between his hat and the image on the wall. "He didn't get my hat right at all. I mean, it's a fedora, but not the right one."

"It's not supposed to be you," I said to him. "This is supposed to be a hunter. He's left us a picture of him."

"You sure?" asked Skin, his head tilted to stare at the blurred face on the wall. "Oh, I see what you mean. He's got a beard."

"And no glasses," I observed. "It's a public park somewhere in the city. See the lights? All the parks in the city proper have those."

"It's the Central Park," said Skin, and he pointed at a detail in the background. "That's the Statue of Victory."

"Or it's Freedom up in that park near the lake, on 87th."

Skin shook his head. "Freedom doesn't have wings. Not on that statue anyway."

"I don't think those are wings. I think that's a tree or something behind it."

"Well, whatever it is, I think this gives us two good places to start searching. You two will take the north side, and I'll call some guys and take central park. We'll meet up at the club since you two will be just a few miles from there."

Tragedy suddenly joined the conversation. "We're going after a vampire hunter?"

"Come on, doll. This guy is probably a vampire hunter the way some people are ghost hunters. He'll be a journalist wearing a necklace of garlic. Ol' Freddy threatened to put us in the papers, so if I am guessing correct, he means us to think this guy is part of that threat."

"And you think this guy will be just standing around in a public park waiting for vampires to show up?" I asked.

"If this guy is that kind of vampire hunter- the paranormal investigator- then he'd be willing to spend all night in a cemetery if he thought someone would come bring him proof. We'll find him, tell him we're friends of, wha'd he

call his self? Finch? And we'll say we're friends of ol' Finch, find out what he's told this guy, and after we're sure what's going on, we'll kill him too."

This made sense to us.

We continued searching the apartment for half an hour, only to find more of the same- poems, drawings, photographs. There were two drawers full of skeletons of various wildlife and probably pets that could be found in or near the city. In less than half a year he had amassed quite a collection. If I had to guess, I'd say he had never slept.

I couldn't read Tragedy's reaction to finding so many pictures of herself, or to the fact that all of the paintings of her were unfinished. She walked through the tiny labyrinth in a daze. I'd never seen her so inside of herself. She would pick up a picture of herself, or a photo of some place she knew, and she would stare at it as though some mystery would reveal itself to her. Each time it failed and she would put it down with a look of bewildered discouragement melting into anger. There were no hidden mysteries. Each one was familiar. It was her own face. It was the club. It was the apartment building she slept in during the day. Everything was familiar except the artist who put it there. The only unanswered question was why he had done any of the things he had done.

As for traps, the only thing Skin found was another trap at the front door. The boy had rigged it to the electrical wiring, but he had run the wires under the carpet so that they could not be seen from the inside either. This one was set to catch anyone coming or going, and would have done a good number on any human with bare hands.

Skin tossed me the keys to his truck as he started making calls. We were to take his truck to the park on the north side, and he was going with two of his skin-head followers to the central park. We would search and we would meet up at the club.

"No, Lips, listen. Shut up for a moment," he spat into the phone. "You and your brother will come with me. Get the Dumont brothers to come over here and burn this stuff. Everything. I want this place empty. Guttled like a fish. Listen, Lips, this is important. We have a dead black whore and she needs to go too. No questions... Lips. I swear if you don't stop talking I will kill you myself."

Tragedy and I were waiting for Skin to tell us to go, but he had been trying to interrupt his man on the other end of the line for several minutes already.

"No, listen, only the Dumont brothers. Tell them no help. No cousins. The four of them will be plenty. And Lips, do not talk to anyone else about this. Good. Now get over here." He hung up and sighed a groan of exasperation. "Humans."

"You know a human called Lips?" I asked. "I thought only those like us had the quirky nicknames."

"I call him Lips because his lips are always flapping. He never shuts up."

"You could eat him," offered Tragedy.

"Yeah, but he does good work. Good being a relative term of course. He and his brother help run the organization so I can be a more behind the scenes white supremacist. Also, if we ever get implicated for anything illegal, which is bound to happen sooner or later, I have them set up to take the fall."

I appreciated his forethought. "And the Dumont brothers?"

"Those four quacks are mad. I mean, certifiably institution material. I could tell them that I was a vampire and I had killed and eaten the dead whore in the other room, and not a one of them would have a problem with it."

"Because they like vampires?" I asked.

"Nah, because she's black," he said, matter of factly. "Their dad was a grand dragon of the KKK or something. And a Nazi of some kind. Kinda after their prime if you ask me."

But they've been raised with it. They make the perfect street soldiers, because there's nothing they won't do and no questions asked as long as there's some darkie getting the business end of it."

"And this is going to make a better humanity?" asked Tragedy incredulously, recalling our previous conversation.

"This is just half of it, doll," he said with some glee. "You forget, somewhere on the west side of this very city, our friend Newton is cultivating the same mindless hate into the very dark brothers that are the focus of my boys' seething hate."

Newton was one of our kind. A tall, black version of Rage in his position. The influence Rage held in our community and among the humans in the city, Newton held with the communities around him. He, like Skin, dabbled in racism as a tool for human husbandry.

"Newton is packing his end of the keg with powder while I pack my end. Someday he and I will light the whole thing and there will be a fireworks display in this city that won't be forgot for a hundred years. In the war that ensues, the pickings for our kind will be lush, and in the aftermath, the stronger will survive.

"The Dumont brothers will all be dead. They're too easy to lead. Too stupid. The human race will adjust one way or another. The result will be a tiny step up on the evolutionary ladder. And when we have made our super men, Newton and I and all of you will feed on them."

"We have something to look forward to," said Tragedy, not overly impressed.

"I think there's a glaring flaw in your plan," I observed. "What if you succeed? If you breed a better brand of human, they will be more difficult prey. You do too good a job, and we'll be going hungry."

Tragedy considered my train of thought. "Do you think they could ever be dangerous to us?"

Skin answered without hesitation. "The humans? I would be disappointed if they were not. See, that's the big picture angle. Yes, they become stronger, and eventually a threat to us. When that happens, either we will also adapt and become a stronger breed because of the struggle to survive, or our kind will become extinct."

"I thought you were doing this to benefit us somehow," said, still unclear on his big picture.

"Evolution favors the strong," he explained. "We are the top dogs because we are the strongest- the most fit. We prey on the planet's top predator. If that is no longer possible, then they will surpass us, and we will die.

"I'm not trying to make easier prey. I'm trying to push evolution forward to a better predator. I am only an instrument of evolution, and evolution has no favorites. It is not a merciful god. Our choices are between struggle to survive and extinction. Fight, or oblivion. Freddy here chose oblivion, and because he's gone, the remaining collection of us is stronger."

"Not to impede the process, but I think I'll choose to go find the hunter, whatever he is, before he adds to our struggle for survival," I said. "Perhaps evolution will help those that help themselves."

Skin nodded. "You two get going," he said to us. "I'll see you in a few hours. Before you go, look around for anything you might want, because in an hour's time everything in these four walls will be ashes and smoke."

"Tragedy?" She looked around the room and shook her head.

"No. I just want to go." She headed out the door and began descending the stairs to the truck.

"Actually, if I might," I said, and I grabbed a messenger bag and tossed a few notebooks and sketchpads into it, including the notebooks that were with his animal specimens. "I'll burn them once I've read them. I'm just

curious if he might have left a clue as to what happened last night.”

“Don’t leave that rubbish in my truck, Lane.”

“I won’t,” I said, and I followed Tragedy.

She was already behind the wheel when I got to the truck, so I hopped into the passenger side without an argument. It was better than the tiny back seat I was subjected to on the ride over from my apartment. I took the opportunity to look through one of Nameless Freddy’s notebooks. On the line that said “Name” he had written ‘Darwin,’ and later in a different pen had added ‘Finch.’ Perhaps he had considered using both names at some point. I wondered if our vampire hunter would know him as Darwin Finch, or perhaps some other name we didn’t know.

Tragedy was quiet as she drove through the still wet streets. The clouds had passed and the standing water was slowly fading into the ground and the sewers. The roads remained wet and reflected the streetlights and headlights like they were coated in shards of glass. More than usual the city was a blaze of light, like the whole thing was burning. The city was never dark, especially to our eyes that were so well adjusted to darkness, but as the water reflected the light off of the road, it looked like the streets were not just wet. They looked like they were on fire.

Tragedy looked angry, her face set in a scowl, staring into the glare of headlights and water. I dug through the messenger bag and pulled out a notebook to leaf through, to appear as casual as possible.

“Tragedy, you ok?”

“I’m angry.” It was a curt response, but didn’t seem to be directed at me.

“What about?” I asked, not looking up. I continued to flip casually through the notebook, barely noticing the sketches of plants and animals and buildings he had drawn, mostly in blue ball-point pen.

"I'm angry at him and I'm angry at me." She paused, so I looked up to see if she was waiting for me to reply. She wasn't. "I believed it. I can't believe I was that stupid.

Vampire hunter. Van Helsing. What's the matter with me?"

"Well, you had woken from a bad dream. It would be easy for anyone to think it meant something."

"Dreams don't mean anything, Lane. I know that better than anyone. Or at least I should. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words." I didn't know the reference, but it sounded like a poem or a proverb. "I let that creepy little fool get to me. All his talk of belonging and love. Now he's got us chasing shadows in the park."

I approached the topic carefully, as she was already agitated, but I still needed to know. "What about the man in your dream? You sounded pretty sure that the painting in the bedroom was the same guy."

"Yeah, maybe it was. But I've seen his sketchbooks. He'd had me over to see his work before, a couple of weeks ago. I probably had seen a drawing of that guy somewhere in his work. I'll bet if we kept looking, we would have found photos of that park and drawings of that guy. Besides, he looks like Skin. The last thing I did before I went home was talk to you and Skin, and I talked about that dream, and we talked about Nameless Freddy. With all of that in my head, it's no wonder I had the dream I had."

She made sense. It was entirely possible that the painting of the man on the wall had been based on Skin. It was just as likely that he had found a picture in a magazine that looked like Skin and caught his attention, so he built a character around the image. I hadn't thought to look for him in the sketchbooks at the apartment, but most painters do preliminary drawings before they do their paintings. He had drawn Tragedy plenty of times before he painted her. I dug out the sketchbooks in the messenger bag and flipped

through them. When we had arrived at the park, I had not found anything I deemed important.

We parked the truck and headed out into the park, not sure what we would find. On the far north side of the widest clearing, lit from below, was a statue of a woman on a pedestal. The pedestal must have been twelve feet tall and was an octagon made of polished stone. Inscribed upon it were the words, "Lady Freedom- She is one of the many, And she is each of us."

Freedom stood over us with her hand on the sword at her side and eagle feathers crowning her head. She was a cross between a Native American Princess and the war goddess Athena. She was a symbol of the wars by which freedom was purchased. She was familiar with blood, and for this I respected her. She was a warrior, a hunter, and a goddess. There was something about her that reminded me of Tragedy- perhaps because she was all of those things. Maybe because she was dark, cold, and silent. Maybe because she was beautiful, there in the dark.

I had been right, there were no wings on her like there are in the more modern sculpture of Victory in the Central park, but there was a flag flying just beyond her. Perhaps that was what Darwin Finch intended to show in his painting. If so, we were in the right place. We ascended the short stone stairway and looked at the dark metal figure. Her face was still wet, as though she had been weeping. It made me smile.

My art appreciation was broken by Tragedy. She quietly said my name and pointed to a figure coming quickly across the clearing. He was holding his long coat tightly around himself and his hat was pulled low over his face as he marched into the wind that was tunneled through the park toward the lake. I looked back at Tragedy, and she said nothing, but she nodded toward him. I guessed this was her subtle way of telling me to do the talking. I took a few steps forward.

As he reached the stairs, I didn't wait for him to speak. "We're friends of Finch," I said.

He stopped and looked up. "Excuse me?" He raised his head, and I could see that he had no beard, just a mustache.

"We are friends of Finch," I repeated.

"Are you now?" he replied.

"Are you here looking for Finch? Maybe you know him as Darwin Finch?" I tried to keep my tone as friendly and non-confrontational as possible, but I could feel Tragedy tensing without looking at her.

"The Darwin Finch?" the old man laughed, and then began to climb the stairs. "I hate to tell you kid, but you've been misinformed. You ain't gonna find that little guy in this city." He walked around me and continued toward the statue. "Never gonna find him around here."

"So, you know that he's dead?"

"Dead?" He stopped walking again and turned back to look at me over his shoulder. "I don't think I understand you at all."

Tragedy spoke up. "Where do you think he is?"

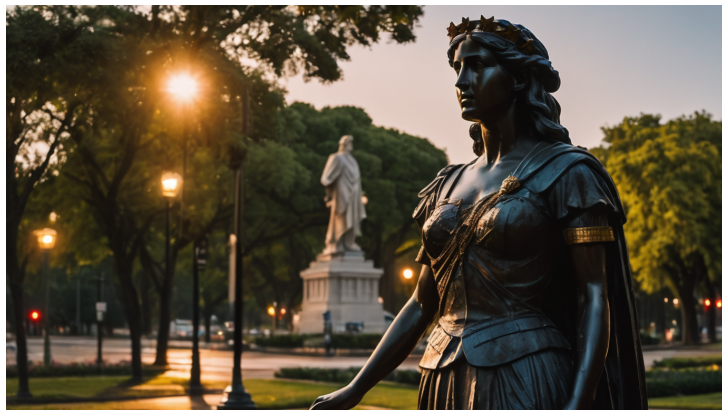
"Sir, if you know anything about it, you can tell us." I did my best to sound sincere. "We're friends of Darwin Finch, and we would like your help."

He laughed again, a hand on his hat against the wind. "First off, kid, if you're looking for contributions, hanging out in the park in the dark is a bad place to start. Maybe come back when the sun's out. Second, the Darwin Finch is native to the Galapagos Islands, which are probably two thousand miles south of here- maybe more. If someone told you he could be found here, you been had, son. Maybe you should try being the friends of the pigeon. We got a million of them dang things in this city. Rats with wings." He laughed and headed off again. "I gotta catch a cab. Good luck."

I turned to face Tragedy. She cocked and eyebrow and said, "Want to kill him?"

"I'm not thirsty," I replied. "But I am feeling slightly better about being part of that Quiet Group."

She smiled. "If ghosts were real, we'd be able to hear him laughing at us right now. Well, at you."



Four joggers, two dog walkers and a stumbling homeless drunk later we surrendered the park to the night and headed back to the truck. Whoever was in the image on the wall, if he was real, and if that was the right place, he wasn't there that night.

We headed to the Club to convene with Skin and report our lack of fortune. As we drove, I looked again through the collection I had taken from Nameless Freddy's apartment. It seems that the blood of most mammals tasted better to him than the blood of birds, and he didn't care for the blood of fish at all.

As we pulled into a parking spot near the Club, I found a curious list of names and phone numbers, most of which had been crossed out and a few of which had been circled.

I didn't recognize most of them, though I noticed that almost all of them were from area codes outside of the local

area. It was not unusual for those of our kind to have contacts with each other in the cities we had come from.

"Who did the Finch know out of state?" I asked Tragedy.

"I don't know," she replied. "Why?"

"This notebook has a couple of pages of numbers in the back. Almost none of them are local."

"Even someone as hopeless as him could have had friends at some point."

"I was thinking that too. But why would he circle some and cross out the rest?"

"Maybe this was his record of who still answered when he called," she surmised.

"Eventually, even a guy like him will cross you off the list and stop calling. Or get himself killed."

"Perhaps he was no more popular there than he had wound up here." I stuffed the notebook back in the bag and we headed into the Unorthodox through the front door.

The Heretic selling tickets at the door saw us and waved us over. "You're Lane, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "You gonna let us in?"

"Yeah," he answered with a nod. "But Mr. Williams said he wanted to see you as soon as you got here." We headed in. "He'll probably be by the bar on the stage level," the heretic hollered after us.

We headed up the stairs into the echoing din of the band that was playing. It was the end of the weekend, which meant the crowd was light and easy to maneuver through, unlike the night before. The music was no less loud, though. As soon as we reached the top of the stairs, Rage spotted us. He headed toward us with the gait of a man about to do some damage. For a moment I thought he might be angry at us for something, and I was not looking forward to finding out what it was.

"Both of you, come with me." He pivoted and headed toward the side entrance to the backstage area. We followed

him through the wings, past the green room, and out into the parking lot in the back. He said nothing until we were outside.

"Where were you two?" he demanded.

I answered for us. "We were at a park on the north side, looking for someone."

"Looking for who?"

"We don't know," I said. "We went to the apartment and found a picture of a guy in a park. We think Nameless Freddy meant us to think it was a hunter. Skin thought it was probably a writer. A journalist or something. So, we went to a park on the north side that looks like the one from the picture to look for him."

"And Skin went to the Central Park?"

I nodded. "We weren't sure which park it was supposed to be, so we went to one and he went to the other. We were supposed to meet him here when we were both done looking. Have you heard from him?"

"No," he said. "I got a call from some guy named Lips. You know him?"

"We know of him. He's one of Skin's guys. Human. Talks too much, thus the name. He called you?"

Rage opened his car door. "Get in," he ordered.

We obeyed. I hopped in next to Rage and Tragedy hopped in back. The engine roared to life and we took off, heading south and ignoring the lights and signs.

"This Lips guy calls me a few minutes before you two showed up. Says he's calling on behalf of Skin- calls him Helmut Weisskamp. He asks for the manager of the club. I say, that's me, and he starts rattle off at a hundred miles an hour. They're at the park, they were looking for some guy and they found someone and he thinks the guy has killed Skin. He and his brother ran for their lives. Then he called me wanting to know what to do. I told him to sit tight and wait for me."

Tragedy leaned forward. "He thinks the guy killed Skin? Who could kill Skin?"

"And alone," added Rage. "This Lips says there was one guy. I don't know what he saw, but that's impossible. On a good day I'd have trouble taking Skin alone."

"Was the guy who attacked Skin human?" Tragedy asked.

"I couldn't really ask him that," answered Rage. "This Lips guy probably doesn't know anything about us. He wouldn't know what to look for. But in case he's not human, I decided to bring you two with. Crimson and Magenta are good fun on the weekends, but I wouldn't put my money on either of them in any fight with one of our own." Tragedy held her tongue, but a quick glance at her told me she had plenty to add to that comment. She quickly suppressed the smirk on her face as Rage continued. "Give me the rundown. You went to his apartment. What did you find?"

I told him the collection we dug through. I described the painting on the wall and the dead girl in the closet.

"I wonder why he didn't just stick her in the window," Rage interjected with a sneer.

"So far it seems like he's kept his attention on us," I replied. "From what I can tell, he's only used the cops to get our attention, not to tell them anything. Not yet anyway. I don't think he wanted to draw the cops. At least, not before we found what he intended us to see. It seems like Nameless Freddy's having a game with us. I don't know how far it goes."

"If this Lips guy is telling the truth, there's at least one more player," said Rage. "This might be Lips now."

Rage slowed to a stop at the corner, where a man stood pacing anxiously. He was wearing muddy boots, old, faded jeans, and a worn red flannel shirt. A cigarette hung from his mouth and his hands were sunk into his pockets.

Rage rolled down his window. "You Lips?" he asked.

The man leaned down until he was at eye level with Rage. "Yeah, I'm Lips. You Mr. Williams?"

"I am. Helmut Weisskampf told you to call me?"

He took the cigarette out of his mouth and leaned on the car. "Well, not so directly, sir, if you know what I mean. He just said, if anything goes wrong, or like, if I ever couldn't find him and there was an emergency or something of that nature, that I could call Mr. Williams at the Unorthodox and ask, cuz you know him and where to find him, but only if it were the most serious of emergencies because Mr. Williams ain't no messenger service, he said. But I figured this was an emergency..."

Rage interrupted him. "Where is he now?"

Lips took a drag off of his cigarette and shook his head. "I don't know, sir. We were searching the park for some guy. Well, we found a guy that looked like the guy that Helmut said we was looking for, and they exchanged words and Helmut jumped the guy and there was a loud crack and Helmut was on the ground. He mighta been dead. I donno. I don't know if this guy broke his back or what, but he broke somethin' cuz Helmut didn't bounce back at all, just lay there still like a rock, so me and my brother took off runnin' for our lives. I mean, I know that sounds cowardly and all, but I ain't never seen the man that could take down Helmut so easy. Knock him down, maybe once or twice, but keep him down? Never seen it. Never once. I figured, if Helmut can't take him, I was gonna die, you know what I mean?"

"Shut up and get in," ordered Rage. Lips took a last drag and tossed his cigarette as he climbed in next to Tragedy. "Now, tell me where this happened."

Lips pointed the way and Rage drove to the park and onto the grass until he was stopped by a line of trees. We all got out and Lips ran cautiously to the spot of the confrontation with us behind him. On the other side of the trees was the amphitheater, a large stone structure built into the slope of the ground. Surrounding the semi-circle of stone

benches were columns and at the corners of the platform at the base were tall platforms with bronze statues on them. One was winged Victory, her arms out before her, a sword in one hand, a wreath on the other. Near her, tied to a column, was a man. Lips ran down the stairs to him while we fanned out and scanned the area with our eyes to see who might still be waiting.

"Pete! Pete, you ok?" Lips was yelling to the man tied to the column.

"Yeah, I'm ok," answered Pete hoarsely. "I didn't get very far, though. The guy tied me like a mule."

Lips began to prattle of what he had been off doing, which eventually included us and who we were. While he was talking, Rage ran the perimeter of the amphitheater to have a look. When he reached the stage, he climbed Victory and stood on her shoulders to get a better look around.

Tragedy and I were cautiously making our way down, eyes to the city. I saw a female jogger, listening to music as she ran. Awful late for that, but in the city some people are nocturnal for a dozen different reasons. A man was wandering down the sidewalk near the street to our east, but he had the uncertain swagger of a man who'd been drinking, and he was jingling the change in his pockets. There were the sounds of birds in the trees and on the sidewalk. A few were scuttling about on the columns and statues.

As I reached the bottom rows of the theater, I also noticed the smell. Smoke. On the ground in front of Pete was a small fire whose glow had died, but that was still giving off the faint hint of a bitter smoke.

I interrupted Lips, who was still talking as he worked over Pete's rope with his pocket knife. "Hey, Pete. Where did this fire come from?" Tragedy heard and came over to see.

"This is gonna sound unbelievable, but I swear this is the truth," Pete began. I took a closer look at the dull red glow and hot white ash. I saw buttons. Metal buttons, and a pair of glasses. "This was Helmut," Pete explained hesitantly.

"The guy Helmut fought with broke him up with a hatchet like he was carved outta wood and burned him right here while I watched."

Rage joined us at the small fire at our feet. "Broke him up with a hatchet?" repeated Rage.

"I swear it's the truth," Pete replied. "Helmut jumped him. I thought this guy was gonna be dead in a minute flat, but before I know it he's tossed Helmut down and whips this hatchet out from his back pocket or somewhere, and it goes into Helmut's chest with a crack and that's the last time I seen Helmut move. I think the next one took his head off, but we took off runnin' before I could be sure. He caught me with a rope 'round my neck like I was a calf at a rodeo, and dragged me back here. Tied me up."

Lips had finally gotten the ropes off and Pete stood to his feet, though it was obvious that it caused him pain even to do so. He stretched his joints a bit and continued his story. "I ain't seen a lotta men die, but I seen enough to know that this was strange. Helmut didn't bleed, even when he was busted up into pieces. Some water puddled under where he fell on the stone there, but whatever that man did to him, Helmut didn't have any blood in him to give. And he burned what was left in a little bonfire. The man was like a boyscout from hell."

Rage stared into the ashes. "You're both telling me that one man did this? One man took on Helmut and not only killed him, but did it without sustaining any injury and was then able to chase you down and tie you up?"

Pete nodded. "Yes, sir. If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe it either."

Rage turned to us. "You two, run the perimeter of the park. Look for anything and be alert."

"And look for a motorcycle with out of state license plates," interjected Pete.

Rage looked at him and waited for him to continue. He got the hint and added, "It's a big one with saddlebags on

the side. It was where he kept his fire making supplies. After he tied me up, right over what was left of Helmut, he wandered off, and then he comes riding right back here and parked it not ten feet away. After he burns Helmut up, he hopped on and rode off."

Rage looked at us again. "Keep an eye open for that and anything else." He reached into his coat and pulled out a pen and some paper as he spoke. "I'm going to talk to these two to see what else I can find out. If you hear me yell for you, come running. And stay together."

We jogged the sidewalk around the park. There were still cops out and traffic driving these streets even this late. On the sidewalks around the park, stragglers were still headed toward buses, trains, or bars. We circled the entire park, looking both around the city streets and in the shadows of the park. More joggers, more wandering city dwellers, and probably a few more guys looking to catch a cab, but nothing that seemed important.

We didn't speak. There was not much to say. If Pete was telling the truth, Skin was dead. Could any human kill Skin? And if so, could they have done it quickly and easily? Was it possible to take him that far off his guard? Or was Tragedy's dream right? Had a hunter come to this city and already claimed one of our most fierce? Nameless Freddy's game had gotten more interesting, and perhaps more dangerous.

As we came around the corner on the far north end, we heard Rage call for us. He was standing at his car, the engine already running. "We're done here. Get in." We obeyed and Rage took back to the streets in a more casual manner, driving near the speed limit. The trip back would have taken almost twenty minutes at that rate. Then I noticed that we were not headed back to the Club.

"Where are we going, Rage?" I asked.

"I'm dropping you two off at the red line. Go home. Better yet, stay together. Until we know who and what we're

dealing with, I'd recommend safety in numbers. I might also recommend not going home."

"Are we in danger?" asked Tragedy.

"I'd like to say no," answered Rage, "but it sounds like those two were telling the truth. If so, there's someone or something out there that can take down Skin. I doubt either of you would fare better than Skin in a fight. Together you'll be safer. I'm going to one of my contacts in the police to set them on finding this guy. I have a possible license plate state and number, and a description for them to go on. If he's anywhere in the city, I'll have every cop looking for him within an hour."

"Why would the cops be looking for him?" asked Tragedy. "I mean, I know he killed one of us, but he also burned what was left. Are they just going to believe you when you say he killed someone?"

"No," he replied, "they're going to believe the double homicide they will find in the park."

"Double homicide?" I asked.

"They'd seen too much anyway," he said. "And someone needed to make that Lips guy shut up."

"Rage, I need to know," said Tragedy in a whisper. "Could it be a hunter? Was Freddy right?"

Rage was quiet for a moment. "Hunters are just a legend. I've never met one. Of course we've all heard of them, but we've all heard of a lot of things that aren't true."

"You said it sounded like those two were telling the truth," she continued.

"Just because they were telling the truth," I interjected, "doesn't mean they saw what they think they saw."

"Lane's right," said Rage. "They saw something, but there's more that they didn't see. I still contend that no one person could take down Skin, not that easy. And no human, hunter or none."

"There might be more than one?" I asked.

"Not only that," Rage answered, "but it makes sense to me that they are of our kind. Only our kind could do what those guys think they saw. There are betrayers in our midst."

I looked back at Tragedy and from the look in her eyes she had arrived at the same deliberation that I had. "Friends of Freddy?" she said.

"Rage, I found something which might lead us in the right direction," I said. "I took some notebooks from Nameless Freddy's apartment. One of them has a list of phone numbers. We thought it might be connections from other cities. What if he's called someone in to, I don't know, have a game with us?"

"And kill some of us," he said. He stopped the car at the side of the road, near the entrance to the red line. "Skin was at the Quiet Group. That could be a coincidence, but it might not. I'll call the others and warn them to be on the alert. You two see if you can pull anything useful out of that list."

I nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

"If you two don't want to go home tonight, just take the red line over to the blue line and stay at the Club. Either way, be there tomorrow night. We'll have business to discuss." We got out of the car and climbed the stairs down to the red line as Rage sped off into the city.

On the platform below, we stood alone listening to the wind whistle quietly through the tunnel.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked.

"I'm not going to sleep for a few days," she said. "But I wouldn't mind being in my own place."

We rode through the tunnels in silence. What was there to say in the face of such uncertainty? A few days ago we were the gods of this world, immortal. We doled out death, but we never died. Now I had helped kill one of our own, and another, one arguably stronger than me, was gone. Destroyed by some form of man who, if not one of us, was better than a fair match. The few pieces pointed to the very

real possibility that Nameless Freddy had not only orchestrated his own destruction, but now his revenge on those who had killed him. Skin was among the strongest of us. Getting rid of him first was a wise move, but it meant the list was one shorter. With eleven of us left, I was one of those eleven. But which one? Was there an order? The game continued, but the rules were unclear. If there were rules.

We reached Tragedy's apartment by daybreak. We spent almost an hour staring into the city from the windows, each of us wondering if he was out there. We didn't know who he was. We didn't know what he wanted. We didn't know if he was alone. We had been told he was hunting one of us in particular, but had no way of knowing which one. If it was Skin he was hunting, maybe he would disappear and we would hear no more of him. If not, who else would be missing the next night when we convened at the Unorthodox? If Rage was right, there were more variables than ever.

The darkness was real, just as it always had been. Only now, there was someone else in our shadows, and these shadows were too dark even for our eyes. I was glad to be with Tragedy, and not just because I was confident in her fighting ability. Uncertainty was her guiding light, but at that point, any light was welcome, no matter how dim.



*And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom
all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that
God has given to the children of man to be busy with.
I have seen everything that is done under the sun,
and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.
What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.
Ecclesiastes 1:13-15*

CHAPTER SEVEN

CALLING OLD FRIENDS

It took my mind a good long while to grasp the idea that Skin would not be at the Club that night, nor ever again. So much of what I thought was foundational had unraveled in the past few days. The ground had crumbled under my feet. The truth we clung to was turning into the mindless jargon I always knew it to be. Being right held no comfort, even for a cynic like me.

Tragedy was restless. She paced the length of her apartment or tried to busy herself with mundane tasks. She had rid herself of her previous outfit and wrapped herself in a long black silk robe with a bright goldfish across the back. Periodically she would don a dark pair of glasses and stare out into the daylight, in case a man on a motorcycle with out of state license plates went by. Every time she caught herself doing this, she would become angry. She was angry that she

was so preoccupied with a person we didn't know for certain existed, and she was angry that we had something to fear.

She peeked out the window, through the blinds. She stepped away from them. She grabbed her sunglasses and angrily threw them across the room where they bounced sharply off of the wall. "Look at us," she growled through her teeth. "Hiding! What am I hiding from?" She looked at me, waited for a moment for me to answer, and in my silence her gaze drifted off to nowhere. She brushed her hair out of her face and cautiously went back to the window. Peering out she quietly asked herself, "What am I hiding from?" She blinked into the painful brightness outside, and reclaimed her sunglasses.

As much as I could identify with her, I wanted to be able to tell her that we had nothing to fear. I wanted to tell her that everything was all right. I wanted it to be true. And part of me wanted to comfort her. The stronger this desire grew, the more I heard Nameless Freddy's voice in my head. I chose, against my will, to keep my distance from her.

To pass the time and keep my mind off of the uncertain future, I tried to dig into Nameless Freddy's past and get some idea as to what had happened. I thought it might help us understand what we were dealing with. I poured over his notebooks, starting with the sketchbooks. There were pictures of Tragedy, of course. For some time she was his favorite subject. There were sketches of other figures I thought I recognized- Geo, Trampoline, Essence... There were drawings of some animals, though most of his animal sketches were done in blue pen in the notebooks.

I reached the last drawing and flipped absent-mindedly through the blank pages that followed. Half of the book was empty, but I flipped through it anyway. I had all day to kill. I was in no hurry.

Then I caught a scent. One of the pages I had flipped through had smelled different. It wasn't pencil like the

majority of the pages before. It wasn't quite plastic. I flipped through a handful of pages quickly and inhaled.

Crayon.

"Tragedy? You have any red wine?"

She stopped pacing and turned toward me. "Wine. Yes, I think so. I have half a bottle of Merlot. You thirsty?"

"No, I think he did it again. Like I told you, most artists practice things before they take the final run." I held a page up to her. It was solid white.

"What am I looking at?" She asked.

"White crayon."

"Little weasel..." and she was off to grab a half empty bottle from her pantry.

I tore out the page and laid it on her kitchen counter. I splashed some Merlot onto the paper and spread it around carefully with my hand. "He would have been able to see this under black light," I said.

"I didn't see any black-lights in his apartment," she said. "Did you?"

I shook my head. I hadn't, but if I had I would not have given them any thought. They might have been on the shelves with his notebooks and I would have looked right past them.

The dark red wine soaked into the paper like blood into a wedding dress. A face appeared. The face was square and he had a mustache and a beard, well trimmed by my guess, and a piercing stare. I looked at Tragedy. "Is this him? The one from your dream?"

"I think so," she answered.

I smeared the wine to the bottom of the page, and a word appeared. "Oblivion."

The artist formerly known as Finch had loved that word.

Tragedy sniffed a few more pages and found more that smelled of paraffin wax. We covered them in wine as well. One page was simply scrawled out in large letters. It

said, "Who is Matthew?" One of them simply had the name Matthew written several times. A third and fourth were the statue of Victory in the central park. The fifth was the note that he eventually wrote on the back of Tragedy's poem.

Tragedy looked over the collection with me and shook her head. "So, the hunter's name is Matthew?"

"I don't know. I guess it depends on what this was meant to be. Is he asking us who Matthew is, or did the guy in the picture ask him that?"

"I don't know anyone named Matthew," she said.

"How can you be sure?" I asked. "He might have called himself Matthew before he was Finch or Chain. Have you ever fed on anyone named Matthew?"

"I have no idea," she said. "There have been so many. How could I possibly know that? What was the name of your last prey?"

"The Tall Girl?" I thought for a moment. I remembered our meeting. I remembered her apartment. "No. I never remember their names. It's never worth it."

"Which basically tells us that we have learned nothing."

I pointed to the image of a man's face on the first sheet. "Maybe this is a better portrait of him. We should bring this to Rage. We can make copies and give them to the cops and the others at the Club."

"It's better than nothing, I guess." She sighed and walked away to lie down on the couch. She shifted, trying to get comfortable, and then got up and paced again.

I sat on the love seat against the opposite wall and grabbed the notebook with the phone numbers. There had been two pages in the back of the book, separated from his scientific observations by a handful of blank pages. Most of them were crossed out, and three were circled- one on the first page and two on the second page. In the margins he had scribbled initials. One set was DF. One set was JF. Not every number had a set of initials next to it, but all three

circled numbers did, and they were all JF. He had left no written record of what it meant. My instinct was to assume DF was Darwin Finch, but then what was JF?

There was only one way to find out what all of it meant. Ordinarily I hate cold calling anyone for any reason. Talking to humans was only for setting up a chance to feed on them. I grabbed the phone from the kitchen wall and stretched the chord into the living room so I could sit on the couch.

Tragedy, who had been staring through the blinds with dark glasses on, noticed what I was doing. "Who are you calling?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But it's, what, almost nine thirty? Whoever Freddy knew should be up by now." I started dialing, but I stopped when I saw the look on her face drop like she was going to be sick.

Out of the blue it had hit her. "Rage doesn't know that it wasn't us."

"What are you talking about?"

"Rage doesn't know who killed Skin. He thinks it was our kind, and he thinks it was someone who had taken him off guard. Skin would never suspect us, so he wouldn't be ready to defend himself if we attacked him. And no one knows where we had been when we arrived at the Club, in Skin's truck, except us."

"Why would we kill Skin?"

"It was your theory. Freddy has arranged his death and the vengeance on his killers. You knew Skin was one of them. You know who all of them are. It was me who told Rage to find him, I had the poem, you and I started this hunt for the hunter."

"And Rage hasn't seen the message on the back of the poem. I read it to him over the phone."

"Exactly," she said, "and now Rage knows you have a bag full of Freddy's notebooks."

"It does look kind of bad." I started to piece it together in my head. Freddy is seemingly obsessed with Tragedy, at least according to public observation. The two of them had spent some time together in recent weeks until her rather abrupt and public shunning of him.

Freddy pens an obvious note calling a Quiet Group on himself. He performs it at the club that Rage owns. He gives it to Tragedy, who tells Rage, knowing he will have to call a Quiet Group. I show up just in time to become a part of the Quiet Group. Rage, Skin and I find and destroy Freddy. Freddy says, before them all, that he was hoping Rage would bring me. The next day I bring Skin to Freddy's apartment. Later that night I show up in the club with Tragedy in Skin's truck, and Skin is dead. I have a bag full of memorabilia from Freddy's apartment.

If I had been Rage I would have been calling the Quiet Group on me and Tragedy.

Especially if I had arranged it.

The worry on my face must have been obvious, because it caught her attention.

"What is it? What are you thinking?"

"What if he knows we didn't do it? What if he knows because he did it?" She didn't like my train of thought, but neither did I. "You heard him. On a good day he would have trouble taking Skin in a fight, but he admitted that only one of our kind could do it. And if it was him, Skin would not have been on his guard. He would never see it coming. Rage could have dropped him if he was fast enough. Put him in a hat and a different coat and those two rednecks wouldn't have recognized him in a police line up. When we got to the club, Rage was waiting for us."

"Why would Rage kill Skin? Skin worked for him, he was a beneficial tool."

"And he was competition. As one of our kind, he was one of few who could take

Rage in a fight, and Rage knew that. As a politician, Skin had amassed more human followers than Rage. Less connected politically, yes, but Skin told us his people didn't worry themselves over the law. Skin was building a war here, and Rage has been building power within the structure that already exists. Newton was doing both. If Rage ever thought Skin was more loyal to Newton, he would have seen him as a threat. Newton might have used Skin to kill Rage and take his political influence for himself. He'd run most of the city with that move. Maybe Rage saw Skin as a threat."

"Or maybe he simply didn't like the idea of a better breed of human," she said. "They both dabbled in human affairs, and in opposite directions. Perhaps they had clashed. But, Freddy...?"

"Rage had taken him in when he came here, when he was Chain," I reminded her. "Chain didn't know who he was. He was easily influenced and unstable. If anyone could have directed that instability into a plan to kill Skin, it would be Rage. He's smart enough to do that. When Chain was still new here, Rage had you show him around."

"Yes. Rage told me to take him under my wing... I was set up?"

"I don't know. All I know is, there is good reason to think that Rage suspects us or set us up, and he knows we're together."

She finished my thought, "Which means we need to get out of here."

There was only one of our kind we could think of that had clashed with Rage enough to be safe to go to. We donned our shades and hit the underground.

After half an hour rumbling through the black tunnels on the Green line, we wound up just west of the south business district in a fifteen story building that wore its 1970's architecture with a blend of pride and disgrace in a neighborhood of buildings that had been given facelifts over

the past twenty years. The only facelift that this building had been given was the very bottom level. The sign and revolving doors were modern enough to look as though they had been accidentally installed. The interior had been given an overhaul as well, resulting in tiles and lighting fixtures that did not agree, especially with the elevators. We opted for the stairs.

On the third floor, taking up a modest wing of the building, was a small independent newspaper with almost no competition. It was called the Pythian Oracle, and it overlapped the major newspapers only in the fact that it made use of ink on paper. It had been named by the two female college students who founded it while they were still as yet journalism majors. They had each since gone on their way to other papers in other parts of the country, but the name remained after they sold it.

The Pythian Oracle's target demographic was the arts community- painters, poets, musicians, and those of our kind, most of whom fell into one or more of those categories. They covered art shows, local bands, theater performances, and various socio-politically minded groups if they did anything noteworthy, or if they bought enough advertising to be considered important. Tragedy had taken photographs for this paper many times as a way of making some quick, easy money when the need arose, or just to stave off the boredom. Every once in a while she even got to provide illustration for environmentally minded poems written by a local poet calling herself Geo. At the helm of this community gem was Essence.

As we passed the girl at the front desk, under the big mural on the wall that said "Pythian Oracle," she hollered at us that we needed to check in and tell her where we were going.

"We're seeing Essence," I said, not turning around to face her. I was in no mood for pleasantries.

"Do you have an appointment?" she demanded.

"We don't need one," said Tragedy.

"I beg your pardon, but you do!" she continued. As we rounded the corner to Essence's windowless office, she continued to follow us. "Excuse me. Excuse me!"

We entered the office and stood before her desk. Essence was staring at something amidst a pile of papers on her desk.

"Excuse me, Essence. They say they don't need an appointment, and I tried to tell them you don't have time to simply have them drop in..."

"Oh, it's quite alright, Brittney," Essence said, not looking up. "Be a dear and get me some Sushi." She looked up at us. "Sushi? Sushi? Three orders and some drinks."

Brittney exhaled angrily and marched out of the office.

Without looking up, Essence waved her directions at us. "You two, shut the door and sit." We did as she instructed. "Now," she said, folding her hands and looking up, "what brings you to my office?"

"We wanted a small, Styrofoam cup of cheap office coffee, and we thought of you," said Tragedy. Her flippant sarcasm took me off guard until I remembered, she had an audience. This was her public persona.

"Charming," replied Essence. "Now, I have a deadline coming up, as I perpetually do. So... what?"

"We need your help," I replied.

"You need my help?" she said back to me. "I hope this isn't time consuming. I'm doing the work of two people today."

"I thought that's what Diana was for," said Tragedy.

"It is," replied Essence. "She hasn't come in today."

"Did she call in sick?" asked Tragedy, a bit tongue-in-cheek.

"She didn't call in at all. That's the problem." Essence waved her hands dramatically at the pile on her desk, as though it reflected the lack of Diana. "I think she and Geo

were having one of their little gatherings in the woods last night. You know how they do that sort of thing on the weekends. But usually she still makes it in here on time. It's not like she ever sleeps. Let's be honest, we don't really need it, do we? Anyway, she hasn't come in and Geo hasn't been answering. So, I'm up to my elbows. What do you two need?"

"We may be in a bit of trouble," I answered. "If you could let us use Diana's office, that would help a great deal."

"It's got windows, but you're welcome to it. Uh, until around three, because it's also our conference room and we have a layout meeting today."

"Does it have a phone?" I asked.

"Of course it has a phone. Who are you calling?"

"I don't know," I said. "I have a list of phone numbers, and I don't know whose number they are."

"Give a copy to Meghan, across the hall. She's my research assistant. She'll find them for you. She's fantastic with finding things, people, places. Anything else?"

"Yes," I said. "It's really important that no one know where we are."

"That's fine," she said.

"I mean no one. Not even Rage," I said, careful to control my inflection. "Maybe, especially Rage."

"Please," she said with a wave of her hand. "I wouldn't take a phone call from that braggadocio, let alone call him. You think I would report you to him?" She paused and looked at us both. "What kind of trouble are you in?"

"We might not be in any trouble," I said honestly. "But until we know for sure, we're being careful."

"My lips are sealed," she said. With that she looked down at her pile and we were done. We stood to leave, and as we reached the door, Essence called, "Tragedy?"

"Yes?" Tragedy replied.

"You can have Brittney make some coffee for you. It will make her day."

"I'm sure it will," Tragedy said with a Machiavellian grin.

We barricaded ourselves in the conference room at the end of the hall. Diana's desk was as clean and organized as Essence's wasn't, everything lined up as though complicated mathematics and surveying equipment had been used. It was shoved against a wall to allow for the long table that filled most of the dull and featureless room. The blinds and thin drapes did just enough to keep the light from being painful, but we still opted for leaving the lights off and working with our tinted glasses on.

Tragedy put herself in a chair with her back to the windows and kicked her feet up onto the table. She was coddling her Styrofoam cup of coffee with both hands, a smug smile almost glowing on her face.

"You don't drink coffee," I reminded her.

"No, but I do enjoy a good piping hot cup of other people's bitter disdain," she sighed. "I was going to water the plant with this." She leaned as far back as she could and did just that.

I looked at the tall plant in the corner that was enjoying her beverage. "It's plastic," I observed.

"Even plastic plants love caffeine," she said. It was good to see her acting more like herself. The morning had been unsettling, to say the least. I had known Tragedy to face almost any situation with flippant cynical abandon, so to see her pacing her apartment in fear all morning had only compounded the bleakness of the world. Watching someone strong unable to cope with a threat gives that threat a weight and a strength it does not have on its own.

When she was done watering the plastic office plant, she dropped the cup into the wicker basket the plant was set in. "What's our game plan?" she asked, feet still on the table. "Watering the plants aside."

"I'm going to start calling some of these numbers," I said, flipping open the notebook. "You are going to look through his other notebooks and see if you can find anything useful. Look for the name Matthew, or see if he wrote down what the initials JF stand for." I tossed her the other two notebooks.

"Well, duh," she said, catching them. "John Fitzgerald. Someone blew his brains out while he was talking a leisurely drive through Texas."

"That would be JFK. This is just JF."

She shrugged and opened one of the notebooks. "Maybe he was lazy. Freddy never did have a lot of ambition."

I considered that she had a point, though not a good one.



I dialed the first number that he had circled and prepared to sound casual and friendly, and my surroundings gave me some inspiration. It rang a few times, and then a chipper woman's voice greeted me.

"Good morning, thank you for calling Saint Anne's, how can I help you this morning?"

A church? Even with no expectations, this was weird. "Uh, yes, hello," I stuttered. "I'm calling from the Pythian Oracle, and I'm following up on a piece one of our writers

started some time ago. I was wondering if you might be able to help me.”

“I’ll certainly do my best!” she replied. I could actually hear the smile on her face. I instinctively rolled my eyes. “What do you need to know?” she joyfully asked.

“Well, that is the difficult part, ma’am,” I said. “See, he left our employ, and his notes are a bit confusing. He was researching vampires and the mythology of vampire hunters.”

“You don’t say?” she chimed in.

“I believe so. And I need to know what he might have learned from you.”

“Well, he didn’t learn anything from me. Wait just a moment and let me see if any of the others here recall talking to, uh, what was his name?”

“There is another snag, ma’am. He publishes under a variety of different names, so I’m not sure which one he might have given you. See if Darwin Finch rings a bell.”

She put down the phone and I heard her talking to some other women. I covered the receiver with my hand. “Find anything good?”

Tragedy looked up from the notebook. “Good? No. The Nameless Wonder was not the most brilliant wordsmith. He rhymes, he doesn’t rhyme. Death, love, oblivion. Nothing new yet.”

A new voice came through the phone. “Hello? This is Phyllis.”

“Hello, Phyllis. This is Lane at the Pythian Oracle.”

“Good day, Lane. Yes, I talked to a Mr. Finch several weeks ago. He said his name was Judas Finch, not Darwin, though I imagine either would have stuck in my memory as easily.” She chuckled quietly.

“I imagine so.” Judas? Why would he name himself Judas and then start calling churches? Maybe he was still trying to be remembered. Obviously it did the trick. “Were you able to help him on his quest?”

"If memory serves, I put him in contact with a member of our congregation, a retired priest, Father Lawrence. I had been told by Father Lawrence that he had sent some of his best research to Mr. Finch."

"What kind of research ma'am?"

"I'm sure I don't know the details of the matter, but Father Lawrence has spent many, many years collecting old books and stories on vampire mythology. He said he had been tracing the stories back to their origins, and it was this matter that Mr. Finch was most interested in."

"Yes ma'am, that is correct."

"Did he receive the package that Father Lawrence sent him?"

"Package?" I scanned the two pages of numbers for anything that might tell me about this and found nothing.

"Yes, Father Lawrence had me make copies of some of his research and send them to Mr. Finch. Do you know if he received it?"

"I'm sorry, he left me no indication that he had. Would it be possible to speak to Father Lawrence about the materials he had sent?"

"I can't say, but I'm sure that if he is available, he would be happy to speak to you about it. It is a passion of his. Shall I give you his number?"

I told her she shall and I wrote it down. I hung up and began searching the collection of numbers Finch had written down to see if I already had it. I did. On the second page he had circled it and put JF next to it. Judas Finch. What was the game Judas was playing?

"What did we learn?" asked Tragedy over the top of the notebook in her hands. "Our nameless friend has another name to add to the list," I told her. "Apparently these people know him as Judas Finch. That's probably the JF in the margins."

"Judas? Cute. And who was our little Judas calling?"

"This one was a church, and the next one was a priest," I told her.

"He's named himself Judas and started calling churches? That sounds like a prank call."

"Almost," I agreed. "He found a priest who collects vampire legends. She said he was trying to trace the origins of the stories."

"Was Judas Darwin Finch asking for information or selling it to him for thirty pieces of silver?"

"She said the priest had sent Finch a package of information. I have the priest's number. I can ask him if it went both ways."

"Judas? Wait a minute..." She started flipping through one of the notebooks. "Here you are. He uses the name in one of his short poems. Listen to this:

*I am become death, destroyer of worlds
I am become Judas, Betrayer of all
The words of the goddess have been a light to my path
I am betrayal and I call down his wrath
I will bring oblivion to us all."*

"He had become Judas," I said in response.

"I don't know," she said. "I think I liked his Quiet Group one better. Do you think it means something?"

"If it means anything at all, my guess is that he took on the Judas, betrayal persona, and Gaia has something to do with it. He had been out to her nature retreats a few times. Maybe something she said stuck with him."

"Or maybe," she countered, "she was so irritating in the woods that he decided to kill all of us. Diana's missing. Maybe Gaia will disappear too."

"Or maybe she's in on the game. She was the only one of us that was accepting and excited about Freddy Judas Finch's exit from this life. Maybe she was expecting it. Maybe she talked him into it."

"Why would she do that? And why would he listen to her?"

"I'm just thinking out loud," I said, "but we know that Freddy wasn't the strongest person, and weak insecure people are drawn to her like sharks to an injured surfer."

"Like Diana."

I didn't understand. "What about Diana?"

"That's why she's part of that stupid cult," Tragedy explained. "You don't have to talk to her for long to see that, like Chain, Diana is looking for someone to be. She's latched onto the two strong females of our kind that can use her. She wanted us to be friends, her and me, but I didn't need a pet, and I didn't need a student and I couldn't think of another use for her. She wasn't good for much else. Geo can use her, so she does. Essence can use her, so she does. Diana latches onto strong women because she isn't one."

"Freddy, when he was Chain, tried to do that with Rage and then Skin, but they both pushed him away because he was of no use to them. That's probably how I got stuck with him."

"And then you pushed him away," I added. She nodded in affirmative. "I hadn't thought of that," I admitted. "It made Finch bitter. Do you think it made Diana bitter?"

"Probably. Why? You don't think she could have killed Skin?"

"No, of course not," I said. "I'm just getting to the point where the only of our kind that I don't suspect is us, and frankly, I'm not too sure about me."

"Just keep calling. Let's get our hands on some actual information to add to our funderful day of speculation."

She was right. I dialed Father Lawrence.

The voice on the other end was a gruff, slightly muffled voice. He started by clearing his throat before he even spoke. "Hello, this is Father Lawrence."

“Good afternoon Father Lawrence, this is Lane from the Pythian Oracle, and I have been told by Phyllis that you have been corresponding with one of our writers. His name is Judas Finch?”

“Ah, yes. Judas. How is the boy?”

I paused while I tried to think of what to say. I could think of no reason that his death should be a secret. I also didn't want to talk about it. On the other hand, if he thinks Finch is still alive, he might want to talk to him, or wonder why I don't. I chose the path of least resistance- sleight of hand avoidance. “Well, the thing is, sir, Judas Finch is no longer with us.”

“No longer with you?” he parroted in confusion. “Where did you say you were from?”

“I am from the Pythian Oracle. He was writing an article for our paper about vampire legends, and we were told that you had sent him some information.”

“What happened to Judas?”

I sighed. “There was a... fire. In his apartment. He died a few days ago.”

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that, son.” he said. “Was it an accident?”

Why did he want to know? I rolled my eyes and tried to move on, this time with a blatant lie. “We believe so. And, as for his article that you were helping him with, all I have left is a few notebooks and not much to go on.”

“That is too bad.” he said, and then paused again to clear his throat. “He seemed a little lost. Judas wasn't even his real name.”

“That's right sir. It was his pen name. A lot of authors write under assumed names.”

“Do you know his real name?”

Now I was stuck. What had he told this man? I was going to guess, but between Darwin and Chain, I had nothing to go on that would even sound legitimate. “No, sir. I didn't know him that well. We were just... professional colleagues.”

"I asked him his real name," Father Lawrence continued in his slow cadence. He spoke like a man who was in no hurry. "He admitted, you see, that Judas was not his real name. Not a lot of babies get named Judas these days. Not for the past two thousand years, I said to him. And he told me what you said, about authors using false names. So, I asked him his real name. He said it wasn't important. I said, no, I suppose it was not, but if we were going to be friends, I just thought we could know each other on a first name basis. He just got real quiet, and I felt like I had stepped on a nerve, you know? When a man is upset, he doesn't like to, uh, show emotion, if you know what I mean, son."

"Yes, sir."

"So I said, I did not mean to overstep my boundaries, but I am a priest. It's in my nature to be relational. I can call you whatever you like. And he says, I don't think we can be friends, so you can call me Mr. Finch and I can call you Mr. Lawrence. I told him, you are welcome to call me whatever you wish. I will call you Mr. Finch if you prefer, but you are still welcome to call me Father Lawrence, or just Lawrence. And I only meant that, seeing how we share a passion in the literature and mythology of vampires that we could be friends over it. And he says, he didn't think that was allowed, since I was a Catholic Man, and he was not."

Father Lawrence had missed the implication that I had caught. Finch was telling him that he was neither Catholic nor a human.

He was probably right. Our kind probably would not have allowed it. Utilitarian relationships with humans were allowed, like the ones Essence had with the girls that worked for her- Meghan and Brittney. Personal relationships had to be kept within our own kind. It was safer. It was the way of our kind. And even between our kind, we usually had a use for the other person.

"I told him it didn't make no difference to me," he continued. "Now, I didn't ask if he was an atheist or Muslim

or what, and if he felt we could not be friends, I said I understood. But I told him I would still enjoy sharing my research with him, and I offered to pray for him as well. He said he didn't know if it would do him any good, but he didn't tell me not to. We only spoke a few times, but I felt he was without hope. He wanted no talk of God, and I respected that, though I can't help it sneaking into my conversations as I am a priest these past forty some years, until my health made me slow it down, but he really seemed as though he believed some of these vampire stories. He wanted to believe in something. Whenever I hear of people talking about Vampires, Ghosts, or UFO's, I can't help thinking, why do they want so much to believe in these things, yet they so much do not want to believe in God, even if you offer evidence, uh, reasons to believe. Do you believe in God, son?"

I shot a look of panic at Tragedy. She cocked an eyebrow in question, but I had no way of explaining it to her. What was I supposed to say to that? "I am... undecided about that sir."

"That's fine son, nothing to be ashamed of." I guess he heard the panic in my voice. "But if I may, being undecided is a fine place to start, but it's a lousy place to end up, especially about the important questions."

"Yes sir, and that is sort of why I am calling," I said, desperate to get him back on track. "I need to know what it is you and Mr. Finch talked about, when he called about vampire legends. What was the package you sent him?"

"Oh, it was a little this and that," he said, almost as if he knew the perfect answer to frustrate me. "There was a focus to his questions, and I tried to pull out my best information concerning those. He asked a lot about the Vampire hunters and their methods of killing vampires."

"What specifically, sir?" I asked. Finally, we were getting somewhere.

"He wanted to know the origins. Now, the origins of a legend is a fascinating subject to me particularly, and all

facets of the vampire legends seem to have some root in some historical event or cultural norm. Well, the real old stories I mean, not the Hollywood versions that get put out every couple years. Uh, Mr. Finch wanted to know if there were ever real vampire hunters. People who chased them, killed them, what have you."

"Like Van Helsing," I interjected.

"Yes, like that." He cleared his throat again and I mouthed to Tragedy, "This guy talks a lot."

"Anything good?" she whispered.

"We're getting there," I mouthed back.

"Among the documents I sent him were some personal letters I received from a missionary friend some years back. He was building churches in a tiny village surrounded by communism, but up in the mountains enough to stay isolated. Well, anyway, he knows that I study these things, and as he travels he asks questions. He met a man who claimed to know real vampire hunters. A family of them, he believes. When I told this to Mr. Finch he was very interested. He insisted that I put him in contact with my friend, and so I gave him the phone number and sent his letter along with the other information I had copied for him. I don't know if he ever contacted my friend."

"Finch was trying to find real vampire hunters?" I asked. Tragedy shot me a dark look and set down the notebook she had been reading.

"He did not say as much, but I imagine that he was interested in finding that family, if my friend could have connected him with the man who originally claimed to have met them."

"Do you think he succeeded?" I asked. If I sounded worried by the idea, he either ignored it or took it was the sort of excitement a small newspaper should have over a unique story like that.

"Oh, I couldn't say. It's been a few weeks since I last talked to him. If he had, perhaps you should check his mailbox. They might have sent something to you."

Or someone. Once again I felt as though my feet were planted firmly in midair.

"Do you think these vampire hunters are real? I mean, was the story your friend heard true?"

"I couldn't say." He replied. "Naturally, I have always meant to follow up on that, and I started to once or twice, but I never got far on account of my responsibilities and my health. Perhaps I shall go and see for myself someday. But I figure, it is as likely as the stories of there being vampires in the first place."

"And how likely is that?" I asked.

"I don't know that either, son. But I always like to say, if no one ever drank blood, the Bible wouldn't bother telling us not to."

This was news. Were there vampires mentioned in the Bible? "I was unaware that the Bible condemned the drinking of blood."

"Oh, in quite a few places. Of course the drinking of blood is mentioned as a metaphor for killing. Persons responsible for the death of the innocent are said to drink their blood. But, for instance, Leviticus chapter seven, verse twenty seven says, 'if anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from his people.' It was a literal forbidding of man consuming blood. And then again in chapter seventeen, verses ten and eleven say, 'Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats any blood—I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.' You see, there was a reason.

"The blood is the life of the creature, so to drink its blood almost always means killing it, and human life is

sacred to God. As for animals, the blood has one purpose to God. It was the sacrifice that atoned, that is, paid for the sins of the people. It was sacred. Meat you could eat, but blood was payment for sins.”

I wondered if Magenta and Crimson had any idea that this was part of Jewish history. Their stupid band name suddenly gained a wider interpretive possibility. “That’s very interesting sir. Would it be possible for me to get the number of your friend in Germany so I can follow up with Finch’s work?”

“Oh, yes, I suppose that would be alright. Oh, I see I am going to be late for a luncheon date if I don’t get going. I need to search for that number anyway. Could you call me back in a few hours, maybe after four, and I shall have it for you then?”

“That would be fine, sir. Thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome, Lane,” he said. Just before I could work in a salutation, he spoke again. “Say, Lane?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Can I pray for you Lane?”

I hesitated, but could think of no objection. “That would be fine sir. Frankly, I could use a little help around here these days.”

He chuckled and cleared his throat again. “Then I will be sure to do that. Good day, son.”

I hung up to find that Tragedy was still watching me. “I’m glad you made that call from here instead of my apartment.”

“You afraid he’d call you?”

“No, I’m afraid I couldn’t afford the phone bill. What was all of that about? And did I hear you say he was looking for vampire hunters?”

“This is every bit as good as the gossip written on the walls in a public bathroom,” I said, “but this priest says he has a friend who met a guy who knows a family of vampire hunters.”

"So, Finch found a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy..."

"Right. He says Finch's main line of question was hunters and their manner of killing us."

That struck a synapse in Tragedy's head somewhere. She grabbed the notebook with the animal testing he had been recording and started flipping through it.

"What are you searching for?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "I had skimmed this book. You already told me about it. Animal research. How they taste, yadda, yadda. But what I hadn't thought of... why was he researching plants and animals? Why the study and self examination?"

I shrugged. "Why not? He didn't have a lot else to do. Maybe he took the Darwin name and decided just to roll with the character."

"Why not is because our kind frowns on the study of vampires. You know this as well as I do. We don't need medicine. We only need human blood. Why would any one of our kind study himself? Especially one like Finch, one who wanted to die?"

I began to see where she was going. "He wasn't looking to prolong his life. He was looking for a way to end it."

"And it's not just suicide," she pointed out. "He found his way out. He was looking for a way to kill a vampire, and then he went looking for a hunter."

"But he didn't go looking," I said, on her mental trail. "He stayed here and sought one out. He wanted to bring one here."

"This," she said, holding up the notebook, "is the scientific pursuit of one of us trying to kill those like us."

"He is become death," I said, repeating the lines she had read me from his poem.

"And like Skin always used to say, when science fails, people turn to religion."

"He is become Judas. The betrayer. Then the goddess lit his path."

"Geo," she said, shutting the notebook. "It's time to see what she might have said to inspire our little poet parakeet."

I went into Essence's office with Tragedy close on my heels. She was still shuffling pages from one pile to another, and then back again in what appeared to be a one player chess game that she was both cheating at and losing.

"How was your coffee?" she said.

"I watered your plant with it," answered Tragedy. She stopped and looked up. "What plant?"

"The plastic one," I told her.

"Oh," she said. "Well, someone needed to. What do you need now?"

"We need to find Geo," I replied. "When did you last try and contact her?"

"Let's see... four or five hours ago I suppose. Try her apartment. She might be home now, though if she is I would like to know where Diana is. I haven't had a minute to eat my sushi." She tapped one of the sushi-to-go boxes with her pen. "These are yours by the way."

I looked around to make sure no one was listening. "You eat sushi?" I whispered. "Well, I mean, you eat?"

"No, of course not," Essence said. "I eat like I smoke. Sometimes you have to choke one down to keep up appearances. Try it sometime. It won't kill you."

"Speaking of things killing us," Tragedy interjected abruptly, "we need to find Geo. Can we have her contact info?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said Essence. "It's on Diana's rolodex."

"Her what?" asked Tragedy.

Essence dropped her head to the side in disbelief. "It's a little wheel made of note cards. Next to her phone."

"I know what she means," I said to Tragedy. I gestured to Essence, not certain how to phrase this next request. "We may also need to borrow your car."

"I'll give you tokens for the subway," Essence said curtly.

"We might be in a hurry," said Tragedy in reflection of Essence's mood.

"Then you might want to run," Essence spat back. "It means less time in the sun. I can get you a sweatband so you look like you're exercising," she continued. "It's very popular with the ones who look your age. You'll fit right in."

I looked at Tragedy's clothing, black lace and bits of chrome, and she looked at mine. Dressed mostly in black, and in clothing clearly not meant for more exertion than riding an elevator, we would only be drawing attention to ourselves. Of course, she could run in platform boots, but that would make it all the more noteworthy to the eyes on the street. In the awkward silence, Meghan crossed the hall to join us.

"Excuse me, Lane? I looked up all of those numbers you gave me." She handed me the copy she had made of the pages from the notebook. "Most of them are local, but as the list goes on, it gets farther away. I wrote the locations in the margin and names wherever I found them. A few were only identifiable by area code, so they may have been private numbers, or cell phones."

"Thank you, Meghan," I said to her. "You are as valuable as you are lovely."

"You're very welcome." She blushed and spun on her heels to head back into her office. Tragedy and Essence gave me a blank stare.

"What?" I asked.

"Is it compulsive," asked Tragedy, "or did you two have a moment together?"

I shrugged, unable to answer. "It's a habit I guess. Sometimes it helps."

"This is charming," said Essence, "but I do have things to accomplish before three."

"Say, I have a great idea," said Tragedy. "You're busy and would be greatly helped if we could find Diana for you. How about we borrow your car for a few minutes so we can go to Geo's place and see if she knows where Diana is?"

"Or," said Essence, growing annoyed, "you could walk down the hall and call her."

Tragedy looked at me, but I was short of witty comebacks. She sighed heavily and shut the door to her office. "Lane, we need to tell her."

"Tell me what?" asked Essence.

"The reason we don't want to call Geo," said Tragedy, "is we don't want to give her a head start if she decides to run."

"Run? From you? And why would she run?" asked Essence. "I thought it was the two of you who were in trouble?"

"Essence," I said, "Skin is dead. He was destroyed last night in the central park." Essence looked up and dropped her sunglasses to look in my eyes. "Not another Quiet Group?" she said somberly. "Was it?"

I shook my head. "No. To be honest, we don't really know who did it. Two human witnesses said it was one person. They think it was human, but of course Rage thinks only one of us could have done it."

"Who are these witnesses?" Essence demanded.

"It doesn't matter," replied Tragedy. "Rage killed them both."

"Of course he did," she said, repositioning her dim eyewear. "Skin destroyed," she said quietly to herself. "Who could have done such a thing? He was a machine. A weapon. Was it one of us that did it?"

"We don't know," I said. "There seems to be only one of us who knew, and he's dead too."

"Nameless Freddy," added Tragedy. "It seems he is playing some game with us from the other side. He wants us to think there is a Hunter in the city."

"A hunter? A Vam...!" she caught herself and continued in hushed tones. "Vampire hunter? Here? Is that even possible?"

Tragedy shook her head and replied, "All we have right now are questions. But old Freddy has left a muddled network of clues, one of which leads to Geo. If she has something to do with this, we want to talk it out in person. Otherwise, she'll disappear into nowhere pretty fast. That's why we want to take your car."

"If Geo had something to do with Skin's death," said Essence, beginning to put the pieces together, "then either Diana is with her in this..."

"Or," said Tragedy, completing the thought, "she's dead too. Someone killed Skin. We don't know who will be next."

"Or who may have already been next," I added.

"Let me ask you again," she said. "What kind of trouble are you two in? Why are you hiding from Rage?"

"Here's the tangled web," I said. "The truth is, we have no idea what the truth is."

"That's profoundly metaphysical," quipped Essence.

"But two possibilities exist," I continued, "which both fit the facts as we know them. In one, Rage looks at all of the facts and realizes that they point to us being the ones who killed Skin. In the other, he killed Skin and is setting us up to take the blame. Either way, we want to figure out the truth before we're met by a Quiet Group."

"I can understand why," she said. She reached to her rolodex and flipped through it. She tore out a card and handed it to me. As I was looking at it, she was digging in her desk. The card said "Geo," and it listed all of her contact information. Over the top of the card I saw her keys fly to

Tragedy. "Be back by five," she ordered. "And of course you will give me a full report on anything you find."

"Are we going to make the front page?" asked Tragedy.

"You know what they say," replied Essence. "If it bleeds, it leads."

"Our kind doesn't bleed," I observed.

Essence put up her hands. "Ah, well. There goes the front page. Now get going. And be careful with my car."

*"What have you done? Listen!
Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.
Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground,
which opened its mouth to receive
your brother's blood from your hand."
Genesis 4:10-11*

CHAPTER EIGHT

HAND OF THE GODDESS

Naturally, Essence's car had darkly tinted windows. It was a sleek, German manufactured machine of speed and elegance with leather interior. It still had that new car smell tainted only slightly by the smell of cigarettes.

Tragedy insisted on driving and I could think of no reason to object, besides which, she had the keys. We tore out of the parking deck much faster than was necessary. Neither of us said anything, but once out in the open, we were both watching for motorcycles with out of state license plates. Despite the distraction of a tidal wave of uncertainty, there was still the threat that the original story was true. Somewhere on these streets- anywhere- could be a man capable of destroying Skin. I could not decide if that was better or worse than the alternative where Rage killed him and was conspiring against us. There is a time when having a choice brings little relief.

Like many of our kind, Geo lived in a small apartment that differed from a college dorm mainly in the existence of a private bathroom. The exterior was a nondescript brown brick, with a touch of flourish between the first and second floor and then purely utilitarian design for the two floors above that. The entrance was in a tiny yet decorative courtyard shared with two other main entrances.

We found a parking space on the block just east of the building, out of the line of sight of anyone looking out the window from that building. We didn't know if Geo would recognize Essence's car, but we agreed that it was best not to risk giving her the advanced warning.

The street was lined with trees, which left us walking in the shade. This reduced the pain of so much sunlight into a manageable burning sensation.

"Here's my plan," I said to her as we walked up the sidewalk from where the car was parked. "I'll go up the back fire escape, and you can call her from the front entrance. If she buzzes you up, you can let me in. If she tries to run, I'll get her at the back door."

"And here's my plan," she replied. "Stay right here for a moment."

I stopped walking and watched her head toward the entrance. As she approached the walk into the courtyard, she stopped and said, "Hello handsome!" She disappeared around the corner.

From somewhere out of my line of sight came the sound of a man standing in the courtyard. He greeted her awkwardly with, "Uh, hi."

"Can I bum one of those off of you?" she asked him. "Sure," he replied.

"Do you live here?" she asked him as his lighter flickered on.

"Yeah," he replied. "I do. Where do you..." and then there was the sound of a coconut being hit with a brick.

Around the corner came Tragedy, cigarette in her mouth and keys jingling in her hand. She flicked the cigarette into the street and nodded at me to follow her.

Around the corner I saw the guy whose keys were in Tragedy's hand. He had landed almost upright in his university t-shirt, sitting against the wall next to the door, slumped over with a drunk look, his mouth hanging open. His lit cigarette was still wedged between his fingers.

She unlocked the door and then tossed the keys onto the smoking guy's lap. We ascended the steep narrow stairs to the third floor and found the number that had been on the card Essence had given me. At the door, I pulled the card out of my pocket to double check the address. I showed it to Tragedy and she nodded, and then pressed her finger against her lips to tell me to remain quiet. So far her plan was working well enough, so I did as instructed.

Tragedy rapped quietly on the door, and then, in a husky voice that sounded like an old woman, she said, "Barbara? Are you in sugar? Babs, honey, it's Emma."

I gave her the thumbs up. It was a convincing impression. Somewhere inside we could hear the sound of someone shuffling around. There was no motion toward the door, so she tried it again.

Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock.

"Barbara? You in Sugah? Barbara?"

Knock, knock, knock.

From inside I heard an exasperated sigh. "You have the wrong apartment." It was Geo's voice.

Tragedy looked at me. I nodded for her to continue.

Knock, knock, knock, knock.

"Babs. Come on now. This pie needs to be put in the refrigerator. Don't make me stand here all day."

Knock, knock, knock.

Another exasperated sigh. Footsteps. Tragedy adjusted her stance as the footsteps approached the door. I expected that she was waiting for the door to open. I was

wrong. When the footsteps had reached the door, there was the slight metallic sound of a hand grasping the doorknob. Geo never got the chance to turn the handle.

Tragedy threw both of her fists into the door so hard, it broke all of the hinges, tore through the frame where the bolt was still holding the door closed, and it flew strait into the apartment with Geo behind, and then underneath it. Before the door or Geo had settled on the floor, Tragedy sprung after them both, like a lioness on a gazelle, and landed on the door. She flung the door aside and grabbed the still stunned Geo by the throat and lifted her off the ground.

"Hello, Babs," she said with her teeth bared. She shoved Geo into the nearest wall and held her pinned there.

I walked in after them and retrieved the door. "Geo," I said in greeting. "We need to talk to you. I suggest you simply answer our questions honestly and don't do anything stupid, like trying to run, or I'll let Tragedy tear your head off and burn your remains. Are we clear?" I jostled the door back into its frame as best as I could.

"Yes," said Geo, still a little wide eyed. "I understand. Can she put me down now?"

I nodded to Tragedy and she lowered Geo until her feet were touching the ground again. "One of our kind was destroyed last night," I said to her, "and we think you can help us figure out what happened."

Some of her fear drained away into a pitiable countenance. Her eyes fell to the floor and she shrugged. "I don't have any answers for you," she said quietly. "I was there. I saw it happen, and all I have are questions. It was terrible."

"You were there?" asked Tragedy.

"You saw it happen?" I added in confusion. "Did you see who did it? Did you get a good look at the guy who killed him?"

By the look on her face it was Geo's turn to be confused. "Him? Him who?"

"Skin!" Tragedy yelled. "Did you get a good look at the guy who killed Skin? Was it one of our kind?"

There was a deafening silence as she looked back and forth between us. "Skin is dead?" she asked, more to the floor than to either of us. "Someone killed Skin?"

"Geo," I said, and waited for her eyes to meet mine. "Who did you think we were talking about?"

"Phoebe," she said. "my Phoebe..."

Tragedy tightened her grasp on Geo and pulled her close. Through her teeth she demanded to know, "You watched Diana die last night? Diana is dead?"

Geo dropped her eyes again. "Yes! I watched it happen." Geo took a moment to compose herself, but this only angered Tragedy. She slammed Geo's head into the wall, denting the plaster deeply and causing a few gilded images of Hindu gods to fall to the floor.

"Keep talking you flake!" she ordered Geo. "What happened to Diana?"

"We...we were meeting a couple of humans," stammered Geo, "at Devil's Lake, at sunset like we usually do." Tragedy loosened her grip, but stayed close as Geo continued her story.

"One of her jobs is to build the bonfire. You've both seen it. We enter, she pours the powder on the wood, which she pre soaks in lighter fluid or something, and it burns explosively. It's a nice dramatic effect. She gets there an hour before I do and builds it and makes any other preparations we might need. Usually she's waiting for me by Demon Rock. There's plenty of shade there, even in the afternoon.

"Last night she wasn't there, so when the humans arrived I took them in myself, to the clearing. There was the wood for the bonfire, in the middle of the clearing, under a deep and darkening blue sky, and sitting on top of it, cross legged like some little Buddhist monk, was Phoebe. She was wrapped in a sheet of white tulle. Nothing else."

Geo shook her head and slid to the floor where she sat nearly on Tragedy's boots, staring blankly across the room as she spoke. "Oh, Lane, you know that wouldn't keep the sun off of her. It was practically transparent." Geo stared off, seeing it again in her mind. "She was all gray and white. Splintered, like an old chair that had been left in the yard for years. Her color was gone. She was brittle. Oh, Lane, she had been there for hours."

"Why?" demanded Tragedy. "What was holding her there?"

"Nothing." Geo shook her head. "She had built the pile of wood, and apparently just sat there until I arrived. She just sat there. I can't imagine the pain of it. All of that afternoon sun, not a cloud in the sky."

"When we walked into the clearing, just as the sun was going down, the humans thought she was a sculpture. They didn't even mistake her for one of their own. I didn't recognize her. When I approached, she opened her eyes, the humans gasped, and I just stared. What could I say? I just, whispered her name. She said, "I've been waiting for you. You said you always took it for granted that we were immortal because you never saw one of us die." And then she poured the flash powder on herself. She said, "I'm following Finch into the next life. Perhaps I will be welcomed by the embrace of mother earth." Well, I tried to talk her out of it. She wasn't beyond healing. "We'll feed on all of them tonight," I said. "That much blood can undo some of this damage." She didn't listen. "Finch found a way to be noticed. To be remembered. Now you will never forget me, because I will be a constant reminder that you are mortal." She ignited her lighter. I didn't even see it in her hand until she lit it. "No!" I said. "I am your goddess and I order you to stop this! I need you here to serve me!" She said, "I didn't betray you, but I can't save you. And I can't worship you anymore." "I am your goddess!" I told her. She just smiled and said, "If you're really a goddess, then you can bring me back from the dead." And she lit herself."

I could see Tragedy's emotion on her face. Her anger had been overcome by horror as Geo melted on the floor. Geo was shaking as she concluded her story.

"The flames erupted, all around her, and she screamed." Geo was still watching the image in her head as she talked. "She was so brittle. It consumed her so fast. But the sound of her screaming, even for just a minute, has been haunting me like nothing I have ever seen. When the humans die, it's just the food chain. It's a hawk on a mouse. It's a fox on a rabbit. We feed on them. But I've never seen one of us die. I've never heard one of us scream like that."

"I have," I said. Freddy was silenced quickly by Rage and Skin, but the sound was still in my memory like a splinter I couldn't pull out.

"How do we know she's telling the truth?" Tragedy asked. Geo looked up, pulled suddenly out of her recollection, seemingly hurt by the suggestion, but Tragedy did have a point.

"At least we can't possibly be blamed for this one," I offered.

"But maybe she can," added Tragedy. "If she drove fast enough, she could have been in the city in time to kill Skin."

"By herself?" I asked. Tragedy was silent. There was obviously a piece missing.

"What happened to Skin?" Geo asked, almost in a whisper.

"Put her on the couch," I said. Tragedy picked up Geo and tossed her onto the couch against the far wall. For the first time I surveyed the room. The walls and surfaces were covered mainly in religious artifacts. Buddhist, Shinto, Hindu, and a few African tribal pieces. Most of them could be bought at any number of trendy home decorating shops. There were candles everywhere, some large ones just sitting by themselves, and the fireplace against the back wall was full of old wine bottles with candles sticking out of the tops.

The couch was a deep red and made a nice contrast to the light green fabric Geo was draped in. If anyone would have dressed with her furniture in mind, it was Geo.



I sat on the coffee table Geo had just been thrown over and pulled out one of the notebooks from the messenger bag I was wearing. “These notebooks belong to our recently departed friend, Nameless Freddy,” I said.

“AKA Chain,” interrupted Tragedy from her seat next to Geo, “AKA Finch, AKA Darwin Finch, AKA Judas Finch, AKA The artist formerly known as Freddy Darwin Judas Finch the fourth.” Her voice carried anger which darkened with each name she said.

“And something we found in here,” I said tapping the cover of the notebook, “seems to say you have had some memorable conversations with our Nameless friend. I want you to think back to any time you spoke with him, and try to remember the times either of you mentioned Oblivion, Death, Betrayal, Judas, or vampire hunters. Can you do that?”

“But what happened to Skin?” asked Geo. “You said someone killed him? What happened? Last night? He was killed last night?”

As Geo was saying these things, Tragedy grabbed a small idol Geo had bought at the mall from where it was sitting on the end table next to the couch. She held it up to Geo, and tore it's hand off. Geo froze and watched her, unsure what to say about the destruction of her home effects. Tragedy held the hand before Geo's face for a moment, and then tossed the hand away. Wordlessly she placed the statue back where it had been sitting.

Then she grabbed Geo's arm with both hands at her wrist and squeezed until I heard something crack. With an audible gasp Geo winced and bent toward it. "I suggest," Tragedy growled, "that you focus. He asked you a question."

Geo stared wide-eyed at her hand, firmly held by Tragedy, and nodded. "Finch. Yes, he came to talk to me. A retreat. In the woods. It was a week or two before you came out, Lane. When I introduced you to, what's her name, the tall girl?

"We fed on one of the worshippers, like we do occasionally, and he asked me some questions. He wanted to talk alone, so I had sent Phoebe off to the camp to tend to the others. He asked me what I thought about our origins. Where we had come from. I started to tell him about the birth of life from the Earth Mother, and he... well, it wasn't what he wanted to hear."

"Imagine that," said Tragedy. "Continue."

"Yes, so, he asked about the legends. Dracula, the old stories. And the hunters. He asked about them. He wanted to know who they were. Who they had been and if they still exist. The Hounds of Heaven."

"What is that?" I asked. "Hounds of heaven?"

Geo looked at her arm again, and then back to me. "The old stories, the ones we used to tell ourselves, did include the hunters. You know how the older ones used to think of us as the gods of hell. It's one of the reasons I chose Gaia, a goddess, as a persona. We used to imagine ourselves

as being above the humans, not just as more evolved like Skin thought, but as gods... or demons.

"I didn't want to be thought of as being from hell, so I chose to connect myself with the earth, and life, you know? Certainly our true selves are a matter to be feared, but I wanted something that would draw the humans in. I chose to be a goddess, and a goddess of the Earth. I wanted to represent life to them, even if I am death to them. It's yin and yang kind of thing. Zen like, you know? Also, I think the Earth AHHHHH!"

There was a slight cracking noise coming from her wrist under Tragedy's hands. Geo winced and leaned toward her arm. She grabbed at Tragedy's fingers with her free hand, to no avail.

"Focus," said Tragedy. "The Hounds of Heaven?"

Geo nodded and began again. "They were hunters. They weren't our kind, but they seemed to be more than just human. One of our kind once told me that the legend of, what's his name who chased Dracula?"

"Van Helsing," I told her.

"Yes, they said his story had been made to downplay any power he might have had, but to cover the truth. The hunters, they were something to be feared. They had swords of fire and rode the most powerful horses. The great hunter was called the Hound of Heaven. He would chase his prey, us, as though he could smell us from miles off. Running did no good. He could smell us like we can smell the humans. And since we thought of ourselves as the gods of hell, obviously he was from heaven, sent to destroy us.

"I've heard his touch burned like the sun. I've heard his sword can cut through our kind like cutting through a cloud of ash. They say the last thing you see before he destroys you is the reflection of your sins in his eyes, and it breaks your heart, and you want to die. Were you to look into his eyes and live, you would soon be begging to be killed."

"Is any of this real?" asked Tragedy. "Can this stuff seriously be real?"

"Why not?" I asked her. "We are."

"I've known these stories for so many years," said Geo, mostly to herself. "They haunt my dreams sometimes. Those eyes. All I know is, when I see them," she paused and looked up at me, "if I ever see them, I'll know who he is. I'll know his eyes from my nightmares."

I dug into the bag and pulled out one of Finch's white crayon drawings. I held it to her. "Is this the guy?"

She leaned away from it instinctively. She stared silently for a moment, and then leaned in closer. "Who is he?" she asked quietly.

"We don't know," Tragedy answered her. "That was drawn by Finch, then painted on his wall in blood. I think I've seen him in my dreams. How about you?"

"I... I don't know." Geo stuttered. It wasn't a denial, and to be fair, it was in crayon and red wine.

"Tragedy dreamed about this guy, Finch painted him on the walls, and now three of our kind who were alive last week are dead today." I put the picture back into the bag. "Something is going on or someone means us to think so."

Geo looked at her arm again. "Can I have my hand back please?"

"Not yet," said Tragedy. "Why did Finch want to know about the hunters? Was he trying to find them?"

"I don't know. He asked where they could be found, but of course I didn't know. They are a legend to us. I told him that. I don't know if they still exist, if they ever did. I guessed that anything supposedly from heaven would be in the history of the church and their folklore. Many of the stories start in medieval Europe."

"You set him on the right path," I told her. "I spoke to a friend of his today, a priest, who has been collecting our legends for most of his life. You set him on the path to finding a hunter."

"He didn't though," she said, uncertain. "They're not real, are they? They're just a legend. Stories." It sounded more like she was trying to convince herself than us.

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe one is here. Maybe one killed Skin. Someone did."

"We have to get out of here. Out of the city!" Geo cried out.

"You're not going anywhere," Tragedy reminded her with a twist of her arm. "The view from where we sit is, you look more guilty than we do. You're coming to the club tonight."

"But if there is a hunter here, he'd smell the club from outside the suburbs!"

"Yes," said Tragedy, "but there will be a dozen or more of us there tonight. Even if this guy is the real deal, a living legend from your nightmares capable of sneaking up on Skin, he's not going to do well against all of us. It will be safer than hiding out here alone. Besides that, you've talked to Freddy Finch. You can tell Rage something about this mess. Then you can explain that you were the last to see Diana before she apparently killed herself, on the same night someone killed Skin. We'll see if he buys your story."

"I swear it's the truth!" Geo exclaimed.

"You don't have to convince us," said Tragedy calmly. "You have to convince Rage."

Geo's eyes dropped to the floor as she considered this. "I didn't know what Finch was going to do. Rage has to know that I couldn't have known what Finch was planning. Do you think he's going to be mad at me?"

"Well, his name is Rage," I observed. This did not make her feel better.

We led her out of the building like the secret service hovering over a president. I reminded Geo that, were she to try and run from us, I would not restrain Tragedy.

Tragedy kept this point in Geo's mind by holding her by the arm as we walked.

We stuffed her into the car and headed back to the office of the Pythian Oracle.

On the way back, I narrated from the back seat the events of Skin's death as we knew them, including the reason we silently bristled every time a motorcycle passed. The chance remained that Geo had some blame to take for the death of one of the recent departures, or possibly all three. A better chance remained that she was too simple to have conspired against any of them.

We grilled her some more on the topics of conversation she may have shared with Finch. Of course they talked about death, she told us, it was part of her litany of monologues as an earth goddess, but she never tried to talk him into wanting to die. Like she had said, she used to think of our kind as being immortal- even unable to die.

Tragedy threw Geo into the chair in Essence's office furthest from the door. Essence looked up from her desk, still covered in papers and pictures, with the look she may have had if, instead of Geo, it had been a platypus.

"This isn't the one I needed you to bring me," she said. She caught her keys as Tragedy tossed them back to her, and she put them in her desk.

"Geo is here to tell you that Diana has resigned from the journalism business," said Tragedy, glaring at Geo as she spoke. I was in a room full of women who refused to look at the person they were speaking to.

"Where is she?" Essence demanded of Geo.

Geo looked up slowly. She looked over at me, perhaps for support, perhaps hoping I would tell the tale. I did not. "Tell her," I said.

"She's dead," said Geo.

"What?" hollered Essence. She removed her glasses and stared at Geo as though fire from her eyes might consume her. "What happened to her?"

Geo continued, clearly wishing someone else would talk. "She destroyed herself. She sat in the sun all day, and then lit herself on fire. Last night. I watched her kill herself."

"She's killed herself?" replied Essence. She looked up to me. "Is this true?"

"Apparently another one of our kind has committed suicide," I told her. "If Geo is telling the truth."

"I am," she exclaimed immediately. "I swear it's the truth!"

"Oh," said Essence. "Well. Then it's not as bad as I thought."

Now it was Geo's turn to be indignantly confused. "What? Not as bad..?"

Essence gestured with the glasses in her hand. "There has been some talk of... hunters. I was afraid there were more victims. Frankly, I'm not anxious to find evidence that the hunters are real and somewhere in the city where I live and do business."

"But, but Diana is dead," Geo stuttered.

"Yes," said Essence with harsh frustration, "and no one is going to suffer more than I on account of it. Oh, I know you'll need someone who can start a fire or hand out pills for your little woodland weekends, but where am I supposed to find an assistant who can not only type more than a hundred words per minute, but also never take breaks to eat, sleep, or use the restroom? I'll have to hire three people to take her place."

"You're a real sentimental fool," said Tragedy.

"I'm sorry," said Essence, her words dripping with sarcasm, "did you want a moment of silence? A group hug? Maybe we can all dress in black and talk about the good times we've had. Tragedy's already dressed for the occasion."

Tragedy glanced down at her outfit and raised an eyebrow at Essence.

"Diana is dead," Geo repeated. "My Phoebe is... is gone!"

"And you will get over it," Essence said coldly. "You got over the last one. She was called Phoebe as well. You can call the next one Phoebe too. Now if you three don't mind, I do need to finish some of this before we head to the Club. We're done with Diana's office- though apparently so is she," she added bitterly. "Why don't you wait in there until I'm ready? We can take my car."

"That's nice of you," I said.

"She wants safety in numbers," offered Tragedy.

Essence made no argument. "Something or someone killed Skin. I don't think it's the two of you. A little prudence is always a good idea." She waved us out of her office. "I'll come get you when I'm ready."

In Diana's former office we sat behind Venetian blinds and waited for the sun to set. Tragedy stuck Geo in the corner, furthest from the door. Geo had made no suggestion that she was going to bolt, but Tragedy was determined to make her face Rage that night. I decided that, since she was done using them, I could riffle through Diana's personal effects, and busied myself in her desk, mainly to pass the time.

"So," said Tragedy from her position between Geo and the door, "how many Phoebes have you had?"

Geo glanced up at her, then went back to watching the last rays of golden orange sunlight walking up the walls across from her. "I don't know," she said. "Three I think. Diana was my second in this city. I've only been here, what, twelve years now? I started in another city for at least that long. But you know how it is. The humans age so fast, it's impossible to make them believe that I'm more than thirty five years old. I have an easier time passing myself off as a high school student, so I have to move a lot."

We all knew that part of the life. Those like Rage, Skin, and Essence were lucky.

The older you appear when you start, the less people tend to notice that you haven't aged in ten years. The three of us could pass for an old seventeen, and up to a very young early thirties, but wherever we started, the lie didn't last long. The humans would only say "You haven't changed a bit!" so many times or for so long before they started to ask questions. It was easier to move on.

"What happened to the first two?" asked Tragedy.

"Oh, well," said Geo, brushing away her mental cobwebs. "The first one was a drug addict. She smoked or swallowed anything I gave her, so keeping her off balance was easy. She really believed I was a goddess. Then, one day, she met some hippies who weren't hippies anymore. On a beach or something. They talked to her, and apparently she found a new God to worship. When I saw her next, it was three weeks later. She hadn't taken a pill or smoked anything in more than a week, and she tried to share her new faith with me, as though I, her goddess, would worship this God of hers. It was all so sad. Here I was, her divinity, and she traded me for another. She was all so excited about it. I tried to bring her back, offer her anything, but she wouldn't have it. She didn't need it anymore. She didn't need me. So, I left. It was either that or kill her, and I had just fed on one the night before. Well, who knows why I left. The winds of fate blew me here, and I sailed in their winds.

"The second one was another human. She got too philosophical. She started questioning the basic tenants of the faith."

"What does that mean?" asked Tragedy. "She refused to worship you because she knew you were no more a goddess than you were a fish?"

"It means she did not embrace the divinity within me. She did not feel the earth mother holding her. Her faith was weak and she could not give herself to me fully."

"It's amazing," said Tragedy, "that you can talk that much and not say anything."

I looked up to see Geo shoot an angry look at her warden. "She asked too many questions. She noticed when the worshippers disappeared. Eventually she became concerned."

"So you killed her," said Tragedy.

"I fed on her," replied Geo. "I thought it fitting. If she could not give herself to me in worship, then she would give herself to me by becoming one with me. From then on, I decided I would only use those of our kind. It made it easier."

"Maybe Diana eventually noticed," I said as I dug in the bottom drawer of the desk.

"Noticed what?" asked Geo.

"That she was nothing more to you than a human who didn't ask too many questions," I said.

"We were partners," she said indignantly. "Equals."

"Is that so?" I replied. I had found a picture of Diana in the bottom drawer, under some files. I held it up to Geo. "And how often did you worship her? When was she your goddess?" Geo was silent.

I looked at the drawing. It was in pencil, and on paper from the same sketchbook we had found the white crayon drawings in. It was much better than the ones that were still in there. This one had taken him some study. When had the two of them spent time together? Apparently, at some point Finch had drawn her, and she had kept it. I held it up to the girls.

"Is that Finch's work?" asked Tragedy.

"Certainly seems so," I replied. "Where is she? Does this look like Demon Rock?" I asked, pointing to the background. Tragedy shrugged. Geo stared, and then nodded. "And where were you while these two kids were getting to know each other?" I looked over the paper carefully on both sides, and was very glad not to find the word 'oblivion.'

"I don't know," she admitted. "Probably doing what I usually do. I don't remember even seeing them talk to each other."

"I wish you had," I said. "Because now the girl in the picture and the boy who drew it are both dead. Did you talk them into killing themselves? Did they get your lecture on how death is a part of the cycle of life? Your sales pitch on riding the wave of life into the next cycle?"

"No," said Geo. "I don't think so."

"Maybe they read Romeo and Juliet too many times," added Tragedy with more than a hint of disdain.

"Or maybe they both had seen themselves in the eyes of the hunter," Geo whispered.

Was that what we had to fear? Was Skin's death the one to wish for- quick and without time to dwell on your own sins? As the golden shine on the city turned into dark purple and finally black, I looked at that picture and wondered what it might be telling me. Why had she kept it? Why was it here, and why was it hidden? Had she come to believe that she loved Finch the way he believed he loved Tragedy? Were they star crossed lovers who chose oblivion over a life without the one they loved? And even if they had, who had killed Skin? Diana couldn't have killed Skin, and even if she could have, she apparently was dead before he was.

But she could have arranged it. Maybe she knew he had been instrumental in the death of Finch and wanted revenge, even if she would not be around to enjoy it. If that was the case, the rest of us would not be safe either, unless they were in on all of these events. Again, that meant it was as likely as anything else that Rage was setting us up. I hoped that, if we could present our case before the others, either Rage would know we were innocent of Skin's death, or at least he would see he could not set us up to take the fall when the others saw we were innocent.

Somewhere in the back of my head was the thought I had been trying to keep buried all day. It seems with every

new piece of information I was given, that thought was trying to claw its way up to the surface. What if...? It asked. What if Rage isn't trying to set you up? What if Rage knows you didn't kill Skin? What if Rage and all of the others believe you and Tragedy and Geo? And what if there really is a hunter out there, and we were all going to die anyway?

*And I saw something else under the sun:
In the place of judgment—wickedness was there,
in the place of justice—wickedness was there.
Ecclesiastes 3:16*

CHAPTER NINE

REVELATIONS

The city was a blur of yellow lights from every direction as we headed back to the north side. Essence was driving and Tragedy, still playing warden, was riding with Geo in the back seat, though finally with her hands to herself.

We passed some motorcycles every few miles. They were clearly made overseas, which we could tell from the high pitched whine of the engines long before we could see them. The riders were consistently in t-shirts and sunglasses. It always amazed me that a species as fragile as humans took so little pains to keep themselves from getting killed.

Of course, on this night, that was not the reason I was watching them when they sped past us. We had very little to go on when it came to identifying the person who had killed Skin. He was riding a motorcycle with out of state license plates. Or that was a lie too.

I suspected Rage. There was enough motive for him to kill one of our kind and make us take the blame. I suspected Geo. She was connected to two of the dead and

while she might not be able to kill Skin alone, she might be one of several missing pieces. I suspected Essence, but only because there seemed to be no reason to suspect her. Because she was intelligent, the lack of evidence seemed to give me reason to suspect her. She would have covered her tracks. If she was guilty of any of these deaths, there would be no evidence, and there was none.

And I suspected that I was slowly going mad. I only wanted to last long enough to crack completely, but there was reason to suspect I would never leave the Cub after we entered tonight.

The bars around the club were full of the normal weekday patrons- working professionals, local college kids, suits and ties and hoodies and jeans all drinking overpriced beers and shouting meaningless conversations over the music. The only traffic on the sidewalk outside the Unorthodox was bar patrons going from car to bar and back. The front of the club was dark, but as we drove by we saw what the humans would not have been able to see. In the dark halls within were still shadows- our kind, waiting and watching.

"Welcome committee's here early," said Essence as we drove slowly past. "I don't know the ones by the stairs," said Geo.

"Two of Newton's boys," said Essence. "I wonder if the panther will be joining us in person, or if he's just loaned them to Rage for the night."

Newton and his flock usually didn't join us at the club. There was never a turf war, at least in the time I had lived in this city, but there were unofficial lines drawn by association, and also by the connections our kind made with the human kind. There were places for our kind to gather on the west side, and a few occasionally frequented on the far north and south. It was just usually the case that Newton and those who revolved around him the way we revolved around Rage had no business in this part of the city. Seeing

them in the Unorthodox only solidified the one thing we already knew with certainty. Things were not business as usual.

Around the back we were greeted by three of our kind playing parking lot attendant. I recognized two as members of the Quiet Group that had silenced Finch, the other was probably one of Newton's as well.

"We've got sentries at the front and back door," observed Tragedy. "Am I the only one who isn't sure if that means we're safe or trapped?"

"No," I replied. "I was wondering that too."

"And I'm starting to think," interjected Essence, "that I should have made the three of you get another ride. Now it looks like I'm the ringleader of this walking circus of death and confusion. Ah well," she said, lighting a cigarette, "let's make this look good."

"One more time," Tragedy said to Geo. "Our deal is, you don't run..." She paused.

"Uh, and you don't tear off any pieces of me," said Geo.

"Good girl," said Tragedy.

We all exited the car and headed into the Club.

The thing that gave confidence to my steps was the gatekeepers. The three who had let us in were still at their posts. They were aware of us, that much was certain, but they were not watching us closely. They were looking for something, or someone.

Tragedy saw it too. "Who else is coming that needs this kind of lockdown?"

I shook my head. "Maybe we're not the guests of honor tonight."

We headed up the short set of stairs into the backstage area through the heavy metal door. The lights were on over the backstage, and the stage lights were blazing gold as though there was a town meeting waiting for us. As the door swung closed behind us with a heavy thud, I

saw reason to suspect it was just that. Rage was on the stage, hands in his jacket pockets, sunglasses on. He was watching us as we walked toward him.

"We've been waiting for you," he said to us. I didn't like the possible insinuation of his comment. Essence didn't like the lack of originality.

"You needn't be trite and insipid all of the time, Mr. Williams," said Essence brashly. "There are options to resorting to cheap villain banter. You could be cordial once in a while." He glared at her silently as we all marched out into the stage lights. "Good evening, Mr. Williams," Essence said with a slight bow. "It's a pleasure to see you. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to leave these three with you because they all have far too much to say and I have had far too little to drink."

We all had to stare in disbelief for her moxie. Perhaps Rage had some old school respect for women and wouldn't retort with the violence I expected, or maybe he was having an off day. I expected something from Rage similar to the time he used Brash's face to put holes in the walls of his office before tossing him out the window. Yet, in the clacking of Essence's footsteps, Rage neither replied nor responded. She waved at the house and walked on. "Oh," she said towards the lights, "good evening all."

I turned to see who she was addressing, and I noticed for the first time that there were far more of our kind in attendance than I had seen at the Club for a very long time. There were at least three dozen. Of course the usual suspects adorned the house, Magenta and Crimson, Party Girl, and Brash. There was the dark Indian girl who called herself Ghusa Parana, and we called Trampoline. She used to frequent the Unorthodox but in the past few months had found a place on the far North side. I guessed that the small collection near her were from whatever local she was frequenting these days.

Near Trampoline was the tall black one from Newton's side of town who spoke with a French accent. He called himself Chocolat, and like the historical figure that was his name's sake, he fancied himself to be a dancer. With him was one of Newton's few light skinned associates, a scruffy figure in old army surplus who we simply called Trash. He was for Newton what Skin had been for Rage.



There were the sentries on the stairs, there were more in the balcony. Those who weren't watching the exits were fixated on the stage. For the moment, we were the show.

"We wish to be heard," I said to them all.

"You will be," said Rage. "But first I have some things to tell those who have gathered."

"We know things you don't know," I said, eager to have my say before another picture could be painted of us. "Another one of our kind is dead." The surprise and confusion rippled through the crowd.

Rage took off his sunglasses and folded them, then carefully placed them into his jacket pocket. "I was about to tell them about Skin's death," said Rage, his voice more frustrated than angry.

"Not Skin," I said. "Another." Surprise flickered in Rage's eyes, but the house replied before he could speak.

"Another?" shouted the Party Girl. "Two of our kind are dead? Since when?"

"Since last night," I told her. I turned to Rage. "Do they know about Nameless Freddy?"

"That was a Quiet Group," he replied. "I didn't think they needed to know. Skin's death was unrelated to his."

"Not necessarily," I said. "Freddy might be tied to these other deaths."

"Who else?" asked Rage.

Tragedy grabbed Geo by the arm and pushed her before Rage. "Tell him," Tragedy ordered her. "Tell all of them. Let's see who buys your story."

Geo looked around, clearly uncomfortable about being the center of attention in this manner. "You knew her as Diana. She worked for Essence at the Oracle." There were whispers of recognition among those watching. "She..."

She paused to look at Tragedy and me, again probably hoping we would tell the story for her, but again she would be disappointed. "She sat in the sun for hours. Then she burned herself. The flames destroyed her in minutes until nothing remained."

"Why would she do that?" Rage demanded through clenched teeth. Even if he believed her, he was not pleased with the report.

"I don't know!" Geo pleaded. "I swear, she chose it. She told me so before she lit herself. She wanted to die. I don't know why. But I think I might..." She stopped and looked around nervously. She had said too much, but it was too late.

"Tell us!" demanded Chocolat in his heavy French accent. "Why would she wan' to die? She was immortal, like us. One of us. Why would one of us wish for death?"

"She had seen the hunter!" Geo blurted out. "Like Finch! They had seen the eyes of the hunter, the Hound of

Heaven! Their sins burning them worse than the sun, and they wished for death to end the torment!"

"That is enough!" Rage bellowed. Geo shrank back as far as tragedy would let her. For the moment, she was silent, but in the moment that followed the whispers in the room erupted into shouting of anger, mockery, and fear.

"There are no hunters!" shouted Trash. "She's a liar!"

"She's a fool," shouted another. "She expects us to believe legends."

"More likely she killed Diana," yelled Brash.

"Did this hunter kill Skin?" shouted the Party Girl. "What happened to Skin?" echoed Trampoline.

"Enough," said Rage. Even without shouting it, he commanded the room and they obeyed.

"Three of our kind are dead," I said to Rage. "Somehow this story starts with the first."

"All right," he said to me. "Tell me what I don't know."

I addressed the house, since I knew they all were listening as well. "There was one among us, he called himself Chain, or Darwin, or Finch," I said. There were a few whispers of recognition, but most of the room was a series of blank faces to whom these names meant nothing. "We called him Nameless Freddy." That illuminated a few more memories, but still not a majority. "A couple of days ago, I was part of the Quiet Group that destroyed him."

"The fires on the north side?" asked Trampoline. "That story about a psycho killer who killed a whole family and then died in the fire he started in their house? Was that him?"

"That was him," I confirmed. A wider acknowledgement filtered across the room. "Obviously that you have heard about the incident, or perhaps read it in the papers, proves that the Quiet Group was necessary. But what you need to understand is that he wanted to die. He wanted us to destroy him."

"Mr. Glass!" boomed Rage.

Up in the balcony, from his seat between two girls dressed in black leather and shiny metals, a sunken-faced man with bright blonde hair stood to his feet. He was dressed all in white and silver. "Yes, Rage?" he replied.

"Tell them who gave the order to destroy the one who called himself Finch," said Rage.

Mr. Glass looked around at the eyes that were now fixed on him. "He did. The kid. Finch, or whatever he was called. Nameless Freddy." He paused and watched the faces around him darken at the news. "Lane is telling the truth. I was there too, one of the Quiet Group. The kid told us to do it, or he was gonna take us public he said. Rage was the head of the Quiet Group, but the kid gave us the order. He wanted to go." Mr. Glass sank back into his seat.

"We have more questions than answers right now," I continued, "but Finch may have been interested in more than his own destruction. He may have been seeking the same for all of us." I dug into the bag and pulled out the white crayon and red wine image of the hunter. "He drew this, and left it for us as a mural in blood on the wall in his apartment. Tragedy, Skin, and I found it when we searched his apartment after the Quiet Group. He meant us to believe that this was a hunter, like Geo said.

"Geo tells us that he was trying to find a hunter. He asked her about them, and apparently he did a lot of digging trying to track down what we thought was only legend. Last night we went looking for this man. The mural Finch left us gave us clues as to what park to search. Tragedy and I went to one. Skin went to the other. At the central park, a man who looked like this," I held up the image again, "killed Skin. According to his human associates, he killed Skin fairly easily. This led Rage to think it was one of us. Or several of us."

"How do we know it wasn't you?" shouted Trash. "You've got the pretty pictures. From what I heard, you were the last to see him alive."

"The two humans were the last to see him alive," answered Tragedy. "They told Rage what they saw."

"And where are these witnesses now?" asked Trash.

Tragedy looked to me. I didn't like the answer any more than I liked the question. "Rage killed them," I said.

"Then how do we know," asked Essence from the bar, where she was helping herself to another drink, "that Rage didn't kill Skin, set up these two humans with a cover story, and then kill them to cover his tracks?"

"We were wondering that too," answered Tragedy. I shot her a worried look. "Well, we were," she whispered to me.

"You can be assured of my innocence in these matters," said Rage calmly, "because the police have already arrested the man responsible."

The room exploded. Beyond the yellow lights that were illuminating us, those who had not been standing were now standing. Some were outraged that the one responsible had not been brought to us to be fed on. Some were certain that no human could have killed Skin and this must be a lie. A few were demanding to know if it was a real hunter, and if they were all in danger. Tragedy and I were in stunned silence. Here was confirmation that the man we had feared, the one from her dreams, was real. Neither of us could think of anything to say.

Rage lifted his right hand, palm out to the wall of voices that was being hurled at him. The room fell silent at his gesture. Rage put his hand back into his pocket and waited for the room to quiet. "I said the police have already arrested him," he said. "I did not say they still have him."

Again the room erupted in shouting, but this time they were all asking the same thing and Rage simply waited for them to let him answer. "Yes, I killed the two witnesses to Skin's death, but they had seen too much and needed to be silenced. I told the police that the man whose picture Lane has showed you had killed those two men. I had a

description of the man and his vehicle. They started searching the city for him before sunrise, and by late afternoon they had caught him. Once he was in custody, they called me in, and I saw him in person. He was not one of our kind. He was warm blooded. His heart beat and red blood flowed in his veins. He looked like a man. He smelled like a man.

“The police said his name was Isaiah, or so he told them, and their records showed nothing about him, but from his accent he might have come from another country—Mediterranean by my guess. They were running his fingerprints with every database they had access to. The picture Lane showed you is about right. He’s a human in his early thirties, dark hair, dark eyes. Nothing very unusual. Nothing even really noteworthy.

“I sent the police out and talked with him in private. Naturally he denied having killed the two humans, but he admitted to having destroyed Skin. He spoke of it as though it had been an unfortunate chore to him. I expected him to brag, or, having known who and what I was, to beg for mercy. He did neither.

“Of course it angered me. This fragile human, nothing more than a food source for us, would look me in the face, tell me he had destroyed one of our kind, and act as though he had been inconvenienced by it? I did not know how a man, a mere human, could have killed Skin, but since I had his confession, I decided to punish him for his crime.

“I grabbed him by the throat. I was going to lecture him on his foolishness and then crush his throat and shatter his neck. But I couldn’t do it. The moment I grabbed him,” Rage held up his left hand, palm out for all to see, “it burned like the noon day sun.” His hand was black and gray, ashen like it had been set on fire or simply left out in the sun for several hours.

The room broke into whispers of shock and disbelief. Rage added to the fuel by pulling his sleeves down

to reveal the black and ash handprints that wrapped around his wrists. "Then he grabbed me by the wrists and forced me to my knees," Rage continued. He examined his own injured arms for a moment. "I have never known such pain. Not in all my memory. And no human has that strength. I should have been able to crush him like a moth, but instead he had forced me to my knees.

"He told me he had come to find one of us. He said nothing would stop him from finding the one he was after, and if we tried, we would end up like Skin. He warned me, us, not to get between him and the one he was hunting. Then he had me order the police to let us out. The door opened, and when I looked up, he was gone. No one knew where he had gone. He simply walked through them, unnoticed, and is somewhere in the city. Hunting one of us."

In the stunned silence that followed, Geo, who had been stifling her responses with shivering gasps, could be silent no more. "It's true!" she screamed, the terror overtaking her. "The legends are true! The hunter is here! His touch burns like the sun! His eyes burn our souls until we long for death! We can't hide from the Hound of Heaven! He will destroy us all!"

And she may have gone on like that for a long time, had Rage not slapped her so hard that she flew from the stage and onto a crumpled heap at the feet of Trash.

"There are no hunters!" he shouted at us. "Those are only legends!"

"Then what is this man?" asked Trash. "How did he leave his mark on you if he's only a man?"

"I don't know," said Rage. "But I do know the difference between legends and truth. This man is not an ordinary man, this much is true. His touch burned me, this is also true. But he has a beating heart and veins that flow with blood. Anything with a heart can be killed. We all know this to be true." The room nodded with agreement. "I know the legends as well as anyone else. What I remember about the

Hound of Heaven is, his very presence would burn us like the sun itself. This man, this Isaiah, didn't burn me until he touched me. For all we know it could be some fluke of chemistry, or a chemical weapon we don't know about. Maybe Finch found something that can hurt us and has given it to this man.

"Whatever the reason, it doesn't matter. He is one man. We are many. He can burn us, don't let him touch you. He is in this city, but this is our city!" The room nodded in approval again. "He has a heart, we will tear it out and feast on the blood that it pumps until his veins are dry!" Shouts of approval came from the shadows behind the blinding yellow glare that was flooding the stage where we stood. "If he has come to find one of us, he will find dozens of us instead! And when he does, we will make him see that we cannot be made afraid. We will not cower before a single man, no matter his strength or secrets. We will not leave one to be taken, for we are not birds to be hunted. We are a murder of ravens! We feed on the blood and the flesh of the living and the dying! And when we find this man, we will let him know that we will avenge our fallen brother by feasting, first on him, and then on a hundred of the humans who are his brothers. He will be the sacrifice to pay for the loss of our kind and their blood will pay the price of our vengeance!

"Assemble and come together from all around to the sacrifice I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the streets of this city! There you will eat flesh and drink blood. You will eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth as if they were rams and goats—all of them fattened animals. At the sacrifice I am preparing for you, you will eat fat till you are glutted and drink blood till you are drunk!"

The crowd before him roared with approval and shouts of praise to this leader of our kind. They were on their feet with their hands in the air, praising his greatness and our victory.

"It has been said, if you kill a man, the humans call you a murderer. If you kill thousands, you will be called a conqueror. But if you kill them all, you will be called a god! And are we not the gods of this world? And if this supposed hunter is from heaven, then we will be the gods of hell, and our fury will burn! Are we not the gods of hell?"

The whole room shouted back to him in praise. 'We are!' they screamed. 'We are the gods of hell.' I watched them, in a ravenous frenzy of hate and self-worship and thirst for blood and vengeance. From up there, next to Rage, I felt the wave of burning hate and thirst wash over us from the dozens assembled. Even Tragedy shouted her approval.

Everyone but Geo, who remained on the floor, afraid or unwilling to get off of the place where she lay.

But I could not join them. I kept seeing Geo's vision of Diana before me.

Burning. Screaming. Hopeless. Engulfed in flames. If we had to be the gods of hell, I didn't want to be a god anymore. I just wanted to stop being afraid. I wanted anything but hell.

We spent the night in discussions of battle plans. Rage had invited Newton, but Newton had not come this night. He had no way of knowing how important a night it would be. His people would inform him, and they would join the fight. The Unorthodox would be the home base for our kind anywhere in the city. If Isaiah knew who Rage was, he would soon find the Unorthodox. Rage canceled the shows and told all of the heretics not to come in. There would be no business as usual until the hunter, this Isaiah, was destroyed and we had our vengeance.

We would go out in teams so that no one could be taken by surprise. We would hunt the city from sewer to high-rise apartment until he was found. We would defend the Unorthodox with vigilance. He would have no fewer than three of us to face if he were to choose any door.

The police would still search for him, and no doubt it would not be long before the state police were involved in case he moved further out of the city. It was only a matter of time. As I watched the gathered members of our kind discussing their involvement, I saw more than the thirst for vengeance and blood. I saw pride in their involvement. They grasped their part in this murder of winged assassins, and they clutched it in their hands and their chests.

Rage had built an army.

When the meeting was finally done, it was still hours before sunrise. Many of them had headed out on the first wave of seekers to find the alleged hunter. I sat with Tragedy on the edge of the stage. Geo was against the wall to our right, sitting on the floor with her hands around her knees. She had spoken to no one for most of the night since being unceremoniously knocked to the floor.

Maybe it was the eloquence of Rage as he united our kind in a common pursuit, or maybe it was just because things were so bizarre, what with three of our kind being destroyed in as many days, but I felt pity for Geo. She had been the goddess of her own cult, with a faithful servant. Now she was a publicly disgraced member of our community- a community which she was certain faced imminent extinction at the hands of an unstoppable legend come to life.

It occurred to me that, aside from having silenced her outburst, Rage did nothing to indicate his position on her story. I realized that the matter needed to be settled, especially in as much as it might implicate Tragedy and myself.

I leaned over to Tragedy and gestured to Geo. "Keep an eye on her," I said. "I have been," she said. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go ask Rage what he wants to do with her. Also, I'm going to make sure he knows that we're not really with her, per say. Just that we dragged her in to tell her tale."

"Sounds good," she replied. "Let me know how that goes."

"Hey," I said, "I got us this far didn't I?"

She raised an eyebrow. I smiled and slunk off into the club to find Rage.

Rage was in his dull green-gray office on the third floor. When the heretics were in, the hallway would be lit with the cold glow of florescent lights. Since we were alone, most of the building's lights were off. Rage had a single small lamp lit in his office. It was all I needed in the hall, and more than he would need in his office. I could hear him finishing his conversation with Newton.

"Your people will fill you in on the details, but just remember, this guy is trouble. I'm pretty sure he's human, but he is not a normal human. Do not underestimate him. Have them stay in groups. If one gets killed maybe the other can help us find the guy. And be here tomorrow with all of your people." He listened as Newton replied. "Because I don't want to wait until he cuts our number in half before we crush him," Rage continued. "I'm telling you, I've never seen anything like him before. We need to work together now and crush him right away. He killed Skin. You know what kind of a death machine Skin was. How many guys you got that could even match Skin? Yeah, Trash, maybe. Now look, your guys will be calling you soon. Talk to them and get your people mobilized. I want to find this guy and paint this town red with his entrails!" He slammed the phone down.

I knocked on the door, though I knew he had heard me approach. "Come on in, Lane."

I felt like I was entering the principal's office. This was worse. "Hey Rage," I said, trying to sound casual and

calm. "Tragedy and I still have Geo downstairs, and we wanted to know what we should do with her."

"Do with her?" Rage seemed to be distracted. "What do you mean?" It wasn't normal for him to be at a loss like this. It was like he was straining to hear me over another conversation.

"Tragedy is watching her," I said. "She was the last person to see Diana alive, and she says Diana killed herself. Like she told you. But, do you buy it? Or do we need to interrogate her some more?"

"No, no. She's fine," said Rage. He rubbed his hands through his white hair, his elbows on the desk. He looked weary, drained. "Lane, close the door."

I shut the door and sat down across from him. Just like the principal's office. "We thought you might still be angry with her. You smacked her off the stage pretty good," I said.

"I wasn't angry with her. I just needed to shut her up," he said. "I didn't need her starting a panic. We need to stay calm and logical." He focused his piercing eyes on me. "What do you think? About what she said?"

I was taken by surprise. Was Rage asking me for advice? For my opinion? Usually he doled out opinions. He didn't ask for them. "I don't know what to think," I told him honestly. "I know Finch was looking for a hunter. I know this guy is a lot like the legends. And I know Finch meant us to think this guy was a hunter. But I don't know. We've been here for years. You longer than any of us. How long have you been here?"

"I've been here long enough to be Mr. Williams Senior and Junior," he said. "After I ran this place for nearly thirty years, I went on hiatus, but while I was living another life in another couple of cities here and there, I also ran this place from a distance. Eventually everyone who had known me was dead, fired, or left for other jobs, so I came back as the son of the original Mr. Williams to run the family

business. I've been two generations of me. It's been a long time."

"Exactly," I said. "If you've been here that long, where has this hunter been? Are there that many of us in the world that he just hasn't gotten around to this city yet? Some part of me still thinks Finch is having a game with us. Here." I gave him the bag full of notebooks and sketchbooks. "In his Darwin phase, he started to experiment. I think he was experimenting on himself. Why else would one of us study our physiology except to find a way to kill us?" Rage nodded as he listened to my theory. "We don't get sick, and all of our injuries heal fast enough." I saw his wrists, still burnt and ashen. "Well, most of them anyway. Maybe Finch found a way to burn us, some chemicals we don't know, and this guy has used it to play a trick on us. To, I don't know, play the part of a hunter."

Rage picked up the notebooks and looked at them. "Maybe," he said. "Lane, there are some things I didn't tell the others, and I don't want you to tell them either." I nodded and he continued. "This Isaiah, he said some things that..." he paused to search for the words, "have been troubling me. I accused him of killing Skin, and he admitted it. But he...He said, 'It is not my goal to destroy you all, but to hunt each of you until there are no more vampires.' Of course I didn't understand him. How are you supposed to rid the world of vampires without destroying us all? I asked. He said, 'You were human once. Would you like to hear your heart beat again?' I told him I would rather tear his out of his chest and feed on it, and I grabbed his neck, and my hand felt like it was instantly on fire. I pulled it back, and he grabbed my wrists. It burned like nothing I have ever felt. I fell to my knees and screamed. Then..."

Rage paused, looking past me into his story. "I felt my heartbeat. In my chest, there was this heavy thumping, like them when they're afraid. Pounding. I heard it, felt it, and it pounded harder."

Rage stopped and his eyes were distant, watching the scene he had recently lived.

He didn't look like Rage anymore. He looked like Geo remembering the death of Diana.

This was more frightening to me than either story I had been told.

Rage caught up with the events in his head and continued telling the tale. "He said, 'You can be reborn into the life you were meant to have. You can be human again. I can do that.' Again? I couldn't speak. I just shouted for him to let me go. He made me tell the cops to let him out, and like I said, when I looked up, he was gone."

He sat in silence for a moment, staring at his wrists as he recalled where the marks originated. "They've healed a lot already. But slowly. And what I can't get out of my head, more than anything else is, why do I have a heart? I heard it beat, Lane. I felt it. I know it's in there. Why do we have hearts if they aren't meant to beat? Were we once human?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Maybe it's like Skin used to say. Maybe it's an evolutionary throwback. Maybe we needed it once, but now it's just dead weight. Taking up space."

"Maybe," I said. "Do you think he might really be a hunter?"

He thought, his eyes squinted up in what looked like pain. "Do you know what would come with that? What it would mean? If the hunters are real..." He shook his head. "No. I'm not ready to accept that yet. For right now, let's leave the door open for other possibilities. And don't say anything to anyone. Just tell Geo that I believe her. She's ok." His eyes lit suddenly as though a thought had surprised him. "Lane, tell her she's ok, but I need you to still watch her. You and Tragedy. Make sure she stays calm. And keep her here. She obviously can't go out on the hunt. She's not ready, and she can't be spreading fear with her stories and legends. It's the last thing we need. Can you do that?"

"You want me and Tragedy to stay here? You mean, we won't be out hunting for this guy?"

He shook his head. "Between Newton's boys and our own, plus those friends of

Trampoline from the far north, we will have enough coverage on this city. Don't forget we have the police on our side. We'll have him and dead by sundown. It's more important that we don't let fear separate us and weaken us. Also," he handed the notebooks back to me, "I'm going to be here on the phone until we have him. I need you to dig into these and see if you can figure out what he may have found that can burn us. Maybe there was something on his hands that did this," he indicated his arms, "and if we know what, maybe we can do something to protect ourselves. Anything in the building is yours to use if you need it." He could see the disappointment in my eyes, as I suddenly found myself in detention with homework. Just like the Principal's office. "I need you here, Lane. And from the look of her tonight, Geo might need the company."

When he said her name, I recalled the things she had been saying. The legends, the stories- her fear. I didn't know how to approach the subject, but I needed to ask. "Rage," I started carefully, "did you see his eyes? Is it like Geo says?"

He smirked a little. "Do I long to be destroyed? Burdened by the weight of my sin?" He laughed. "No. We can chalk that up to legend. That two of our kind suddenly wished for oblivion is unfortunate, but I think it may be coincidence."

"Ok," I said, standing to go. "I'll let Tragedy know that she can stop playing warden."

"Sure," he said. Then, as if I had just asked him the question again, he said, "But you know what? The strangest thing. All night, I keep... seeing their faces. Do you ever see them again? The ones you have fed on? Remember their names?"

A MURDER OF ONE

“No,” I replied. “I never remember them. There’s no point.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Me too. Strangest thing.” He fell silent, and I went back down to the stage to free Tragedy of her prisoner.



*"God forbid that I should do this!" he said.
"Should I drink the blood of these men
who went at the risk of their lives?"
1 Chronicles 11:19*

CHAPTER TEN

THROUGH SHARDS OF GLASS

The next day passed with a quiet uncertainty, and the dull echoing voices of dozens of conversations all over the building. Tragedy was not happy to have been put on guard keeping Geo company.

"If I had wanted a pet," she said, "I would have gotten a dog."

I could tell that she was glad to be in the Unorthodox. Out on the streets, we were chasing shadows, or being chased by them. There, in the Club, was our own kind in larger numbers than anywhere else we knew. Like she had told Geo, this was the safest place in the city for us to be until this was over.

Newton and more of his collective arrived right after sun up. Not long after that, a small woman with tightly pulled black hair, calling herself Xing Yun, showed up from the far north side with a few more of those who knew Trampoline.

"We call her 'Fortune,'" Trampoline told us. "Because she's rich, and because she's bad luck." Trampoline thought this was terribly clever, but Tragedy was unimpressed.

All day the Club buzzed with talk, directions, reports and the coming and going of those like us. Rage and Newton were in offices on the third floor being reported to and contacting whatever human help they may have in their arsenal. Maps were hung and labeled, including maps of the bus routes and subways.

The general mood was optimistic. Everyone expected to feast their mouth or at least their eyes on the body of this man who had killed Skin. As the day went on, more and more were certain they would be the one to take him down. Part of me understood why Rage wanted them to remain optimistic. They were aggressive and eager to find him. No one was afraid.

Except Geo.

Geo remained somewhere within herself. We kept her on one of the bright red couches in the green room backstage. Looking at her I knew what would happen to us as a community if her fear spread. A building full of withdrawn and frightened vampires would be easy pickings for a hunter or counterfeit hunter. Whatever he was. Eventually, as panic turned to self-preservation we would no doubt turn on each other- and thus Rage was wise to hide the truth from them.

Yet, part of me thought they should know the truth. They should know what they were looking for. They should know what he could do.

But Rage had spoken, and I was pressed to obey him. We were at war, and if there was any time not to oppose Rage, this was it. I can't say if he was motivated by the desire to protect the community, or the desire to rule it with their approval. At the moment it looked exactly the same, and to oppose it would bring swift justice. Rage had become the political power we all knew he could become. He was

untouchable, and unquestionable. That fact alone made me wonder if the hunter was his servant or a figment of his creation. Even if it was a lie, it had given him all the power he could want. It was too late to ask questions.

Chocolat went out with Trash to ride the underground. Trampoline was part of a group with Fortune that headed back to the north side. Mr. Glass took Crimson and Magenta to the airport. The Party Girl and Brash joined a few of Newton's boys to search the parks. They all had positions. They all had teams. By nightfall, everyone had been given assignments. By midnight the Unorthodox contained only the sentries at all of the doors, Rage and Newton in offices making orders and taking reports, and the three of us near the stage waiting for news or an end to the whole ordeal.

The so-called 'greenroom' was actually almost entirely black, with bright red couches and walls checkered in old posters and newspaper ads for the Club and the acts that had played there over its long history.

Geo sat against the arm of a couch with her eyes to the door that led to the stage. We told her she was safe. We told her this building was locked down like a national monument. She told us that she believed it. Yet, she still kept watching the door with a look that betrayed her thoughts. She was waiting for something to come through that door.

I sat with Tragedy and strummed an acoustic guitar for a long while. This did nothing for Geo's mood, but it passed the time. Tragedy and I took turns pouring over the notebook again. In his Darwin phase, he had gathered every harsh chemical and natural or unnatural poison he could find, and though it was never directly stated in the records, we believed he used them on himself to see what they would do. He had tried household cleaners, bleach, vinegar, and lemon juice. We were unsurprised but slightly amused that he had devoted three pages to garlic. He grated it, ate it, put it in his eyes, and rubbed it on self-inflicted injuries. Naturally, the

results were negligible. Garlic would repel the humans faster than it would repel us.

He tried different tools to see which would leave the worst and longest lasting damage. Power tools did a decent job at puncturing his surface, but the healing was just as swift with each of them. He tried electricity, but of course with no beating heart, there was nothing for it to interfere with. He tried rat poison and found it affected him the same way garlic did, though he noted the flavor was worse. Tragedy made some quips about his secret desire to write a cookbook.

“Throw in some butter and he could have been the undead Julia Child.”

The first pages of both books were sketches of animals and his record of having fed on them. Birds, dogs, fish even. He found the result similar each time. It was blood, but the flavor was dull and it did little to satisfy the thirst. Something I had not noted before was the note on each page of what he called water-flow. It took some digging through his notebooks to piece it together, but eventually I figured out that he was checking the water-like substance that flowed through his veins. He would cut himself open and see how much was there before he healed.

His cryptic notes, seemingly written for no one but himself, indicated that he believed what I had already suspected about us. When a vampire’s body is cut open, something like water leaks out. I got to see it when we cut him down. He believed that there was a correlation between the substance and the blood that had been consumed. He thought, as I did, that our bodies only made use of the platelets in the blood we consumed, and the water and plasma lubricated our veins until it too dried up. Apparently he found that only human blood added to the water in our veins, and only human blood really satiated the thirst. He didn’t seem to know any better than I did why it was.

I knew what Skin would have said. We had evolved in different bio-evolutionary paths. We had become a parasitic version, which fed on the other ones. Something in their blood was missing from our own physical make up. But many of us had tried the blood banks. We had drank from bottles of blood which some of our kind liked to keep on their shelves like wine. It wasn't the same. The effect was short lived. The satisfaction died away faster with dead blood than with the blood of the living. Was it the oxygen content? I found the question in one of the notebooks but not the answer.

Maybe the answer wasn't found in the facts of science. Perhaps, I thought, the answer was not physical or biological. "Geo?" I said, shaking her from her internal world. She lifted her thin face to see me, displacing her long hair from her face with her fingers, but said nothing. "You know more about the old stories and legends than either of us," I said. "What do they say about the perfect prey? Is that based on something real, or is that just one of our touches like garlic and holy water?"

She thought about it for a moment, digging through her memories and collections of facts- some true, some lies. "I don't know the origin of that one," she said. "The perfect prey." She glanced around the room as though it may be hiding somewhere among the old newspaper clippings and home made posters. "Doesn't it just seem like something we all just instinctively know?"

"I don't think so," I said. "It seems like a desire we may have, but isn't it like the legends we tell each other?"

"That's what I mean," she said. "I've never heard any of our kind introduce the idea to another. And I don't remember being told about it. As far back as I can look, I see that in my head, a desire with a name, or without a name. Who told you about it?"

I had no answer for that. "In the same way, who told me to desire blood in the first place? Did I just know that, or did someone teach me what I wanted?"

"But that's my point exactly," she said. "All of us desire the blood of the living, and we all secretly hope every time that this will be the one that fills us up. The one that kills the thirst. Why do we want the perfect prey in the first place? Why is that even something we want? Do we secretly agree with the humans- that we're evil parasites? And think about what our lives would be like without the thirst."

"We'd be free from it," I said. "We would never have to worry about the Quiet Groups, or finding our next feeding. It's the only thing that controls us, and we would be free from it. Truly free. The humans are controlled by a dozen instincts, puppets on the strings of a hundred desires. We have one. And if we satiated it, we would be completely free."

"No, that's just it. It doesn't just control us. It motivates us. It's our reason for existing. We spend all of our time seeking blood, feeding, and hiding the evidence. We have contact with the humans so we can find the next feed. We build these little communities of our kind to make it easier to hunt, and we find human jobs and human apartments so we can blend in, so we can be near the ones we feed on. The thirst is our only real reason for doing anything. If it died, what would you do?"

"I'd get hammered on margaritas," interjected Tragedy, "and go shoe shopping with my rich girlfriends."

"Looking for the perfect pair of shoes," replied Geo. Tragedy looked up, apparently surprised that Geo would pull her snide commentary into her actual point.

"They do it too," Geo said. "Haven't you noticed? Whatever they are hunting, they want the perfect one. The one that will end the hunt for good. They don't take lovers because they want a temporary high, and they don't take drugs because they want to feel good for a moment. They get addicted to these things because they're looking for the

perfect love, the perfect high. They want the one that will finally stick and make them stop chasing it.

"They want what we want. That's why they get so obsessed with stupid things like sex and shoes."

"Well, well... look who's become the human psychoanalyst," said Tragedy.

"It's the science behind my religion," replied Geo. "They all need to worship. Some like to pretend they don't, but they bow to an altar made of money or power or knowledge or influence. It's part of being human. The ones without religion are the easiest to make slaves out of because they don't already have an object of worship, but they need one. So, I give them myself, the goddess Gaia. I give them the Mother Earth. I give them acid, I give them sex, I give them ego. And they bow and worship and devote their lives to it. They sacrifice all they have on some altar in the pursuit of the perfect prey. That's why what I do is so easy. They obsessively hunt for the one thing that will finally satisfy them, just like we do. Only, we know what it is. It's blood. They'll chase anything because they don't know what it is. They fight wars over it."

I had observed this part of the human experience as well. "We only kill for one reason," I said. "They will kill each other for a thousand different reasons."

"And they think we're the monsters," said Tragedy with a sneer.

Our discussion was suddenly interrupted by a loud commotion near the front entrance. Tragedy and I quickly headed toward it to see what was going on. Geo fixed her gaze on the door and sunk back into herself.

We hit the floor in front of the stage at the same time Rage did. Newton was behind him but remained in the balcony when Rage jumped the rail to join us. Through the line of sentries came Chocolat. His eyes were wide and when he reached the top of the stairs near the bar he turned to the

sentries and shouted, "Back to your post fools! He could be right behind me!"

"Who might be behind you?" demanded Rage. "Where's Trash?"

"Trash is dead," Chocolat answered.

"What happened?" Rage bellowed as though he was about to punish Chocolat for it.

"Where?" called Newton. "Chocolat, tell me where!"

Chocolat looked up to Newton. "Where the Green Line crosses the Red Line," he said. "The three story platform by the bank."

Newton disappeared, most likely to order some of his men to change direction and head to the latest sighting.

Rage was containing his anger, but just barely. He grabbed Chocolat by the front of his shirt and pulled his face close. "What happened?" he shouted again.

"Nothing for hours," said Chocolat, almost unphased by Rage's grip. "We rode all of them, we searched stations and platforms. Then we got off at the Red stop before the intersection. The one over 17th street. It's the third stop after it leaves the underground and the first stop that is that high, on account of it going over the Green line at the next stop."

"I know the place," said Rage, "What happened?" Rage must have seen the panic in Chocolat's eyes, for he let go of his shirt and put his hands down.

"I had stepped away from the car just a few feet when something slammed into my back so hard my feet no longer touched the ground. When I landed, I realized that I was on the street level. I ran up the stairs but Trash was gone. I ran down to the Green line, which was just pulling away. The people on the platform were all staring at it, talking to each other. I hopped onto the tracks and followed it. I am fast, but not quite that fast. It got to the station before I could.

"They had stopped at the next station and emptied all of the cars because of the destruction. When I searched

the train, I found what remained of Trash. He had been cut in half, his head taken clean off. He must have put up a bit of a fight because three of the windows were smashed. I had run through shards of glass to get there." He paused and looked around at all of us. No one spoke. "There was no one else on the car, so I grabbed the pieces. I burned his remains in a garbage can on the street under the station," he said.



"Where is the hunter?" asked Rage.

"I don't know. They had stopped the train because of the damage, so I ran to the Red line. I intended to keep riding until I found him again. Then I realized how quickly he had killed Trash. Trash was a fighter. I am a dancer. I cannot face him alone. I ran here, and every time I see a shadow I think it is him on my heels."

"I'll go," I said.

Rage answered quickly. "No."

"I'm useless here," I said. "When Chocolat goes out again, let me go with him."

"Chocolat will be put with another one of Newton's teams." He pushed a finger into Chocolat's chest. "You'll fit in with them. Go upstairs and ask him where to go."

Chocolat turned and headed for the stairs.

"Rage, we have more than enough people here, and Tragedy can stay and babysit..."

Rage did not let me continue. "You have been given a job to do, and you will obey and do it." He stared at me, full aware of the argument I wanted to make. "Go to my office and wait for me there. Go." I obeyed and followed Chocolat up the stairs to the offices. Behind me, Rage continued giving orders.

"The rest of you will stay at your posts until I tell you otherwise. I don't care who comes in here and how good the story they tell. You will stay at your posts, am I clear?"

There was the mumble of understanding as the dozen who had come to hear Chocolat's story quickly went back to their assigned door or window.

I watched Chocolat enter the office where Newton was on the phone. "Tell me where you are," he was saying, "I have another to add to your team. Where will you be headed next? He can find you there."

I opened the door to Rage's office where the light was on, and sat in the same seat I had sat in previously. Just like the principal's office. The quiet buzz from the overhead light broke up the scuffling and muted voices from the other side of the door. I waited for Rage's footsteps as I wondered what the landing would be like if he put me through the window.

I did not have long to wait. Rage burst through the door and stood at it while Tragedy entered behind him. He slammed the door and sat on his desk.

"Why are you here?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she answered. Her eyes betrayed confusion and worry, but she remained cool.

"Lane," Rage said, his eyes on the map of the subways on his wall, "What were you called before you came here? You were, Blaze, weren't you?"

"That's right," I answered, wondering where he was going with this. "Blaze Pascal. I worked at a small radio

station just outside the city." I waited for Rage to continue, but he sat in quiet thought. Since Rage hadn't said anything more, I continued. "No, I haven't been a fighter, but I can still help one of the teams. You've got Crimson and Magenta out there! I can fight at least as good as them. If nothing else I might see him coming..."

Rage put up his hand to silence me. It still showed some of the burn marks, though it was healing. I stopped my tirade and waited for him to speak.

"I do not doubt your abilities. And yes," he said firmly, "I know you both could do better than either of the girls. That isn't why I am making you stay here. Lane, I haven't told you everything."

Tragedy muttered a quiet, "Uh oh," and Rage ignored her.

"The police caught the... Isaiah. They said he didn't put up a fight. At the time they said they had gotten the drop on him, outnumbered him. It seemed plausible. He had gotten the drop on Skin and caught him off guard. Then the cops did the same thing to him."

"He wanted to be caught," said Tragedy.

"You've always been faster than most," Rage said to her. "That's what I think. He had let himself be caught because he knew someone like me would show up. And I walked right into his trap. I asked him if he had killed Skin, and he admitted it. I told him Skin had been one of my best men. 'One of my best fighters. One of the strongest. You must be very strong yourself,' I said to him. He said nothing. 'That leaves me down a fighter,' I said. 'Perhaps you would like a place where your strength and talents can be rewarded.' I told him to work for me. I offered him a fortune. Money, penthouse, prostitutes. 'All you have to do,' I told him, 'is take a few orders from me, and you'll never want for anything.'

"He still didn't say anything. He smiled like he was amused by my offer. 'What do you want?' I asked him. He

says to me, 'You should be asking what I can give you.' What I can give you, your money can't buy.'

"Of course his reply angered me. This human. His beating heart. So, killable. I grabbed his lapel and said, 'you can give me your obedience, or I can give you death. I am what Skin was and I can drain the blood from your veins.' He was still so unshaken, I was starting to think he was crazy. He just looks into my eyes and says, 'You could, but you're not going to.' Just matter of fact.

"I've told you how I grabbed him, and it burned, and he grabbed me and burned me further." I nodded as he continued. "I didn't tell you what he said before he left. I was screaming at him to let me go, and he leaned down and whispered, 'here's the one thing you can give me. I'm looking for one of your kind. His name was Blaze Pascal. Tell me where to find him.'

I felt as if the air had been sucked from the room. "He's after me?" I said. "This guy wants me?"

"I told him I didn't know where you were," Rage continued. "I told him you had left the city years ago. I don't know if he believed me, but at least he knew I would be no good to him."

"Why?" I struggled to get the word out. "Did he say why he wants me?"

Rage shook his head. "He was gone before we could have that talk, but I think it's obvious. Why else would someone hunt for one of us?"

"Vengeance," said Tragedy.

Rage nodded in agreement. "Something you did, probably someone you fed on as Blaze Pascal. He wants revenge and you won't be safe until we destroy him."

"You're keeping me here to protect me?" I asked.

"Partially. And partly because he may finally find you. If he found out who I am, he'll know where this place is. It may only be a matter of time before he comes here."

"He's bait," said Tragedy.

"Yes," said Rage. "Everyone knows you're here, and if this guy forces them to talk, they will lead him here. That's why we have so many on the doors. That's why most of the teams are within a few miles of this place. It's why Newton and I aren't leaving the building. If the teams can't find him, he'll find us."

"But why me?" I choked out. "What have I done that's different than any of you?"

"There's no way to know, kid," said Rage.

"You bit someone's princess," offered Tragedy, "and he's mad."

"Could be," Rage added, "or could be anything like it. The important thing is, he's out there, and he's already killed two of our best fighters. You won't stand much of a chance alone, so we're keeping you here. You'll be safe, and maybe I'll get another crack at him. I'll be ready this time.

"Tragedy, your job is to make sure Lane stays here until this is over. You still need to keep Geo calm. It's bad enough that Chocolat had to share his story with the whole building. We cannot let fear spread. It will only weaken us."

Tragedy nodded. "I hope I'm getting paid double for this," she said as she rose, "now that I have two to babysit."

Rage smiled at her impishness. "When this is over, I'll see you have whatever you want. For now, let's have you stay in the balcony. I think the greenroom is too close to the backdoor. I'd rather you be near the middle of the building, equidistant from the sentries and away from the doors."

We nodded and Rage waved us out of the room. He sat behind his desk and said, "Just be patient. I need to stay here. My teams are supposed to be checking in with me soon. Party Girl should have called already. Keep Geo quiet, and sit tight. This will all be over soon."

We retrieved Geo and took our places in the balcony, overlooking the stage. I was the target. I was the bait. I searched my mind for anything that would illuminate someone from my past capable of killing me. Who had I

been that careless with? Who knew who and what I was? The haze of forgetfulness and the blur of memories and lies became an infuriating net. I was tangled in it, while something from the other side was coming here to kill me.

Party Girl never called. Brash didn't either. Magenta and Crimson returned to the club without Mr. Glass. Newton lost track of half a dozen of his men.

Trampoline returned with the tale of Fortune's death and she refused to go out with another team, so she joined us in the balcony. Like Geo, she sat silently, her eyes darting to the doors periodically, getting on her feet every time someone came through a door or walked onto the stage. It was taxing Tragedy's patience, and I could tell it was also making her jumpy. It was making me jumpy as well.

Eventually Tragedy started yelling at Trampoline to stay put and relax. The first couple of times she did as Tragedy commanded her. The third or fourth time she tried to argue. Not long after that, I had to pull Tragedy off of Trampoline as Tragedy was smacking her face into the floor.

"What did I say?" Tragedy growled through clenched teeth, her hand embedded in Trampoline's hair. "I said stay in your seat!"

I grabbed Tragedy and pulled her away, and Trampoline scrambled to the far side of the balcony. I was thankful that she didn't turn on me, and thankful that Trampoline only wanted to get some distance between them.

"Tragedy! Calm yourself!" I was shouting at her as I held my arms around her to keep her from going at Trampoline again.

"Every time!" she shouted back. "Every time someone walks through a door! Every time there's a loud noise! Every time a car door slams outside she's jumping to her feet! It's driving me nuts!"

Trampoline muttered an apology, and quickly let her panic overtake her. "I'm sorry! But I watched Fortune die! He

cut her down like she was nothing! I don't know if any of us can stop him!"

"Make her shut up or I'm going to tear her arms off!" Tragedy yelled. I held on tightly to her, fairly certain it was not a hollow threat.

Geo made her way over to Trampoline and walked with her to the far side of the balcony. They sat and talked, Geo's low steady voice interrupted by the high, excited pitch of Trampoline. I figured that was good enough.

"Tragedy," I whispered. "Sit down. Just sit."

She slid to the floor and I went with her, my back against the railing that overlooked the house floor. "You can let go of me," she said.

"I'll let go when I'm certain that no part of those girls is getting torn off."

"I can't promise that."

"Then I can't let go yet." We sat in silence for a moment as I considered my earlier thoughts. Rage had hidden some of the truth from the others because he didn't want them to panic. Trampoline had seen the truth for herself. She was in a worse state than Geo, and Tragedy had just tried to leave Trampoline's face print in the linoleum floor. Things were only going to get worse as the others either returned with the knowledge Trampoline had, or as some didn't return at all.

"At least you're handling all of this well," I said without much sincerity.

"Yeah, I'm having a grand time. It's like summer camp and Woodstock all in one." She let out a loud guttural growl. Then, quietly, she said, "How are you?"

I shook my head. "I feel numb," I said. "I'm naked, in the dark, with no ground to stand on. Last week I was immortal- WE were immortal. We were the gods of hell and we could not die. Now... How many are gone? Never to return? One at my own hand. I'm numb."

"Last week, hunters were a legend I barely knew. Now, one has asked for me by name and will be coming for me if the others can't stop him.

"Everything I know is wrong. Part of me is waiting for Nameless Freddy to walk out onto that stage and yell, "Surprise! April fool! Happy birthday, Lane, this is your life!" But the game is still going on, and he's still dead. I'm not sure of anything anymore."

"Why does he want you?" she asked me quietly. We hadn't spoken about it since we had left Rage's office. "Why is this guy after you?"

"I don't remember," I told her. "I've been trying to remember. When did I betray myself? Who knew I was a vampire and lived to tell about it? I have no answers."

"I don't want you to die." She grabbed my arm as she said it.

I didn't want to die either. I had nothing to say to her, so I said the same thing we all say when things look bad. "It's going to be ok."

"How?" she demanded. "How is it going to be ok? Somewhere out there is a guy who was capable of killing Skin and Trash, and that Fortune lady. Others are missing, probably dead. He wants you. He's coming here. You know as well as I do that he's coming here.

"I don't want to die Lane. And I don't want to watch you die." She had stopped fighting me and was just leaning against me, her hand still on my arm.

"You should get out." I said it before I could think it through, but as soon as it was out of my mouth I knew it was the right thing to do.

"Get out? What do you mean?"

"I mean," I said, "we get you a set of wheels and you drive until the car dies. You can go to another city, another country, start a new life. Be someone else."

"Lane, I can't..."

"It was only a matter of time before you had to do it anyway. We all do." She turned and looked at me, incredulous. "I don't want you to watch me die either," I said.

She turned and kneeled in front of me. She took my head in her hands. "Hey," she said. "We don't know that you're going to die."

"You already said it, and you were right. He probably already knows where I am. And to be honest, I don't know if anyone can stop him either." I grabbed her hands. "You can get out, and if I survive all of this, I'll come find you."

"No. I can't run, Lane. Rage has given me a job and I'm going to do my part to help the operation he's got going on here."

"Without tearing their arms off?" I asked.

"She was freaking me out!" I cocked an eyebrow at her. "Yes," she said, "I'll behave." She fell over to sit next to me, and we watched the two girls chatting in fast, high-pitched tones from a safe distance.

"Promise me something," I said. "What?"

"If he does come here... don't try and protect me. If he comes here, run."

"Lane..."

"Promise me. Please Tragedy." I looked into her dark eyes and whispered. "I don't want to watch you die either."

She nodded. "I think we'll both be happier if neither of us dies," she said.

I smiled. "Sure, if you want to do it the easy way."

*"How much more—when wicked men have killed
an innocent man in his own house and on his own bed—
should I not now demand his blood from your hand
and rid the earth of you!"*

2 Samuel 4:11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOLILOQUIES

The following day passed with whispers and silence. It was dark in the club except where the doors and windows let the sunlight sneak in. There was something worse out there than sunlight. Something far more dangerous that burned much quicker.

Rage and Newton spent their day in their offices on the phone taking reports about who had seen something and who was not coming back. After the previous night they stepped up the reports so that there were constantly calls coming in. Most of them were uneventful. There was a ring, followed by the muffled voice of Rage or Newton, and the sound of the phone being placed on the cradle, followed by another ring. Occasionally Rage would curse loudly and the conversation would last longer.

Sometimes the phone didn't ring, and we couldn't hear anything over the silence. Trampoline and Geo didn't speak much, and spent most of the day sitting in the old vinyl chairs at the far end of the balcony, staring over the railing at

the stage. They both tried to control their reaction to the noises and movements below, and would shoot the occasional nervous glance at Tragedy. They were afraid of her, and this made Tragedy feel better. Tragedy was occupying herself by sitting at the end of the hall where the offices were, listening in on the snippets of conversation that leaked under the doors.

Much to my amazement, Essence had gone back to work. Rage didn't stop her, probably because he didn't care if she got herself killed. She argued that, with our entire collection wandering the streets trying to find this guy, she would be alone, drawing no attention to herself, getting some work done. The last thing she said on her way out the back door, lit cigarette in hand, was, "Let me know how it all turns out."

Late in the day I heard feet clamoring up the stairs and Tragedy leaned over and said, "The Bobsy Twins are back."

Magenta and Crimson climbed the stairs and headed past us toward Rage's office. I leaned against the bar as Tragedy leaned back in her chair to hear what would happen.

The sound of Rage's phone slamming down was followed quickly by the sound of Magenta knocking on the office door. Behind me a short, white-haired kid jogged after them. He was all in black and boots, an emo rocker like me who called himself Slash, after the guitar player whose skills he had not yet mastered. We all called him Jimmy, though not after another guitar player whose skills he also had not yet matched. We simply refused to call him Slash.

Rage opened the door to find the three of them standing before him. "Anything to report?"

"I'd like to report that I'm getting dizzy from circling this stupid block," said Jimmy.

"Quit whining, Jimmy," said Rage coolly.

"My name is Slash."

"Don't correct me, Jimmy."

"Yes sir."

"Rage, sweetheart," whined Crimson. "We've been out there for hours, and people are starting to notice."

"And the sun is getting to us," added Magenta, not to be out-whined.

"Please," cooed Crimson, putting her head on his chest, "can we come back in for a little while?"

"The girls are just scared because they think the hunter is going to kill them too," said Jimmy.

"We don't know that it's a hunter," said Rage.

"What else would he be?" said Jimmy, a little too sure of himself. "It was a Hunter that killed The Soldier, and probably Virgo too."

"The Soldier?" I whispered to Tragedy.

"Before your time," she whispered back.

"The Soldier wasn't killed by a Hunter!" said Crimson with a tone meant to imply how stupid Jimmy was.

"What do you know about it?" demanded Jimmy.

"Well," she stuttered through faltering confidence, "Hunters are a myth. A legend someone came up with to cover the Quiet Groups. If the Soldier is dead, he was probably killed by his companion, Virgo."

"She's the one who told us it was a Hunter that'd killed him," Jimmy shot back. "Virgo took the Italian with her to find and destroy the Hunter. Neither of them were ever heard from again. This hunter might be the same guy."

"Or," said Crimson, in the increasingly school-yard-fight tone this conversation was taking, "she and the Italian were in on it together."

"Or," interjected Rage, "she killed both of them. Virgo always had a black widow vibe about her. Now, you three, go make sure all of the doors are well covered. If they are, then you can find somewhere dark to sit in the club. I'll be calling the rest of them in soon anyway."

"You are?" asked Jimmy. "Why you gonna do that?"

"I'll explain later. Just go."

The three of them toddled off down the stairs past us, and we pretended not to know they were there. When they reached the floor below us, Tragedy turned to me. "Thing One is a liar."

"You noticed that too?" I replied.

"She knows something she was pretending not to."

"That's her personal philosophy you know."

"Pretending not to know things? She's good. I really believed she was stupid."

"It's her Modus Operandi," I said. "I asked her about it once. She said, 'The dumber people think you are, the more surprised they are when you kill them.' I guess she likes the look on their faces."

"Good to know," Tragedy said. "I'll watch my back."

Rage was good to his word, and as the sun sank beyond the horizon, our kind flooded the Unorthodox. Tragedy and I wandered down to the house floor to ask about the news, but forbade the two girls from leaving the balcony with us. It was the safer place for them to be anyway.

A few hours after nightfall, Rage and Newton came down to join us. There was a hush as Rage walked through the house. The roar of conversations died into a dull drone as he climbed the stairs and walked onto the stage. Tragedy and I walked toward the stage, part of us thinking that, where Rage was, safety was. His hands were in his pockets again. I wondered if this meant his hands hadn't healed and he was hiding them.

I looked up to the balcony. Trampoline and Geo were still sitting where we left them. Walking to the center of the balcony was Newton. He nodded to Rage, and Rage began.

"All of our teams have joined us, and almost everyone is in some way accounted for. I had hoped to stand here and announce our victory well before this time, but this man is a wily prey and hard to get our claws into. Instead,

Newton and I have discussed it, and we have decided that the easiest thing to do will be to collect you all and wait for him to come to us.

"It is true, as no doubt some of you have heard, that we have suffered losses. Now, I warn you not to assume that because we have not heard from someone that we should immediately assume they are dead. Several of you missed your check in calls by more than an hour, and no doubt there are several that will be joining us later tonight. We will not let fear and speculation overtake us, or we will be tearing each other to pieces in short time."

I looked at Tragedy. She shrugged.

"Yes, we have lost numbers. When our teams were in twos and threes, he got the jump on a few of us and there have been confirmed losses." The crowd, nearly a hundred of them on the floor alone, began to grumble amongst themselves. "But this is all the more reason to strengthen our resolve to find and destroy this man! He will pay for his crimes! He will be destroyed for what he has done! We have every door to this place, and every window on every floor covered. As soon as he is spotted we will be alerted and he will face all of us. Maybe he does well against one when he catches them off guard, but he will not survive long against us all. We will tear him into pieces and spread them all over the streets of this city!"

It was then that Rage paused to allow those of us who were motivated to applaud his words. The applause didn't come.

It was that moment that, instead of shouts of approval, Rage saw eyes go wide. He saw heads turn. He heard footsteps. And then he heard the clear low voice behind him.

"Mr. Williams." It was a greeting.

He was almost as tall as Rage, but thinner, even in his long gray coat. He removed his hat and held it in his hands. His hair was neatly pulled back behind his head. His

beard was neatly trimmed, just like in Finch's drawings. His boots ceased their noise as he came to a stop behind Rage. His piercing eyes scanned the crowd, we all stepped unwillingly away from the stage.



Rage was so shocked to have been interrupted in this manner and by this man that he completely froze. There was nothing he could say. The doors were covered. There were more than a hundred vampires in this room. Yet, here he stood.

Isaiah. Killer of our kind.

Trampoline came unglued and began screaming. "It's him! He's the one that killed Fortune!" she yelled.

"And Trash!" yelled Chocolat.

There was more screaming, but there was no movement toward the stage. We looked to Rage. We looked to Newton. They were frozen. They thought they had a plan for this moment, but now that it was here, all of us were in a state of checkmate without a move.

Isaiah walked downstage. "How does one kill something that is already dead? You accuse me of killing." He pointed to Trampoline. "Does your heart beat? Do you breathe? What makes you, any of you, think you are alive and capable of being killed?"

I instinctively took a step between Isaiah and Tragedy.

He continued to look at us, and those who had been answering were silenced by his withering gaze. His eyes were an ice somewhere between anger and sorrow. They did not carry the hate that Rage's eyes did. But they did not have the fear and despair of Geo's. They were hard and cold.

"You fools!" he shouted. "Liars and hypocrites! You are not a breed that lives. You are not even a kind. You are dead men's bones, well dressed tombs. Outside you are dyed hair and silk suits and inside you are the rot of death. Your hearts are cold and dead. They have not beat for many years.

"You chose this walking death. You are guilty of your own deaths! You stopped your beating hearts! You chose to be the walking dead feeding on the lives and the blood of your brothers and sisters! And you accuse me of killing your kind? I cannot kill that which is already dead!"

His voice pounded against us with heavy blows. His words beat into our chests like hammers, and I could see around me that those who stood with me felt it too, as though he had physically beaten us. What power did this man have that his words could not only silence us, but beat into our chests?

"You blind fools!" he shouted. "You have no life in you! You gave up the life that you had, and then you take it from those who still wish to live! Parasites! You wear makeup and hide your skin so that your dead form will be hidden from other men, you hide from the light so you will not see yourselves for what you truly are, yet you are no more alive than a felled tree, and like a tree you can be cut down and burned.

"Evil parasites! You buy expensive homes for yourselves, tombs to house your dead bodies, but send good people to shallow graves. You have killed all from sinners to prophets. You stay youthful drinking the blood of the living, and so your own faces testify against your murderous ways

when your lips will not! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

A quiet panic spread across the room. He had destroyed Skin. He had destroyed Trash. How many others had fallen, and here he stood in our midst, without a scratch on him to tell of his confrontations with our best fighters. What if he could destroy us all? What if he could condemn us to hell?

"I know who you are!" It was Geo. She screamed from the balcony, on her feet, her voice echoing around the room. Her control was gone and she was consumed with terror. "I know who you are! You are the Hound of Heaven! You are the Hunter! You have eyes that burn like fire! It is you who comes to remove every vampire from the earth! Will you also cast us into hell?"

She may have continued forever had she not been silenced. Isaiah put his hands to his lips and quietly shushed her, and like a small child she bent under the weight of his command. She was silent, but her eyes were screaming.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"I am Geo. I am known as Gaia, the earth goddess."

"Goddess?" he replied. His tone was firm, on the edge of anger. "You are no goddess. Never has anything come from heaven so in the likeness of a demon."

"Please!" she screamed again, unable to contain her terror as it gripped her. "Don't destroy me! Swear in the name of Heaven that you won't destroy me!"

"You will never again be called a goddess," he said to her. "Never again will you accept the worship of any man or woman."

She nodded, frantic in her fear. "Never," she said.

For a moment he started at her in silence and then, quietly, he said simply "Go."

At his command she ran through the balcony, into the hall where the offices were. From down the hall we heard

the sound of glass shattering. She had jumped through a window.

"What about the rest of us?" It was Trampoline. She was on the verge of breaking down, but did not yet have the will to run. She had not gotten permission. "Will you destroy the rest of us? Is that why you are here?"

"I have not come to destroy you," he said. "I have come here for only one of you. I am hunting one soul, and you will either be with me or against me." He scanned the house with his cold eyes. "Blaze Pascal."

Those in the crowd who knew who I had been gasped and looked toward me.

They may as well have pointed and yelled, "There he is!" Anyone between Isaiah and me backed away until there was nothing between us.

His eyes caught mine, and the universe screamed to a stop. That moment was an eternity as I waited for him to act. Then, for a second, his eyes jumped behind me. As his eyes met hers, I heard Tragedy inhale sharply. For a second, the look on his face melted into what looked like surprise. I did not know what she had done to elicit that response, and would not find out soon.

"No." That one defiant word put the earth back into motion. Somewhere in the silence of the room, Rage had gotten his voice back. He took a few steps toward the front of the stage. "You can't have him," Rage growled.

Isaiah did not respond.

Rage reached out with his hands, which I only now saw were gloved, and grabbed Isaiah by the neck with his left hand and turned him to look into his eyes. His right hand held a knife at Isaiah's throat. He waved his gloved fingers around the knife, pleased with himself that he had defeated Isaiah's only known strength.

Rage's voice was a dark voice was a growl that came through teeth and a hateful grin. "Boy," it said, "I'm going to enjoy..."

But it would not continue. From between them came the flash of silver, up over their heads, and then around quickly past Rage's shoulders. The sound was one of rotted wood being broken, and it was the only one in the room.

Rage's arms fell, then his head, and they bounced on the stage where they fell as his body toppled over backwards. His head rolled off the stage onto the floor at the feet of some of Newton's boys.

Isaiah sheathed the sword as quickly as he had wielded it, and turned back to me. He pointed at me. "I only want him," he said again. Not a threat. Not a warning. Just a fact. It sounded almost as if he was trying to reassure the rest that they had nothing to fear. But they were afraid.

Fear quickly turns into anger, and anger quickly turns into violence. Shattering the silence, Newton leapt to the stage from the balcony, screaming his hatred. One by one his boys followed suit and soon there were a dozen on the stage. I turned to run, and from what little I saw before I hit the sidewalk outside, most of us had the same idea.

I hit the pavement running, and around me others were scattering in all directions.

Several didn't wait to open the doors and soon all of the doors had been shattered by vampires diving through the glass.

For a moment, I stopped in the middle of the street. I had no plan. I didn't know where I could go. A foreign made motorcycle was whining its way toward me from the south end of the street. As it passed, I grabbed the rider and threw him to the ground. I picked up the fallen bike, its engine still humming, and as I righted it, I heard that voice again.

"Stop!" One word, and I knew. Isaiah was at the doors of the Unorthodox and headed toward me. I hopped on the bike, but he caught me by the back of my jacket and pulled me off.

I spun around and threw a punch at him. It was futile, but I had to try. He caught it, and then grabbed my other

hand. My wrists burned with searing pain like I had never known. I knew, as soon as he let one wrist go, his sword would slide through my neck. I screamed, howled.

“Stop running from me,” he said. I looked up into his eyes. His cold, steel eyes.

He wasn't even angry.

I looked around, desperate. Headed south in the other lane was a taxi, going well over the speed limit. I threw my weight into him as hard as I could. The front headlight hit Isaiah and shattered, sending him tumbling. Once free, I dove back onto the motorcycle and headed north as fast as I could get it to go.

I saw him running in the rear view mirror that remained. He was faster than any man I had ever seen. Behind me I heard him. “Stop!” he shouted. “Matthew! Don't run! Matthew! Come back!”



I tested the endurance of that bike and easily tripled the legal speed limit. I weaved through traffic in both directions with an eye constantly toward the rear view mirrors. I had no plan except to get as far away from Isaiah as possible. I had no direction except away from the Unorthodox, away from my oblivion. I had nowhere to go.

And now, I had another piece to an ever-changing puzzle. He had called me Matthew. My mind raced under the screaming whine of the engine as I considered what that meant.

Rage was dead. Isaiah had dispatched him. It was the only word that fit. Not conquered, not defeated. Dispatched. Like brushing off a large mosquito, he had dealt with Rage. Rage's broken body flashed through my mind. Except that he was in several pieces instead of one, he looked no different. It magnified how dead he already looked-how dead we all already were.

He had called me Matthew. The name from Finch's notebooks. We didn't know what it meant at the time, but now I did. He thought I was Matthew. One more piece of the puzzle I was desperate to solve.

He thought I was someone else.

*How lonely sits the city that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
she who was great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
has become a slave.
She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers she has none to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
they have become her enemies.
Lamentations 1*

CHAPTER TWELVE

SANCTUARY

Instinct had taken me to the southbound highway, toward my apartment. Halfway there I was overcome by the fear that he would know where I lived and would be waiting for me when I arrived. There was no reason to believe he knew where I lived. He knew me only as Blaze Pascal or Matthew. I knew my apartment would be safe, but I could not ignore the image in my mind of him standing in my doorway. The fear grew until I had to obey. I drove around the city for hours, searching for some place to hide, but only finding reasons why I needed to press on.

My self preservation had caused me to run. In the din of my confusion and fear there was a voice in my head screaming at me to run as far as I could and never look back.

But there was another voice, and it had a question I could not ignore. "Did she escape?" it asked. That question fought with my fear until I knew the gas tank was running dry. In my mind I was across the state line and headed toward the next, but I had to know. In the end, I headed back North.

I ditched the bike in an alley half a mile from my destination and ran through the shadows, trying to avoid light, which in many neighborhoods was hard even this late at night. The black of the sky had begun to give way to the dim glow of the coming morning.

Up a few flights of stairs I quietly rapped on the back door to Tragedy's apartment. Behind me the glow of morning was gaining strength enough to threaten the dominance of the stars on the horizon. I knocked again. "Tragedy," I whispered loudly, "It's me."

I heard the sound of the door locks being undone and the door burst open enough for Tragedy to look out. Her eyes darted around, past me, behind me.

"Can I come in?" I asked.

"Why did you come here?"

"Why did you open the door?"

She had no answer, so she grabbed me and pulled me quickly inside. Behind me, she shut the door and bolted the lock.

"Do you think that will do any good?" I asked her.

"No," she replied honestly. "But I just learned how to use the locks, so I thought I'd give them a try. Maybe they'll slow him down for a second."

"It's enough time to dive out a window."

"That's my plan," she said. "What's yours?"

"I don't know. I drove until the motorcycle I borrowed was almost out of gas. Tragedy, I'm a wreck. I don't know what to do."

"Well, you can't stay here."

"I know I can't," I agreed.

"I don't think you understand." She paused to look out the window. Still searching the streets below she continued. "Essence called me. Rage is gone. Newton is gone. Fortune is gone. The city is in chaos. Her office has become a hub of communication for our kind because the leaders are all dead. Everyone is afraid that a war is going to break out over leadership. If Skin and Trash were still around it might have happened already. In short, the only thing they all agree on is that you need to leave the city."

"Because the hunter is after me."

"They think if you leave he'll follow. Essence said if you don't leave, there will be more than one Quiet Group after you."

"But where am I to go? Is anywhere going to be safe?"

"You have connections," she said. "Vegas. You said you lived in Las Vegas once. Or Ontario. You must still have connections."

"Yes, of course," I said. "But how many of us also have connections? Wherever I go, I'll be met with a Quiet Group. Who of our kind won't have heard about this by tonight?"

Tragedy sighed and leaned against the door. For a moment we both sat in the silence, waiting for the answer to come to us. This city was done with me. The next would not welcome me any more than this. Who would offer me refuge?

"Thing One," said Tragedy, the spark of an idea shining in her eyes.

"Crimson? She's probably hiding in her band's practice space, waiting until someone comes to get her. What help can she be?"

"She," said Tragedy, "knows where the Soldier is."

"The Soldier..."

"She knows he wasn't killed by a hunter or Virgo. She knows where he is. Probably a hermit, which is perfect. If he

has no contact with our kind, he won't know the trouble you're in. No one will warn him. And this hunter will have a hard time finding a hermit. It can at least get us out of the city and give us a place to hide until we find somewhere to go."

"Us?" I asked. "It's me he wants. Why would you risk yourself by coming with?"

There was an awkward pause as Tragedy assembled her response. "At the Club. When he found you in the crowd, he saw me. He looked at me. We locked eyes just before Rage grabbed him, and the look on his face..."

"I saw it," I told her. "He looked surprised."

"Exactly. Surprised. As though he was not expecting me there, but then he saw me, and it surprised him to see me. And the question is..."

"Why would he be surprised," I continued the thought for her, "unless he thought he knew who you were?"

"Does he know me?"

"I don't know. He thinks I'm someone named Matthew."

"You're Matthew?"

"He thinks so. It's just as bad as if I was. Although, maybe once I told someone I was Matthew and..." I trailed off as I realized I couldn't finish the story. The past was too hazy. "We need to get out of town."

We arrived at the Pythian Oracle looking like refugees from a chemical bomb-dark glasses and scarves over our faces. The sun was barely overtaking the night when we arrived, but we didn't care. It was better to hide from the eyes of the hunter than avoid the stares of the coffee slaves riding the subway with us.

Her staff had not yet arrived, but as I expected, Essence was there. She was in the conference room that had been Diana's office.

"I was expecting you two to show up sooner or later," she said as we entered. "Though you should know the

danger you are in. The leaders are gone. Rage, Newton, that Fortune woman. With them gone, everyone is calling me. Believe it or not, I don't want to run the city. I was happy with the life I have been leading. There are no lines anymore. There are some who want me to be Rage, and I'll warn you, they want me to call a Quiet Group on you."

"I know," I said.

"The good news," Essence continued, "is that none of them feel brave enough to do it themselves. For now. Sooner or later someone will, and either they'll come hunting for you or there will be a war over leadership. Maybe both. Suffice it to say, I predict storm clouds for the weekend, and you two need to get out of town before they come."

In Diana's chair was Geo, and the sight of us clearly sent her into a panic. "They should not be here," she said, barely over a whisper. She was afraid to look up at us, perhaps hoping if she didn't see us we wouldn't be there.

"She's been seeing the hunter everywhere she looks. I've had to keep her away from the windows," Essence said with a weary voice.

"Don't worry, princess," Tragedy said to Geo. "We won't be here long. We're looking for a ride out of town and a safe location to hide out in."

"Any chance we can borrow your car again?" I asked.

"I had a feeling that is why I would be seeing you again," Essence replied. "And the answer is no. However, never let it be said that Essence does not serve her kind." She walked to the desk and pulled a set of keys out of the front drawer. She tossed them to me.

"What's this?" I asked.

"I rented you a car in Diana's name. Suffice it to say, you won't need to worry about returning it on time."

"That's right neighborly of you," said Tragedy.

"Quite," said Essence. "Besides, I'm hoping the rest are right and he follows you out of town. No offense, but I have no wish to die in your place. That and I'm pretty sure I'll

never get any decent work out of this one until she's sure that he's gone." She indicated Geo.

"Relax, Geo," I said to her. I walked to the desk and grabbed the rolodex. "I'll even do you the favor of taking this with me so you can honestly say you don't know where we were going next." I flipped through the cards until I found Crimson's address. Then I noticed Geo's stare and looked up to meet her eyes.

Geo threw herself out of the chair and against the wall. "You!" she screamed. "The hunter's eyes! You have his eyes! I knew it. I always knew it. Please... please, go."

I looked to Essence and Tragedy. Essence shrugged. "Good help is so hard to find, even among the undead," she said. "The car is the dark blue, four door right outside the front entrance."

I offered my thanks and we were on our way.

It was no surprise that Crimson was not in her apartment, but despite the odds we checked there first. Rage owned a condo on the north side near the Club. We headed there next, feeling the whole time as though we were heading into enemy territory. Like before we didn't know where the Hunter might be. This time, however, we knew for certain he was out there.

We were met at the door by one of Rage's many domestic servants. She had a thick accent and eyes that could not hide her fear. I wondered what she knew.

"Mr. Williams is no here," she said. The door was not even entirely open. There was a little chain at the top which she left latched.

"I know he's not here," I replied quietly. "I'm looking for the one who calls herself Crimson."

The domestic's eyes widened and her breath caught in her chest- a subtle, involuntary response to the name. It wasn't a loud gasp, but it was enough that we knew her answer. "N-n-no," she stuttered. "No one is here. You must go."

She began to shut the door, but I stuck my hand into the opening and kept it from shutting. I gently opened it again and looked at her. "Ella es el Diablo," I whispered. Her eyes darted into the house and back to me. I motioned her outside, and she hesitatingly joined us on the steps. "Mr. Williams is dead," I said to her. "Uh, Senor Williams es muerto." She nodded in understanding. Crimson, and whoever else was inside, had been careless with their conversation. This woman had suspected something about them, and she was afraid. The news of her employer being dead did not surprise her, but I suspected she had been waiting for confirmation. I held up a handful of cash to her. "Tu necesitas el trabajo nuevo." She did not move. "Take the money," I said. "Go home. No one will come looking for you."

She grabbed the money carefully, as though she expected me to strike her suddenly, and she quietly ran down the stairs.

We entered the house quietly, and we heard conversation echoing quietly down the hall. But then we heard it stop suddenly. They knew we were here, and by the silence that filled in the gap where a greeting should be, they weren't happy about it.

Tragedy looked around the condo. The others were in the room ahead to our right, we knew that much. She leaned in real close to me and whispered as quietly as she could, "Just talk as though I'm standing here with you." Then, she headed down the hall into the kitchen.

"Well," I said as though she was next to me, "I expected a warmer welcome than this. Here's what I think we should do. I'll go upstairs and see if the girls are sleeping the day away, and you check the basement, and we'll meet back here in a few minutes."

The conversation I was having with myself was interrupted by the sound of glass shattering. Before I could make a decision about what to do, Crimson came flying through the doors of the room to my right, clearly not of her

own choice, and slid to a stop against the wall. I walked into the room, a sitting area with bookcases and a fireplace, to see Tragedy near the door on the far side into the dining room behind her, half surrounded by four others, Magenta, Jimmi, and two other males, and then Trampoline standing near the door where I had entered. They had axes in their hands, like a miniature Quiet Group.

"Excuse me," I said as I grabbed the axe out of Trampoline's hands, "but isn't it me that you wish to destroy?"

In the time it took them to turn and look at me, Tragedy had two of their axes and buried them into the legs of the ones she took them from. Those two crumpled with cries of pain and the others took a step away from her. I glared at Trampoline and ordered her to the couch. "Sit," I said through clenched teeth. She obeyed.

Crimson appeared at the door, an axe in her hand, apparently willing to rejoin the fight.

"Crimson, we need to talk to you," I said.

"It's your fault," she said. "It's your fault he's here. Your fault that Rage is dead."

"Talk to me for a minute and we'll be leaving town immediately after," I said to her.

She gripped her axe handle tightly. There was a loud cracking noise behind me, and I saw that Tragedy had pulled the axes out of the legs of the ones at her feet and was holding them, ready to continue taking pieces of the others apart.

"If we kill you, we can make him go away." Crimson was not listening. "We can give him your pieces and he can burn you and leave. We will give you to him to save us."

"As a Blood Sacrifice?" said Tragedy. "Oops, I mean a bloodless sacrifice." Her taunting came to a sudden stop. Her eyes went wide and she was transfixed beyond Crimson. "Oh no. It's too late." She pointed toward the door we had entered though with her axe. "He's found us!"

Crimson pulled the axe close to her chest and turned to the front door. She squinted into the glare of the light from outside. She found nothing in the windows, and the door was still closed. I also did not see anything. But then there was a loud thud of a blade sinking into dead wood. I turned to find it, and what I saw was Tragedy, smirking. Jimmy was staggering back to the fireplace, where he would fall, an axe in his neck. The axe he had been holding was in her hands.

"I could do that all day," she said. She waved both axes at Magenta and sang, "Who's next?"



Crimson screamed a tribal yelp and swung her axe at me, but having had clearly no experience in this type of combat, swung wide and gave me plenty of time to catch it with my free hand. I sunk my axe into her shoulder and forced her to her knees as she cried out.

"Once more," I said to her, "I just want to talk. Then, Tragedy and I will leave." I pulled the axe out of her and she screamed again. "Tragedy?" I called behind me. "We're going into the next room to talk. If Magenta doesn't put her axe down and sit with Trampoline, cut her head off."

As I dragged Crimson into the next room, I heard Magenta's axe hit the floor.

On the other side of the kitchen was a spacious two-car garage, filled with Rage's black cars. I tossed Crimson onto the hood of the convertible.

"You are angry. I understand that. You think if I leave the hunter will follow me and leave the city. I agree. I am leaving, but I need a place to hide while I figure out where I can go. The big cities are not options. You know where a hermit lives. Tell me how to find him."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"The Soldier," I said. "You know where he is. Now, you can tell me, and I will go hide with him for a while, or I can stay here and ask you to tell me until the Hunter finds us both. Or until Tragedy loses her cool and cuts all of you into small pieces. Either way, the clock is ticking."

She must have realized the logic of my words, as it didn't take her long to choose.

Her make-shift Quiet Group had failed. The Hunter was still out there. She slid slowly off of the hood of the car and went to the back seat. She pulled out an atlas and started flipping through it.

"Do you have a pen?" she said.

Within a minute I was walking with Crimson back to the study where Tragedy was lecturing the girls on the couch.

"I'm not saying you need to live at the gym," she was ranting, "but a little training could help a lot. Did you see how wide she swung that axe? And slow! She may as well have written a note that said, 'my axe will be arriving at this time at this location. Feel free to catch it when it shows up.' And these clowns on the floor. Were you thinking they would protect you?" She walked over to Jimmy, who still had an axe still lodged in his neck. "NEVER take your eyes off of your opponent!" she yelled as she yanked the axe out. "Are you listening to me, Jimmy?" He blinked and groaned quietly.

"Tragedy, we're going," I said to her.

"A girl has to be able to protect herself!" she yelled at them, walking toward me. "You can't just spend your existence being pretty and waiting for help to arrive! Come on!" She turned to Crimson. "Sit down. I'm keeping these," she said, indicating the arm full of axes she had collected. "And if any of you fools comes out of that door before we drive away, I will cut your heads off. We're leaving. Don't follow." Then she stormed off toward the car.

"Also, you might not want to be hiding out here," I said to them. "The hunter knows who Rage was. I don't think it will be long before he decides to search the old Williams estate. Oh, and now the bad news. The Hunter thinks I'm someone named Matthew. If he realizes that he's wrong, then getting rid of me might not help any of you. Tell the others." And with that we were gone.

The city held nothing for us now. Being attacked solidified the fact that the door had closed behind us. There was nothing for us except Quiet Groups and an unstoppable Hunter. I had left a lot of places, but I could not remember having left a place to which I could never return. I had left a lot of lives behind, but I had never had a life cast me out. It felt different- more hollow and empty. There is normalcy to things running out- time, money, blood- but there was something heavy and oppressive about a life running out.

The option to go was always there. I always knew it. Now that control was gone from my hands. The option was gone. This life was gone, an empty wine bottle, and it was not coming back.

Once again I knew that I had never been part of a flock of anything. There was no family. There was no loyalty. There was no community. I was a murder of one. I was glad to have Tragedy with me, but I knew it was only a matter of time before she left me as well. Every one of my kind either wished me gone or dead for their own sake. My self-pity was staved off only by the honest realization that, in their place, I would have done the same to them.

*I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.
The wise man has eyes in his head,
while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize that
the same fate overtakes them both.
Ecclesiastes 2:13-14*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SPEECH OF A FOOL

Thanks to tinted windows, we were able to drive during most daylight hours, though when the sun was screaming through the windows in early morning or late afternoon, we found shady places to park the car for a while. A direct route to our destination would have taken less than twenty hours, but we both decided to take an indirect route. We didn't know how he might track us, but a little throwing him off of the right track was a good idea nonetheless.

We headed south for fifty miles, then east for fifty miles, then south for another two hundred. By this time the sun was pouring into the car as it started the decline into setting, so we found a parking garage near a large public library. In the darkness of the auto sarcophagus, we reclined in our seats and rested for the first time in days.

The darkness quickly took me, and I fell into the timeless sleep I was used to. The silence was broken by a tapping on the window next to me. I opened my eyes to see

that Tragedy was not in the passenger seat. When I turned to see the tapping on the glass, she was gone, but I heard my name.



“Come on Lane.”

There was no light now except for the electric lights buzzing dimly over the sporadic cars around the concrete ramps. By the time I had gotten out of the car, she was already in the stairwell and ascending. I walked after her.

In the stairwell, she was several flights above me. “What’s the hurry?” I asked. “And where are we going?”

Her answer came mixed with the sound of another door opening above me.

“Come on Lane.”

When I reached the door she had exited, I could see that the sky was dark. We had come out on the roof, and the moon was full. I stared at it, trying to remember if it was supposed to be full. For some reason my memory was telling me this was the wrong time of the month for a full moon. How long had I been out?

If I hadn’t been looking up, I would have seen it coming. I found myself slammed against the brick wall of the stairwell, a vice grip on my neck. It was Newton. I was certain he had been destroyed, but here he was with his hands around my neck. My mind quickly flashed to my previous fear that Rage was setting us up and adjusted Newton into the place of the mastermind. In that fraction of

a second, as I fought back my fear, I tried to calculate the odds of my surviving a fight against Newton. It was not good.

Before I could try to fight back, I saw the rest of the scene before me. It was far worse than my instincts had warned me. Tragedy was only a car's length from me, but she was also being held- by Isaiah. His blade was at her neck. Next to them was the girl I had followed up here. Looking at her now, I didn't know how I could have mistaken them. This girl's hair was longer, and she was easily taller than Tragedy. Something was familiar about her. Before I could search my memory to find her, I heard a voice I could not have expected.

"Do you wish to see her die? All he has to do is flick that blade and Tragedy will know Oblivion. Oblivion, my friend. I tried to warn you," he said, but I did not know if it was pity or sarcasm.

Newton turned my head for me, and I saw him- black jeans, dark button shirt, thin tie, messy hair. I saw him, but I did not believe it. It was Nameless Freddy. It was Judas Darwin Finch.

"Finch? I don't understand..." I said. My head was spinning.

"You've played the game well," he said, almost sincerely, "but I'm afraid we've come to the end."

Newton released me as Finch walked toward Isaiah, but he stayed right on my arm. "Oblivion!" Finch shouted with glee. "And now you must make the choice I told you that you would make. Either your life or hers. Watch her die and walk away free, or ask to die and see her live."

Tragedy was in a dead panic, the gleaming silver blade at her throat, its edge touching her. "Please, Lane," she whispered. "I don't want to die."

"How?" I demanded. "I watched you die. I helped kill you."

"Oh, Lane," Finch replied. "I know what you're thinking. But this isn't about revenge. I'm not here to punish you for your sins. This is about love. I loved Tragedy, and she hated me for it. And I know you love her as well. You don't want to see her die, so I am giving you the chance to lay down your life for her. Show her that you love her, and she will hate you, but she will live to hate you. You will get to die, having sacrificed your life for her, knowing that she hates you for loving her. What do you say?"

"Let her go," I said.

"It's not that simple," Finch said with a smile. "There is protocol. There are rules to this game," he said as he walked to me. "But they are simple." He stopped at my arm and leaned in close to me. "Tell her you love her," he whispered harshly into my ear, "and ask to die. That's all. Then we will kill you and she will be free."

I looked at Tragedy, her eyes wide with terror. Her nightmare was holding her by the waist with a blade to her neck. Her eyes pleaded with me, though I cannot say if she knew the cost of setting her free. I knew he was right. I tried to find the words to argue with him, to negotiate, to bluff. The words did not come. I loved her, and I could not watch her die. I already knew that. The game was over, and I had lost.

I nodded and Finch smiled. "Tragedy," I said. "I love you." I could see the expression on her face change. Maybe she expected a fight plan. Strategy or a bargain.

Clearly, she did not expect a profession of love. "I love you Tragedy," I said. "I love you more than anything or anyone. Isaiah, let her go. Let her go and destroy me instead."

Isaiah released his grip on her and the sword disappeared behind her. She stared at me, wordlessly. I can only imagine the thoughts spinning through her head. I wanted her to respond. I wanted her to tell me how she felt. Did she love me too? Did she hate me for it like Finch predicted? The next seconds hung in the air like an eternity.

Then it was too late. The silver gleam of Isaiah's blade reappeared. It was in the middle of her chest. He had thrust it through her from behind. Her eyes dropped to see it just before her legs failed her.

I screamed in protest, but before the sound could escape my lips Newton and Finch had me by the arms and had forced me to my knees. They were overpowering and my limbs refused to obey my commands to move. Tragedy looked up into my eyes just before she slid off of the blade and onto the ground.

The tall girl I had followed up the stairs stepped around her carefully. She was wearing boots and a long dark skirt, and until she stepped into my view of Tragedy, I had forgotten she was there. I looked up as she stood before me. Her dark hair hung around her face and obscured her, but her voice was clear.

"How many girls have you said that to?" she asked. "How often have you professed your love? And now, it's finally true, and it finally cost you something." She knelt and looked me in the eye. "It's cost you everything."

She lunged forward and sunk her teeth into my neck and began to drink my blood.

I woke up screaming.

Tragedy stared at me over the road atlas as though she was wondering if she should get out of the car or slap me around.

"Tragedy?" I asked.

"Lane?" she replied.

"What's happening?"

"Well, you were sleeping, and then you started screaming. Other than that, nothing."

"Did I say anything?"

"Well, you said, 'Ahhhhhhhhh!' And then you woke up. You ok?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Great."

"Nightmare?" she asked.

"I guess. We had been double-crossed. Finch was alive, and he brought the hunter here." I paused as the scene ran laps around my mind. I chose to skip to the end. "Then Carrie Anne dug her teeth into my neck and began feeding on me."

"Who's Carrie Anne?"

"You know. The tall girl. From a couple of days ago."

"I thought you didn't remember her name."

I thought for a moment. "I didn't. But that's what it was. Her name was Carrie Anne."

"You want me to drive?"

I handed her the keys. "Yeah. Thanks."

We drove through what remained of the night and found another parking garage for the early morning until the sun was high enough to not come through the windows. The skies were clear and unseasonably warm. Many of the fields we drove through had been harvested already, many more were in the process of being harvested. Combines worked through most of the night and all day as we passed. Because of the harvest and flat land, the sun hit us almost immediately after dawn and drove us to find shade until the roof of the car could provide protection. Because of this, our path was further interrupted and we would spend more time in the car than we might otherwise have needed.

As we drove, Tragedy asked me if we should ditch the car and find a human to feed on. After some discussion we both decided against it. We had each fed within the past two weeks, and we could easily control our thirst for several weeks before it became an issue. Besides that, I argued, we didn't want to risk leaving any evidence of where we had been. Being careful was the wise thing to do. Being cautious would keep us alive.

The truth was, I could not get Carrie Anne's face out of my head. The man we had fed on at Devil's Lake, Darrin, had crept into my memory with Carrie Anne. Before him had been a woman named Lisa, whose story was very similar to Carrie Anne, and before her Heather. Their names and faces had been coming back to me. Even with my waking eyes I could see them, accusing me of their deaths, begging for me not to kill them, their last moments a waking nightmare for me. I could not think of them without seeing Carrie Anne drinking my blood in my dream. I could feel their pain and fear. I could remember their names. I could not look at a human without thinking of one I had fed on. Before the next nightfall there were dozens in my head- a cloud of witnesses to my sin. I was afraid to sleep again, but the fight to keep them out of my conscious mind had tired me so that I slept that afternoon as we waited for the sun to go down.

Especially because I was so unaccustomed to dreaming, I faced the scene with fear and uncertainty. They had surrounded me- those I had fed on. I didn't know where we were. I didn't know how we had got there.

Carrie Anne stood before me with a knife in her chest, shouting "Murderer!" Darrin stood next to her with the teeth marks from the cougar still in his neck. "Liar!" he shouted. Lisa and Heather had the usual injuries in their necks. Some had bruises or other injuries reminding me how I had killed them. The circle closed in on me as they began to assault me not only with memories, but with their fists as well. They shouted, "Liar! Murderer!" and they struck me with fists that felt like iron until I sank into a ball on the ground in self-defense.

They suddenly stopped, and I looked up to see a hand extended toward me. It was Finch.

"Come on," he said. "Get up."

I took his hand and stood. The humans stood around us, forming a wall, but for now they were silent and still. Part of me suspected that this was another dream, but I could not

be certain. "This isn't real. You're dead," I said to him with wavering conviction.

"Yes I am," he replied. "Aren't you?"

"No. I'm still alive. Hunted, but alive."

"Does your heart beat? Does blood run through your veins? Do you breathe?" he asked.

"No, of course not," I said. "Our kind doesn't breathe or have beating hearts."

"Then we are already dead."

"You talk like the hunter."

"Maybe he was right. Maybe you aren't the next step in evolution. Maybe you are the rotting corpse of the last step. Maybe you're dead and just too stubborn to admit it."

I wanted to argue with him, but I found no reason. "Maybe," I admitted.

"Look around you, Lane. Look at the death you have been to so many."

"Don't try and condemn me, Freddy," I spat at him. "You were one of us. You fed on the humans just like all of us did. We are a different kind. We are made to hunt, and so we do. We survive on their blood. They are our food. You cannot condemn me for being the thing I was made to be. I didn't ask to be a vampire, but however I became one, I live the way our kind has to live."

"What choice do we have?" he asked. It wasn't even an argument, though I had expected one.

"Yes," I said. "What choice do we have? None. We have to survive, and they are our sustenance."

"I asked you to leave," said Carrie Anne. "You could have left when I asked you to."

"If it wasn't you, it would have been someone else," I replied.

"You could have let me go when I asked you to," said Darrin. "You could have chosen to let me live."

"Gaia chose you," I reminded him.

"You could have stopped her," he said.

"I begged for mercy!" shouted Lisa.

"So did I!" added Heather.

The others added their protests. Soon there were dozens of angry voices reminding me of their last moments and how they had begged, pleaded, and cried for their lives, all of which I had denied them.

Freddy held up his hand and they obeyed and were silent again. "You took lives that did not belong to you. You stole our lives from us, Lane."

"You told me to destroy you!" I yelled at him.

"Yes, I did. But you did not have to obey me. You had the choice to let me live. There is always a choice Lane. You stole their lives, and not just from them. You stole them from their mothers and fathers and friends. Thief. Liar. Murderer!"

"Our kind must feed!"

"That's a lie you have chosen to believe."

"What lie?" I asked. "We feed to live, just like any other animal."

"Have you ever seen one of us die because we failed to feed on human blood?"

"No, but..."

"No."

"We have to feed or we'll die!"

"Then die!"

"I don't want to die!"

"Neither did they!" he shouted, pointing at the crowd around us. "You could have chosen to let them live. They asked for their lives."

"They deserved to die," I said, grasping for some defense. "They were wicked. Liars, adulterers, murderers..."

"And of which of these sins," Freddy asked me, "are you innocent?"

He was right and I could not disagree with him. "I thought..." I stuttered as I looked around at them. "I thought we would die if we didn't feed. We all knew it. The thirst was

so strong. How could I resist the thirst when I thought I would die?"

"You could have chosen to die. You would have died for Tragedy."

"But I love her."

"Did you love none of these?" he asked.

"You said you loved me," said Carrie Anne.

"You said you loved me," said Lisa.

"You said you loved me," said Heather.

"Lair!" they shouted at me as others reminded me of the promises I had made.

"I didn't know!" I shouted at them. "I knew thirst. I knew desire. I knew lust. I didn't know love was different!"

"Now you know," said Freddy. "You would give yourself for her."

"Yes," I said. "You were right. I love her. I didn't know what it meant until now."

"Now look around at the ones you murdered. Their mothers loved them. Their fathers loved them. Their friends loved them. Their brothers, sisters, children. Now that you understand love, you can understand what you have done."

The crowd parted. Behind Freddy was Tragedy. Rage, Magenta, and Crimson held her. Her eyes pleaded with me. I could not move.

"Now that you understand what love is, you can understand what you have stolen from those that remain."

Rage sunk his teeth into her neck and blood poured out of her skin as she screamed in pain. I dove toward them to save her, but I was caught by the dozens of arms of those around me. They held me fast and my screams joined hers as Crimson and Magenta also bit into her and she bled more. Then the crowd closed in on me and began to bite into my flesh. I too bled from the wounds. I too screamed in pain. I heard Tragedy shouting my name. The sounds of my screams and her shouting my name blended together until I

could see nothing. The pain suddenly stopped and everything was suddenly quiet.

When the sound of my screaming stopped, I was blinded by light, and I heard her say my name again.

"Lane!"

I opened my eyes to see we were on the road, sometime in the early morning, and Tragedy was behind the wheel. The fields around us were a painful glare of daylight, and there was nothing to the horizon in any direction except a few cars and trucks dotting the vast landscape.

"Lane! Wake up!" she shouted.

I composed myself for a moment. "Where are we?" I asked.

"Well, we're about fifteen miles from the dead center of nowhere," she said. "I was about to start screaming but you beat me to it."

"Sorry," I said sheepishly. "More nightmares?"

"Yeah. Freddy came back and he brought a crowd of old friends."

"Lane, this is your life."

"Sort of," I said. "I was surrounded by the humans I had fed on. I'm remembering their names and their faces. I'm remembering feeding on them."

"Sounds like fun," she said.

"No. Not fun. It ended with them sinking their teeth into me and drinking my blood."

"Drinking your blood?"

I nodded.

"Maybe you should start drinking coffee," she suggested.

"Yeah," said. "I've had enough of this dreaming business. Do you ever wake up screaming?" I asked.

"I have," she said. "Probably did a couple of days ago. I haven't slept since then."

"I can't blame you," I said.

*I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;
he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.
He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;
he has broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.
Lamentations 3: 1-6*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SOLDIER

We got into the city limits of our destination just after high noon. The town was a tiny rural town with a comical name where things like combines and silos were normal parts of everyone's lives. The downtown consisted of three bars, a post office, and a corner store with pumpkins sitting outside of it in a pile with a big hand painted sign which told the prices. We drove around the area for a while before we found the street we were looking for.

The neighborhood was made up of houses from a few different eras. Closer to town the houses were a more elaborate, almost Victorian style. Three blocks later, where

the street dead-ended into a cornfield, the houses were clearly products of a growth spurt in the 1960's or 70's. There were bicycles and other toys in the yards of some, bird feeders and painted wooden figures in the yards of others.

We pulled into the driveway of the house that matched the address Crimson had given me. The windows were covered with heavy drapes, which both encouraged us that this was the right place, but also made it fit into the neighborhood as several homes were closed to the outside in the same manner. As we exited the car, I searched the sky for some cloud cover, and found none. It was painfully bright, even though we were well covered save our hands and heads. I looked down at my hands as I thought about the sun and I saw the hunter's finger prints in my wrists. I decided to do what Rage had done and keep my hands in my pockets for a while.

"You can stay in the car if you want," I suggested. "It's pretty bright out there."

"It's fine," she assured me. "Besides, he might not be real happy to see his own kind standing at his door. Let's stay together until we see if we get a warm welcome."

I conceded and we walked to the front door together.

I knocked on the door and we waited a few moments for a reply. Having heard nothing, Tragedy pushed the button for the doorbell, but again we heard nothing, not even a doorbell chime. She pushed it a few more times and there was no sound, so I knocked again. The sun was burning my neck, so I pulled up the collar on my jacket and buried my hands in my pockets again.

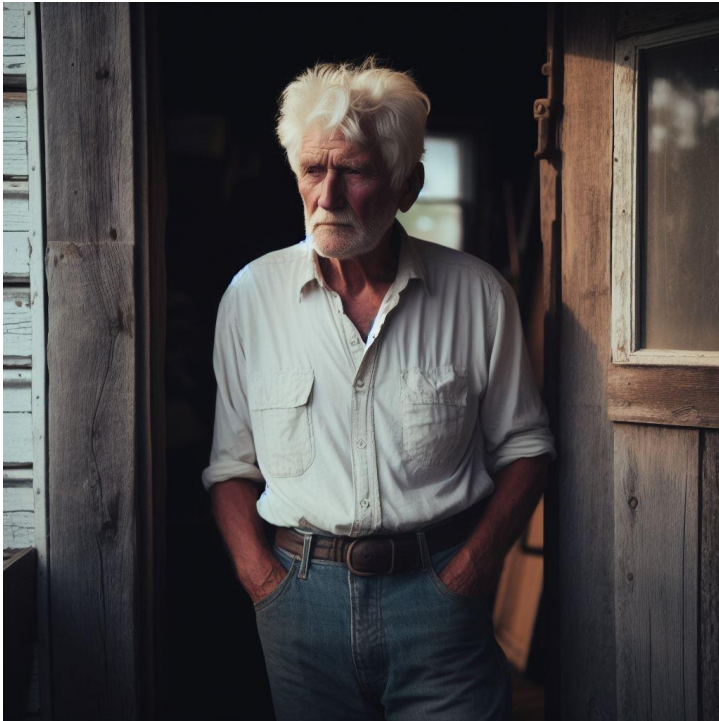
"It's really bright out here," she said.

"You should have worn something with sleeves," I replied.

"Next time, you can help me pack." She looked around the yard. "Why can't this guy have a tree or something?"

A MURDER OF ONE

I knocked again, and this time we heard a quiet shuffling from inside. Perhaps we had woken him from a nap, or maybe he realized that we were not going to leave. The door opened and we were met with the stiff form of an older, white haired man in blue jeans and a white t-shirt. He took off his thick, wire rimmed glasses and looked us over. Then he looked up, and back at us.



“Do the two of you realize that it’s high noon and not a cloud in the sky?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Tragedy curtly, “and it burns like holy hell. Are you going to let us in?”

“Well, that depends,” he answered slowly, still looking us over. “Why are you here?”

"We'll be here to rip your freaking head off if you leave us out in the sun for much longer!" growled Tragedy.

"Hey!" I said to her. "Easy. I said you could wait in the car."

"Still burning," she replied.

"I'm sorry. My name is Lane, and this is Tragedy. We need your help. Specifically, we just need somewhere to stay for a short time while we make plans for our next destination. We won't be any trouble."

"Just the two of you?" he asked.

"Yes," assured him. "Just us, and only one other knows where we are."

"All right," he sighed. "Pull your car around back, next to the garage, and then come on in."

We did as he had instructed. Once inside Tragedy began to feel better. The interior was dark and cool, and in almost every way unremarkable. The colors were all neutral, and there were almost no photographs.

We sat on the couch and he sat on one of the two chairs across from it in the narrow living room. He let out a deep sigh as he surveyed us both. "So, who sent you?" he asked.

"Her name is Crimson," I said. "She's the pet of Rage, Mr. Williams."

"The Unorthodox?" he replied. "My goodness, I have not been there in a very long time. I wouldn't think anyone there would remember me. And I certainly don't remember anyone knowing where I was. Crimson you say?"

"Yes," I said. "She's a flighty, light skinned girl with big eyes and dark hair. Dresses like a Victorian doll."

"I can't say that triggers any memories," he said.

"Perhaps she knew the Italian," Tragedy said. "She seemed to know something about your combined disappearances."

"Ah," he said. "Yes, that would make sense. There was a girl who played the part of his sister that could have fit

your description. No one called her Crimson, but these things change over time. Perhaps he told her before we all disappeared.”

“She told us you were called the Soldier,” I said.

“I was once, yes,” he replied. “But again, that was a very long time ago. I’m just William Craig now. I had been a soldier. For many years and many wars.”

“Oh yeah?” said Tragedy. “Were you in Nam?” she asked with a slight southern drawl.

“Yes. But I was also in the civil war on the side of the Confederacy. I still have part of that uniform in the attic.”

“Oh, good times,” she said.

“They were,” he said. “There are few things to compare to war.” He fumbled with his glasses as he searched his memories for the stories he probably had not told in many years. “I lived in the south until the first world war. Thanks to groups like the KKK, our kind could take a Negro whenever we needed to feed and there would be no investigation. Racism always worked well for us. I went decades without even hearing mention of a Quiet Group because the humans were killing so many themselves. If we thought we were feeding on too many, we could simply feed on a white woman and claim she was killed by a black man, and the Klans would start up more killings to cover anything we did. It was the next best thing to war.”

“Next best thing? You enjoyed your times at war?” I asked.

“Oh, sure,” he said. “Surrounded by humans killing other humans is the best place for our kind to be. In World War One, chemical weapons started being used. I was with the Big Red One in France when they became a part of the war. Big Red One’s the first infantry division. When a dozen of your comrades fall over dead for lack of air because of a chemical cloud, there is nothing stopping our kind from feasting. The French and Germans of our kind I met on the

fields were all doing the same. That much death is a feast. It is a time of plenty for our kind.

"I stayed with the army for the various conflicts in Asia over the next couple of decades. Nowhere was it better than in the jungle. Even mid day there was little sunlight to speak of, with all the trees and the rain. With so much cover, I could feed midday during a fire fight and never be noticed. Just follow the sound of the machine guns to your next meal."

"Why did you ever retire?" asked Tragedy. "It sounds like you had it made."

"Why the hermit lifestyle you mean?"

"Yes," she said. "You went from feast to famine, but you chose the famine. I don't understand."

"Mine is not a popular lifestyle with our kind," he said. "I have seen those of our kind respond with anger and violence at the mention of it. The reason actually comes from the time I spent between wars."

"I made movies. Starting as early as the thirties, I made low budget films. Probably nothing you would ever have heard of, but I contributed to the cultural understanding of our kind."

"You made vampire movies?" I asked.

"Yes, a few. Well, more than a few," he admitted. "I started in New York, this was the late twenties, and at the time I was living in a predominantly Italian neighborhood. It was the first time I learned about the Catholic faith. I found it fascinating. And of course the apartment always smelled like a dozen Italian meals every night. The stairwell smelled like garlic all day- even at sunrise. I started putting these influences into my films, and that's why vampires are afraid of garlic, holy water, and crucifixes."

"You're kidding," said Tragedy with a smirk.

"My films were the first to use all of those elements. The crucifix had been used before I think, but I expanded on it. I said to myself one night as I was walking out the door to

my apartment, 'All of this garlic is going to kill me,' and I put it into the next film I made. It was a backhanded slam against my Italian neighbor's overuse of the herb.

"Once I started, I kept digging for cultural icons, and of course the rosary and the crucifix were easy additions. When I heard about Holy Water I knew I had to add that as well. To be honest, I don't remember if that was influenced by the Wizard of Oz or not, but the similarities always amused me."

"Wizard of Oz?" said Tragedy with a quizzical look.

"The wicked witch is melted by a bucket of water," I said to her, "sort of like a vampire being burned to death by holy water."

"What a world," she replied.

"So, you left war to make movies?" I asked.

"Not exactly," he said. "I just found a good war was harder to find. The American army was too well equipped, too well monitored, and too ready to take prisoners.

Besides, a lot of conflicts were popping up in the Middle East. Too much sun. But I have to tell you, the path to my retirement came through my films."

"Made a lot of money?" asked Tragedy.

"Well, yes," he replied, "but that isn't why. I had begun to do more research for my films in the late sixties, and that led me into the Catholic Church. I've always been drawn into the Catholic Churches because of the architecture, the artwork, but when I started digging into the folklore and iconography, I started to wonder, what if some of this is true? What if there is a God? What if there is some moral law and order to the universe?"

He must have caught the look Tragedy shot me, as he chuckled slightly as he continued. "I know, it must sound absurd. But I had to find out. When I met the Italian, I started attending Mass with him. I had simply wanted to learn the customs and folklore and whatnot, but when I heard about

the moral law, I wondered if it applied to us. I went to confession once and asked if the priest could forgive me my sins, and then I told him I killed the living to drink their blood. He didn't know if I could be forgiven. He suggested penance.

"I stopped going to the Unorthodox. I stopped feeding. The idea that there was some wrathful God waiting to damn me to Hell kind of gripped me. I know how silly it must sound to you, but I couldn't let go of the idea. If there is anything in the universe that our kind should fear, it would be God. And if he is real, he must hate us. Our kind, feeding on the humans he made."

He paused to fiddle with his glasses for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. "I knew if I was ever to earn his forgiveness, I had to escape the life I had lived. I had to isolate myself from temptation and all of our kind. So, The Italian, Virgo and I made a plan to move us all on to our next lives. Apparently the Italian told that Crimson girl. Maybe she would have gone looking for us if he hadn't."

"When is the last time you fed?" Tragedy asked.

"It's been a very long time," he said. "I can't say I have been completely without since moving into the fields like I have, but there have been few lapses, and the last time has been, oh, more than ten years. I've been clean and sober, in a manner of speaking, for the majority of more than twenty years," he said proudly. "I have beaten my desires into obedient servants. I have put great effort into cleaning the blood off of my hands and out of my mouth. I am not the monster that I once was." He looked up at us awkwardly, probably considering suddenly the fact that we were not on the path of self-cleansing that he was. "That's probably why I look so old. Especially to a couple of kids like you two."

"You've been aging?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. But still, not as fast as they do. I imagine I will have to move to another town somewhere far from here in the next few years. My only real contact with the humans is at church events, but it's only a matter of time until

someone notices that I'm the only church member who refuses to die. One can only attend so many funerals before he is burying the next generation and the one after that.

"Speaking of moving on, how long do you two think you'll be staying before you head wherever you're going?"

I looked at Tragedy and she shrugged at me. "I'm not sure," I said. "We need to make some arrangements. We're kind of looking to start over also, but we don't yet have a final destination."

"Had to get out of town quick?" he asked.

"Sort of," I answered hesitantly. "I think you could say that we're not on speaking terms with Mr. Williams anymore."

"Oh, dear," he said. "Is there a Quiet Group coming for you?"

"No," I answered honestly, "but there might have been one if we hadn't left. It's a long story, and one you might not believe if you heard it."

"And this Crimson girl isn't going to tell Mr. Williams where she sent you?"

"No," I said. "She's not on speaking terms with him right now either."

"But what if they repair their relationship?" he asked. "Are you certain she won't betray you and send him here?"

"I can promise you that it won't happen," I said. "There's not a lot I'm certain of these days, but one thing I am sure of is that Mr. Williams is no longer a threat to us."

The Soldier, who was living under the name William Craig, told us about an apartment that was empty for the time being, its latest resident having died within the past year. She owned the building she lived in, which had three other families living in it and two vacant as two of the families had moved out after her death. She had been a widow with no surviving family, so she left the building to the church.

When the sun went down we drove over to the church, a few blocks north of his house. As the most enduring active member of a small church, he had a key, and we went into the church to retrieve the keys to the apartment. He was eager to show us around the church, as he had been eager to talk to us about his past. I surmised that, having been away from our kind for so long, he was glad to be able to drop the façade for a short while.



“Here’s my home away from home,” he said as we walked into the sanctuary hall.

“Enough stained glass that even a bright morning is not too painful. I sit there, in the middle row, on the aisle. In the past years the congregation has waned considerably. When I first came here, we were able to fill the pews for Christmas, but as of late, no one sits behind me on a Sunday unless they show up late.”

Tragedy had stopped in the foyer as we stepped into the sanctuary. I noticed that she wasn’t with us and turned to find her staring at a life sized sculpture of a man hanging on a cross.

“Tragedy?” I said. “What is it?”

“I don’t know that I’ve ever seen one of these up close,” she said. “I’ve only seen the little ones on Rosary

necklaces and gravestones. Do they all have railroad spikes through their limbs?"

"Oh, yes," said the Soldier. "Even on the small ones on a rosary necklace, or at least they imply them. This is Jesus, one of the main teachers and prophets of the church. A martyr. His mother, Mary, is the woman up front by the candles there," he said pointing to a small ceramic statue, "and you probably saw her outside as well, by the shrubs out front. They're two of the saints we pray to the most often."

"This is how he died. The Romans of the first century used this manner of execution for the worst of their criminals. They were literally nailed to this cross of wood and left to die. It could last hours or days."

"And you think God is mad at us?" she asked. "None of my kills last that long. They die quick."

"An odd lobby decoration," I observed. "Welcome to church, here's a dead guy nailed to some wood."

"It used to be in the sanctuary, there, where the big cross is," he said pointing to the front of the sanctuary where a new cross hung like a shiny cherry wood letter 't.' "A few years back I finally got them to take it out of there as part of a remodeling we were hoping would encourage young parishioners to come, but someone who was putting up a lot of money refused to let us get rid of it. Because they were fronting a lot of money, they got to decide what happened to it, so, here it went. Then he died and she moved out of town."

"Still," he continued, "I'd rather it here than up there. Can you imagine staring at this thing every Sunday? This lifeless, wooden dead man. Bloodless and dry and dead. It reminds me entirely too much of the life I left behind- of what I am. That's us up there-bloodless and dead. When I do think about it, it encourages me to try harder to be faithful to my religious duties, my prayers, my service to the church and attendance to Mass. But most of the time I just do what all of the others do."

"And what do all of the others do?" asked Tragedy.

"They just ignore him. It's easier to do that now that we finally got him out of the sanctuary." He smiled awkwardly, and turned to continue the tour.

We followed him into the main hall of the building. The high, slanted ceiling was nearly white, as were the walls. We walked the long, narrow room on the plush, decorative carpet toward the empty cross. The pews were elegantly carved and decorated. The walls were adorned with small images, some of them gilded. Large, decorative lighting fixtures hung from the ceiling on chains, giving the room a slightly medieval feel.

At the front of the room was a low platform with a table on it. "This is the Altar," he said, "though it is only for decoration. There are no sacrifices here. Though we do have a reoccurring ritual where we pretend that grape juice is the blood of a martyr- the one hanging out in the foyer in fact."

"You pretend you're drinking his blood?" asked Tragedy.

The Soldier nodded in reply. "I've always been divided by this ritual. Part of me likes it," he said, "because it feels so familiar. Drinking blood with my comrades. Yet, part of me hates it because it reminds me so much of the life I have worked so hard to leave behind. Sometimes I feel like an alcoholic pretending to drink a shot of whisky. Which, now that I think of it, might not be unusual to our congregation. We have at least one former alcoholic, and aside from pretending that it's blood, we also pretend that it's wine."

"You guys do a lot of pretending around here," observed Tragedy.

"It's all for a good cause," he said. "Purification of the soul. We do what we have to. Come. The offices are this way."

We took a right past the platform and headed through the doors and down a short hallway into the church office, which was a small room with two desks and a copy machine.

He grabbed the key from one of the desks in the church office. There was not much to see, so he didn't spend much time showing us around. Once you've seen the old school charm of a typewriter you've seen everything a small town church office has to offer.

We headed out the back door of the church. The apartment building was just the other side of a small cemetery. It was a tiny, three story building between two one-story houses and across the street from the back yards of a newer section of housing. The street light on the corner was the only one on the block, which suited us just fine. The interior of the building was a tiny box with cement walls and the furniture left from the last owner, none of it purchased in the past twenty years.

The Soldier took our car to keep behind his house, as it would draw less attention than it would sitting out on the street. In a town this size, anything new would gain plenty of attention, even something as simple as out of state license plates. Besides that, his house, like most of the town, was only a few blocks away.

Once alone in the apartment, we talked briefly about where we should go. We flipped through the road atlas and considered every city it offered. We discussed different countries and parts of the globe. Mainly we tried to forget that we were being hunted, and we tried not to let ourselves fall asleep.

*I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.*

You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death;

I have suffered your terrors and am in despair.

Your wrath has swept over me;

your terrors have destroyed me.

All day long they surround me like a flood;

they have completely engulfed me.

You have taken my companions and loved ones from me;

the darkness is my closest friend.

Psalm 88: 5-6, 16-18

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Unknown Caller

Too much of the night was spent in silence. The options were wide open, as were the unknowns. With every city we seemed to find that one of us knew connections that Rage or Newton would have there. If that wasn't an issue, we didn't know which of our former collective would have run to those cities to hide from the Hunter. In short, anywhere in the country we went we might be walking into a hive who thought what happened to Rage and Newton was my fault. We had been attacked by our own kind before we left the last city, and we had no way of knowing that we wouldn't face the same welcome walking into the next one.

Our best option, as we talked it out, was to reinvent ourselves here, in this little town, and then to leave the country. I suggested Mexico, because we could drive there, and I knew a handful of ways to get rid of the car in a handful of towns not too far from the border. Tragedy thought we would stick out like a sore thumb, but I thought we could stick close to the resort towns on the coast and mingle with the affluent travelers.

The world suddenly felt very small. Anywhere we went either took us into territory where we would be painfully obvious, or closer to where we assumed the Hunter had come from in the first place. Eventually we succumbed to the silence of the dying night and drew the curtains to keep out the morning.

Tragedy went to lie down in the bedroom as I remained in the living room. The night's conversations about our future were hard on her as she faced dead end after dead end and she fought to keep calm. The hopelessness seized her by the chest a few times and I could see her restraining her desire to scream.

He was out there somewhere- tracking us. We didn't know where, and we didn't know how long it would be until he found us. All we knew for certain was, we could not survive unless we ran. Every second ticked down one more until he found us again, and we were anxious to move on as quickly as possible. What we both realized was, we didn't know when this would stop. We didn't know if there was ever going to be a time when we knew he had stopped hunting us.

I must have drifted off sometime in the early morning, because I suddenly realized that the light was gone, and I heard his voice again. Finch. Nameless Freddy.

"Matthew..." He was calling to me somewhere in the dark. "Matthew!"

"I'm here," I said.

He emerged from the shadows. "Matthew. I warned you. I tried to tell you. Did I not?"

"Tell me what?"

"He's coming for you, Matthew," he said. "And he's coming for her."

Then I heard Tragedy screaming.

I blinked hard when I opened my eyes. I was still on the couch. Light was sneaking into the room through the sides of the curtains. This was the widow's apartment. Freddy was gone. Tragedy was still screaming.

I ran into the bedroom to find her rolled into a ball and screaming into herself. I grabbed her and shouted her name. Her eyes unwillingly opened. She flinched as she saw me, then her mind identified me. "Lane?" Her eyes darted around the room.

"Are you ok?" I asked her.

"Nightmare," she said, and she turned away from me, toward the wall. "Is there anything I can..."

"I'm fine," she said quickly. I stood by the bed for a moment. "I'm fine," she said again. "Just leave me alone."

I walked out into the living room, closing the door behind me. I could hear her crying quietly into a pillow. I didn't know if I had ever heard one of our kind cry. She wept like one who had no hope. I felt a gaping hole of helplessness in my chest that grew until it was physically painful. I sat on the couch again and redoubled my efforts not to fall asleep.

I watched the shafts of sunlight creep across the floor. Somewhere in the town, someone mowed their lawn while I sat in the stillness of the apartment, waiting for inspiration to strike and offer me a solution. Tragedy had stopped crying before the uncertain engine sputtered its last. I don't know if Tragedy fell asleep again or if she just fell silent. Soon the apartment was still and the noise outside was a rare interruption to the quiet.

My mind was a blur of noise that has no competition in the outside world.

Freddy's voice was still in my head. What was worse, I knew he was right. I loved her, yet somehow, because of me, Tragedy was being hunted and there was nothing I could do to protect her. What weighed just as heavily on me was the faces of the ones I had fed on—the ones I had killed. I could see them with my waking eyes, as though they were a room full of ghosts accusing me with my own memories. Murderer. Thief. Liar. Of what sin was I not guilty?

And what if the Soldier was right? What if God sat in his heaven, angry at us for the evil things we were? What if The Hound of Heaven was really sent from God to avenge the victims we fed on? What if Geo was right and he had the ability to not only destroy me, but cast me into hell?

And what if I deserved it?

I tried to remind myself of the lies I had heard them tell. I tried to remind myself of the betrayal they had willfully committed. One of them, a runaway who called herself Pearl, had even killed her pimp because I told her to. She was a murderer. Carrie Anne tried to kill me. I dug through my past as far as I could for the reasons why they all deserved to be punished, but in the end there was none as guilty as I. They had lied for me. They had killed for me. I had moved their hands to evil. Maybe I was the devil. Maybe we were the gods of hell, but the God of heaven had no intention of losing the war between us. Maybe I deserved the wrath of God. Maybe I deserved the oblivion that was hunting me. By the time Tragedy joined me again, I could think of no reason why I did not.

I heard Tragedy digging around in the bedroom storage a good ten minutes before she came out. I thought it best to let her come to me when she was ready. She came out of the bedroom wearing a pillbox hat. "Check it out," she said. "Apparently they haven't cleaned out any of her stuff. The closet is full of clothes."

"Nice," I said halfheartedly. "You can recreate yourself as an old librarian or something."

"Are you kidding?" she replied. "This stuff is so old that it's already coming back into style. Retro-chic my dear." She disappeared back into the bedroom. "Have you made any decisions?" she called to me from the other room.

"Nothing helpful," I replied. "Although I think you're onto something with this woman's wardrobe. I think it may be as far from your starting point as you can get, in terms of fashion."

"True," she called back, "but egad! Everything has that old human smell to it."

"Maybe that will cover your tracks better."

"I guess it can't hurt."

In the closet were enough relics to keep Tragedy amused and distracted for a while. She tried on a few things and found a couple of things that either fit or would with a little alteration. I dug in another closet and found a sewing kit. I also found a box of men's clothing- a jacket, a few ties, and some items telling of military service. He had gone to war at the same time as the Soldier, at least once. But whereas the Soldier had gone to feed on death, the old man whose effects I dug though had gone to give his life to serve his nation and to die for those whom he loved.

Despite an enjoyable distraction, we could not keep our minds free of our situation. It was rare to hear a car or anything else outside, but when we did Tragedy went to the window to look. She could not help herself.

We heard footsteps crunching through the leaves outside and both went running to the window to see a child coming home from school. I had almost forgotten that other people lived in the building. Traffic picked up a little bit as the day waned and Tragedy found it hard to stay away from the windows.

Then we heard a motorcycle. Tragedy dropped her sewing and we both ran to the window. Peering out carefully we saw a motorcycle coming up the street. The rider wore a dark coat.

"No," Tragedy said to herself. "No. No."

A moment passed as he approached. Then we both saw.

"No," I said to her. The rider had a white beard and as he got closer, we could see that he was heavier than Isaiah.

"No," she replied with relief, and went back to her sewing. She picked it up, stared at it, and put it back down. "I don't know how long I can take this, Lane. I'm gonna crack. I go between the suffocating fear that the next sound I hear is going to be him at the door, and wishing that it will be. If he isn't going to stop hunting us, then I wish he would get here and get it over with! If the Hunter doesn't kill us, then the irony is going to!"

"Irony?"

"Us! Hiding behind curtains like this! Peeking out the windows every time we hear something outside! Us, the prey, fearing the hunter! Living like this is going to drive me mad! It's exhausting."

"You should go," I said. "Leave me here and go back to the city. You'll be safer with the others, especially since you can assure them that I've left town."

"The city's done for me," she said. "It's been losing its charm for a long time anyway. The others would only fear that, once he's killed you, the Hunter will come back for me. Then they'd send me off or threaten me with a Quiet Group, and I'm right back here where I started."

"Then go somewhere else. Another city. Get lost in Los Angeles, or New York. We don't have any reason to think he's after you."

"You saw how he looked at me." "Perhaps he found you attractive."

"Right," she said with a sly smile. "I'm sure I'm what any vampire hunter is looking for in a wife. No, it was a look of surprise. He was surprised to see me. Which means he thought he recognized me."

"Just because he recognized you doesn't mean he is hunting you."

"Why else would a Hunter know who I am? Do you think we were old friends?"

"Maybe he thought you were someone else," I offered. "Maybe he was mistaken."

"Like he was about you?" she asked. "He thinks you're someone called Matthew, but we're hiding anyway."

"That's different."

"How?" she demanded.

"I am Matthew," I said hesitantly. "Or was anyway."

"You don't know that."

"Yes," I said. "I do. I didn't, but I've remembered a lot. Geo was right about a few things, and this was one of them. I looked into his eyes, like Rage did, and I'm remembering things, like Rage did." I looked down on the handprints, still burned into my wrists where he had grabbed me outside the Club. "A dam has broken. Names, faces, events, all flooding back on me no matter what I do. And I remember the name Matthew. It was me, once."

I walked to the window and looked out. For now the street was empty, but I could hear the wind kicking the leaves around. I had a sudden thought which escaped in a "Ooh," before I could stop it.

"What?" Tragedy demanded. "Nothing," I lied.

"Lane!"

"Fine. I just thought, what if he's not riding a motorcycle anymore?"

"Thanks, Lane," she said with bitter sarcasm. "I was looking for a reason to spend more time at the window."

I shrugged. "Good thing we chose a small town."

For a few minutes she went back to her sewing and said nothing. I looked through the closets a bit more, but found nothing useful.

"We should tell the Soldier," she said, apropos of nothing.

"Tell him what?" I asked. "Everything?"

"It can only help. He can be another set of eyes. If he knew what to look for, he could give us the heads up."

"Or, he can do what all the others have done," I countered. "He can send us packing or try and destroy us to protect himself."

"I don't think he would."

"Why shouldn't he? He came here to escape our kind, and now we show up and, oh, by the way, a Hunter is coming. Keep a weather eye. Give us a call if you see him so we can get out of here and leave you on your own."

"He was a soldier, Lane. Maybe he can help us. Maybe he knows enough about fighting to give us an edge. Maybe we can stop the Hunter if he's on our side."

"We can't stop the Hunter."

"You don't know that!"

"Rage couldn't stop the Hunter," I reminded her. "Newton, Skin, Trash. All of our best fighters couldn't touch this guy. A retired hermit is not going to give us the strength to curb our fate."

"They didn't know what they were up against," she said. "We do. They didn't know anything about strategy or real combat. This guy probably does. You don't go through a century of wars and not learn what works."

"The Soldier is retired, old, and weak. Besides that, he's on the path of righteousness. The Hunter is the Hound of Heaven, sent by God to punish me for my sins. The Soldier is not going to stand up to him. He'll deliver me to my fate because he thinks I deserve it, and let's face it, I probably do."

"Come on, Lane. You walk through one church and you're ready to flog yourself like that crazy old hermit?"

"I told you, Tragedy. I've been seeing them for days. Names, faces, my sins replayed for me over and over in my head. I am a monster!" I shouted.

I could see I shocked her with this behavior, but the truth was under so much pressure in me that I couldn't stop

it from erupting. "I've killed so many for so long, and...and look at the Soldier! Not a drop of blood for ten years and all he's suffered is a little aging? Have we been killing only to keep ourselves pretty?"

"Stop it, Lane!" she shouted at me. "You're just letting this Hunter, this... Human get into your head! I remember what happened to Rage, but I also remember what Rage told us. He has a beating heart. He can die. And if we get the Soldier to help us, maybe we can kill him. We have to try."

"Why?" I asked. "What is the point?" She tried to reply, but I continued. "No, you tell me now why we do it! Why do we live? Why do we sustain our existence?"

"Don't get metaphysical with me!" she spat back. "Our existence is simple, you know that as well as I do. Life is the struggle to survive, for us as well as anything on the planet. We are the top predator and we survive on the other top predator on the planet."

"But why?" I demanded of her. "Do none of us have a purpose other than our animal instincts? Do we feed to survive, and survive only to feed? We don't even enjoy it. When was the last time we laughed just because we were happy?"

"We laugh all the time, Lane." She almost looked hurt as she defended the time we'd spent together from me. "You and I have a good time. We always laugh."

"We laugh *At*," I said. "We mock, we scorn, but all of our laughter is laced with hate and disdain. If that is the most pleasure we get from this life, then why are we fighting so hard to protect it? Why are we afraid to lose something so empty?"

Her face was a mixture of anger and the frustration of not being able to answer my questions. She didn't know, but she was too proud to admit that out loud. Besides, when you acknowledge a truth out loud, it becomes more real. You

own it. She was not ready to own the fact that we were living meaningless lives, and I could not blame her.

The sun was setting and I peeked out the window to watch the shadows stretching out on the lawn between us and the church across the cemetery. Somewhere a dog was barking. The wind carried the scent of lighter fluid and smoke as someone started making themselves dinner. The stillness of the town was a stark contrast to the churning in my own mind.

"Things have been coming back to me," I said to her as I stared out the window. "The names of the ones I've killed. The ways I killed them. The way they begged me not to.

"Something I remember now as clear as if I had never forgotten it is the fact that I was once Matthew. The Hunter wasn't wrong. I was. I was Matthew." I didn't want to say it, but she deserved to know the truth. "And Matthew," I said, "was human."

"No," she said. "That's impossible."

"It's true. We have hearts, you know. Why do we have hearts if they never beat? Why do we have veins if blood never flowed through them?

"We were Human once. Like the ones we feed on. I was a human called Matthew, just like the Hunter said. And your name..."

"Shut up," she said through clenched teeth.

I turned to look at her.

"Shut up!" she screamed as she stood to her feet.

"Your name," I said, "was Rebecca."

She sprang at me like a panther and knocked me off my feet, through the window. I landed in the yard, covered in curtain and shattered glass.

When I looked up, she stormed off into another room. I lay on the grass and looked up at the clouds turning dark shades of purple. I just laid there and wondered why I had known that.

I don't know how long I laid there, but the sound of the phone shook me out of my mental haze. The sky was dark and the few homes around us were lit from the inside with the dull blue glow of televisions. I brushed the glass out of my hair and walked back toward the apartment. Since the door was locked, I hopped in through the broken window.

The phone continued to ring as I noticed Tragedy glaring at me from the bedroom door. I picked it up and said the customary "Hello."



"Hello, Lane," said the Soldier on the other end. "This is William Craig. Something has just come to my attention."

I was afraid the neighbors had called him about the broken window. Even in a town this small and sleepy, it must have been seen by someone. "We will pay to have the window replaced," I said. "Did we attract any serious attention with that?"

"Window?" he asked. "What about the window?"

"We broke... wait, what is this about?" I asked him.

"Yes, well, it seems I have just discovered the reason why you were trying to get out of town so fast. Apparently there is a Hunter after you, is there not?"

I looked to Tragedy. "Now he knows," she said.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Or someone who claims to be a Hunter."

"Is it true that he killed Rage?" he demanded.

"Yes. And apparently a few others. How did you find out? Did Crimson call you?"

"No, no phone calls," he said. "I have a visitor. He'd like to speak with you."

There was a moment of silence, and then a new voice over the phone. "Hello, Matthew. Tragedy is there with you?"

"She is. Who is this?" I asked. But I already knew.

"This is Isaiah." It was his voice. The thing we had feared was instantly the reality we faced. He was with the Soldier. He knew where we were. He knew Tragedy was with me. He was here. He was never going to stop hunting me until one of us was dead, of that I was certain. I took a step toward my fate.

"You're very persistent," I said.

"You're very evasive," he replied. I was chilled by his tone. I expected anger, or maybe sarcasm. He was almost friendly with his conversation, as though he felt no reason to fear. Like he knew how little a threat I was to him. I knew it too. "And frankly, I had almost started to fear that you weren't coming."

"Coming?" I asked.

"Here," he said. "To town. Apparently I found Crimson not long after you did. I'm always disappointed at how fast your kind betray each other, but she was a bit angry with you, so it didn't take too much persuasion on my part to get her to talk. Apparently you took the scenic route and I got here before you did."

"What do you want?" I asked.

"If you look out that window you broke, you'll see a church. I thought we could meet there tonight. Just the two of us."

"I'll come under one condition," I said, fairly certain I was in no place to make demands.

"And what's that?" he asked.

"I'll give myself to you, no fight, and you let Tragedy go. Let her live and you can do to me what you will." Tragedy shook her head at me, but I looked away from her. I didn't know if he would agree, or even if he would honor his word if he did, but I had to try.

"I have no desire to destroy her," he answered. "But tell me something. Do you remember your name?"

"You mean Matthew? Yes," I said. "I remember being called Matthew."

"Good," he said. "My father will be pleased. As you have remembered being called Matthew, do you remember what Tragedy was called?"

"I...yes. I don't know how I know, but... she was called Rebecca."

"Remarkable!" he exclaimed. "It is her... Well, fear not, Matthew. I will not destroy the woman you love. I would not wish her to die for all the world. I'll head over to the church now. Don't keep me waiting too long." And with that he hung up.

The silence that took the place of his voice was deafening, and for a moment I stood holding the phone. Finally, the shock began to melt and I placed the receiver back on the cradle. My mind was a whirlwind, but through the noise I remembered Tragedy. I looked at her and she was staring at me, waiting for me to do something. I could think of nothing to say or do.

"We need to go!" she whispered at me. Tragedy was still frozen to the place she stood, but her eyes betrayed her panic.

"You will stay here until I am in the church," I said, "then you will go to the Soldier's house and get our car. Go to Mexico and start a new life. Or go back to the city and tell

them that it's over. Tell them the Hunter has what he wanted."

"No! Lane! We need to get out of here! He's going to destroy you!"

"And if he keeps his word, he's going to let you live. You'll be safe." I could see by her expression that she was confused. My dreams flashed through my head. I was held to this town by something stronger than Newton or Rage, and I could see the blade at her throat. I didn't know if I could save her, but I had to try.

"There's something I haven't told you yet," I said to her. "During the Quiet Group, when we destroyed Nameless Freddy, he said some things to me which I've kept from you.

"He said he loved you, which you know. He also said he believed that I loved you, and that someday you would know and you would hate me for loving you like you hated him."

"Why would he say that?"

I took a breath. "Because it's true." I didn't know what she was thinking, but with time running out, I decided not to wait. "Our kind doesn't understand love. We know lust. We know desire. We know the desire to control another, or the will to be owned. None of that is love. But I understand it now. I never wanted to own you. I never wanted to consume you. I wanted to be with you. I wanted to make you laugh. I wanted you to want to be with me. And now, I want to protect you. So... I'm going to die so you don't have to."

"No! There has to be another way," she protested.

"I've already told you, I can't watch you die."

"I don't want to watch you die either."

"And this way you won't have to," I said. "I'm going to give myself to him and you're going to start a new life somewhere else. I know what love is now, Tragedy. Love is the way your life is more important to me than mine is."

I took her hand. "I love you Tragedy. You were always more important to me than all of them, and now you're more

important than my own life." I let go of her hand and turned to walk out the door.

"What if I do hate you for it?" she asked. I stopped and looked back. "What if I hate you for loving me?" she continued. "Will you still do it? Still get yourself killed for me? Or would you see how foolish this is?" She smiled just slightly, her eyes pleading. "And go to Mexico with me?"

"You can hate me if you have to, but I will still go."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because even if you hate me, I will still love you." I looked down at the traces of his fingers burned into my arms. "And I will still deserve to die." I left her standing alone in her silence as I headed toward the cemetery.

My steps were heavy as I walked into the shadows. Around me I heard the leaves brush against each other as they danced through the trees and gravestones. I heard the televisions through the windows of the nearby houses. I heard Tragedy step out into the night, and then turn and run in the opposite direction. I could not bring myself to watch her go, but I could hear her as she crossed the street behind me and ran toward the horizon. I couldn't blame her for abandoning the car. After all, to go toward the car would be to head toward the Hunter.

I stopped at the black iron fence that lined the edge of the cemetery and looked around. Stones of varying height stood like sentries, guarding the path to the church. In my mind's eye, they did not stand alone. Alongside each grave marker was the ghost of one I had killed.

They stood, staring silently at me as I waited. I looked them over and again it became clear. Here was my legacy. Here was the evidence that condemns me. Here was the great cloud of witnesses, silently testifying to my evil. My cold, dead chest was filled with two violently expanding feelings, threatening to burst my chest from the inside. The first was my love of Tragedy, which was a swirling mixture of my desire to be with her and the fear that I could not save her

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even by giving myself to the Hunter. The other was the burning hate of everything I was- the bloodthirsty monster I saw that I had been for so long. I was a murderer with no mercy. I was a liar with no remorse. The only things I had ever done that were not meaningless chasing of the wind were irrevocable wickedness. I was drenched with a shame that crushed me as I stood, staring into the memory of their eyes.

A light went on in the church, and then another. I knew he was there. My destiny was just the other side of this small valley of the shadows of death. I walked through them. Their accusing eyes followed me. I felt their hate, and I knew they were right to hate what I was. If sinners were a tribe, I would be their chief.

I deserved to die.

I entered the church to do just that.



"But now, do not consider him innocent.
You are a man of wisdom; you will know what to do to him.
Bring his gray head down to the grave in blood."
1 Kings 2:9

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Last Stand

I went around the front of the church to enter through the main doors. He had unlocked them for me. I entered past the crucifix and stood in the doorway of the sanctuary. Isaiah sat on the altar, his hat and coat placed neatly over the pew in the front.

It felt like an old western showdown, except that he didn't stand. His posture told me that he could have just as easily met me at a trendy coffee bar.

"Good evening Matthew."

I nodded in reply. I didn't know what to say. What do you say to someone who so casually waits to kill you?

"I am pleased to see that you remember that you are Matthew."

"I remember that I was Matthew," I replied. "I am Lane."

"And who named you Lane?"

"I did."

"Your true name is the one that is given to you by the one who made you. Your father called you Matthew. You've had a lot of names since then. Do you remember them?"

"Some of them," I answered.

"I find that most of these names that vampires choose for themselves tell a good deal about who they think they are, or who they want to be."

"And what does the name Lane say about me?"

He smiled. "It says you don't know who you are. Most of them mean the same. You create a persona—someone you wish you were. Eventually it fades under the truth, or you go somewhere else and you need to abandon or hide that persona and you make a new one. Do you remember who you were in Chicago?"

"Yes. I was Blaze Pascal." I slowly walked to the center of the room. He made no motion toward me.

"A name based on a spiritual wager, after a life in Las Vegas. I thought that was interesting, though it's unclear if the way you spelled Blaze was symbolic or just a mistake."

"I don't remember," I admitted.

"Do you remember who you were in Las Vegas?"

"John something."

"You called yourself John Streets, or Nomad."

"Nomad..." I said. The name illuminated the life just a little more. "I convinced Pearl to kill her pimp. We attacked the crack house en masse. It was the only time we attacked as a group to feed. They were pimps, drug dealers and addicts. We convinced ourselves that we were doing the city a favor."

"You're remembering the ones you killed?"

"Yes. Ever since you grabbed me outside the Club. Their faces and names, the ways I killed them. I dream of them. I see them in my mind. I remember thinking I was their righteous judge, preaching their eulogy to them."

"You thought you were fighting evil?" he asked.

"I convinced myself that I was. It was easier to feel... vindicated. If I could pretend they were evil and I was good, feeding on them could taste like justice. But it's been a long time since I really believed in good and evil. It became a game. Something to make myself believe I was not a monster."

"And now?"

"I believe in good and evil. I know that evil is real and that it must be punished. It is right for the wicked to die. And I know there is no one as evil as I am."

I expected him to say or do something, but he waited for me to continue as though he was in no hurry. But then, why should he have been? We both knew I could never stop him, and he had just proven that I could not run from him either.

"I'm not going to fight you," I told him. "I deserve to be destroyed, and that's why I have come here tonight."

He grabbed the hilt of his sword. "If that's entirely true," he said slowly unsheathing it, "then I wonder why you didn't come alone."

Before I could protest, he swung his blade and I heard the ring of metal on metal. When I saw the axe bury itself into the podium behind him, I realized that he had just defended himself. I also heard the next one whip through the air next to my head toward him.

As Isaiah was defending himself from the next axes, I saw the Soldier emerge from the hallway to my right, and Tragedy appeared next to me. She handed me an axe and shouted, "Come on!"

She sprinted to the front where she and the Soldier swung their remaining axes at Isaiah, hitting his blade and the air around him. I ran after her, desperate to reach her before his blade did. When I reached them, Isaiah ducked the Soldier's right hand and I caught the Soldier's axe in my chest where it stuck. I fell to the ground and pulled at the blade to dig it out of my chest.

The Soldier swung again with his left hand. Isaiah caught the Soldier's axe with his blade and kicked the Soldier square in the chest, sending him into the pews, almost to his Sunday regular seat. Tragedy swung again and he caught her wrist. She screamed as her skin burned at his touch. He stared her down and said, "Please don't do this." Before she had a chance to reply, the Soldier had launched himself toward Isaiah again. While he was yet in the air, Isaiah kicked Tragedy away from himself, through the window on the far side of the platform.

I tossed the axe pulled from my chest on the ground and ran to the window to catch Tragedy before she could scramble to her feet and rejoin the fight. I caught her as she leapt back through the window.

"Stop!" I cried, holding her around the middle.

"What are you doing, Lane? We can kill him!"

Before I could answer, there was a silence behind me and she stopped struggling. I looked down to see where the Soldier's Axe had landed and saw his hand was still gripping it. Near the altar, Isaiah stood with his blade at the Soldier's throat, while the Soldier gripped a pocketknife with his remaining hand.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Both of you!"

"We came to save you, boy," said the Soldier. "We just need to work together."

"No!" I said. "You'll just force him to destroy you!"

"Then I'll die a soldier's death," he replied. He raised the knife to use it against Isaiah, but as soon as he did it, Isaiah's blade went from the Soldier's neck to his wrist, cut off his remaining hand. It then plunged into his stomach, pinning him to the ground. He fell with a thud and moaned in pain and despair, immobilized by the sword.

Isaiah turned and walked toward us. Tragedy held her remaining axe to her chest and I put myself between her and Isaiah. He stooped and picked up the Soldier's hand, tossed the axe away, and walked back to the Soldier. He bent

down and the Soldier instinctively lifted his arms to shield himself. Isaiah grabbed the Soldier's wrist, and the Soldier screamed in pain. Isaiah stood and walked behind the altar.

The Soldier gasped and quietly exhaled the word, "how?"

When he did, we looked to him and saw the Soldier's hand. It was attached to his wrist again. He was staring at it in disbelief, moving his fingers. Isaiah returned from behind the altar and stood over him with the other hand. "Would you like the other one?" he asked.

The Soldier didn't answer, so Isaiah tossed the hand onto his chest, and said, "If you decide you do, let me know." He pulled the sword out of the Soldier and said, "Go home. I will come for you tomorrow. We can decide your fate then."

There was a long moment of still silence. Then the Soldier grabbed his hand and ran out into the night.

Isaiah sheathed his sword and turned to us. He sighed. "Rebecca."

"That's not my name!" she shouted angrily at him.

"It is your name," he said calmly. "You've simply forgotten. I remember. Matthew remembers."

"Is that it?" she said to me. "You've accepted the things he's told you? You really wish to die?"

"Evil must be punished," I said.

"And we're evil?"

"We are."

"You said you love me."

"Yes," I said. "I do. And you have to go."

"She doesn't have to go," said Isaiah. "She can choose to stay as you have, and things will be made right. Stay with us, Rebecca."

"My name is Tragedy, and I am your enemy!" she replied angrily.

"Those things are only true because you have chosen them to be so. Things don't have to be this way."

"Things are this way," she replied. "Will you not kill me regardless of what I choose?"

"I cannot kill that which is already dead," Isaiah said. "But what you are asking is, will I let you walk away? Yes, if you so choose. If you wish to continue your life as a bloodthirsty killer, I will respect your choice."

"And I'll never see you again?"

"No. Someday we will meet again. Either because you come to me as Matthew has, or because my Father sends me to destroy all that remain of his enemies."

"When will that be?"

Isaiah shook his head. "Only my father knows. But the day is coming."

"Then I'll take what days are left," she said defiantly. She grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me in the eye. "Lane, are you sure this has to be your fate?"

"I'm sure," I said. "I can't live that way anymore. I can't be what I was."

"Even with me? You love me. Isn't that enough?"

I shook my head. "It's enough to make me stay. I can't watch you die, but I can die for you. Please go."

She pulled me close and embraced me. "Goodbye Lane." She pulled back and looked me in the eye one last time. "Freddy was wrong," she said. "I... I don't hate you." Then she leapt out the window and was gone.

I watched her disappear into the night, until I was staring at nothing, and then I turned again to Isaiah. He was sitting on the altar again, as he was when I first arrived.

"Let's finish this," I said. I kneeled before him and I waited.

"It is good to see that you realize that this evil thing you have become, this vampire you call Lane, needs to die." He pulled out his sword and I closed my eyes.

"You'll cut my head off? Burn what is left?"

"No, I'm not going to cut your head off," he said.

I opened my eyes and saw that he was offering me the handle of his sword. "I can't cut my own head off," I said. "I don't have that much strength."

"No, Matthew. You're going to use this to cut me open."

I was overcome by frustration. "Don't toy with me, Hunter!" I snapped. "Is this some kind of test? I hate all that I am! I deserve to be destroyed! Have I not told you enough to justify my death? Or can you not kill me if I don't fight back?"

"I'm not going to kill you, Matthew."

"Then what am I doing here?" I demanded. "No more lectures and no more games! I long to die! I deserve to die! You said so yourself!"

He sighed. "Matthew, do you know why you drink blood?"

None of the answers I used to know sounded like anything but hollow lies now.

"The thirst..." I said. It sounded almost like a question.

"It never fully satisfies you, does it? Only for a moment."

"Only for a moment," I agreed.

"Your kind is so sure they need it- so sure that it makes you strong, so sure that it keeps you alive. Yet it leaves you weak and hollow, an addict never fulfilled. You wind up full of blood for a short time, but your heart never pumps. Soon you need more. The last feeding so quickly becomes nothing more than a distant, fading memory. Have you ever wondered why? Have you ever wondered what it is you are really looking for?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Part of you knows that there is fulfillment," he said. "You know that there is a blood that will completely and finally fulfill you. You just don't know where to find it."

"The perfect prey? Is that what you mean?" I asked. "It's not real. I know that. It's just another lie we tell ourselves

to justify our evil. We pretend we're searching for something good. There is no perfect prey. We're just empty addicts that nothing will fill."

"No, Matthew," said Isaiah. "This one thing you tell yourselves is true. It does exist. I am the perfect prey. It's my blood that will satisfy you and end your thirst forever. Drink my blood, and you will never be thirsty again."

For a moment I looked at his sword. If it was true, all I needed to do was grab the hilt and cut him open and I could drink the blood that would satisfy me. I would be free of the thirst forever.

In the same moment I realized that even if this was true, even if his blood would set me free, I could never defeat him. I had seen him move. I would never be fast enough to overcome him. It was another game, like I used to play with my prey.

"Please," I pleaded, "I know I deserve this- to be toyed with and driven mad before I die. I've done that to so many, I know I deserve it, but please. I long to die. I told you, I am a monster who deserved to be destroyed. Please, just do it. Just kill me and let it end. I want to die."

"No, Matthew," he said. "You are dead already. You desire to live. This Lane is a monster with a cold, dead heart that doesn't beat and a soul that cannot truly love or experience pleasure or joy. To destroy it, we must make you live. To kill you now would only make this walking death an eternal death."

"I don't understand," I confessed.

"You are dead, but your deepest desire is to live. That is why you drink blood, but none of it brings you to life. It feels like life, but you've only been stealing time from the dying. There is only one blood that will bring life inside of your dead heart, and it is my blood. Eat my flesh and drink my blood and you will have life."

"No!" I replied. "I've killed too many already! I will not take another life."

"No one takes my life," he said. "I lay it down for those I love."

"Who are you?"

"Matthew," he said, "my father is your father also. He loves you and has mourned the loss of you for many years. He has sent me to bring you home, and I will bring you to him no matter the cost- and it will cost my blood."

"My father...?" I could not remember back that far. I had a father? My father had sent Isaiah to bring me home? Could this be possible? "My father sent you? My father wants me to come home?"

"Yes. Your father loves you, Matthew. He wants you to come home and be his son again."

"Then, take me to him. Or, show me the way and I will go."

"I am the way to him!" Isaiah said. "You don't understand. He is the great vampire hunter. He is the true Hound of Heaven, and I am his first son. I only do as he has told me to do. He has sworn by the Throne of Heaven to destroy vampires, and if you are one, he must destroy you as well though it would break his heart. You have seen yourself why he must destroy your kind."

"Yes," I agreed. "The Soldier is right. We are evil- the enemies of God."

"Furthermore, his very presence would burn you the way my touch does. He is a consuming fire. You cannot go to him as you are. But when the vampire is destroyed, his son can come home to him. When this evil thing you are is gone and the son you were born to be lives again, he will run to you with open arms."

I tried to imagine it, but my memory would not allow me to peer back far enough into the past to see my father. I did not see him, or my home. I didn't even see the family resemblance between myself and Isaiah that, apparently, Geo already had seen.

"Home," I said. "I don't remember it. I don't remember my father or any of my life as Matthew. How do I know this is true? How can I trust you?"

"You only need enough faith to surrender your will," he said. He held the hilt to me. "Take the blade. Pierce me. Drink my blood."

"How can I drink your blood when your touch burns me?"

"I did not say that it would not hurt," he answered. "You need to make the choice. Your father loves you, Matthew, and I am the only way to your father."

I was not certain. I had no proof. But inside of me burned the hope that what he said was true. If he was lying, I would die in agony, but I had come to die. There was oblivion or misery. Yet there remained the chance that he told the truth. If I risked it, I might be destroyed, or I might be on the verge of a home and a loving father. If I ran, I gained nothing but years of misery. If I chose to believe him, I had the world to gain. If I believed him in vain, I would be dead before I knew it to be so.

I took the blade. He stretched out his arms to the walls, his empty hands open, making no attempt to defend himself.

I cut him deeply.

I smelled the blood.

I sunk my teeth into his flesh and drank.

My lips burned. My hand burned as I held to him. My throat burned as if I was drinking fire. But the taste was like nothing else has ever been. It was the sweet perfection that all the others had only pretended to be and, though it burned me, I would not heed the pain. If this sweet perfection destroyed me, I was ready to be destroyed.

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My instincts overtook me and I drank deeper. I pushed him down on the altar, holding him down in case he tried to escape before I had drank him dry though he made no effort to push me away. My hands burned. The heat inside me grew until it felt like I was drinking the light of the noon day sun and the burning filled my chest completely.

Isaiah cried out in pain.

I felt my heart beat and the fire pulsed through my veins until the fire reached my skin and I was nothing but heat and fire.

Every inch of my surface burned and my mind screamed out in the pain of it. Just when I felt the burning would overtake me, Isaiah fell silent and stopped moving. If he was breathing or his heart beating, I heard neither.

Silence filled the room.

Darkness filled the silence.

The floor left my feet.

My eyes closed and the spinning darkness took me.

But I did not dream.

The darkness was real, and it took me as the burning overcame all of my senses.

It was finished.



*No one looked on you with pity
or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you.
Rather, you were thrown out into the open field,
for on the day you were born you were despised.
Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood,
and as you lay there in your blood I said to you,
"Live!"
Ezekiel 16:5-7*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BAPTISM

I assumed I was dead. Was this oblivion? Burning and darkness? I was warm inside and out. The pain had faded into heat. I didn't feel the ground. The world swirled around me. I felt like I was upside down and swaying.

Suddenly, there was a brilliant light and it filled the world. My eyes blinked open, but had to immediately close because of the brightness. The light hurt my eyes and I squeezed them tightly closed, but I could not keep it out. The light washed over me and I felt the heat on my skin.

I realized that I was lying, but not on a surface. I was moving, but not of my own will. I squinted hard to see the world beyond the brightness, and I realized that I was being carried. As my eyes struggled against the light I wondered what I would see when I could see. Would I be like I was, or would I find I was a newborn in his mother's arms? It was

just as likely that I had been born as that I had died. Perhaps I had experienced both.

My limbs hung limply, and I felt the sunlight with my hands. With effort I brought my hands up from my sides and over me where I could see them. I squinted at my hands and saw the brittle, dry, gray surface that covered them like the bark of a dead tree. It was flaking off onto my face as I tried to shield my eyes from the light. It looked like I had been through fire.

I breathed deeply and realized that I was outside. I could smell the leaves and I heard them crunching. The sky was the deepest blue I had ever seen. I was being carried outside, into the morning sunlight. It covered me, warming all of me, and I wondered if I might burst into flames. Yet, in the warmth was no pain. Sunlight wrapped around me like a blanket. I was swaddled in light, and it gave me great comfort.

Suddenly I felt myself falling, weightless, and everything was dark. There was the sudden, stinging burn of cold. Maybe I was dead. Maybe I was dead before the light hit me. I didn't know. I opened my eyes and saw the darkness, but beyond the darkness I saw light, and from the light came his hands, and they pulled me up.



I burst forth from the waters and gasped for air. I felt his hands holding me up, I felt the cold of the water and the warmth of the sun. I heard the brittle crunching of leaves rustling together because of the wind. I felt the cold of the wind blowing against the water which dripped down my whole body. I saw the bright yellow, orange and red leaves. I saw the deep blue sky. I saw the green of the grass. I saw colors like I had never seen- bright and bold and glorious.

And I saw Isaiah smiling down on me. "Welcome back," he said.

"I thought you were dead," I said, amazed that he not only lived, but was supporting me. He had been carrying me.

"I came to lay down my life for you."

I gained the strength in my legs and I stood. I looked at him, and his tired eyes smiled at me.

"What do you feel?" he asked me.

"I feel..." I took in a sudden breath as the awareness hit me. "I feel my heart beating!" I hugged him and I laughed until I cried.

I felt clean, as though the waters of the stream had washed away the death that used to cover me. I wiped the water from my body and the gray ash dripped off me into the water until it was gone. I saw my skin as I had never seen it. Even in direct sunlight, I wasn't splintered and dry. I was pale and soft and flesh and blood. I felt new, reborn. I remembered who I was as though I had always been Matthew, and Lane was the nightmare from which I finally awoke.

And I felt alive. More than I had ever thought possible.

I could feel the ground when I walked. I could feel the temperature of the air. I could feel the wind on my skin. I could feel the warmth of the sun, though it didn't burn me like it used to. It warmed me in a way that was soothing and comforting.

I felt hungry. It was a hunger I had not felt in a very long time. A good hunger. A hunger which promised joy and fulfillment. One which did not overwhelm me, but which stood at my side like a faithful dog, waiting to be handled. The old hunger could only be satisfied in red. This one would offer me satisfaction in every color the world had to offer and in a thousand more flavors.

Isaiah made me breakfast in the widow's apartment. "How is it?" he asked as I devoured his scrambled eggs and cheddar.

I could only reply with a smile and a laugh. I didn't have the words to express the joy I felt. There was the deep orange of cheddar, the bright green of onion, the deep brown of coffee, the bold red of strawberries, and the warm yellow of eggs, each with their own gorgeous smell, each with a unique texture on the tongue or crunch in the teeth, so clean and inviting. What could I say? Lane had eaten food and drank other than blood, but he never knew what Matthew now remembered. I tasted food and drink like it was the first time. Each bite was amazing, as though previously everything had been salt water and smoke, and now it burst with flavor like it was music.

Once I had eaten, I felt satisfied. I smiled at the feeling- satisfaction of a desire without having to take, steal, or kill. If the flavor hadn't filled me with joy, that thought alone would have.

As we ate, he told me about our family, and the castle that awaited when I reached my father's house. The memories of my real life began to come back to me as he spoke.

"You've never seen anything like it in this country," he assured me. He reminded me how it had all started. "You were born to join our father's work against the vampires. You had been a proud member of that family- too proud perhaps.

"You were unsatisfied being just the son of the great hunter. You wanted to be like him, so I went searching for the power to do more. It took you away from home."

My search for power took me to dark places- places my father had told me would be death. I met one who questioned the words of my father.

Did he really say I should not have their powers?

Did he not really mean I should not have their evil hearts? Their murderous ways?

I was told that I could have all of the powers of the vampires to use against them. I envisioned myself powerful, unable to be hurt, not needing sleep or other physical sustaining. Would that not make me as great a hunter as my father?

I thought it would. I gave in.

"You let a demon talk you out of your humanity for what you told yourself was righteousness," Isaiah told me. "You were made one of them, but for a time were able to suppress the urge for blood. You slayed vampires and felt yourself as great as our father.

"You convinced Rebecca that you were powerful, and in complete control. You used her love for you to take her away into that life- into that walking death. She followed. Others followed your example. It was something like divorce or civil war.

"For a short time, you and Rebecca both controlled the power, the new bodies, the thirst. You owned this curse and used it for purposes you thought good. But it didn't last.

"You began to forget who you had been. You forgot what it had been to desire sleep, or food. You became less and less able to bear the light.

"Your power made you without fear, and without fear you became selfish. No man was a danger to you, and you could do as you pleased. You forgot the task which had once moved us together. You forgot the fight against evil. Eventually both of you forgot who you were and then you

forgot each other. You forgot yourselves. You became the thing you had hated- the thing you once swore to destroy and began to destroy the things you had once sworn to protect.

"In his love, our father kept his distance from you. If he had pursued you too closely, his very presence would have hurt you, even destroyed you. He sent messengers in his place to call you home. His servants sought you out with the message of his love- begging you to turn from this evil and become his son again. Eventually you started killing those messengers too. But while you made yourselves his enemies, our father had not stopped loving you. We knew that servants and messengers could never bring you home. He sent me to find you, because he knew I was the only one who could bring you home. "

I looked into the face which was the proof of this fact. My father had sent the way for us to come home. He had sent his firstborn son to bring me home.

After breakfast, we sat at the kitchen table and talked for a long time. The sun climbed higher into the sky until I could no longer see it out the windows.

"What now?" I asked him. "Do I go with you to see my father now?"

"You could," he said, "but you have things still to do. There is a homecoming celebration waiting for you that you will not believe until you see it, but I think it would be a better celebration if it were also a wedding celebration."

"A wedding?" I responded. That's when it hit me, my path, my purpose and my mission. "Rebecca! I have to find her! I have to bring her home!"

"That's right," he said. "She is your bride. She was once, and she can be again"

"My fiancé. My Bride!" I felt my heart beating faster with joyous excitement at the thought. "I have to find her. I have to bring her back! But how do I find her?"

"You have my blood in you now," he said. "You are being restored to your original state. There are years of deep damage to be undone, but the process is already in motion. Your mind will be renewed and transformed. Your senses will become like mine and you will come to know things you didn't know before. You will be stronger than you used to be. You will find her, and then you will bring her to me. If she chooses, she will receive my blood and receive the life you now have in you."

"You'll help me? I mean, I won't be alone out there, right?" I asked, nervous as I realized that I didn't know what happened now. Going to find her meant going back into that world as something like human. They wouldn't even pretend to accept me as one of their own. They would see me as food or a threat; probably both.

"I will never be far from you," he said. "But that doesn't mean no harm will ever come to you. As I had to bleed to save your life, you may have to bleed to save hers. Are you willing to do that?"

"Yes," I replied. "I love her. I will do whatever it takes." He smiled at me. "You are your father's son."

We walked to the Soldier's house together in the soothing warmth of sunlight as the leaves danced around our feet in the wind. The walk was as new and pleasant to me as breakfast had been. The leaves were every variety of yellow, orange, and brown, and they crunched under our feet like the crinkle of old paper. The wind was its own instrument, changing pitch to direct the dance of the leaves. The sounds of the world were distant cars and conversations in backyards drifting over the housetops. Beyond the

Soldier's house I saw a combine working in a field and heard its deep, rhythmic, rumbling hum. The world was full of music, ordinary and holy.

We stopped in the driveway of the Soldier's house. My car was still parked there and I would need it to begin my search for my bride. Isaiah also reminded me that there remained unfinished business for him in the house. We would part ways here, for a short time.

"Where will you go?" he asked me.

"Back to the city we started from. She is either there, or there will be someone who knows where she might have gone."

"It's a good place to start," he said. "Stay in touch with me. Never go anywhere outside of where I can guide and protect you."

"Don't worry," I said. "I've seen what you can do, and I can't do it. I'll be checking in frequently."

He smiled and nodded, and I saw the creation of an idea in his mind as he smiled. "I will send someone to you, who will be a great help. With her you will do greater things that you've seen me do. Go to the city, to your apartment, and do not leave it until she finds you."

"A friend of yours?"

"I have many friends, but this one will be an invaluable help. She will find you, and she will be to you every bit of help you may need."

"Another hunter?"

"Another part of the family," he said with a nod. He smiled the way a man smiles just before he gives a great gift. "You have a family now, Matthew, and this family will never forget you or forsake you. You will never be alone again. I am going to send your mother to you. She will continue to teach you and guide you."

"My mother?" Another wave of emotion swept over me. I did have an origin! A mother- but what was she like? I could not remember her face. "What is she like, Isaiah?"

"Oh, she is in many ways beyond description. For starters she is very much like your father. They are one, after all. She loves you. She is powerful and wise. But where he is

like a raging fire, she is like a song. Both will warm you and transform everything they touch. She will be a great source of joy and comfort.”

I embraced him tightly- my brother, my friend. No longer was I an island in a sea of islands. No longer a scavenger in the skies looking for somewhere to land. No longer a murder of one. I was a brother and a son and someday, a groom.

“Go find your bride, and love her, and bring her back,” he said to me.

“Thank you. For coming after me. For not giving up when... well, ever.”

“You are loved, Matthew. Now remember that and love others in the way you have been loved.”

“I will. What will you do here?” I asked. “Last night the Soldier tried to kill you. What if he still chooses to fight you?”

“He’s religious and self-righteous,” Isaiah replied. “Sometimes people like him don’t like to listen. Maybe he’ll let me in, maybe he’ll stay hidden and injured. He’s accepted being the walking dead, maybe he’ll accept being broken. Whatever he chooses, I will stand at the door and knock.

“When I am done here, I will return to my father and prepare a place for you. You will have a home, and when you finally come home to stay, there will be a wedding feast like the world has never known.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I said.

He knocked on the door and waited, and I headed back to the city I had started in to find the woman I love.

And now, my friend, you have heard the story- the first part of it at any rate. I wait in the city for the one Isaiah is sending to me. I can think only of my home, and finding the one I love so that she may come home with me. I am living where I used to live, but nothing is the same. I am sure I do not have to convince you of that. If what Isaiah has told

me is true, and I do not doubt that it is, you will be seeing the world through new eyes as I am. I will help you take your first steps into this world and share with you all Isaiah has taught me.

We are more than human now- we are children of the great Hunter. We have powerful enemies, but they will not overcome us. Those who are still what we once were will hate us, and we will face a violent struggle, but we will not hate them in return. We have been shown love. We will love in return.

When you see me, you will see that not only do I have my father's eyes, as Isaiah does, but that I am becoming more and more like Isaiah in all the ways a brother can. I have great hope that when you recognize me by my eyes and see that they are his eyes, you will see the love of your brother, and not the fear you once did when last we met, when you were Geo.

You will be my sister, and I will be your brother, and not under the lie of the earth being our mother, but because we have both found our true mother and our true father. Please, come to me and help me find my bride- soon to be your sister. She loved me once. I know that someday she will love me again, be my bride, and become your sister, and we will celebrate in our father's house. Perhaps those of us that once imagined we were a murder can be adopted and someday truly be a family.

We have a family, and no matter what happens now, every step we take is another step closer to home.

I will see you soon.

Sincerely,
Matthew