

Madhouse

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As al-ways, for my mom

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I ha-ve ta-ken gre-at li-ber-ti-es with the tun-nel system at Co-lum-bia Uni-ver-sity, as well as with the in-te-ri-or of Bu-ell Hall. It was all in the in-te-rest of the plot, I pro-mi-se you, but as a re-sult, re-ality has suf-fe-red. My apo-lo-gi-es to re-ality.

Then aga-in, what has re-ality ever do-ne for me?

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I ha-ted kid-nap-ping ca-ses. Ha-ted them with an un-holy pas-si-on.

And trust me, un-holy was so-met-hing I knew abo-ut-hell, I wo-re it li-ke a fa-ded old T-shirt. One I'd had sin-ce birth. The-re we-re tho-se who sa-id I co-uld'n't let go of that, and that it was long past ti-me I did. But hey, if you can't bitch abo-ut yo-ur mons-ter half, what can you bitch abo-ut?

As for kid-nap-pings, no surp-ri-se the-re on how I felt abo-ut them. Se-ve-ral months be-fo-re, so-me-one I knew had be-en kid-nap-ped-two so-me-ones, ac-tu-al-ly. Alt-ho-ugh the se-cond ta-king had las-ted less than an ho-ur, the first had las-ted two we-eks. Des-pi-te the dif-fe-ren-ce in ti-me, they had both left the-ir mark, physi-cal-ly and men-tal-ly. My shirt and jac-ket hid the first. I wasn't su-re anyt-hing hid the se-cond, but I ga-ve it my best shot with ca-us-tic sar-casm, brit-tle bra-va-do, and go-od old-fas-hi-oned de-ni-al. That was a trip-le thre-at that had do-ne well by me for a long damn ti-me, and I had no plans to gi-ve it up now.

I was briskly swat-ted on the back of my he-ad. "I'm cu-ri-o-us, Cal. Do you plan on pa-ying at-ten-ti-on any ti-me so-on or wo-uld you li-ke to ha-ve the kid-nap-pers resc-he-du-le? I'm su-re they'll be ame-nab-le. Kid-nap-pers so of-ten are."

Ni-ko Le-and-ros. He had be-en one of tho-se who had di-sap-pe-ared on me, even if only tem-po-ra-rily. As brot-hers went, he was a go-od one, des-pi-te a hor-rif-ying ob-ses-si-on with he-alth fo-od, me-di-ta-ti-on, and things ge-ne-ral-ly not re-vol-ving aro-und piz-za and be-er. But we

all ha-ve our cross-es to be-ar... Mi-ne was to be smac-ked when I wasn't with the prog-ram, and his was to be ove-re-du-ca-ted, as self-awa-re as the Da-lai La-ma, and to ke-ep my ass ali-ve. Po-or bas-tard.

"I'm pa-ying at-ten-ti-on," I li-ed ins-tantly, rub-bing the back of my he-ad and gi-ving him a wo-un-ded gla-re.

He snor-ted, but didn't call me on it as sharply as I de-ser-ved. Ap-pa-rently the swat was pu-nish-ment eno-ugh. "Then let's mo-ve on be-fo-re you pay so much at-ten-ti-on that you fall as-le-ep whe-re you stand."

Li-ke I sa-id, a go-od brot-her, and go-od brot-hers, be-si-des ke-eping yo-ur ass ali-ve, al-so don't let it get away with much. But the-re was no den-ying he was let-ting me sli-de a lit-tle. Why? Be-ca-use he knew me, and he knew a ca-se li-ke this wasn't go-ing to trig-ger any go-od me-mo-ri-es. Grun-ting in reply, I mo-ved along at his si-de. "So they kid-nap-ped the mist-ress of a vam-pi-re," I grumb-led. "She's a la-mia. I've se-en la-mi-as and I don't know why the hell an-yo-ne wo-uld want one back." Li-ke vam-pi-res, la-mi-as fed on blo-od. The-se days most vam-pi-res had fo-und a bet-ter way, but la-mi-as we-ren't lo-oking to imp-ro-ve them-sel-ves. And alt-ho-ugh they fed on blo-od, the-re the si-mi-la-ri-ty to vam-pi-res en-ded. A la-mia's bi-te, usu-al-ly on the chest-or if they we-re re-al-ly in-to you, ot-her, mo-re sen-si-ti-ve parts-had a che-mi-cal in its sa-li-va that pa-raly-zed its vic-tim. Li-ke a le-ech they wo-uld stay fas-te-ned to you and dra-in yo-ur blo-od...very, very slowly. It co-uld ta-ke days-days in which you co-uld'n't mo-ve, co-uld'n't scre-am, co-uld'n't beg for a fas-ter de-ath.

Su-re, that's *my* dre-am girl. Bring her on.

But ob-vi-o-usly a vamp felt dif-fe-rent and he-re we we-re.

"I think it mat-ters less abo-ut his tas-te in bed part-ners and mo-re abo-ut us get-ting pa-id." I didn't see his dark blond he-ad mo-ve, but I knew Ni-ko was scan-ning the area un-ce-asingly.

"I ke-ep tel-ling you, if you'd go with the who-le trophy boyf-ri-end thing, li-fe wo-uld be a lot easi-er," I po-in-ted out help-ful-ly.

From the nar-row-eyed lo-ok shot my way, ap-pa-rently I wasn't as help-ful as I'd tho-ught. Ni-ko was tight with a vam-pi-re of his own, Pro-mi-se. Pro-mi-se was, to say the le-ast, lo-aded. Fi-ve ex-ces-si-vely rich, as well as ex-ces-si-vely el-derly, hus-bands in the past ten ye-ars had her set up for...well, not li-fe-after all, she was a vam-pi-re. But it wo-uld ke-ep her com-for-tab-le for a long, long ti-me. And Ni-ko ab-so-lu-tely re-fu-sed to ta-ke ad-van-ta-ge of it, not that he had so-me sort of mac-ho hang-up. He simply wo-uld ma-ke his own way as we had all of our li-ves. Right now, ma-king our way re-vol-ved aro-und an agency we'd set up with Pro-mi-se. Kid-nap-pings, body-gu-ard work, cle-aning so-me kil-ler clowns out of a car-ni-val...we we-re up for all of it. The fact that it didn't qu-ite co-ver our ex-pen-ses yet had us wor-king se-cond jobs. Ni-ko was a te-ac-her's as-sis-tant at NYU (pity the kid who wal-ked la-te in-to one of his clas-ses-de-ca-pi-ta-ti-on is a big de-ter-rent for tar-di-ness). As for me? I ten-ded to mo-ve aro-und a lot. Ma-inly bars. It wasn't go-od to get at-tac-hed. I'd le-ar-ned that from a li-fe-ti-me of run-ning from my re-la-ti-ves...the ones with claws and hund-reds of te-eth. And alt-ho-ugh the run-ning had stop-ped, ha-bits we-re hard to bre-ak. Which, I gu-ess, is why we'd ma-de mons-ter hun-ting a ca-re-er ins-te-ad of an oc-ca-si-onal ne-ces-si-ty.

And Cent-ral Park was full of them.

They li-ked the park. It was big, and it was full of snacks. No one no-ti-ces if a mug-ger, mur-de-rer, or ra-pist go-es mis-sing. It was a go-od pla-ce to hit the hu-man buf-fet and not be no-ti-ced. We'd on-ce had an in-for-mant he-re of the very sa-me opi-ni-on. He was go-ne now, de-ad by Ni-ko's sword. So-mew-he-re to the north lay a mud pit empty of a bog-gle with the worst New Yawk ac-cent I'd ever he-ard. I kind of mis-sed him so-me-ti-mes. If not-hing el-se, he'd be-en en-ter-ta-ining.

Blo-odt-hirsty and ho-mi-ci-dal, but amu-sing-up to a po-int. Trying to kill Ni-ko had be-en that po-int.

"Are we the-re yet?" I chec-ked my watch. We had abo-ut fi-ve mi-nu-tes un-til the me-et.

"Did you lo-ok at the map that was sent with the inst-ruc-ti-ons?" Ni-ko lo-ok-ed down his long no-se to ask in a for-bid-ding to-ne that sa-id he al-re-ady knew the ans-wer.

"That's what I ha-ve you for." I grin-ned. "I'm just he-re to carry the he-avy stuff. The uni-on says

thin-king rolls me in-to over-ti-me.”

Ni-ko pul-led his ka-ta-na from be-ne-ath his gray dus-ter, lo-oked at the mo-on-light glim-mer of it, and then lo-oked at me with an eyeb-row ra-ised.

“Ye-ah, right,” I dis-mis-sed, un-fa-zed.

“You’re as-su-ming I wo-uldn’t pad-dle you with it li-ke the child you are.”

Okay, that thre-at I bo-ught. He co-uld do it all right, and he ac-tu-al-ly might du-ring one of our spar-rings just for his own per-so-nal amu-se-ment.

“And yes,” he ad-ded, “we are al-most the-re.” He to-ok anot-her three steps. “And now we are.”

I lo-oked aro-und, but didn’t see anyt-hing even in the bright mo-on-light. Sho-ving my hands in the poc-kets of my black le-at-her jac-ket, I to-ok a whiff of the co-ol No-vem-ber air. Ins-tantly, I gri-ma-ced. I might not ha-ve se-en anyt-hing, but I damn su-re smel-led it. The scent was dank-stag-nant wa-ter with the ri-pe and ran-cid ta-int of day-old fish be-ne-ath it. “They’re co-ming.” I fire-ed a hand and rub-bed at my no-se. “And they stink li-ke you wo-uldn’t be-li-eve. So-met-hing from the wa-ter.” A fish of the day you de-fi-ni-tely didn’t want to or-der.

“Aqu-atic,” Ni-ko mur-mu-red. “That nar-rows it down to a few hund-red in the non-hu-man pant-he-on. Very help-ful.”

“Hey, I tri-ed.” Get-ting ac-cus-to-med to the smell, I shif-ted im-pa-ti-ently on the grass and chec-ked my watch aga-in. “Cro-oks, mons-ter or hu-man, they’re all the sa-me. No damn con-si-de-ra-ti-on.”

I sup-po-se that’s how my gun fo-und its way in-to my hand as the first fi-gu-re ap-pe-ared out of the tre-es. “Bis-hop-fish,” Ni-ko mur-mu-red. “Not-hing ext-ra-or-di-nary. Easy to kill.”

If I was a lit-tle di-sap-po-in-ted at that, I kept it to myself. As cre-atu-res went, it wasn’t that imp-res-si-ve. I’d se-en so-me-one mo-re grimly un-ner-ving in a mir-ror. So-me-ti-mes I wasn’t su-re who I me-ant by that. It co-uld’ve be-en the cre-atu-re known as Dark-ling, who a ye-ar ago had craw-led out of a mir-ror to put my body on li-ke a snazzy su-it and ta-ke it cru-ising on the ro-ad to hell, or it co-uld’ve be-en my own mun-da-ne ref-lec-ti-on. Eit-her way, the-re was no den-ying the both of us had our mo-ments and eit-her of us co-uld eat fish boy for lunch. Alt-ho-ugh de-ad Dark-ling, every mo-le-cu-le the mons-ter to my half, might’ve enj-oyed it a lit-tle mo-re.

May-be.

Dap-pled he-re and the-re with the ghost of sca-les over ne-arly trans-pa-rent pa-le skin, the bis-hop-fish had the form of a hu-man. Sort of. The sha-pe of his he-ad was a lit-tle off. Ha-ir-less and only lightly sca-led, it was oddly flat-te-ned and the mo-uth had thick, rub-bery lips and tiny tri-an-gu-lar te-eth. No kelp eater, this one. He wasn’t we-ar-ing a stitch-not a damn thing, which told me he didn’t rub sho-ul-ders with the lo-cal New Yor-kers much. I lo-oked down. Even they wo-uld gi-ve that a glan-ce. Ye-ah, *that*.

Now I knew whe-re fish sticks ca-me from.

I de-ci-ded ke-eping my ga-ze on his eyes was the les-ser of two evils des-pi-te the-ir unb-lin-king bul-ge. Gu-ess you can’t blink if you don’t ha-ve eye-lids. Ro-und pu-pils to-ok us in and the mo-uth ope-ned to gurg-le, “The-se are the de-mands. First-”

That’s when I shot him.

My pa-ti-en-ce with kid-nap-pers was long go-ne be-fo-re I had even ta-ken a step in-to the park. I put a bul-let in his chest, which exp-lo-ded li-ke an over-ri-pe to-ma-to and splat-te-red flu-id in a wi-de arc. With his im-pos-sibly wi-de mo-uth ga-ping, he te-ete-red and be-gan to fall. I step-ped for-ward and slip-ped the pa-per from the fleshy claw as Mr. Fish Stick crump-led to the gro-und with a dis-tur-bingly wet slap-ping so-und. “I can re-ad, as-sho-le,” I mut-te-red.

Ni-ko sa-id from be-hind me, “Re-al-ly? When did you le-arn?” Ra-ising his vo-ice, he as-ked mildly, “Is the-re an-yo-ne he-re we co-uld ne-go-ti-ate with that my brot-her wo-uld find less an-no-ying?” Li-ke me, he knew the-re was so-me-one el-se in the tre-es. I smel-led them and he he-ard them. Rust-le one le-af, step on one frost-brit-tle pi-ecce of grass, and he wo-uld he-ar it. He was all hu-man, Ni-ko, li-ke our mot-her, Sop-hia Le-and-ros, but when he did things li-ke that you had to won-der.

The smell I was pic-king up from a dis-tan-ce wasn’t as bad as that of the fish. It was the scent of old things and at-tic must and hund-reds of aban-do-ned spi-der-webs. In ot-her words, it smel-led li-ke

Ni-ko's lib-rary of bo-oks. Kno-wing Ni-ko wo-uld be watc-hing its ap-pro-ach, I squ-in-ted at the pa-per in my hand, ig-no-ring the damp sli-me on it. If the mo-on hadn't be-en so bright and plump in the sky, I wo-uldn't ha-ve be-en ab-le to see anyt-hing. I might ha-ve mons-ter smel-ling-who-opee... what a su-per-po-wer-but I had hu-man vi-si-on. As it was, I co-uld ma-ke out only a few words. Mo-ney wasn't men-ti-oned. I wasn't that surp-ri-sed. Very few mons-ters we-re in-to the ma-te-ri-al world. Vam-pi-res, pucks, and we-re-wol-ves li-ked to li-ve high on the hog, but most of the non-hu-man world was mo-re in-te-res-ted in eating. Lots and lots of eating.

The ran-som men-ti-oned pe-op-le. Ni-ce, plump pe-op-le. Ni-ce, ju-icy child-ren. The kids. Why was it al-ways the kids?

So-me kid-nap-pers don't want to earn the-ir mo-ney, and so-me don't want to catch the-ir own din-ner. Tra-de one la-mia for a truck-lo-ad of hu-mans-what a de-al. In the end they we-re all lazy psycho-tics and the one that fi-nal-ly ca-me to Ni-ko's call was no dif-fe-rent. You co-uld all but see the wa-ves of cra-zi-ness co-ming from her, shim-me-ring li-ke he-at off a sum-mer ro-ad.

"Black An-nis." Ni-ko so-un-ded al-most ple-ased. "I tho-ught she was a myth."

She scut-tled with the back and forth mo-ti-on of a po-iso-no-us cen-ti-pe-de. Part of the ti-me she was on two fe-et, the rest on all fo-urs. She lo-oked li-ke an old wo-man, but not a sad wra-ith in a nur-sing ho-me or che-er-ful croc-he-ting grand-ma-unless it was one who'd ha-ve no prob-lem pic-king her te-eth with a sli-ver of Han-sel's gna-wed leg bo-ne.

Now, this was a lit-tle mo-re dis-tur-bing than the fish. And it be-ca-me mo-re dis-tur-bing when six mo-re of her ap-pe-ared to ra-ce ac-ross the grass.

"You tho-ught *she* was a myth. She. Sin-gu-lar. Is that what you we-re sa-ying?" I drop-ped the pa-per to the gro-und. I still had my gun in my right hand and I drew my kni-fe with the left from the do-ub-le hols-ter un-der my jac-ket. Ugly and ser-ra-ted, the bla-de had be-en a cons-tant and fa-ith-ful com-pa-ni-on for a whi-le now. Ni-ko did gi-ve damn fi-ne Christ-mas pre-sents.

"Appa-rently the myth is in-cor-rect. It only ma-kes things mo-re in-te-res-ting," he sa-id blandly. "Su-rely a few old wo-men don't con-cern you?"

Old wo-men, my ass. The se-ven of them we-re co-ve-ring the gro-und with fre-akish spe-ed. Long, thick fin-ger-na-ils sco-red the gro-und, sen-ding dirt and grass flying, and the-ir te-eth... let's just say they we-ren't the kind that got put in a glass on the bed-si-de tab-le. The An-ni-ses, An-ni, Black An-ni-es... wha-te-ver-they we-ren't iden-ti-cal, but they we-re so si-mi-lar they may as well ha-ve be-en. They all wo-re the sa-me rag-ged black shifts too. Torn to stre-amers in pla-ces, the cloth flut-te-red and tang-led as they ran. I saw flesh thro-ugh the ho-les, flesh I sus-pec-ted was cya-no-tic blue alt-ho-ugh it ap-pe-ared gray in the glow of the mo-on. Wha-te-ver co-lor it was, I didn't want to see it.

"Fi-ne. You play shuf-fle-bo-ard with the gran-ni-es and I'll che-er you on from the si-de-li-nes," I re-tor-ted. Not that I wo-uld ha-ve, but one of them ma-de su-re I didn't ha-ve the op-ti-on. She went from scut-tling to le-aping. From ne-arly thirty fe-et away, she la-unc-hed off the gro-und and pro-pel-led her-self on-to my chest with a for-ce I didn't ex-pect from her spi-dery fra-me. I hit the gro-und hard. Unab-le to get the gun bet-we-en us, I bu-ri-ed the kni-fe in her back. I was ho-ping to se-ver the spi-ne or at le-ast put a se-ri-o-us dent in it, but the bla-de prac-ti-cal-ly bo-un-ced off the bony struc-tu-re. "God-damn it," I grit-ted, and went for anot-her tar-get ins-te-ad. With her te-eth snap-ping at my thro-at, I plun-ged the kni-fe in the si-de of hers.

"Le-ave one ali-ve, Cal, to le-ad us to the la-mia."

Thick and bit-ter flu-id flo-oded out of the An-nis's thro-at and ac-ross my fa-ce. Trying not to retch as it wor-ked its way in-to my mo-uth, I spat with re-vul-si-on and shot back, "I'll try and show so-me self-cont-rol." Then I stop-ped tas-ting the blo-od and ca-ught the scent of it... or rat-her what was in it. "Oh, hell. We are so not get-ting pa-id."

I tos-sed the thing off me, its te-eth still fe-ebly gnas-hing, and saw Ni-ko, who had mo-ved a dis-tan-ce away to get a lit-tle el-bow ro-om. He was sur-ro-un-ded by fo-ur of them. "For-get the rest-ra-int," I cal-led. "They ate her." I smel-led it in the one twitc-hing be-si-de me... in the blo-od, on her last bre-ath... hell, le-aking out of her damn po-res.

Ni-ko sho-ok his he-ad. “Anno-ying.” He swung at the ne-arest An-nis to de-ca-pi-ta-te it, only to ha-ve his sword re-pel-led by that unb-re-akab-le spi-ne. I he-ard the gra-ting clash of me-tal and im-per-vi-o-us bo-ne. He frow-ned. “Even mo-re an-no-ying.” Step-ping back with a de-cep-ti-ve spe-ed of his own, he she-at-hed abo-ut ni-ne inc-hes of his sword thro-ugh the An-nis’s sing-le eye. Ni-ko tur-ned to pre-sent his si-de to her and las-hed out with a fo-ot to pro-pel her off the bla-de and in-to anot-her An-nis.

He had things, as al-ways, un-der cont-rol, and I de-ci-ded to ta-ke ca-re of my own bu-si-ness. Two mo-re of them we-re circ-ling me, wary of the kni-fe. What they we-ren’t con-cer-ned with was the gun I had hid-den be-hind my leg. One snar-led, I swe-ar, just li-ke the cranky old wo-man we’d li-ved next to in one of the tra-iler parks whe-re our mot-her had set up her for-tu-ne-tel-ling scam. That old biddy had sic-ced her yappy, ank-le-bi-ting dog on us mo-re ti-mes than I co-uld co-unt. The An-nis didn’t ne-ed a dog, yappy or ot-her-wi-se.

“Sho-uld’n’t you be ba-king co-oki-es or pla-ying bin-go, Granny?” I ga-ve her a black grin, tap-ping the muz-zle of my gun on the back of my thigh. She crab-bed clo-ser, her hands bent in-to claws in front of her.

“You are no lit-tle boy.” Her grin was so bro-ad I co-uld see the black gums gle-aming slickly. “Yo-ur flesh will not be soft.” It was glo-ating, the words rol-ling aro-und her ton-gue as tho-ugh she we-re al-re-ady sa-vo-ring the me-at in her mo-uth. “We will eat it any-way.”

I’d he-ard it all be-fo-re.

I shot the mo-uthy one. I na-iled her in mid ma-ni-acal, cho-king la-ugh. She saw the gun as I whip-ped it from be-hind me, and she’d al-re-ady star-ted to mo-ve. It didn’t do her a damn bit of go-od.

Des-pi-te the one se-cond it to-ok, the ot-her one was al-re-ady on me. Li-ke Is aid...qu-ick.

It hit me from the si-de. I’d al-re-ady be-en tur-ning to pre-vent it from get-ting be-hind me. This ti-me the te-eth did re-ach me, fas-te-ning on the junc-ti-on of neck and sho-ul-der. Li-ke the rag-ged ed-ge of a saw, they gro-und in and loc-ked. And the-re went the chunk I’d be-en so su-re that I wo-uld’n’t lo-se to-night.

As with the first one, I used my kni-fe, but this ti-me ope-ned the belly. Wha-te-ver spil-led free slit-he-red down my hip and leg. Slit-he-red...not fell. That was so-me se-ri-o-us mo-ti-va-ti-on to get granny off my neck, and to hell with the mo-uth-ful of flesh she might ta-ke with her. Rip-ping her and her de-ath grip off of me, I spun her and threw her as far as I co-uld, and then I to-ok a lo-ok at what was twi-ning its way aro-und my leg.

Holy shit. I me-an, re-al-ly...holy *shit*.

The bright pa-in and blo-od flo-wing ste-adily un-der the col-lar of my jac-ket to sta-in my T-shirt to-ok a back-se-at just li-ke that-be-ca-use what felt li-ke sna-kes wasn’t. Not that that wo-uld’n’t ha-ve be-en bad eno-ugh, sna-kes fal-ling out of so-me-one’s gut. But I co-uld’n’t get that lucky, co-uld I? No-pe. What I got was a craw-ling com-bi-na-ti-on of worms and in-tes-ti-nes with a lit-tle bar-ra-cu-da tos-sed in. They un-du-la-ted slow and su-re li-ke the worm, we-re ropy and drip-ping in-tes-ti-nal flu-ids, and had the be-ar trap mo-uth of a bar-ra-cu-da. Did I sha-ke my leg li-ke I was ha-ving an epi-lep-tic se-izu-re? Yes, I did. Did I scre-am li-ke a B-mo-vie bim-bo? No...but it was a clo-se thing. Ni-ko ne-ver wo-uld’ve let me li-ve that down.

I step-ped back from the se-et-hing mass. “Je-e-esus.”

“Prob-lems?” Ni-ko was al-re-ady pe-eling my jac-ket off one sho-ul-der to exa-mi-ne the wo-und.

I swi-ped it with my hand. The pa-in was sub-si-ding to a sharp ac-he and I de-ci-ded the An-nis had got-ten away with less than the mo-uth-ful I’d tho-ught she had. It had be-en an ap-pe-ti-zer at best.

Past Nik I co-uld see one An-nis still ali-ve. Her wrists and ank-les we-re hand-cuf-fed, and she was writ-hing, his-sing, and bi-ting the gro-und li-ke a ra-bid dog.

A mons-ter we-ar-ing hand-cuf-fs-it was a lit-tle re-ality-jar-ring at first. We’d star-ted car-rying them months ago when we ne-eded to rest-ra-in a we-re-wolf, one who re-al-ly didn’t ca-re to be rest-ra-ined. He nor-mal-ly might’ve shat-te-red them-I wasn’t su-re how strong Flay was-but he’d be-en inj-ured and was ba-rely ali-ve. He’d be-en in-ca-pab-le of lif-ting his he-ad, much less rip-ping apart ste-el. Still, it was a use-ful le-ar-ning ex-pe-ri-en-ce, and we’d car-ri-ed them with us ever sin-ce.

Ni-ko was still frow-ning at my neck. “It’s mo-re messy than fa-tal. They ha-ve the te-eth of an ado-les-cent cro-co-di-le.”

“Didn’t fe-el li-ke a baby one to me,” I grumb-led as I felt the punc-tu-res and slas-hes. The blo-od was slo-wing and I dug in my poc-ket for so-met-hing to hold pres-su-re with. Of co-ur-se the-re was not-hing but a flyer for a Chi-ne-se res-ta-urant.

Exha-ling in re-sig-na-ti-on at my lack of pre-pa-ra-ti-on, Ni-ko pul-led a pac-ka-ge of ga-uze and a roll of ta-pe from in-si-de his co-at. With qu-ick, ef-fi-ci-ent mo-ves he had the wo-und co-ve-red and ta-ped up in se-conds. “It’s ama-zing how hard I work to ke-ep you from ble-eding to de-ath on so many oc-ca-si-ons, and for so lit-tle re-ward.” He fi-nis-hed and step-ped over to the tor-tu-o-us twi-ning of the bi-le-drip-ping cre-atu-res on the gro-und. “Do you want a pet? One wo-uld fit ni-cely in a ter-ra-ri-um.”

“Ye-ah, and I’m just one gi-ant nummy num on the ot-her si-de of the glass. Thanks, but no, thanks.” I pul-led a re-pul-sed fa-ce.

“All things bright and be-a-uti-ful, all cre-atu-res gre-at and small,” he qu-oted.

“Right,” I sa-id drily. “God”-ma-king the hu-ge as-sump-ti-on the-re was one-“did not ma-ke tho-se.”

“Per-haps you’re right.” He pul-led yet two mo-re things out of his dus-ter-a small con-ta-iner of ligh-ter flu-id and a pack of matc-hes. On-ce the bar-be-cue was star-ted and the air stank of ro-as-ted bar-ra-cu-da, Ni-ko ma-de a call and we went, pic-ked up the sur-vi-ving An-nis, and mo-ved on. A vam-pi-re met us ne-ar the ed-ge of the park. He sto-od among the tre-es; co-uld’ve be-en one of them as he blen-ded in-to the dark-ness. Black ha-ir, black eyes, and an equ-al-ly dark Ar-ma-ni su-it. At le-ast I as-su-med it was Ar-ma-ni. It was the only ex-pen-si-ve brand I knew. To me, all fancy su-its we-re Ar-ma-ni.

We dum-ped the snar-ling, spit-ting An-nis at his fe-et, and I con-si-de-red but de-ci-ded not to stick my hand out for the mo-ney. I had a fe-eling I might draw back less than I put out-a few fin-gers less. Vam-pi-res mo-urn too, ap-pa-rently even over la-mi-as. Ni-ko had al-re-ady de-li-ve-red the bad news over his cell pho-ne. Now all he sa-id was, “She is the only one left. The ot-hers are no mo-re.”

“And they suf-fe-red?” His vo-ice was co-ol and empty. It didn’t bo-de well for the An-nis. At le-ast with ra-ge you wo-uld go qu-ickly. It wo-uld be messy, but it wo-uld be qu-ick. Icy ret-ri-bu-ti-on co-uld go on for...shit, it didn’t be-ar thin-king abo-ut. My ap-pe-ti-te for din-ner had al-re-ady be-en ru-ined by the smell of co-oking in-tes-ti-nes; I didn’t ne-ed to kill it al-to-get-her.

“Ye-ah, they suf-fe-red,” I con-fir-med. “And the god-awful things in them suf-fe-red too.” The An-nis hadn’t re-al-ly suf-fe-red, not the way he me-ant, but it was go-ing to ha-ve to do. A job was a job and tor-tu-re wasn’t on our me-nu. Not for pay any-way. But the-re was no po-int in di-sap-po-in-ting him. Cranky vam-pi-res are a pa-in, and I’d had eno-ugh ass-kic-king for the night.

Des-pi-te what I’d sa-id ear-li-er, we did get pa-id. An en-ve-lo-pe thick with cash was pas-sed to Nik. Li-ving off the ra-dar, we didn’t exactly ha-ve the ID to set up a bank ac-co-unt. We co-uld’ve got-ten the fa-ke stuff and Pro-mi-se had of-fe-red to ke-ep our sha-re of the pay-ments for us, but on-ce aga-in, we fell back on the ways we’d al-ways known. We’d bo-ught a sa-fe and stuf-fed what we ma-de in the-re. Un-for-tu-na-tely, it was still pretty damn empty.

As we left, we he-ard one sharp scre-am af-ter anot-her. It se-emed li-ke tor-tu-re was on so-me-one’s me-nu. I won-de-red if it so-un-ded li-ke the scre-ams of the pe-op-le that the Black An-nis had kil-led over the ye-ars, be-ca-use you know they’d scre-amed too.

Kar-ma, she is a bitch. But in this par-ti-cu-lar in-ci-dent, not my kar-ma, not my prob-lem.

We mo-ved on. We we-re ne-arly to the ed-ge of the park and for a few mo-ments the night was per-fect. Co-ol and crisp with the rust-le of fal-ling le-aves. Per-fect. Right up un-til we saw what was han-ging in the last li-ne of tre-es. He-avy and ri-pe li-ke fru-it, the co-lor of a nec-ta-ri-ne...pa-le sal-mon blo-oming with red. Lots and lots of red.

In the tre-es.

Bo-di-es.

We'd pul-led off the job. May-be not with comp-le-te suc-cess, but with eno-ugh to get pa-id. We'd he-ro-ical-ly fo-ught the po-wers of dark-ness. So stal-wart and bra-ve that vir-gins tos-sed ro-se pe-tals in our path and strong men wept at our co-ura-ge. Did li-fe get any bet-ter than that? Mi-nus the de-ad pe-op-le in the tre-es of co-ur-se. Ye-ah, de-fi-ni-tely mi-nus that.

"You're sca-ring the cus-to-mers aga-in."

It was la-ter that night and I was le-aning my el-bows on the bar of my cur-rent pla-ce of emp-loy-ment, al-so known as the Ninth Circ-le. It ca-te-red to the strictly su-per-na-tu-ral crowd. That's not to say a hu-man wo-uldn't wan-der in on oc-ca-si-on, but one go-od lo-ok at the crowd who was gi-ving no kind of go-od lo-ok back had them run-ning for the do-or. Ever-yo-ne in the bar co-uld pass for hu-man-they had to walk the stre-ets af-ter all-but they exu-ded eno-ugh bad at-ti-tu-de and ass-kic-king vi-bes to get rid of stray hu-mans wit-ho-ut even trying.

With my chin prop-ped in my hand, I rol-led my eyes in the di-rec-ti-on of the stern vo-ice. With his pa-le blond ha-ir to the sho-ul-ders, stra-ight slash of dark brows, gray-blue eyes, and whi-te wings bar-red with gold, the only thing that kept him from be-ing a fi-gu-re stra-ight out of a sta-ined-glass win-dow was his we-apon-cal-lo-used hands and a long scar along his jaw from chin to ear. Is-hi-ah, who ow-ned the bar, was one kick-ass an-gel if ever the-re was one. You co-uld all but see the fla-ming sword, not to men-ti-on the nonf-la-ming bo-ot he'd be happy to put up yo-ur ass. Of co-ur-se he wasn't re-al-ly an an-gel. As far as I knew, tho-se didn't exist. Is-hi-ah was a pe-ri, and no one qu-ite knew what they we-re. They we-re ru-mo-red to be the of-fsp-ring of an-gels and de-mons, but how co-uld that be? The first didn't exist. As for de-mons...open yo-ur eyes. De-mons are everyw-he-re. They're us.

"And how am I do-ing that?" I snor-ted. I'd de-ci-ded aga-ainst brin-ging up what Ni-ko and I had fo-und in the park. He might be my boss, but I didn't re-al-ly know Is-hi-ah, and I de-fi-ni-tely didn't trust Is-hi-ah. Not yet. Not that I had any re-ason not to trust him. Trust simply wasn't an emo-ti-on I was very go-od at. "By slin-ging drinks and ma-king chan-ge be-ca-use the che-ap-ass bas-tards don't tip? Ye-ah, that's scary shit right the-re."

The wings fle-xed, shim-me-red with light, then di-sap-pe-ared. It was a ne-at trick. I didn't ask how he did it or how any of the pe-ri did it, for that mat-ter. We all ha-ve our sec-rets. Ever-yo-ne in this bar had the-ir sec-rets be-ca-use the-re wasn't a hu-man among them. Is-hi-ah, now lo-oking li-ke just a man, al-be-it an unu-su-al one, sa-id in a lo-wer to-ne for the two of us only, "You're be-ing Aup-he."

Aup-he. The ot-her half of my ge-ne po-ol-my in-he-ri-tan-ce from go-od old Dad. The Aup-he we-re what mytho-lo-gi-cal el-ves wo-uld be if they we-re born in the ninth circ-le of hell and pas-sed thro-ugh the ot-her eight on the-ir way out. Be-ca-use hell co-uld'n't hold them-not-hing co-uld. Most had pa-le, ne-arly trans-pa-rent skin, po-in-ted ears, mol-ten red eyes, whi-te fi-la-ments mas-qu-era-ding as the flow of ha-ir, and what se-emed li-ke a tho-usand ne-ed-le-fi-ne me-tal te-eth. So fi-ne that when they smi-led, ne-ver a go-od oc-ca-si-on, you co-uld see yo-ur hazy ref-lec-ti-on.

Mir-ror, mir-ror, on the wall, who is the most ma-le-vo-lent of us all?

"And how," I as-ked, an-no-yed, "am I do-ing that?"

The twi-light eyes stu-di-ed me. "Let us say you don't pre-ci-sely lo-ok happy. And when you don't lo-ok happy..." He ra-ised eyeb-rows in the di-rec-ti-on of the cli-en-te-le, so-me who knew thro-ugh the gra-pe-vi-ne and so-me who co-uld smell the Aup-he in me, who we-re eit-her clus-te-red on the far si-de of the ro-om or at clo-ser ran-ge si-lently snar-ling. "That hap-pens. It's not go-od for bu-si-ness."

"Happy? I'm happy." I ba-red my te-eth in a fi-xed grin. "See? Happy."

"Gods sa-ve us. I ha-ven't se-en an exp-res-si-on li-ke that sin-ce Me-du-sa went thro-ugh me-no-pa-use." Ro-bin Go-od-fel-low drop-ped on a sto-ol and sho-ok his he-ad.

"Qu-ick. Brandy be-fo-re you dest-roy my will to li-ve with yo-ur ca-tast-rop-hi-cal-ly bad tem-per."

Ishi-ah im-me-di-ately drif-ted off. He and Ro-bin had so-me sort of prob-lem with each ot-her. I had no idea what it was, as both we-re si-lent on the su-bj-ect. But with Ro-bin's mo-uth, if one of them didn't le-ave, the-re'd be lit-tle left of the bar for me to ter-ro-ri-ze with my in-ner Aup-he. They wo-uld pull the pla-ce down aro-und our ears.

“Ca-tast-rop-hic tem-per?” I re-ac-hed for the go-od stuff I kept un-der the bar just for Ro-bin. A hund-red ye-ars old, it was still ba-rely fe-tal in age to his po-int of vi-ew. Yet anot-her mystery: why Ish wo-uld stock it for him. “Co-me on.”

“Kid, everyt-hing abo-ut you is ca-tast-rop-hic. Yo-ur tem-per, yo-ur figh-ting skills, yo-ur at-ti-tu-de, and let’s not even dis-cuss yo-ur lo-ok. Simply put on the eye-li-ner and jo-in the rest of the Child-ren of the Night knoc-kof-fs at the lo-cal Goth bar.”

And that was Ro-bin. Ot-her-wi-se known as Rob Fel-lows-car sa-les-man wit-ho-ut pe-er, Ro-bin Go-od-fel-low-tricks-ter ext-ra-or-di-na-ire, and, oh ye-ah, our fa-vo-ri-te puck. Con-si-de-ring I’d kil-led the only ot-her one we’d met, it wasn’t much of a con-test.

“I don’t ne-ed the eye-li-ner.” I ga-ve him a glass and the squ-at bot-tle.

“Yes, yes. Child of the Night is on yo-ur birth cer-ti-fi-ca-te. Six-six-six is tat-to-o-ed on yo-ur in-fant ass. I be-li-eve I’ve he-ard it be-fo-re.” He po-ured a drink as I ga-ve a qu-irk of my lips, but it was mo-re ge-nu-ine than the grin I’d flas-hed a few mo-ments ago. Ro-bin did ha-ve a way of pul-ling me out of a mo-od. It was hard to mo-an and gro-an abo-ut my bo-gey-man he-ri-ta-ge when he tre-ated me less li-ke a mons-ter and mo-re li-ke Bo Pe-ep with a gun. I ap-pre-ci-ated it, be-ca-use the-re had be-en ti-mes he had se-en what I *co-uld* be. And it didn’t co-me out of any nur-sery rhyme.

“So, did the ca-se not go well?” He held the preg-nant glass-all cur-ves-snif-fed the li-qu-id, clic-ked his ton-gue, and sho-ok his he-ad, but to-ok a swal-low any-way.

“Eh.” I shrug-ged. “We got pa-id. The la-mia got eaten. Re-al-ly a win-win in my bo-ok.”

“And the fact that it was a kid-nap-ping ca-se, that do-esn’t even be-ar dis-cus-sing?”

I duc-ked my he-ad, let-ting my lon-gish ha-ir swing for-ward-black to my brot-her’s dark blond. My skin fa-ir to his oli-ve. All we had that sho-wed our com-mon mot-her was our gray eyes. And I knew mi-ne, pe-ering thro-ugh the dark strands, we-re now opa-que. “It was months ago. Let it go, okay?” I war-ned.

He to-ok anot-her swal-low. “Months. Mil-len-nia. A ve-ri-tab-le eon. Wha-te-ver was I thin-king?”

“You we-ren’t,” I sa-id stiffly.

A we-re-wolf ca-me slin-king up to the bar, ears flat and no-se wrink-led in dis-gust at the Aup-he tin-ge to my scent. It was hard to ask for a brews-ki with his half-hu-man fa-ce con-tor-ted aro-und a mo-uth-ful of te-eth stra-ight out of *The Call of the Wild*, but he po-in-ted just fi-ne. He was ob-vi-o-ously not a fi-ne-bred, but part of the wolf po-pu-la-ti-on bre-eding for re-ces-si-ve wolf ge-nes, not that I had any pre-j-udi-ces abo-ut that. How co-uld I? I ga-ve him his be-er and kept my chew toy jokes to myself. Is-hi-ah was right. It re-al-ly wasn’t go-od for bu-si-ness, and he’d gi-ven me a bre-ak with this job.

I didn’t know if it was as an uns-po-ken fa-vor to Ro-bin or to piss him off. I had as-ked Go-od-fel-low on-ce which it was, and he had dec-la-red smo-othly that if I didn’t want the job, I’d ma-ke a gre-at juni-or car sa-les-man and he had a pla-ce for me wa-iting at his lot. Hell, no. I didn’t know if I had a so-ul or not, but if I did, I wasn’t gi-ving it away that easily. If the-re we-re a su-rer path to dam-na-ti-on than be-ing a car sa-les-man, I didn’t know what it wo-uld be.

“I al-ways think. You might not want to he-ar what I say, Ca-li-ban, but that’s yo-ur prob-lem.” He po-ured anot-her glas-sful. “Thin-king and tal-king are what I do best.”

“I’ll gi-ve you the last one all right,” I grun-ted.

He smo-ot-hed his wavy brown ha-ir, stra-igh-te-ned his su-it jac-ket, rich brown over a de-ep gre-en shirt. Just the fab-ric of one of them pro-bably cost mo-re than a we-ek of my pay. Pic-king up the bot-tle in pre-pa-ra-ti-on to le-aving, he sa-id so-berly, “You sho-uld try tal-king to her.”

Her be-ing Ge-or-gi-na-Ge-or-ge. She was the one who’d be-en kid-nap-ped. We’d got-ten her back. She’d sur-vi-ved. Alt-ho-ugh it had be-en a very clo-se thing-for all of us. Ge-or-ge was the lo-cal psychic, but she was the re-al thing...and this girl, this spe-ci-al girl, had tho-ught we co-uld be to-get-her. I had known bet-ter. And alt-ho-ugh she’d pro-ved to be as stub-born and hard-he-aded as me in her own way, I still knew it.

“I talk,” I co-un-te-red de-fen-si-vely.

He sto-od, the am-ber li-qu-id in his bot-tle not slo-sing even a mil-li-me-ter. When you’d be-en ali-ve

as long as he had, you ten-ded to be pretty damn gra-ce-ful and cont-rol-led in yo-ur mo-ve-ments. “I me-an re-al-ly talk to her as op-po-sed to flap-ping that use-less mo-uth on-ce in a blue mo-on and sa-ying ab-so-lu-tely not-hing. But I wash my hands. Ple-ase, ru-in any chan-ce of a lo-ve li-fe that you ha-ve whi-le I go ex-pand mi-ne.” He win-ked ra-pa-ci-o-usly. “Do you want to gu-ess? Ma-le or fe-ma-le? Ot-her? One or three? I’m wil-ling to gift my know-led-ge to the less for-tu-na-te.”

“Ye-ah, thanks any-way,” I re-fu-sed. “I li-ke be-ing less for-tu-na-te.” Alt-ho-ugh la-tely that wasn’t pre-ci-sely true. “Gi-ves me so-met-hing to bitch abo-ut.”

“As if you ne-ed an ex-cu-se,” he snor-ted.

“Wa-it,” I sa-id as he star-ted to mo-ve off. “Ni-ko and I ca-me ac-ross so-me bo-di-es in the park. Fi-ve. Han-ging in the tre-es li-ke god-damn or-na-ments.” And wasn’t that cre-epy as fuc-king hell? “Wo-uld a Black An-nis do so-met-hing li-ke that?”

Ni-ko and I had dis-cus-sed it. If they we-re wil-ling to catch the-ir own fo-od, why bot-her with kid-nap-ping the la-mia? We co-uldn’t in-ves-ti-ga-te for mo-re than a few mo-ments-the in-ner ed-ge of Cent-ral Park wasn’t the sa-fest pla-ce to be pa-wing over bo-di-es for clu-es. “Two men, three wo-men.” One had be-en mo-re a girl...six-te-en may-be...with long ha-ir that had drip-ped blo-od in a gent-le ra-in to the grass. “All we-re...shit...che-wed on, I gu-ess you’d say. Rip-ped and torn.”

He con-si-de-red it. “A Black An-nis? It’s con-ce-ivab-le. They’re not much for de-la-yed gra-ti-fi-ca-ti-on, so ta-king a bi-te or two whi-le wa-iting on you and Ni-ko wo-uld be so-met-hing they wo-uld do. Han-ging them in a tree?” He se-esa-wed a hand back and forth. “They’re mo-re for ca-ves, but in a pinch?” He shrug-ged. “They are adap-tab-le.” Pa-using, he ad-ded so-berly, “Fi-ve pe-op-le? Unp-le-asant.” Set-ting the bot-tle back in front of me, he ad-vi-sed, “Just this on-ce. Bac-chus was a doc-tor in his own right.” He then wa-ved a hand and was go-ne.

Less than a mo-ment la-ter, Is-hi-ah re-tur-ned and watc-hed Ro-bin di-sap-pe-ar out the do-or. He lo-oked exas-pe-ra-ted. Scratch that. Not exas-pe-ra-ted-highly, pro-fo-undly an-no-yed. And in-tent, very in-tent. It was a pe-cu-li-ar com-bi-na-ti-on. “Oh, hey. I get it.” I grin-ned, po-uring a small amo-unt of Ro-bin’s gift in-to a glass. I wasn’t a drin-ker, to say the le-ast, but he was right. One wo-uldn’t hurt; it co-uld only help. “You ha-ve a thing for him.”

He tur-ned his ga-ze to me. It was still an-no-yed. “Inso-lent bas-tard.”

“True eno-ugh, but it do-esn’t chan-ge the fact.” I tos-sed the bar to-wel over my sho-ul-der. “You we-re watc-hing his ass, don’t lie.” I had no idea if Go-od-fel-low had a go-od ass or not. That wasn’t the way my bo-at flo-ated, but *Ro-bin* had told me and ever-yo-ne in the free and not-so-free world that he did. Co-uld be Is-hi-ah had an opi-ni-on on the su-bj-ect. “By the way, is it a go-od...”

He tur-ned and wal-ked away be-fo-re I had a chan-ce to fi-nish. In re-ality, I kind of do-ub-ted that’s what it was all abo-ut. If it we-re, Ro-bin wo-uld’ve be-en wal-king out of he-re with fe-at-hers in his ha-ir, down his pants, and a smug grin on his fa-ce.

I shrug-ged. Not my bu-si-ness. At le-ast, as long as Ro-bin wasn’t in tro-ub-le. And he usu-al-ly wasn’t. He’d got-ten very, very go-od at avo-iding that sin-ce be-fo-re the hu-man ra-ce was born. I wasn’t su-re how old he was exactly, but I was gu-es-sing that he had pro-bably ser-ved up one of man-kind’s wrig-gling wa-ter-go-ing an-ces-tors on a ni-ce whe-at-ber-ry bre-ad at so-me po-int or anot-her.

At fo-ur I clo-sed up the bar. Swept up the fe-at-hers, fur, and sca-les, loc-ked the do-or, and he-aded ho-me. The apart-ment was re-la-ti-vely clo-se to the Ninth Circ-le on St. Mark’s Pla-ce, but every ti-me I had to think I might not ma-ke it...I had every night for the past fo-ur months, but I al-ways had my do-ubts. Spi-ne ten-se, sho-ul-ders set, I se-arc-hed every dark no-ok and every ro-of for the Aup-he. I ne-ver saw my re-la-ti-ves du-ring that pe-ri-od, but it was only a mat-ter of ti-me.

They’d kid-nap-ped me and kept me pri-so-ner for two ye-ars when I was fo-ur-te-en. They’d do-ne the sa-me aga-in last ye-ar only with a lit-tle mo-re of a twist. They’d had me pos-ses-sed and plan-ned to use me to re-ma-ke the world in the-ir ima-ge. When we’d re-tur-ned the fa-vor by dest-ro-ying the re-ma-ins of ne-arly the-ir en-ti-re ra-ce, they had be-en a lit-tle put-out. We’d tho-ught they we-re all de-ad, dest-ro-yed by a col-lap-sing wa-re-ho-use, but we’d be-en wrong. And when you we-re wrong abo-ut the Aup-he, you might as well cut yo-ur own thro-at and get it over with. It wo-uld be a hel-lu-va

lot less pa-in-ful.

The Aup-he had tor-tu-re down to a fi-ne art. They'd ro-amed the earth with the di-no-sa-urs-be-fo-re the di-no-sa-urs. It had gi-ven them a long ti-me to per-fect the-ir tech-ni-que. And the Aup-he had tech-ni-que out the ass. I still didn't re-mem-ber what they had do-ne to me in the two ye-ars they'd had me. I do-ub-ted I ever wo-uld...not wit-ho-ut en-ding up in a pla-ce whe-re pe-op-le shamb-led in pa-per slip-pers and con-si-de-red lunch to be a cup-ful of happy pills.

Unfor-tu-na-tely the Aup-he we-re de-ter-mi-ned to ma-ke me pay for bet-ra-ying my own kind. Months ago when I'd had the one thing in my hand that wo-uld bring Ge-or-ge back to us, one had snatc-hed it away and told me in exc-ru-ci-ating de-ta-il just how I wo-uld pay. They'd ma-ke the ot-hers pay too, Ni-ko and Ro-bin, who had hel-ped in the-ir dest-ruc-ti-on. They'd al-so ta-ke an-yo-ne I ca-red for, simply be-ca-use I did ca-re for them. My fri-ends, my fa-mily, they wo-uld all go first, long be-fo-re I did.

Li-ke I sa-id, the Aup-he had tor-tu-re down to a sci-en-ce. And that they we-re ta-king the-ir ti-me abo-ut it only ma-de things wor-se. The only thing that kept me mo-de-ra-tely sa-ne was the fact that Ni-ko, Pro-mi-se, and Ro-bin co-uld ta-ke ca-re of them-sel-ves, and I avo-ided Ge-or-ge whe-ne-ver I co-uld. The Aup-he wo-uld ne-ver know she exis-ted if I had anyt-hing to say abo-ut it.

Of co-ur-se, all that sa-nity res-ted on the fact that I was li-ving in de-ni-al abo-ut how ama-zingly go-od at kil-ling the Aup-he we-re. God knew that they'd al-most kil-led Nik and me on mo-re than one oc-ca-si-on. We we-re go-od. They we-re bet-ter.

Trud-ging up the sta-irs to the apart-ment, smel-ling of se-cond-hand be-er and wor-se, I un-loc-ked the do-or, ope-ned it, and drop-ped my jac-ket on the ne-arest sur-fa-ce...the flo-or.

"You may as well pick it up. We ha-ve so-mep-la-ce to be."

"Christ. It's fo-ur thirty," I gro-aned as I to-ok in Ni-ko wa-iting with arms fol-ded. His fa-ce was amu-sed but se-ri-o-us no-net-he-less. His ha-ir was pul-led back in-to a ba-re inch and a half of pony-ta-il. On-ce it had be-en a bra-id that tra-iled down his back, but I knew he didn't beg-rud-ge its sac-ri-fi-ce. It had be-en for me, and he hadn't ex-pec-ted to sur-vi-ve long eno-ugh to walk aro-und with the Ko-j-ak lo-ok.

"Yes, it is fo-ur thirty and the lon-ger we stand he-re the la-ter it will get, but I'm su-re the ba-sic mec-ha-nics of ti-me are un-ders-to-od even by you."

"You're in ra-re form to-night," I sni-ped. "Ra-re shitty form."

"Yes, ke-eping us in rent pay-ments, how in-con-si-de-ra-te of me." He til-ted his he-ad and frow-ned slightly.

"How's the sho-ul-der?"

I'd mo-ved only with the slich-test amo-unt of stif-fness, but he'd still no-ti-ced. I ro-ta-ted it and did my best not to win-ce at the pull of torn flesh. "Be-arab-le."

"I told you ser-ving drinks wo-uld ag-gra-va-te it. You sho-uld've told Is-hi-ah that you we-re in-jured and co-uldn't work." He sta-red po-in-tedly at the jac-ket, and I pic-ked it up with an an-no-yed gro-an.

"I was af-ra-id he'd turn me in-to a pil-lar of salt. Be-si-des, he's pretty iffy abo-ut me wor-king the-re, pe-ri-od. Ap-pa-rently when I'm gro-uchy, I exu-de Aup-he." I snor-ted. "And I'm gu-es-sing they don't ma-ke a roll-on for that."

We we-re al-re-ady out in the hall and mo-ving as I yaw-ned he-avily. "It's only be-ca-use the cli-en-te-le al-re-ady know thanks to the lo-ose-lip-ped we-re-wol-ves." Ni-ko fo-cu-sed on the ban-da-ge, vi-su-al-ly chec-king for blo-od as I pul-led on my jac-ket. Sa-tis-fi-ed that it was uns-ta-ined, he con-ti-nu-ed. "If it we-ren't for them, no one wo-uld know."

Ni-ko tri-ed hard, he did, to ma-ke me be-li-eve I re-al-ly wasn't that dif-fe-rent. And even tho-ugh it wasn't true, I was gra-te-ful as hell for the ef-fort. "The pe-ri wo-uld know," I sa-id ab-sently as I zip-ped the jac-ket. "They know, shit, everyt-hing as far as I can tell. At le-ast everyt-hing that has to do with who or what pas-ses thro-ugh the-ir bar. Alt-ho-ugh Go-od-fel-low se-ems to ha-ve them bam-bo-oz-led."

"Bam-bo-oz-led?" Ni-ko's eyeb-rows went up.

“I’m trying to ex-pand my vo-ca-bu-lary.” I grin-ned.

“Just for you. Now, whe-re the hell are we go-ing?”

“The Met-ro-po-li-tan Mu-se-um. Pro-mi-se is me-eting us the-re. She’s on the bo-ard of di-rec-tors thro-ugh one of her la-te hus-bands. The-re’s be-en a dif-fi-culty of so-me sort. The cu-ra-tor is a go-od fri-end of hers, the su-per-na-tu-ral kind, and do-esn’t want to call the po-li-ce in on this one. She says it’s mo-re up our al-ley.”

“Kic-king ass and ta-king na-mes?” I yaw-ned aga-in, re-ady to let the ima-ges of crazy old wo-men and de-ad bo-di-es fa-de with sle-ep.

“We so ra-rely ask the-ir na-mes that I’m not su-re the last co-unts.”

A half ho-ur and a ri-de on the num-ber 6 tra-in la-ter, we we-re at the Met and I was ham-me-ring on the hu-ge do-ub-le do-ors. No one ca-me. “Don’t get a lot of piz-za de-li-ve-ri-es he-re, do they?” I grumb-led, be-fo-re po-un-ding aga-in.

“How abo-ut I call Pro-mi-se to co-me let us in? It’s an auda-ci-o-us plan, I re-ali-ze, but don’t dis-miss it out of hand,” Ni-ko sa-id dryly. He had his cell pho-ne in his hand when Pro-mi-se and anot-her wo-man ope-ned the do-or. The wo-man, the cu-ra-tor, was a fo-ot tal-ler than Pro-mi-se...at the very le-ast. She was al-so tal-ler than Ni-ko and me. Her ha-ir was the co-lor of bron-ze and pul-led back in-to a tight French bra-id. Her eyes we-re a fi-er-ce ice blue, her bre-asts an en-tity un-to them-sel-ves, and I co-uld prac-ti-cal-ly see the hor-ned hel-met and bre-astp-la-te she sho-uld be we-ar-ing ins-te-ad of a gray su-it.

“Valky-rie?” I mur-mu-red to Nik.

“Mis-sing her crow fe-at-hers,” he ans-we-red in the sa-me low to-ne, “but yes. Very go-od. You are le-ar-ning, no mat-ter how re-luc-tantly.”

Along with Ni-ko, I to-ok a few steps clo-ser and lo-oked up at her. I was go-ing to of-fer my hand to sha-ke, but de-ci-ded I ne-eded it for figh-ting and ot-her...ah...noc-tur-nal ac-ti-vi-ti-es and hers lo-oked as if it we-re ca-pab-le of rip-ping off my arm to use as a back scratc-her. Ni-ko was bra-ver and held his hand out and sa-id gra-vely, “A fri-end of Pro-mi-se is a fri-end of ours.”

The lar-ge hand sho-ok Ni-ko’s firmly. “Sang-ri-da Odins-dót-tir.”

“Ni-ko Le-and-ros. My brot-her, Cal.” To this day, he re-fu-sed to call me Ca-li-ban. The me-aning be-hind the na-me gi-ven to me by our ever-ado-ring mot-her had ne-ver es-ca-ped me. Even be-fo-re I co-uld re-ad See Spot Run, much less Sha-kes-pe-are, she’d be-en all too eager to tell me a mons-ter de-ser-ved a mons-ter na-me.

Mom did find ways to get her kicks. I was slowly get-ting used to the ot-hers, who knew the me-aning of my na-me but not the in-tent, using it...just as I was still get-ting used to the-re *be-ing* ot-hers. For ye-ars it had only be-en Ni-ko and me on the run. Now the-re we-re fri-ends and lo-vers and god-damn if that didn’t still warp my re-al-ity on oc-ca-si-on.

Pro-mi-se was one of tho-se. Ni-ko and her-hell, they’d be-en ma-de for each ot-her, the few hund-red ye-ars’ age dif-fe-ren-ce asi-de. Des-pi-te the de-ep cho-co-la-te and pa-le blond stri-pes of ha-ir pul-led back in-to an Ama-zo-ni-an bra-id that re-ac-hed the small of her back and eyes the co-lor of spring vi-olets, she was a qu-i-et be-a-uty. The exo-tic co-lo-ring didn’t ma-ke her flashy, and it didn’t to-uch her in-ner stil-lness, her in-na-te tran-qu-ility. Of co-ur-se un-der that tran-qu-ility she co-uld be de-adly. She and my brot-her we-re two of a kind that way. Now she cur-ved her lips gently in a smi-le me-ant only for him. “Thank you for co-ming, Ni-ko. Cal. I re-ali-ze it’s al-re-ady be-en a long night for you both.” She la-id her fin-gers on Ni-ko’s arm for a fle-eting mo-ment, and then step-ped back in-to the mu-se-um.

Sang-ri-da mo-ved with her as we fol-lo-wed. The in-si-de of the mu-se-um was pretty much as I re-mem-be-red it from the last ti-me Ni-ko had drag-ged me the-re for arts and crafts, art edu-ca-ti-on, his-tory stuff. Wha-te-ver. I li-ked the Na-tu-ral His-tory Mu-se-um bet-ter, myself. Di-no-sa-urs. Who do-esn’t lo-ve di-no-sa-urs? I re-mem-be-red se-e-ing an ex-hi-bit with a re-cre-ati-on of a T. rex to-we-ring tall. Ro-bin had on-ce sa-id the Aup-he used to hunt them in packs...not so much for the me-at as for the fun.

Ye-ah...the *fun*.

“So, Pro-mi-se, what’s up?” I as-ked, my vo-ice ec-ho-ing aga-inst the marb-le.

Sang-ri-da ans-we-red ins-te-ad. “The-re has be-en an in-ci-dent with one of the ex-hi-bits.”

“It co-uld’n’t ha-ve be-en sto-len,” Ni-ko com-men-ted. “Pro-mi-se wo-uld know that is not our area of ex-per-ti-se.”

“No, it was not sto-len.” She wal-ked with long, mus-cu-lar stri-des. “Not exactly.” The-re was a fa-int glot-tal fla-vor to her words, but ba-rely no-ti-ce-ab-le.

“Best for you to see.”

We en-te-red the Arms and Ar-mor sec-ti-on and wal-ked past an ex-hi-bit of su-its of pla-te ar-mor. One of the gal-le-ri-es was la-be-led with a red and black ex-hi-bi-ti-on sign that re-ad FA-MO-US SE-RI-AL KIL-LERS THRO-UG-HO-UT HIS-TORY AND LE-GEN-D.

“Enter-ta-ining,” Ni-ko sa-id wryly. “It puts imp-res-si-onism to sha-me.”

Sang-ri-da sig-hed in an-no-yan-ce. “It’s a tra-ve-ling ex-hi-bit of hor-rors. The bo-ard of di-rec-tors, cur-se them, are res-pon-sib-le. Not you of co-ur-se, Pro-mi-se,” she ad-ded gruffly. “Just the vul-tu-res and hye-nas on the bo-ard. They are of the opi-ni-on that sen-sa-ti-ona-lism ke-eps at-ten-dan-ce high. The first ex-hi-bit to yo-ur right will be, of co-ur-se, Jack the Rip-per.”

Pro-mi-se ga-ve a hint of a sa-tis-fi-ed smi-le at the men-ti-on of the na-me, and I tho-ught how Jack had di-sap-pe-ared, ne-ver to be he-ard from aga-in. Not many se-ri-al kil-lers stop, un-less they’re ca-ught or so-me-one do-es the stop-ping for them. In a ti-me when vam-pi-res still re-li-ed on blo-od, it co-uld be that Pro-mi-se had ta-ken from tho-se who in turn to-ok from ot-hers. As I stop-ped to ta-ke a lo-ok thro-ugh the glass at old let-ters, pho-tos, and pe-ri-od bla-des that co-uld’ve be-en si-mi-lar to the ones used, Pro-mi-se to-ok my arm and gen-tly ur-ged me on. “He li-ked at-ten-ti-on then. Let us deny it to him now.” Con-si-de-ring what I’d se-en of the pho-tos, I wasn’t sorry to mo-ve on. I’d se-en si-mi-lar in li-ving co-lor just ho-urs ago.

A few ex-hi-bits down, Sang-ri-da stop-ped. The glass of this disp-lay ca-se was blac-ke-ned...scorc-hed by what lo-ok-ed li-ke a small exp-lo-si-on. Glass shards we-re lying everyw-he-re.

“The ca-se burst from wit-hin,” Ni-ko po-in-ted out, ob-vi-o-usly int-ri-gu-ed. “The-re is no glass wit-hin the ex-hi-bit it-self, only on the flo-or.”

Also on the flo-or was a sto-ne box, the lid bro-ken in-to pi-eces and scat-te-red far and wi-de. I to-ed a pi-ece with my black sne-aker. His-to-ri-cal or not, I damn su-re co-uld’n’t do any mo-re harm to it. “What was in that?”

“Ashes. Frag-ments of bo-ne.” Sang-ri-da sho-ok her he-ad, high fo-re-he-ad knit with worry. “Saw-ney.”

“Saw-ney?” I re-pe-ated cu-ri-o-usly, only to be ins-tantly over-rid-den by Ni-ko.

“Saw-ney Be-ane? The Scot-tish mass mur-de-rer?” He sat on his he-els to get a bet-ter lo-ok at the box. “The can-ni-bal? I knew the wo-men and the child-ren of the clan we-re sup-po-sedly bur-ned, but the men we-re exe-cu-ted dif-fe-rently.”

“No one is qu-ite su-re what re-al-ly hap-pe-ned. No one who wasn’t the-re.” I ma-de a men-tal no-te to ask Go-od-fel-low. If he wasn’t the-re, he pro-bably knew so-me-one who was. Sang-ri-da went on, “Of co-ur-se, man-kind do-esn’t know if Saw-ney was fact or fic-ti-on, but we know bet-ter. And alt-ho-ugh he ate clo-se to a tho-usand pe-op-le, he wasn’t strictly a can-ni-bal, as he wasn’t hu-man.” She lo-ok-ed at the shat-te-red box and cor-rec-ted him-self. “Isn’t hu-man.”

Fi-ve words fo-ught to be first out of my mo-uth. A *tho-usand* pe-op-le and *isn’t* hu-man. I went with the one most per-ti-nent to the im-me-di-ate si-tu-ati-on.

“Isn’t?” I re-pe-ated. “He ca-me back from as-hes and bo-ne? No god-damn way.”

Sang-ri-da didn’t blink at that lan-gu-age. I gu-ess if you hang aro-und war-ri-ors for a few cen-tu-ri-es, you get used to it. I had no do-ubt she co-uld cur-se me un-der the tab-le...pro-bably whi-le bench-pres-sing me with one hand and swil-ling ale with the ot-her. “I’m not su-re. I’ve ne-ver he-ard of such a thing in re-gards to him, but it is a chan-ce I don’t wish to ta-ke.”

The exp-lo-si-on from wit-hin, the mis-sing re-ma-ins-I co-uld see her po-int. “Was the-re any-thing

el-se in the ex-hi-bit?"

She frow-ned. "His scythe. Or what was cla-imed to be. It was a hand-held one, his we-apon of cho-ice. It is mis-sing as well."

And that was the de-fi-ni-ti-on of didn't bo-de fuc-king well, now, wasn't it?

3

The-re was no way to se-arch the en-ti-re mu-se-um inc-lu-ding the ro-oms be-low whe-re the unu-sed col-lec-ti-ons we-re sto-red, not in the two ho-urs be-fo-re the staff wo-uld start ar-ri-ving. We se-arc-hed the first flo-or, fo-und a me-tal exit do-or that was crump-led and as-kew and that sa-id it all. At le-ast the Cliff's No-tes ver-si-on. Eit-her so-me-one had ta-ken Saw-ney's bits and pi-eces out of the-re or Saw-ney had ta-ken him-self.

With that go-od news un-der our belts, we left so Sang-ri-da wo-uld trig-ger the alarm that wo-uld bring the po-li-ce. The se-cu-rity, her spe-ci-al se-cu-rity, had tur-ned off the alarm system the ins-tant it went off, be-ne-fi-ting from the fi-ve-mi-nu-te lag bu-ilt in-to the system that most of the bo-ard of di-rec-tors de-fi-ni-tely didn't know abo-ut. The-re we-re a lot of old things in the pla-ce and not all of them we-re known to be comp-le-tely "inac-ti-ve," so to spe-ak. The-re was chec-king to be do-ne be-fo-re the aut-ho-ri-ti-es sho-wed up. With that now ac-comp-lis-hed, Sang-ri-da was re-ady to play the dist-res-sed cu-ra-tor. Well, with Sang-ri-da's back-bo-ne, the mildly con-cer-ned cu-ra-tor.

When Ni-ko and I fi-nal-ly got back to our apart-ment on St. Mark's Pla-ce, I was wis-hing I had that iron rod run-ning bol-ted to her spi-ne be-ca-use I was te-ete-ring on the ed-ge of ex-ha-us-ti-on. So-met-hing to hold me up wo-uld've be-en ni-ce. I yaw-ned he-avily. "You think what we saw in the park co-uld be Saw-ney?"

Ni-ko was strip-ping off his we-apons on-to the kitc-hen tab-le. "I think we don't know eno-ugh to ma-ke sup-po-si-ti-ons. The-re are many cre-atu-res that co-uld do what we saw. Per-haps even one not so po-wer-ful as to be res-pon-sib-le for the de-aths of over a tho-usand pe-op-le." He drop-ped his last bla-de on-to the sur-fa-ce. "But to re-in-teg-ra-te from ash and bo-ne, that wo-uld ta-ke enor-mo-us energy, enor-mo-us sus-te-nan-ce. And he wo-uld'n't ha-ve had ti-me to ta-ke the bo-di-es with him, not when he was on the run."

"In ot-her words, who the hell knows?"

"In ot-her words," he con-fir-med with a qu-irk of his lips.

"It'd be ni-ce if the-re was only one mass mur-de-rer to worry abo-ut. Ho-pe sprin-ging eter-nal and all that shit. I'm grab-bing a sho-wer, then bed. I'm ti-red of smel-ling li-ke a le-aky keg."

"Con-ve-ni-ent. I'm ti-red of smel-ling a le-aky keg." He he-aded for his own bed-ro-om, ad-ding ca-su-al-ly,

"The bath-ro-om is ta-ken ca-re of."

He ne-ver for-got, but he usu-al-ly told me any-way, and it was al-ways sa-id as if it we-re per-fectly na-tu-ral to se-cu-re the bath-ro-om li-ke an enemy en-camp-ment. As if I didn't ha-ve one hel-lu-va we-ird pho-bia-even if it we-re a slowly re-sol-ving one.

When I went in, the bath-ro-om mir-ror was co-ve-red with a to-wel just as he'd as-su-red me. I knew Dark-ling was go-ne. He wasn't co-ming thro-ugh any mir-ror ever aga-in, but the fact that I co-uld ha-ve a mir-ror in the apart-ment, even a co-ve-red one, was an ac-comp-lis-hment. The Aup-he had sto-len my body and tri-ed to ste-al my mind. Dark-ling had pos-ses-sed me and gob-bled up my so-ul. Tem-po-ra-rily, thanks to so-me help from Ni-ko and Ro-bin, but it wasn't an ex-pe-ri-en-ce you for-got. Or got over, not comp-le-tely.

I knoc-ked the glass thro-ugh the to-wel and mut-te-red, "Rot in hell, you bas-tard."

After the sho-wer, I slept for abo-ut fi-ve ho-urs and then stag-ge-red up. Ni-ko and I had al-re-ady dis-cus-sed what our next mo-ve was. Or, rat-her, who it was. And at no-on we hit Ro-bin's pla-ce in Chel-sea just as he was rol-ling out of bed.

He ans-we-red the do-or we-aring silk pa-j-ama bot-toms, an un-ti-ed matc-hing silk ro-be, and a shit-lo-ad of mor-ning cranky. Blin-king in sle-epy ill hu-mor over a ste-aming cup of cof-fee, he

mumb-led, “Who...what...” Gi-ving up, he sna-red a hand in his tang-led curls and to-ok a drink. Gre-en eyes cle-aring with the ad-di-ti-on of li-fe-gi-ving caf-fe-ine, he ma-na-ged to get out an en-ti-re sen-ten-ce. “Why? Why are you wretc-hed cre-atu-res he-re at this ho-ur even Apol-lo him-self wo-uld spit upon?”

“We’re he-re to pick yo-ur bra-in.” I im-me-di-ately flop-ped on his co-uch, an af-fa-ir so mas-si-ve that it co-uld host an orgy. Hell, this was Ro-bin we we-re tal-king abo-ut. Just go ahe-ad, gi-ve the be-ne-fit of the do-ubt, and say it *had* hos-ted an orgy. “And by the way, Bob the do-or-man sa-id the con-do as-so-ci-ati-on shot down yo-ur idea of a con-dom mac-hi-ne on every flo-or.”

“Pu-ri-tan bas-tards,” he mut-te-red. “Even I, on oc-ca-si-on, run out.” I wasn’t su-re why he used them to be-gin with. He co-uld’n’t get an-yo-ne preg-nant. Pucks don’t rep-ro-du-ce that way. In fact, I didn’t know how they rep-ro-du-ced, and qu-ite frankly, that was fi-ne by me. As for the con-dom’s ot-her use...I wo-uld’n’t ha-ve tho-ught Go-od-fel-low wo-uld be too vul-ne-rab-le to STDs...at le-ast not the hu-man kind. That tra-in of tho-ught led me to pla-ces my mind had no de-si-re to go...vam-pi-re go-nor-rhea, glo-wing pi-xie her-pes, who knew what the fuck el-se. As I has-tily men-tal-ly kic-ked tho-se tho-ughts to the curb, Ro-bin clo-sed the do-or be-hind Ni-ko and wa-ved a ca-re-less arm at the kitc-hen. “Cof-fee. Tea. The-re.” With that elo-qu-ent in-vi-ta-ti-on, he col-lap-sed on the co-uch next to me and im-me-di-ately do-zed off. Mi-ra-cu-lo-usly, the cof-fee cup re-ma-ined firmly up-right and ba-lan-ced.

I sho-ok my he-ad and flic-ked his ear-lo-be. “Ri-se and shi-ne, Sle-eping Be-a-uty.”

“Talk abo-ut yo-ur worst lay ever,” he mur-mu-red, and then swat-ted at my hand, le-aving me with fi-er-cely stin-ging fin-gers. “And I’ve yet to he-ar why you are ru-ining a per-fectly go-od mor-ning of post-co-ital la-zing abo-ut.”

“Saw-ney Be-ane,” Ni-ko an-no-un-ced as he le-aned aga-inst the marb-le co-un-ter-top that se-pa-ra-ted the kitc-hen from the li-ving area. With arms fol-ded, he ig-no-red the burb-ling cap-puc-ci-no mac-hi-ne and fo-cu-sed on Ro-bin. “He may be back.”

If we we-re ex-pec-ting a big re-ac-ti-on, we we-re di-sap-po-in-ted. Sig-hing, Go-od-fel-low ope-ned his eye-lids to half-mast, grun-ted, and drank mo-re cof-fee. “So,” I sa-id, re-li-eved, “not such a bad thing, huh? To-tal-ly over-ra-ted, right? No way the son of a bitch ate a tho-usand pe-op-le.”

“A tho-usand?” he snor-ted. “Hardly. Six hund-red most li-kely. Se-ven hund-red tops.”

Ah, shit.

I was abo-ut to drop my he-ad in my hands when the-re was a rat-tle at the do-or-a very pro-lon-ged rat-tle. One that sa-id “he-re I co-me” as cle-arly as if the per-son had sho-uted it thro-ugh the do-or.

“Ah, my ho-use-ke-eper,” Ro-bin sa-id with amu-se-ment, roc-ke-ting to comp-le-te alert-ness in a he-art-be-at-the kind of alert-ness that se-emed to spring stra-ight from the son of a bitch’s crotch. “Se-rag-lio is re-luc-tant to be a spec-ta-tor to so-me of my mo-re exo-tic en-ter-ta-in-ments. She do-esn’t se-em to ap-pro-ve of nu-dity eit-her, cer-tain-ly not mi-ne any-way.” He put the cof-fee mug on the slab of rock crystal mas-qu-era-ding as a tab-le and sto-od. “Con-si-de-ring her na-me me-ans ha-rem, that’s rat-her cu-ri-o-us, but to each her own. If one can-not ap-pre-ci-ate the mu-se-inspi-red work of art that is my body...” He held his arms out to in-di-ca-te the glory of it all. “Then I must re-spect the-ir men-tal pat-ho-logy and get on with my li-fe.”

He ti-ed up his ro-be and flas-hed Se-rag-lio a bril-li-ant smi-le as she ca-me thro-ugh the do-or. It bo-un-ced off her im-pe-net-rab-le fa-ca-de wit-ho-ut ef-fect. “You’re lo-oking...pro-fes-si-onal as al-ways, ma’am. Why, the very air spark-les with yo-ur un-matc-hed ef-fi-ci-ency.” He ga-ve Ni-ko and me a wink. “Se-rag-lio has al-ways ma-de it very cle-ar that comp-li-ments of a per-so-nal na-tu-re are not wel-co-me and that she has fo-ur pro-tec-ti-ve brot-hers who wo-uld be ecs-ta-tic to tu-tor me on the con-cept. So, as dif-fi-cult as it is, I be-ha-ve myself.”

I co-uld tell he tho-ught it was a pity, tho-ugh, as he watc-hed her be-gin to work. With her flaw-less pe-ach-co-lo-red skin, enor-mo-us age-less black eyes, and glossy dark ha-ir that she wo-re pi-pled high on her he-ad, Se-rag-lio was be-a-uti-ful in all the ways the-re we-re to be be-a-uti-ful. I wo-uld’ve gu-es-sed her to be thirty-fi-ve, but I co-uld’ve be-en a de-ca-de off in eit-her di-rec-ti-on. She was al-so a lit-tle per-son, but not Go-od-fel-low’s kind of lit-tle per-son. She was a hu-man one, ba-rely

fo-ur fe-et tall-me-di-cal-ly spe-aking, a per-son with dwar-fism. And if she wasn't pro-of po-si-ti-ve that on-ce in a whi-le Mot-her Na-tu-re got so-met-hing right, I didn't know what was.

"Why, are you lo-oking at me, Mr. Fel-lows?" Her vo-ice re-min-ded me of oran-ge blos-som ho-ney, Spa-nish moss, and the thorns of a wild black-ber-ry bush. Ge-or-gia or so-mew-he-re down that way. We'd li-ved in a tra-iler park the-re on-ce; I re-cog-ni-zed the bro-ad drawl and fa-ded Rs. Her words drif-ted over her sho-ul-der as she bent over to ret-ri-eve cle-aning sup-pli-es from the bot-tom half of the pantry. Ro-bin's lips cur-ved in-to a wic-ked grin as he watc-hed her uni-form pants pull ta-ut over her ro-un-ded back-si-de.

"No, ma'am," he li-ed gra-vely. "I wo-uld so-oner pluck my own eye-bal-ls out than show you such dis-res-pect."

As I rol-led mi-ne, ot-her skep-ti-cal ones pin-ned the puck. "Well, sir, if any as-sis-tan-ce is ne-eded in that area, you just let me know. I ha-ve ice tongs that wo-uld be just the thing," she of-fe-red mat-ter-of-factly be-fo-re tur-ning back to her task. "Now, run along, child-ren. I ha-ve work to do." A be-jewe-led hand flap-ped im-pa-ti-ently to hurry him and us on our way.

So we went el-sew-he-re for the who-le se-ven-hund-red-tops dis-cus-si-on. Af-ter dres-sing, Ro-bin de-ci-ded lunch wo-uld be a gre-at fo-rum for can-ni-bal ta-les and pic-ked the res-ta-urant, be-ca-use af-ter one three-ni-nety-ni-ne buf-fet, he wo-uld ne-ver let me cho-ose aga-in. This pla-ce se-emed in-te-res-ting, tho-ugh, and I let the tho-ught of a tasty twenty-fi-ve-cent eg-groll go. The res-ta-urant didn't lo-ok too fancy from the out-si-de, a few dingy win-dows and a fa-ded stri-ped aw-ning, but the in-si-de ma-de up for it. The tab-les we-re old, dark wo-od with mo-sa-ic ti-le tops, and the cha-irs...they we-re just ugly as hell. With claw fe-et and worn vel-vet se-ats, they lo-oked li-ke props from Co-unt Dra-cu-la's cast-le. From the ce-iling hung se-ve-ral non-matc-hing chan-de-li-ers. So-me we-re lo-oping me-tal, so-me whim-si-cal blown glass, and so-me lo-oked li-ke they'd be-en ban-ged to-get-her by kin-der-gart-ners with a lot of ent-hu-si-asm and ab-so-lu-tely no ta-lent. Everyt-hing in the pla-ce did ha-ve one thing in com-mon, tho-ugh-it was all old. An-ti-que, and I co-uld see how Ro-bin wo-uld li-ke that.

He or-de-red for us, so-me dish cal-led Ta-vuk Gog-su, and then got down to bu-si-ness. "Tur-kish." He wa-ved off the wa-iter be-fo-re Ni-ko or I co-uld even ta-ke a lo-ok at the me-nu. "It's mag-ni-fi-cent. Trust me. You'll bring of-fe-rings to my al-tar in thanks. Now, what abo-ut dusty old Saw-ney? Oh, and by the way, he wasn't a can-ni-bal, as he wasn't."

"Hu-man. Yes, we're now awa-re," Ni-ko in-te-rj-ec-ted.

"Pro-mi-se's ac-qu-a-in-tan-ce at the mu-se-um fil-led us in re-gar-ding that, at le-ast that he wasn't hu-man. She didn't say pre-ci-sely what he was."

"A Red-cap," Ro-bin sa-id ab-sently as he ac-cep-ted a drink from the re-tur-ning wa-iter. "Try this. Kah-lua, soy, ho-ney, very much li-ke a me-ad I had in pre-Ne-ro Ro-me. Qu-ite tasty."

Ni-ko and I exc-han-ged lo-oks of to-le-rant re-sig-na-ti-on, ga-ve in, and drank. Ro-bin ope-ra-ted on Go-od-fel-low ti-me and me-re hu-mans, or hu-man-Aup-he hybrids, co-uld'n't chan-ge that. Af-ter a po-li-te swal-low, Ni-ko put his glass down. "Saw-ney's a Red-cap? I didn't know they we-re that po-wer-ful. And why the hu-man-style na-me?"

My own swal-low ba-rely ma-de it down and I pus-hed my glass away with a cur-led lip. Pre-Ne-ro Ro-me co-uld ke-ep that crap. "What's a Red-cap? So-me sort of gob-lin, right?"

"A Scot-tish-English le-gend," Ni-ko ela-bo-ra-ted.

"They we-re sa-id to mur-der tra-ve-lers and then sta-in the-ir caps with the-ir vic-tims' blo-od, hen-ce Red-cap."

"And on-ce aga-in, the folk-lo-re mon-keys got it wrong. Caps sta-ined with blo-od." Ro-bin ga-ve a fo-amy snort in-to his drink. "Yes, how frigh-te-ning. A ca-pe-ring evil we-ar-ing a *hat*. May-be he we-ars sus-pen-ders and short pants as well. Will the ter-ror ne-ver end?"

"No caps, then?" Ni-ko sa-id mildly.

"No." He fi-nis-hed his glass and promptly re-ac-hed for my dis-car-ded one. "They use the blo-od on the-ir ha-ir. They ha-ve this mess of twists and tang-les, mat-ted to-get-her with go-re and stin-king to high he-aven. They're unp-le-asant, filthy, nasty cre-atu-res, but only dan-ge-ro-us to the un-wary or

simply stu-pid. Ho-we-ver...” He tap-ped my now empty glass aga-*inst* his and frow-ned. “Saw-ney Be-ane was qu-ite a dif-fe-rent thing al-to-get-her. *Is* a dif-fe-rent thing, I gu-ess, if what you say is true and he has co-me back. That’s qu-ite the trick, and one I wasn’t awa-re he was ca-pab-le of. I’m still do-ubt-ful.” Sig-hing, he le-*aned* back and lin-ked fin-gers ac-ross his sto-mach.

“Be-si-des, what he was ca-pab-le of was mo-re than eno-ugh to be-gin with. As for the hu-man na-me, who knows? Fa-mi-li-arity? They de-al with hu-mans. Fo-ol hu-mans. Eat hu-mans.” He shrug-ged.

“Then the le-gend of Saw-ney Be-ane as we know it is mostly true?” Ni-ko was flip-ping the ser-ving kni-fe from wrist to palm and back aga-in. Lunch was no ex-cu-se to let a prac-ti-cing op-por-tu-nity pass by. “He and his in-ces-tu-o-us clan rob-bed and mur-de-red tra-ve-lers du-ring the fif-te-enth cen-tury. They drag-ged the-ir vic-tims back to the-ir ca-ve in Ban-na-ne He-ad, hung them from ho-oks, dis-mem-be-red them, and ate them. You put the body co-unt a few hund-red lo-wer, but do the ba-sic facts hold true?”

“Except for the in-cest.” Go-od-fel-low be-amed at the wa-iter who had cho-sen that par-ti-cu-lar mo-ment to ap-pe-ar with our fo-od. “They’re brot-hers,” he sa-id to the ser-ver, sha-king his he-ad wo-eful-ly. “I tell them that clo-se is go-od, fa-mily is go-od, but don’t be so qu-ick to li-mit yo-ur op-ti-*ons*.”

I las-hed out with my fo-ot, but only suc-ce-eded in ban-ging the shit out of my to-es on his cha-ir leg. Both Ro-bin and Ni-ko ga-ve me a lo-ok of di-sap-po-int-ment-Ro-bin’s mock and Ni-ko’s mo-re ge-nu-ine. “La-ter we spar in the park,” my brot-her or-de-red. “If we can find you a worthy op-po-nent from the playg-ro-und.”

By that ti-me the wa-iter had ma-de his es-ca-pe, the lucky bas-tard, and Ro-bin con-ti-nu-ed. “Red-caps aren’t in-to in-cest. That was a typi-cal hu-man so-ap ope-ra ad-di-ti-on, be-ca-use mass mur-der and can-ni-ba-lism simply we-ren’t ju-icy eno-ugh.”

I swir-led a fork thro-ugh the pa-le mo-und on my pla-te du-bi-o-usly as he went on. “In re-ality, Red-caps don’t much ca-re for one anot-her’s com-pa-ny. Lo-at-he each ot-her. The ma-le and the fe-ma-le even mo-re so. Con-se-qu-ently, they ha-ve the qu-ic-kest ma-ting ha-bits one co-uld pos-sibly ima-gi-ne. In, out, hands-ha-ke, see you next ye-ar-this is how much they ha-te one anot-her. Which is what ma-de Saw-ney so uni-que. He bro-ught over forty Red-caps to-get-her. They kil-led to-get-her, dwel-led to-get-her, and didn’t try to eat each ot-her du-ring it all...asto-un-ding.” He to-ok anot-her bi-te.

“And what of the rest of the le-gend?” Ni-ko as-*ked*, ig-no-ring his fo-od for the mo-ment. “How they ca-me to the-ir end.”

“Half true. In the ori-gi-nal, the wo-men and child-ren we-re bur-ned and the men bled to de-ath af-ter ha-ving the-ir hands and fe-et chop-ped off. In re-ality the-re we-re no wo-men or child-ren. They we-re only ma-le Red-caps and the hu-mans bur-ned them all. I he-ard that Saw-ney, as the-ir le-ader, was gi-ven spe-ci-al at-ten-ti-on and bur-ned se-pa-ra-tely. If his re-ma-ins we-re gat-he-red and put in a cask, then I sup-po-se that was true.” Un-fa-zed by the su-bj-ect mat-ter, he con-ti-nu-ed to ma-ke his way thro-ugh lunch with ent-hu-si-asm.

“How the hell did a bunch of hu-mans ma-na-ge to cap-tu-re and kill the-se guys?” I fi-nal-ly bro-ke down and to-ok a bi-te of the we-ird stuff in front of me. It lo-oked and smel-led li-ke chic-ken pud-ding. That’s what it tas-ted li-ke as well, but cin-na-mon swe-et. It wasn’t half bad.

“How did they ma-na-ge?” He ga-ve a lit-tle shrug.

“They had an army. Li-te-ral-ly. If you ha-ve so-me bi-zar-re fas-ci-na-ti-on with ta-king up with whe-re they left off, you’re a few short.”

“Even co-un-ting you?” Ni-ko had go-ne back to pla-ying with the kni-fe. Palm to the back of the wrist, back of the wrist to palm. The wa-*iters* we-re watc-hing the show from ac-ross the res-ta-ur-ant-so-me gi-ving si-lent whist-les in awe at the sight, so-me lo-oking a lit-tle per-tur-bed.

“I’d ad-vi-se you not to get ahe-ad of yo-ur-self,” Ro-bin sa-id with a ja-un-di-ced air. “Is an-yo-ne of-fe-ring to pay you to cha-se af-ter what may end up only be-ing a phan-tom? An-yo-ne? Hel-lo?” He cup-ped a hand to his ear. “What? No ans-wer? Qu-el surp-ri-se.”

“And if this is re-al? If Saw-ney is back...if he isn't the phan-tom you ho-pe, what do you ad-vi-se then?” Ni-ko co-un-te-red, flip-ping the kni-fe to tap the tab-le lightly with its hand-le.

Ro-bin went back to wor-king on his me-al. “Per-haps he'll be di-eting. He is ol-der now. Age wa-ges hell on the wa-ist-li-ne.” He lo-ok-ed up to see Ni-ko's pa-ti-ent eyes on him. “Oh, fi-ne,” he grumb-led. “I don't ha-ve any furt-her in-for-ma-ti-on on Si-re Be-ane, but I ha-ve a fri-end who may-Wa-han-ket. Well, fri-end is rat-her a strong term...an ac-qu-a-in-tan-ce. He tends to gat-her facts, has a de-sic-ca-ted fin-ger in many a pie.” He ad-ded smugly, “I do know pe-op-le.”

“Ye-ah, you know pe-op-le,” I com-men-ted so-urly, re-mem-be-ring anot-her of his in-for-mants, Ab-ba-gor, who'd tri-ed to kill us...twi-ce. “Too many god-damn pe-op-le.”

Wa-han-ket, tho-ugh, tur-ned out to not be ne-arly as bad as Ab-ba-gor. Equ-al-ly as fre-aky, but now-he-re ne-ar as ho-mi-ci-dal. And he li-ved in the mu-se-um we'd left only ho-urs ago, which ma-de him mo-re li-kely than an-yo-ne to know abo-ut Saw-ney and his Gre-at Es-ca-pe.

The Eight-sixth Stre-et sta-ti-on was star-ting to se-em aw-ful-ly fa-mi-li-ar. Af-ter exi-ting and wal-king over to Fifth Ave-nue, we we-re back whe-re we'd star-ted. The Met was pac-ked when we wal-ked in. The-re we-re drif-ting co-up-les, hor-des of to-urists from every co-untry ima-gi-nab-le, pe-op-le wan-de-ring alo-ne, and a scho-ol gro-up of scre-aming rug rats from hell. They must've left the-ir in-do-or vo-ices on the bus; even the empty su-its of ar-mor lo-ok-ed pa-in-ed as they thun-de-red by. We kept mo-ving past them as Go-od-fel-low mur-mu-red so-met-thing abo-ut the lost art of child sac-ri-fi-ces. In one wing, he stop-ped be-fo-re a bust with blind marb-le eyes and the sne-er of whi-te sto-ne lips. “Ca-li-gu-la, you dumb son of a bitch.” He sho-ok his he-ad. “I told him hor-ses we-ren't the mo-no-ga-mo-us kind, but did he lis-ten? No, not for a se-cond. In-sa-nity, tyranny, and one scre-wed-up lo-ve li-fe, that was Lit-tle Bo-ots for you.” He sig-hed, “Threw so-me gre-at par-ti-es, tho-ugh.”

Shrug-ging off the nos-tal-gia, he led us to a cor-ri-dor off the ex-hi-bit hall, and that in turn led to anot-her cor-ri-dor and a loc-ked do-or mar-ked AUT-HO-RI-ZED PER SON-NEL ONLY. Ni-ko of-fe-red, “I'm su-re Sang-ri-da Odins-dót-tir wo-uld be ab-le to pro-vi-de us with a key.”

“Ple-ase. You in-sult me.” Ro-bin slid a bright gre-en glan-ce back over his sho-ul-der as he slip-ped a kit of small me-tal to-ols from his poc-ket. “Not that that can't be aro-using in cer-ta-in si-tu-ati-ons.”

Ni-ko had left the res-ta-urant kni-fe be-hind and wasn't prac-ti-cing with any of his at the mo-ment, but the shim-mer of me-tal was em-bo-di-ed in the mi-nu-te ri-se of his eyeb-rows all the sa-me. “No fun,” Ro-bin mut-te-red and got back to the job at hand. “An en-ti-re ab-sen-ce of re-velry what-so-ever.”

Wit-hin se-conds we we-re on sta-irs and he-ading down-ward in-to the glo-om. The steps en-ded in a rab-bit war-ren of sto-re-ro-oms. “Wa-han-ket or Hank as I li-ke to call him used to be up top, mi-xing and ming-ling, so to spe-ak, but even-tu-al-ly he was shuf-fled off down he-re with the ot-her passé ex-hi-bits. I think he much pre-fers it he-re. Dark, cram-ped, musty...much mo-re li-ke ho-me.”

“Whe-re the hell was ho-me?” I tur-ned si-de-ways to mo-ve bet-we-en a row of cra-tes. “A gop-her ho-le?”

“Not qu-ite.” Ro-bin had pro-du-ced a small flash-light and switc-hed it on. Eit-her the over-he-ads didn't work or his fri-end wasn't in-to a lot of light. We mo-ved along and en-te-red an open area en-circ-led by a Sto-ne-hen-ge of pi-led cra-tes. The-re we-ren't any signs of ha-bi-ta-ti-on, but that's whe-re he stop-ped, vo-ice ec-ho-ing in the empty area, “Hank? You up for a vi-sit?” he cal-led che-er-ful-ly.

The-re was a long stretch of si-len-ce, and then a si-bi-lant hiss, dry as dust and ab-ra-ding as sand, ca-me out of the dark-ness. “A long ti-me, Pe-ter Pan. It has be-en a long ti-me, long ti-me.”

“Get the guy a VCR and so-me Dis-ney mo-vi-es and this is the thanks I re-ce-ive,” Go-od-fel-low grun-ted.

“I've bro-ught fri-ends, Hank. Let's re-du-ce my emas-cu-la-ti-on in front of them and call me Pan, shall we?”

A brown fi-gu-re ma-te-ri-a-li-zed out of the dark in-to the dim whi-te light of the flash-light. He

se-emed to be ma-de en-ti-rely of stick-li-ke bo-nes and re-sin-har-de-ned ban-da-ges. A ga-ping pit of a no-se and empty eye soc-kets we-re all that co-uld be se-en of his fa-ce. He lo-oked li-ke the tit-le vil-la-in from every bad mummy mo-vie I'd watc-hed when I was a lit-tle kid, co-me to li-fe. But he wasn't slow li-ke they we-re. He wasn't slow at all. He slip-ped in and out of the thick sha-dows, scor-pi-on-qu-ick and sna-ke-si-lent. It was the cow-boy hat, tho-ugh, that was the crow-ning to-uch. I won-de-red if Sang-ri-da knew abo-ut her squ-at-ter. Or knew that he was ra-iding the...

"The lost and fo-und, eh, Hank?" Ro-bin set-tled on a cra-te and til-ted his he-ad. "It's a go-od lo-ok for you. Very rug-ged."

Co-ve-to-us fin-gers of nut-brown bo-ne to-uc-hed the brim of the cow-boy hat. "It is a crown for a king." The-re was a ga-ping grin of blac-ke-ned stubs that re-ve-aled a le-at-hery curl of ton-gue and the ta-ut li-ga-ments of a di-sin-teg-ra-ting jaw.

The thing was it sho-uld ha-ve be-en funny, a mummy cal-led Hank we-ar-ing a cow-boy hat, but we we-re lo-oking at what was ba-si-cal-ly a corp-se ma-de of jerky. Not be-ef, mind you, but hu-man jerky. Not funny. You co-uld've dres-sed him in drag and it still wo-uldn't ha-ve be-en funny. Li-ke ro-ad-kill dres-sed in a tu-tu. It was spo-oky and mo-re than a lit-tle re-pul-si-ve.

"The clo-sest you got to a king in ye ol-den dynas-ti-es was ste-al-ing the-ir dusty mum-mi-fi-ed ge-ni-tals to ma-ke yo-ur po-ti-ons," the puck scof-fed be-fo-re promptly cont-ra-dic-ting him-self. He was ne-ver one to let lo-gic in-ter-fe-re with a go-od in-sult. "Ni-ko, Cal, this is Hank... Wa-han-ket. He's a scho-lar, li-ke they used to ma-ke them in the day when know-led-ge trans-la-ted to po-wer. He was the high pri-est of so-me cranky Egyp-ti-an god or anot-her. He was al-so the te-ac-her of a mi-nor pha-ra-oh or two. Or fi-ve or six. May-be even ten or twel-ve. Only Hank knows for su-re how many dynas-ti-es he pul-led the strings on, and he's not tel-ling." He cluc-ked his ton-gue rep-ro-vingly at the stin-gi-ness of it. "I don't be-li-eve he was ever hu-man, alt-ho-ugh he's not tel-ling that eit-her. But he's the only wal-king, tal-king mummy I've co-me ac-ross in my li-fe-ti-me. The hu-man ones just tend to lie the-re li-ke a bad da-te."

Wa-han-ket's jaw snap-ped shut ri-gidly and a yel-low glow ro-iled to li-fe in the hol-low eye soc-kets of the brit-tle skull. It wasn't a sunny light-mo-re li-ke the lu-mi-nes-cen-ce of a cre-eping ca-ve cre-atu-re. Dim, flic-ke-ring, and *cold*. I co-uld he-ar a buzz vib-ra-ting his thro-at-it co-uld've be-en the rat-tle of pet-ri-fi-ed vo-cal cords or a pla-gue of en-ra-ged lo-custs swar-ming from wit-hin the hol-low ca-vity of his chest. I didn't ha-ve the sligh-test ur-ge to know which.

"What ha-ve you bro-ught me, Pan?" ca-me the disp-le-ased rasp. "Whe-re are yo-ur of-fe-rings? Lest I find you most un-worthy, lay them be-fo-re me."

"Offe-rings, eh? On-ce aga-in, I ste-er the su-bj-ect back to dusty, unu-sed ge-ni-tals." Go-od-fel-low's he-el kic-ked the cra-te and the be-am of his flash-light dan-ced over my fa-ce moc-kingly.

"Shut the fuck up, Lo-man," I snap-ped. I'd used the na-me for him from the be-gin-ning. Alt-ho-ugh Go-od-fel-low was a much bet-ter sa-les-man than Willy Lo-man had ever be-en, it was a go-od na-me for him... mostly be-ca-use it pis-sed him off. Much, say, as he was pis-sing me off now.

"We are he-re for a re-ason," Ni-ko re-min-ded us both, his pa-ti-en-ce a lit-tle less than it had be-en in the res-ta-urant. "And I'm su-re that Wa-han-ket has bet-ter things to do than en-ter-ta-in us. So let us mo-ve things along. Now."

"Fi-ne, fi-ne. I wo-uld think re-gu-lar vam-pi-re no-okie wo-uld mel-low you out, but ap-pa-rently not," Ro-bin mumb-led as he dof-fed the strap of his sho-ul-der and dug the "offe-ring" out of its black le-at-her ca-se. It was a lap-top, the very la-test with all the bells, whist-les, and tech-nop-hi-le crap that you co-uld pos-sibly want. That's what Wa-han-ket was, the puck had sa-id, a tech-nop-hi-le of the hig-hest or-der. If it was bright, shiny, and it plug-ged in, then he wan-ted it, and thanks to the se-ekers of his in-fo, had it. "The la-test and the gre-atest, O Son of the Sun. Its RAM is as plen-ti-ful as the wa-ters of the Ni-le," he pro-mi-sed, flas-hing that blin-ding sa-les-man smi-le. Pu-re shark. No bark, all bi-te.

Gre-ed-y claws snatc-hed it up and be-gan to exa-mi-ne it. "Ahhh, how can one wors-hip gold and jewels when the know-led-ge wit-hin this ma-kes you un-to a god?"

“Ye-ah, that’s gre-at,” I sa-id dis-mis-si-vely. “Enj-oy. So, what do you know abo-ut Saw-ney Be-ane? Ate a lot of pe-op-le, was sup-po-sed to be de-ad. He was ups-ta-irs, now he’s not. What’s go-ing on?”

“Saw-ney Be-ane.” The se-et-hing eye soc-kets lo-ok-ed up from the com-pu-ter. “Six hund-red and eighty-se-ven hu-mans con-su-med. For a Red-cap, mildly imp-res-si-ve. But re-cons-ti-tu-ting from bo-ne and ash...ah. That is qu-ite imp-res-si-ve in-de-ed. Pity the-re we-re no se-cu-rity gu-ar-ds bet-we-en him and the way out or it co-uld ha-ve be-en six hund-red and eighty-ni-ne. Craw-ling back from one’s mo-le-cu-lar sho-re must cre-ate a pro-di-gi-o-us ap-pe-ti-te.” The frag-ments of te-eth clic-ked to-get-her. “Unbe-li-evably pro-di-gi-o-us.”

I had a fe-eling he was spe-aking from per-so-nal ex-pe-ri-en-ce...per-so-nal hun-ger. “It was him, then?” Ni-ko ve-ri-fi-ed. “Saw-ney has re-tur-ned?”

“Yessss.” The whe-eze car-ri-ed with it a scent that drif-ted ac-ross the spa-ce...it was full of de-sert he-at and spi-ce. It so-un-ded ple-asant; it wasn’t. It was re-pug-nant, flo-ating over dry rot and out of the empty ca-ra-pa-ce of a long-de-ad cock-ro-ach. The cock-ro-ach might still be wal-king and tal-king, but the-re was not-hing in the-re but the stink of de-ath. Stuff it to the brim with all the myrrh and fuc-king ore-ga-no you wan-ted; it wasn’t go-ing to chan-ge a thing. De-ad was de-ad.

“Saw-ney is go-ne and Saw-ney is he-re and so-on things will be-co-me mo-re in-te-res-ting in this city of glo-om.” Li-ga-ments stretc-hed and pop-ped to ac-com-mo-da-te the pre-da-tory ga-pe of jaw. “Exce-edingly mo-re in-te-res-ting.”

Bo-di-es in tre-es, de-ad girls with empty eyes and mo-uth-fuls snatc-hed from the-ir flesh-if that was in-te-res-ting, I co-uld do wit-ho-ut it.

4

We sur-vi-ved the mummy wit-ho-ut a scratch. When de-al-ing with an in-for-mant of Go-od-fel-low’s, that was an ac-comp-lish-ment. Ro-bin knew pretty much ever-yo-ne, and when you cast a net that wi-de, you’re go-ing to sco-op up so-me cra-zi-es, so-me kil-lers, and, if you we-re re-al-ly lucky, a happy com-bo of the two. Com-pa-red to that crowd, Wa-han-ket was prac-ti-cal-ly ser-ving up sup-per down at the Mis-si-on. He hadn’t tri-ed to mu-ti-la-te, kill, or eat us. In my bo-ok, that ma-de him go-od pe-op-le. Cre-epy, de-ad, we-ird as hell with the hat, and not too frag-rant, but go-od pe-op-le all the sa-me. Gran-ted, he se-emed an-xi-o-us to see what ha-voc Saw-ney was go-ing to wre-ak, but, hell, he was a mons-ter, and for a mons-ter, that was se-ri-o-us rest-ra-int.

It didn’t ma-ke me any less glad to show him my back-si-de. The-re’s only so much talk of ge-ni-tal ste-al-ing you can he-ar be-fo-re, damn, it’s ti-me to go. And this ba-se-ment...the-re was so-met-hing abo-ut it. If you sto-od still and clo-sed yo-ur eyes, New York wo-uld fa-de away. The-re wo-uld be low gut-tu-ral chan-ting, a cho-king lack of air, and the des-pe-ra-te scra-pe of fin-ger-na-ils aga-inst blo-ody de-sert sto-ne. Wa-han-ket had ma-de this pla-ce his own, and it wasn’t a pla-ce whe-re I wan-ted to spend a lot of ti-me. Un-for-tu-na-tely, it didn’t work out that way.

We we-re three ro-oms away from the sta-irs when Ni-ko and Ro-bin stop-ped si-mul-ta-ne-o-usly with we-a-pons drawn. That’s when I he-ard it too: the fa-in-test uni-den-ti-fi-ab-le rust-le. I might not know what it was, but I did know what it wasn’t-it wasn’t hu-man. The-re was no af-ters-ha-ve, no sham-poo or so-ap, no wo-ol or synthe-tics-no pe-op-le smell at all. Not fresh any-way. The-re we-re tho-usands of ot-her smells down he-re...ani-mal, plant, mi-ne-ral. So-me strong, so-me not, and no way to tell which was pac-ked away in a box and which was out and mo-ving aro-und.

With the hund-reds of cra-tes, it was clo-se qu-ar-ters for my gun and I drew my kni-fe. It wasn’t a sword, but at twel-ve jag-ged inc-hes it was clo-se eno-ugh. “Is the flash-light just a spe-ci-al ef-fect,” I as-ked Ro-bin, “or do the lights work down he-re?”

“In this sec-ti-on, no. Wa-han-ket di-sab-les them on a ro-uti-ne ba-sis.” Go-od-fel-low had pla-ced the flash-light on a dust-co-ated, empty disp-lay ca-se and ca-uti-o-usly step-ped away from it to ke-ep from gi-ving away his po-si-ti-on in the dark-ness. Ni-ko mo-ved se-ve-ral steps in the ot-her di-rec-ti-on, and using his free hand on the top ed-ge, va-ul-ted on-to a fi-ve-fo-ot-tall cra-te.

And he im-me-di-ately ca-me cras-hing back down un-der se-ve-ral hund-red po-unds of sca-les and sur-ging musc-le. For one bri-ef se-cond, I saw the snap-ping of di-no-sa-ur-si-zed jaws, the fla-re of oran-ge eyes in the glow of the sta-ti-onary flash-light. I saw a yel-lo-wed ivory grin.

Then re-ality slid in-to pla-ce, and I slid with it, sin-king my bla-de in-to the eye of the writ-hing monst-ro-sity on top of Ni-ko. Not a di-no-sa-ur-hell, the Met didn't even ha-ve di-no-sa-urs-but so-met-hing just as hor-ri-fic in its own right. It was a ser-pent, the si-ze of a man and half aga-in as long, with the po-wer-ful legs and fe-et of a jung-le cat. The inky black of its un-der-bel-ly was spot-ted with the pa-lest fin-ger smud-ges of gold, and it blen-ded in-to the dark-ness so ef-fi-ci-ently that on-ce it flo-wed off Ni-ko, it di-sap-pe-ared ins-tantly. But first, the-re was the gra-te of its bony eye soc-ket aga-inst my kni-fe as it rip-ped its mas-si-ve he-ad off the bla-de, the twist of a he-avy ta-il that slam-med me aga-inst a cra-te se-ve-ral fe-et away, and a ste-am-whist-le scre-ech that had my ears rin-ging.

“Ca-li-ban?”

I co-uld see only the fa-in-test sme-ar abo-ve me, a pa-le oval to go with Ro-bin's dis-tant call of my na-me. I blin-ked. It didn't imp-ro-ve things any. If anyt-hing, it ma-de things wor-se. Oran-ge, black, gold-a hur-ri-ca-ne rush, and then the oval and the vo-ice we-re go-ne. It was just me and the dark-ness. Shit. I tri-ed rol-ling over. On-ce, twi-ce, three ti-mes was the charm. Three ti-mes was al-so a fa-ce-ful of flo-or, but it was still prog-ress. I ma-na-ged to get my hands un-der me and push up. I was half-way the-re when a hand un-der my arm bo-os-ted me the rest of the way.

Nik. I ste-adi-ed myself with a hand on his sho-ul-der, then pul-led it back when I felt the wet warmth. “Shit. You okay?”

“It's not mi-ne. Ha-ve so-me fa-ith, lit-tle brot-her.” He'd va-nis-hed un-der so-met-hing that co-uld've be-en a baby T. rex, sho-wed up drip-ping with blo-od, and I was sup-po-sed to ha-ve fa-ith. I lo-oked at my hand bri-efly be-fo-re wi-ping it on my je-ans. It was hard to tell with only the ref-lec-ted glow of the flash-light, but the li-qu-id on my skin lo-oked pa-le gold, not red. That, mo-re than Ni-ko's de-ni-al, hal-ted the twist in my gut.

“Whe-re's Ro-bin?” My kni-fe was at the ba-se of the cra-te I'd im-pac-ted and I mo-ved to ret-ri-eve it.

“I think it to-ok him.” He was al-re-ady mo-ving, fol-lo-wing spat-ters of the mons-ter's blo-od, and I ca-me up hard on his he-els. We we-re si-lent from that mo-ment on. It wo-uld pro-bably he-ar us co-ming no-net-he-less, but we didn't ha-ve to ma-ke it easy for it...be-ca-use we wo-uld find it. We wo-uld get Go-od-fel-low back. This was not-hing com-pa-red to the shit we'd all go-ne thro-ugh to-get-her. A big li-zard-a pis-sed-off gi-ant gec-ko. So what? Hell, Ro-bin wo-uld ma-ke a belt out of it by the ti-me we ca-ught up.

Bo-xes and bo-xes, a laby-rinth of them every which way I tur-ned. I clip-ped se-ve-ral as we ran. We'd left the flash-light be-hind. It wo-uld gi-ve us away qu-ic-ker than my no-se wo-uld. The-re was so-me light now-small emer-gency lights up in the cor-ner junc-tu-re of ce-iling and wall. Hank hadn't got-ten to the-se yet, but they we-re dim eno-ugh to do mo-re harm than go-od. They cre-ated im-pe-net-rab-le pits of black sha-dow that lo-oked as thick and sticky as tar and just as ca-pab-le of suc-king us in-to suf-fo-ca-ting depths. They'd ma-ke go-od pla-ces for a ser-pent to hi-de and wa-it for its next me-al to wan-der by.

Or to le-ave what was left of its last one.

I saw his sword then, lying on the flo-or half in and half out of the sha-dow. Ro-bin didn't tre-at his we-a-pons with the re-ve-ren-ce Ni-ko did, but ne-it-her did he dis-card them ca-re-les-sly li-ke trash. “Ni-ko?” I sa-id grimly.

“I see it.” He di-sap-pe-ared in-to the black-ness to in-ves-ti-ga-te, and I kept fol-lo-wing the blo-od. As I pas-sed a sta-ge-co-ach, fa-ke tre-es, and a mas-si-ve stuf-fed be-ar, the spat-ters tur-ned in-to an unb-ro-ken tra-il.

“Fol-low the Yel-low Brick Ro-ad,” I mut-te-red as I ca-re-ened aro-und a cor-ner in-to the next ro-om, slip-ped, and ne-arly fell in a la-ke of li-zard flu-id. It stretc-hed al-most se-ven fe-et ac-ross and was still flo-wing slug-gishly from the belly of the ser-pent. Mi-nu-te tre-mors ran un-der the sca-led

hi-de, but it lay on its si-de with its mo-uth open and un-mo-ving. The re-ma-ining eye sta-red at not-hing as a put-rid stench be-gan to se-ep from the hund-reds of sli-ces that bi-sec-ted the sto-mach.

The-re we-re le-aves in the blo-od, co-ur-tesy of the fa-ke tre-es sto-red ne-arby. A bright and ar-ti-fi-ci-al gre-en, they flo-ated se-re-nely on the gol-den sur-fa-ce. It was a bi-zar-rely pe-ace-ful and stran-gely be-a-uti-ful sce-ne, and I ho-ve-red wa-rily on the ed-ge of it. “Ro-bin?” The ser-pent was still ali-ve...dying, ye-ah, but the-re was li-fe in it yet. And it only to-ok an oun-ce of li-fe to ma-ke a ton of mur-de-ro-us pur-po-se ca-pab-le of im-pos-sib-le ven-ge-an-ce. No one li-kes to go out alo-ne, not even sna-kes. “Go-od-fel-low?” He was the-re so-mew-he-re. Had to be. What co-uld pos-sibly kill that smug, va-in, ir-ri-ta-ting son of a bitch? “Ro-bin, whe-re the fuck are-”

“He-re.”

He slip-ped out of the night fo-rest of fa-ke tre-es to my right. Li-ke Ni-ko, he was co-ve-red in blo-od that wasn’t his own. It sta-ined his ex-pen-si-ve clot-hes, slic-ked the equ-al-ly ex-pen-si-ve ha-ir-cut, and co-ated the bla-de he car-ri-ed. He’d lost the one, but he had ot-hers-which was why he’d li-ved so long and why he was still he-re right now. “Christ.” I scow-led ins-tantly, sho-ving the re-li-ef down. “I tho-ught yo-ur worth-less ass was a fo-ot-no-te. An-ci-ent his-tory.”

“From a sir-rush?” He slu-iced a hand-ful of yel-low flu-id from his fa-ce and slung it to the flo-or. If that hand sho-ok, he wo-uld cla-im it was from exer-ti-on. Con-si-de-ring how many slas-hes had be-en ne-eded to ta-ke down the li-zard, it might even be the truth. “Do you mock me? On my best day, I co-uld ta-ke on an en-ti-re nest of them and ba-rely work up a swe-at. I might even ha-ve ti-me to squ-e-eze in a mar-ga-ri-ta and mas-sa-ge, happy en-ding of co-ur-se.”

He was still tal-king, but I’d stop-ped lis-te-ning. It wasn’t only mons-ter blo-od af-ter all. The-re was red mi-xed in with the gold. Puck red. “Ro-bin?”

Stop-ping in mid-sen-ten-ce, he met my ga-ze and fol-lo-wed it to the red sta-ining his shirt and pants. “Ah. Yes.” His sword drop-ped from his hand as he swa-yed slightly. “Not exactly as gent-le as a cat with her kit-ten, was it?”

It had car-ri-ed him away, eit-her in a cla-wed grip or in its mas-si-ve mo-uth. De-fi-ni-tely not gent-le. I didn’t carry the first aid sup-pli-es Ni-ko did, and I wasn’t as go-od with them eit-her. I to-ok Go-od-fel-low’s arm to ke-ep him up-right and tur-ned my he-ad to call for my brot-her. I didn’t get the op-por-tu-nity.

Impos-sib-le ven-ge-an-ce, and he-re it ca-me.

Go-od-fel-low had cal-led it a sir-rush. That so-un-ded li-ke so-met-hing that co-uld fly. This one didn’t ha-ve wings, so in re-ality it co-uld’n’t. But it so-ared thro-ugh the air re-gard-less. With the sa-me gra-ce and po-wer as a spring-pro-pel-led co-ugar, it ca-ta-pul-ted to-ward us. I only had the ti-me to get the imp-res-si-on of a ka-le-idos-co-pe of te-eth, claws, and sca-les be-fo-re it was on us. The wo-un-ded can be dan-ge-ro-us-the dying can be al-most in-vin-cib-le. The-re was no ti-me for a bla-de. No ti-me for a gun. The-re was ti-me for only one thing.

I bu-ilt the ga-te-way. In the past, I’d cre-ated them se-ve-ral fe-et away...ma-de for wal-king thro-ugh. This one I bu-ilt *aro-und* us. I’d ne-ver do-ne that be-fo-re. I’d ba-rely bu-ilt a hand-ful of ga-tes in my li-fe, and trying so-met-hing new wasn’t the brigh-test thing to do. It was the bol-dest, tho-ugh, and bold was all that co-uld sa-ve us now. Gray light out-li-ned us, a tar-nis-hed and ta-in-ted sil-ver glim-mer. I felt the turn in my sto-mach, the burn at the ba-se of my skull, the twist of re-ality, and then we we-re one ro-om back. Be-hind Ni-ko. And ahe-ad of him ca-me the so-und of the sir-rush slam-ming in-to the wall whe-re we had be-en stan-ding a frac-ti-on of a se-cond ago.

“*Ska-ta*,” Ro-bin gurg-led at my si-de be-fo-re he hit the flo-or. I wo-uld’ve held him up, if I co-uld’ve sta-yed up myself. As the ga-te-way pop-ped out of exis-ten-ce, I went down as well. Whi-le Go-od-fel-low fell flat, I ma-na-ged to stop my des-cent at my kne-es. My he-ad was a tight ball of agony and my fa-ce felt warm and wet. I swi-ped at it and ca-me away with a blo-od-co-ated hand. I’d le-ar-ned so-me cont-rol over the tra-ve-ling se-ve-ral months ago when fa-cing down Ge-or-ge’s and Ni-ko’s kid-nap-per, but I hadn’t ma-de a ga-te sin-ce. It didn’t co-me as easily as I re-mem-be-red...not that it had be-en easy be-fo-re, but it hadn’t hurt. It had na-use-ated and ter-ri-fi-ed but it hadn’t hurt. It hurt now.

I felt the warmth at my ears too. From nose and ears, I was apparently a faucet and that couldn't be good. "Cal." I looked up from my dripping hand to see Ni-ko's face before mine. It was a little blurry-not quite double vision, but almost. The sir-rush was blurry as well...blurry, enraged, and coming toward us. A little more slowly now, but still coming.

Ni-ko heard it before I had a chance to open my mouth to warn him. Flashing a hand under my jacket, he pulled my gun, whirled, and fired. Two shots careened off the skull, but seven more went through the remaining eye with exquisite precision. Ni-ko wasn't particularly fond of guns-he felt they lacked grace and technique-but that didn't mean he wasn't good with one. If it could kill, Ni-ko knew how to use it and use it well. The sir-rush went down when the bullets hit, and this time it stayed down.

My weapon was reholstered smoothly, and Ni-ko continued calmly. "You're a mess."

There was no arguing with that. "Ye-ah," I verified, and wiped at my face again, this time using my sleeve. Le-ather wasn't good at sopping up blood and I could feel it smear things to a much worse degree. "Robin's worse." A sick groan from the floor confirmed it.

"Don't do that again." The puck curled on his side and gave a nasty dry heave. Apparently, it was less his wounds and more a profound case of motion sickness. "Don't ever, *ever* do that again."

"Right. Being eaten would've been better. What was I thinking?" My knees decided enough was enough and I sat hard on my ass. Dropping my head in my hands, I clenched my fingers at my temples and aimed a muffled query at Ni-ko. "Tylenol? Aspirin? Morphine?"

"Head?" I felt his fingers below my ears, checking the flow of blood. I didn't nod. I couldn't begin to imagine what that would feel like, but it wouldn't be pleasant. Luckily, Ni-ko didn't need the confirmation. While one hand rested lightly on the back of my neck, he used the other to pull out his cell phone. Within seconds he was informing Sang-ri-da Odins-dóttir that she had a dead sir-rush in her basement as well as two wounded warriors and he would appreciate whatever help she could offer that fell short of a trip to Valhalla.

A half hour later we were back at Ni-ko's and my apartment courtesy of Sang-ri-da's private car. By that time, Good-fellow could walk, more or less, and I'd stopped bleeding. The headache hadn't eased any, though, and I let Ni-ko lead me along as I covered my eyes with my hand. The thin glow of the hallway light was suddenly a hundred times worse than staring directly at the sun, and it felt like molten lava pouring directly into my eyes to fry my brain with laser thoroughness.

Inside our place, Ni-ko steered me to the couch, pulled the blinds, and turned off the lights. "I'll dress Robin's wounds in my bedroom. Rest."

As a sign of how truly miserable he felt, Good-fellow didn't have a word, rapaciously sexual or otherwise, to say about being in Ni-ko's bedroom. Fifteen minutes later Nik was back to settle onto the couch beside me. I'd slid and slouched down enough that my head rested against the back of the sofa and my legs sprawled wide. "Robin?" I asked, turning my head cautiously to look at him.

"It wasn't as bad as it appeared at first glance. Several penetrating claw wounds to his arms and legs, but they're fairly clean. No ripping. I believe traveling with you through your gateway affected him more. Pucks don't take well to it is my guess." He handed me a wet washcloth for my face. I'd cleaned it up as best I could in the car using the front of my shirt...just enough to get me into our building without people stopping to donate money to the axemaniac survivor fund.

"Probably no one does." I scrubbed at my face, careful not to jostle my head too much. If it weren't for my Auphe half, the nausea I felt when opening and traveling through the gate would be a helluva lot more debilitating. "No one normal."

Ni-ko frowned, a slight downturn of tightened lips. "You know better." He'd spent a lifetime, mine at least, telling me that I was normal, that I wasn't Auphe, wasn't a monster. Though he could save my life, my sanity, and everything in between, it was the one thing he couldn't fix,

co-uldn't chan-ge. But I'd fi-nal-ly co-me to re-ali-ze that as long as I co-uld re-ma-in *who* I was, I co-uld sur-vi-ve what I was. It was only bad ge-nes. Al-co-ho-lism ge-ne, can-cer ge-ne, mons-ter ge-ne, cho-ose yo-ur po-ison and work aro-und it. Thanks to Ni-ko, I was do-ing that. And when I fal-te-red in that be-li-ef, he was the-re to kick my butt back on the path.

I drop-ped the washc-loth on my leg. In the past ope-ning a ga-te wo-uld dra-in me, ex-ha-ust me. Go-od-fel-low had on-ce sa-id that he tho-ught that wo-uld pass with prac-ti-ce. He was right. I was ti-red, damn ti-red, but not li-ke I had be-en in the past. But the he-adac-he...shit. What the hell was with that? And the blo-od? The last ti-me I'd used the abi-lity months ago, I'd ope-ned a ga-te and *kept* it open for ne-arly a half ho-ur. May-be a full-blo-oded Aup-he co-uld do that with ease, but I didn't think so. Rip-ping a ho-le in the world or bet-we-en worlds-it wasn't so-met-hing me-ant to be long-term. "I think I bro-ke so-met-hing." I gri-ma-ced, mas-sa-ging my fo-re-he-ad with the he-el of my hand.

Ni-ko pic-ked up the cloth and pul-led my hand back down to fold my fin-gers aro-und the damp ma-te-ri-al. Ste-ering it to the area on my jaw by my ear, he re-le-ased me and ag-re-ed, "I think you may ha-ve." He wa-ited un-til I'd wi-ped at my skin aga-in for a few se-conds, then to-ok the blo-ody cloth from me and put it asi-de. "Or stra-ined it. How is the he-adac-he? Imp-ro-ved any?"

We'd thrown so-me Tyle-nol at it. We may as well ha-ve thrown it down the to-ilet and flus-hed. "It'll pass," I eva-ded. "On the plus si-de, I can still he-ar." Thro-ugh the open do-or in the hall ca-me a na-sal sno-re mo-re su-ited to a cons-ti-pa-ted mo-ose than a puck. "But on the down-si-de, I can still he-ar."

"You didn't rup-tu-re yo-ur eard-rums, then. Do they still hurt as well?"

"Let's wri-te off the en-ti-re area abo-ve the neck. It'll sa-ve so-me ti-me." I knew what he was thin-king. CAT scans, MRIs, all the things that we-ren't pos-si-b-le for me. Our mot-her, Sop-hia, had ne-ver be-en one for doc-tors or anyt-hing that cost mo-ney. We got our shots at wha-te-ver lo-cal cli-nic we we-re li-ving ne-ar at the ti-me, but only be-ca-use the scho-ols de-man-ded it. If I got hurt or Ni-ko got sick, we to-ug-hed it out. And when we we-re ol-der, Ni-ko and I had co-me to the re-ali-za-ti-on that hos-pi-tals...any pla-ce with ima-ging equ-ip-ment, any pla-ce that wo-uld want blo-od tests...we-re out. I was hu-man on the out-si-de, but it might not be the sa-me on the in-si-de. We'd even-tu-al-ly met a he-aler and when he'd fo-und out the truth abo-ut me, he'd con-fir-med it. I was dif-fe-rent. Subtly, but no-ti-ce-ably dif-fe-rent. I didn't ask how. I didn't want to know.

The bot-tom li-ne was, no hos-pi-tals for me. And as our he-aler hadn't ans-we-red his pho-ne in a whi-le, we had to ma-ke do. This was anot-her ma-ke-do si-tu-ati-on.

"No mo-re ga-tes, Cal," Ni-ko sa-id un-comp-ro-mi-singly. "No-ne."

"May-be if I gi-ve it a few months," I hed-ged. I didn't li-ke ope-ning them. It only re-min-ded me of a part of myself I'd so-oner for-get. But the-re was no den-y-ing that if you had yo-ur back to a wall with a gi-ant ser-pent le-aping at you, it ca-me in handy.

"It's be-en se-ve-ral months al-re-ady." He sto-od and he-aded in-to the kitc-hen. "Next ti-me it might be yo-ur bra-in that co-mes out of yo-ur ears. I'd li-ke to avo-id that." Re-tur-ning, he han-ded me a soft pack from the fre-ezer. "Altho-ugh it wo-uld be pro-of the-re was so-met-hing in yo-ur skull be-si-des la-zi-ness and inept swords-mans-hip skills."

With the pack co-ve-ring my eyes and the cold se-eping thro-ugh, I re-la-xed mi-nu-tely. "You for-got my blin-ding cha-ris-ma and stun-ning po-pu-la-rity."

This ti-me he didn't play along. "No mo-re ga-tes, Cal. I me-an it."

I ga-ve in for the mo-ment, pe-ering out from un-der the pack at him, but I had a fe-eling I was ma-king a pro-mi-se I co-uld'n't ke-ep. Mo-re ho-nestly, didn't in-tend to ke-ep. "Okay. No mo-re ga-tes." I'd sur-vi-ved ne-arly my who-le li-fe wit-ho-ut them, but the-re was no den-y-ing that an emer-gency exit li-ke that co-uld sa-ve my li-fe. So-met-hing to think abo-ut...may-be la-ter when Nik wasn't stud-ying me so sus-pi-ci-o-usly. Sli-ding down anot-her few inc-hes, I pul-led the pack back in pla-ce and wa-ited for the cold to kick in and les-sen the he-adac-he. "Ro-bin sa-id it was a sir-rush, wha-te-ver the hell that is. So, what was it do-ing in the ba-se-ment trying to eat us? Do you think Wa-han-ket sent it af-ter us? That'd be abo-ut par for the fuc-king co-ur-se with Go-od-fel-low's bud-di-es."

“I as-ked him whi-le dres-sing the punc-tu-re wo-unds. He sa-id no, that it wasn’t Wa-han-ket’s ‘style.’”

“But did the wi-ze-ned son of a bitch *know* it was the-re?” I pres-sed.

“That, Ro-bin sa-id, wo-uld be en-ti-rely his style,” Ni-ko sa-id sar-do-ni-cal-ly. “And a sir-rush is a Baby-lo-ni-an cre-atu-re-part sna-ke, part cat. Why it was hun-ting in the ba-se-ment of the Met is an-yo-ne’s gu-ess.”

“Ever-yo-ne ma-kes it to the Big Ap-ple so-oner or la-ter, huh? See the sights.” The cold was be-gin-ning to work, easing the pa-in so-mew-hat, and I yaw-ned.

“The Valky-rie go-ing to pay us for the ex-ter-mi-na-ti-on on the si-de?”

“I’ve al-ways enj-oyed yo-ur sunny op-ti-mism, lit-tle brot-her.”

I was glad so-me-one did.

5

As much as I ha-ted kid-nap-ping ca-ses, I wasn’t a who-le lot fon-der of the ex-ter-mi-na-ti-on ones, but work was work, and mo-ney was mo-ney. And truth-ful-ly, ex-ter-mi-na-ti-on ca-me up abo-ut as of-ten as kid-nap-ping did. Whe-re’s the co-ol fac-tor in that? No-damn-whe-re. We’d al-so do-ne baby-sit-ting, and baby-sit-ting so-met-hing that can eat you if you try to gi-ve it a ti-me-o-ut ma-kes ex-ter-mi-na-ting a fun gig by com-pa-ri-son. Usu-al-ly. Mostly. On the who-le.

Other ti-mes you just get scre-wed.

And that mor-ning we en-ded up so very, very scre-wed. Af-ter three ho-urs out on Sta-ten Is-land, we’d ta-ken the ferry back to Man-hat-tan and ma-de our way ho-me with clot-hes sin-ged and ha-ir co-ve-red in bird shit all co-ur-tesy of an Ait-va-ras, ot-her-wi-se known as a de-mo-nic chic-ken from hell. A fi-re-bre-at-hing, crap-slin-ging half ro-os-ter, half ser-pent that we-ig-hed all of sixty po-unds had ne-arly ser-ved our as-ses to us on a sil-ver plat-ter. It’d al-so bur-ned down one-third of the ho-use of our less than comp-le-tely sa-tis-fi-ed cli-ent. And a less than comp-le-tely sa-tis-fi-ed gar-goy-le isn’t a pretty sight. A sa-tis-fi-ed one isn’t eit-her for that mat-ter, but they hawk up less gra-ni-te-sprink-led phlegm when pa-ying the bill.

After cle-aning up and chan-ging, we jum-ped on the 6 tra-in and he-aded up to Pro-mi-se’s pent-ho-use for so-me bra-ins-tor-ming. I ten-ded to not be so go-od at that type of thing, but I suc-ked it up. And the-re was fo-od the-re. That al-ways hel-ped. Pro-mi-se had a tur-key and ba-con club sand-wich for me and so-me sort of ve-ge-tab-le soy che-ese thing for Ni-ko along with an an-ti-oxi-dant car-rot-cran-ber-ry ju-ice mix-tu-re. I co-uld smell the he-alt-hi-ness of it from ac-ross the tab-le and ga-ve an in-ter-nal *blech*. Ta-king a hu-ge bi-te of my sand-wich, I won-de-red who ma-de the fo-od. I ne-ver saw a co-ok the-re, but the tho-ught of a vam-pi-re sla-ving over a skil-let wasn’t an ima-ge I co-uld wrap my mind a-ro-und. Es-pe-ci-al-ly an ext-re-mely we-althy vam-pi-re. They did eat fo-od, tho-ugh ap-pa-rently not very much, along with mas-si-ve do-ses of iron and so-me kind of ot-her sup-ple-ments, but Pro-mi-se ma-king a cas-se-ro-le? No-pe, co-uldn’t see it.

Ni-ko to-ok a drink of his red-oran-ge stuff, ig-no-red the fa-ce I ma-de, and then sa-id, “Saw-ney can’t go on the way he has. He’s go-ing to be no-ti-ced. The po-li-ce will cer-ta-inly sus-pect a se-ri-al kil-ler at so-me po-int. Alt-ho-ugh the-re’s be-en not-hing in the pa-per abo-ut the bo-di-es in the park.” He frow-ned, puz-zled. Ni-ko didn’t li-ke to be puz-zled eit-her. It ten-ded to in-ter-fe-re with things li-ke sur-vi-ving. “They’ve di-sap-pe-ared, ap-pa-rently.” Puz-zle-ment co-uld al-so le-ad to an-no-yan-ce when you we-re as anal-re-ten-ti-ve as my brot-her, but he tuc-ked it out of sight and went on. “But that’s a mystery for anot-her ti-me. It’s not the fif-te-enth cen-tury any-mo-re and even-tu-al-ly Saw-ney will re-ali-ze he can’t just kill who-ever he wants. On-ce he set-tles on a ter-ri-tory, he’ll be even mo-re wary. He won’t want that ho-me to be fo-und and I think he’ll start to go af-ter vic-tims who won’t be mis-sed.”

“Li-ke tho-se that don’t ha-ve fa-mi-li-es to ra-ise a stink with the po-li-ce.” I cha-sed a bi-te of sand-wich with Co-ke. Abo-ut as un-anti-oxi-dant as you co-uld get and I was damn happy abo-ut that.

“Such as the ho-me-less.” Pro-mi-se sat down next to Nik at the po-lis-hed di-ning ro-om tab-le. An

ac-tu-al di-ning ro-om in NYC, co-uld you be-li-eve it? “But how wo-uld we track so-met-hing such as that?”

“Go-od-fel-low wo-uld say I had the clot-hes for the un-der-co-ver work,” I snor-ted. “But tho-se guys aren’t so trus-ting of stran-gers, I’ll bet. And, hell, it’s New York. How wo-uld we co-ver all of the city as-king if any of them had di-sap-pe-ared? The-re’s no way.”

“True.” Ni-ko pus-hed his pla-te away, fi-nis-hed.

“The-re’s the shel-ters, the en-camp-ments, the stre-ets them-sel-ves. The-re’s bo-und to be gos-sip among them if the-re ha-ve be-en di-sap-pe-aran-ces, but as you say, they’re not go-ing to talk to us.”

“A big was-te of our ti-me and for na-da.” I was still hungry and eyed what was left on Ni-ko’s pla-te. Nah, I wasn’t *that* hungry. Then I had an idea...it hap-pe-ned oc-ca-si-onal-ly...and it wasn’t from any an-ti-oxi-dant crap ma-king my bra-in cells sit up and ta-ke no-ti-ce eit-her.

“Hey, I know a guy.” I le-aned back in my cha-ir.

“Ham. He co-mes in-to the bar so-me-ti-mes and plays the sax. Just for kicks. He do-esn’t get pa-id or anyt-hing, but he’s damn go-od. He says he plays the sub-ways and stre-ets too. Not that he ne-eds to from the lo-oks of him. We-ars so-me pretty flashy clot-hes.”

“And if he plays the sub-ways and the stre-ets, he may be fa-mi-li-ar with so-me of the ho-me-less.” Pro-mi-se ga-ve a nod of ap-pro-val, wrap-ping a string of dusk-co-lo-red pe-arls a-ro-und a fin-ger.

“If he’s ame-nab-le to hel-ping us. Not too many are.” He was right. A hu-man and a half Aup-he we-ren’t go-ing to ever win any po-pu-la-rity con-tests.

“What exactly is he?” Ni-ko as-ked.

I frow-ned. “I don’t ha-ve a clue. He lo-oks hu-man. Do-esn’t smell hu-man, but he se-ems okay. Drinks whis-key, plays the sax, has a thing for pretty wo-men, es-pe-ci-al-ly vam-pi-res...se-ems fa-irly la-id-back to me.” And con-si-de-ring what I’d do-ne to a few cus-to-mers that had pis-sed me off, that was sa-ying so-met-hing, not to men-ti-on my auto-ma-tic sus-pi-ci-on of an-yo-ne I first met. “I don’t know how the hell we’d get in to-uch with him, tho-ugh. He co-mes and go-es at the bar. So-me-ti-mes I won’t see him for we-eks. The-re’s no pre-dic-ting it.”

“Per-haps Is-hi-ah knows his last na-me,” Ni-ko sug-ges-ted.

Non-hu-mans didn’t ha-ve last na-mes or if they did I hadn’t run in-to one. “You’re kid-ding. And so what if he did?”

Nik sho-ok his he-ad. “One idea and yo-ur bra-in shuts down for the day. It is a pity.” He went on to exp-la-in, “If he is that go-od a sax pla-yer, he pro-bably plays at clubs as well. And if he plays at clubs, I ima-gi-ne he’d want to be ava-ilab-le for gigs.” He ga-ve that fa-int smi-le of his. “In ot-her words, he’d be in the bo-ok.”

Je-ez, the pho-ne bo-ok. May-be the-re was so-met-hing to that car-rot-cran-ber-ry ju-ice af-ter all. “I’ll gi-ve Ish a call.”

Luc-kily he was at the bar, and he did know Ham’s last na-me. I didn’t ne-ed any bra-in cells at all to think it was may-be mo-re than co-in-ci-den-ce. “Pi-per,” I sa-id af-ter shut-ting off the pho-ne. “Now, I know I’m no ge-ni-us, Eins-te-in.” I ga-ve Ni-ko a mock gla-re. “But even I can gu-ess that one.”

“The Pi-ed Pi-per of Ha-me-lin.” Ni-ko sto-od and be-gan to cle-ar his dis-hes. “If not-hing el-se, this sho-uld be in-te-res-ting.”

Ham was in the bo-ok and ho-me when I cal-led. He re-mem-be-red me fi-ne and sa-id in a de-ep, mel-low vo-ice to co-me on over. If I wor-ked for Is-hi-ah, then I was go-od in his bo-ok. He ga-ve me the ad-dress: Park Slo-pe in Bro-oklyn. I win-ced, kno-wing we had a trans-fer at Fifty-third Stre-et and a ri-de on the F tra-in to lo-ok for-ward to.

When we ar-ri-ved, he ope-ned the do-or and im-me-di-ately ga-ve a blin-ding smi-le...to Pro-mi-se. Ni-ko and I we-re wa-ved in ab-sent-ly. “If I’d known you we-re brin-ging such a fi-ne lady with you,” he sa-id che-er-ful-ly, “I’d ha-ve cle-aned up so-me.”

The pla-ce wasn’t that messy. The-re we-re a few inst-ru-ments lying a-ro-und, two sa-xes and a gu-itar, and a co-up-le of flashy su-it jac-kets tos-sed over a cha-ir and the co-uch. Dark red, bright blue, and the most subt-le one, brown with fin-ger-width ne-on yel-low stri-pes. I lo-ok-ed away

be-fo-re my re-ti-nas we-re bur-ned out of my eyes and to-ok a lo-ok at the rest of the pla-ce. It was a loft, big-ger than a mu-si-ci-an sho-uld've be-en ab-le to af-ford, and pa-in-ted...ne-ver mind how it was pa-in-ted. It ma-de the su-its lo-ok li-ke pas-tels in com-pa-ri-son.

“Pull up a cus-hi-on.” He tos-sed one jac-ket to jo-in the ot-hers, his eyes still on Pro-mi-se. He was a tall, thin black man with unu-su-al-ly pa-le brown eyes. He kept his ha-ir in short dreds and was dres-sed ca-su-al-ly in a shirt pat-ter-ned in a mix-tu-re of black and dark gre-en and black pants. It was ni-ce to gi-ve my eyes a bre-ak from the rest of the pla-ce and I kept them on him.

“Hey, Ham, thanks for tal-king to us.”

He pat-ted the co-uch for Pro-mi-se, gi-ving her anot-her wi-de smi-le be-fo-re tur-ning to Nik and me. “No prob-lem. Li-ke I sa-id, if Is-hi-ah lets you work in the Circ-le, then you're go-od by me. He's not one for slac-kers or tro-ub-le-ma-kers.”

Unless you hap-pe-ned to be a fri-end of Ro-bin's, be-ca-use I fell in both of tho-se ca-te-go-ri-es. But I kept my mo-uth shut on that and got to the po-int. “The-re's this thing in town.” It damn su-re didn't qu-alify as anyt-hing el-se. “A Red-cap. Saw-ney Be-ane. He's be-en kil-ling so-me pe-op-le and we'd li-ke to chat the bas-tard up.” Chat with a sword, a gun, a can-non...wha-te-ver it to-ok.

“With his his-tory, 'so-me pe-op-le' will so-on be-co-me many pe-op-le and we'd li-ke to stop that be-fo-re it hap-pens,” Ni-ko ad-ded.

It was a tricky su-bj-ect. The-re we-re mons-ters and then the-re we-re non-hu-mans. Mons-ters ate pe-op-le and non-hu-mans didn't-they just li-ved the-ir li-ves. The-re we-re cros-so-vers so-me-ti-mes. A wolf co-uld be eit-her or. I knew both kinds. So-me ot-hers qu-ali-fi-ed as well. No mat-ter what Pro-mi-se sa-id abo-ut vamps and the-ir vi-ta-mins, you co-uldn't tell me the-re wasn't the oc-ca-si-onal ro-gue out the-re ble-eding pe-op-le for all they we-re worth. But the tricky part was that so-me non-hu-mans had a po-licy of ke-eping the-ir mo-uths shut. The way they saw it, they we-ren't go-ing to get bet-we-en a mons-ter and his me-al. That was dan-ge-ro-us, may-be de-adly, and not the-ir job.

It was ours, tho-ugh.

The smi-le fa-ded as he sat down be-si-de Pro-mi-se, slin-ging a ca-su-al arm on the top of the co-uch be-hind her. Gre-at. Anot-her Go-od-fel-low. I didn't check to see if Ni-ko was je-alo-us. If he was, he wo-uldn't show it any-way, but I do-ub-ted he was. He trus-ted Pro-mi-se, fi-ve de-ad hus-bands asi-de. And if he trus-ted her, then she de-ser-ved it. Ni-ko didn't of-ten ma-ke mis-ta-kes when it ca-me to trust. “Saw-ney Be-ane. I he-ard that son of a bitch was de-ad a long ti-me ago.”

“He was. He's back. And if you do not re-mo-ve that arm, I will. Per-ma-nently,” Pro-mi-se sa-id co-ol-ly.

It wasn't the type of thing to bu-ild up go-od-will and use-ful con-ver-sa-ti-on, but I didn't much bla-me her. Ham only flas-hed a smi-le and pul-led the arm back. “No harm in trying. Didn't know one of the-se pups was yo-urs.” No harm, no fo-ul. If he was the Pi-ed Pi-per, we we-re pups to him. “That'd be the only thing that'd ha-ve you re-sis-ting my skills.”

“Yes, of co-ur-se that's the re-ason,” she sa-id dryly.

Ni-ko ste-ered the su-bj-ect back. “We we-re thin-king that so-on eno-ugh Saw-ney will be-gin to prey on the ho-me-less. They're mo-re vul-ne-rab-le in that they'll be less li-kely to be mis-sed. He was bur-ned at the sta-ke on-ce. I do-ubt he'll want to risk get-ting ca-ught aga-in.”

“We tho-ught you might know a few of the guys from the sub-ways and the stre-ets. All kinds of pe-op-le hang aro-und to he-ar you play at the bar. I fi-gu-red it wo-uldn't be much dif-fe-rent on the stre-ets.”

“Ye-ah, pe-op-le ha-ve al-ways li-ned up to he-ar me play.” The smi-le was mo-re sly than fri-endly now.

“And for pro-fes-si-onal jobs I al-ways get pa-id. One way or anot-her.”

Such as ha-ving child-ren fol-low his pi-ping out of a town so-me six or se-ven hund-red ye-ars ago when he got stif-fed on a job he'd do-ne on the-ir rat prob-lem. But he did gi-ve the kids back on-ce he got pa-id. So the story went at le-ast. That kept him off the mons-ter list. Ba-rely.

“But, ye-ah, I know so-me guys and tho-se guys know so-me guys. So-me of them are co-ol eno-ugh-for hu-mans. Just fell on hard ti-mes.” His smi-le di-sap-pe-ared this ti-me. “And if they ha-ve a

nic-kel, hell, even a qu-ar-ter, they al-ways toss it in my ca-se. Go-od guys who ap-pre-ci-ate a lit-tle en-ter-ta-in-ment.” He drum-med long fin-gers on his knee. “Let me ask aro-und. See what I can find out. The-se guys do co-me and go, so it may ta-ke me a few days, may-be mo-re. Di-sap-pe-aring for a whi-le isn’t so unu-su-al for them and Saw-ney’s not the only one who thinks they’re easy prey.”

That was true eno-ugh. I’d se-en the Kin try to ta-ke an en-ti-re bus-lo-ad of them on-ce. That to-ok balls. Furry ones, but balls all the sa-me. Ye-ah, the ho-me-less we-re easy prey all right, but if Saw-ney was still shop-ping aro-und for his new “ca-ve,” he might not be as ca-re-ful abo-ut not ta-king a lot from one pla-ce. Most mons-ters know bet-ter than to hunt in the-ir own back-yard. Saw-ney wo-uld too, but if he was still hun-ting aro-und for a pla-ce, he might not be so ca-uti-o-us. I do-ub-ted he’d set-tle on the first one he fo-und. It’d ha-ve to be just right. De-ep, hid-den, sa-fe to eat yo-ur hu-man pork chops. You know what they say: It’s all abo-ut lo-ca-ti-on, lo-ca-ti-on, lo-ca-ti-on.

6

The next mor-ning I cal-led the car lot lo-oking for Go-od-fel-low only to find out he’d cal-led in sick. Su-re, he’d be-en inj-ured, but too hurt to lie, che-at, and ste-al from the mas-ses of clu-eless con-su-mers? Kno-wing Ro-bin, that fre-aked me out a lit-tle and had me at his pla-ce chec-king on him. From the way he was go-ing on abo-ut our vi-sit to Ham, I might’ve be-en was-ting my ti-me. Then aga-in, he was in bed. Un-less it was for se-xu-al ac-ro-ba-tics, se-e-ing Ro-bin in bed was damn ra-re. So many or-gi-es, so lit-tle ti-me.

“Ah, he wan-ted to be Pro-mi-se’s *spe-ci-al* fri-end, eh?” Ro-bin sa-id gle-eful-ly. “Tell me mo-re. Did Ni-ko ac-tu-al-ly emo-te? Did righ-te-o-us je-alo-usy ca-use a slight twitch of one eyeb-row? I can-not wa-it to...*ska-ta*.” His fa-ce gra-yed as Se-rag-lio ef-fi-ci-ently rip-ped the ban-da-ge from his up-per arm. The re-ve-aled punc-tu-re was knit-ting but still puffy and red-de-ned. It lo-oked pa-in-ful as hell.

“I’m no nur-se, Mr. Fel-lows,” the ho-use-ke-eper sa-id as she swab-bed the wo-und with a mix-tu-re of half pe-ro-xi-de, half ste-ri-le wa-ter. “And I ne-ver cla-imed to be, now, did I? But it’s eit-her me or this ta-le-car-rying yo-ung man.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” I draw-led. “He-aling’s not exactly whe-re my ta-lents lie.”

“Ma’am, is it? Don’t you ha-ve the su-gary ton-gue.” She ap-pli-ed an an-ti-bac-te-ri-al oint-ment with a slightly gent-ler to-uch than the one used to re-mo-ve the ban-da-ge. “At le-ast yo-ur mot-her ta-ught you pro-per man-ners.”

No, but my brot-her had. I wa-ited un-til she fi-nis-hed up dres-sing all the wo-unds, hel-ped cle-an up the lef-to-ver sup-pli-es, and then clo-sed the bed-ro-om do-or be-hind her. “She ma-kes me fe-el li-ke a kid.” Which in a way was rat-her ni-ce. It was a fe-eling I hadn’t had too of-ten in my li-fe.

“She do-es ha-ve the es-sen-ce of the Earth Mot-her abo-ut her.” The-re was a we-ary qu-ality to the satyr qu-irk of his lips. “Soft hands, sharp ton-gue, and bre-asts li-ke sun-war-med vel-vet.”

“Li-ke you’ll ever know.” I grin-ned. “You’ve fi-nal-ly fo-und the one wo-man who’s too much for you.” I watc-hed as he slowly pul-led the pa-j-ama leg down to co-ver the last ban-da-ge ap-pli-ed. I was torn bet-we-en moc-king his cho-ice of sle-ep-we-ar and as-king a qu-es-ti-on. I went with the qu-es-ti-on. “Why are you lying aro-und in bed any-way? Why aren’t you at work ste-aling so-me po-or guy’s last di-me?”

“I li-ke be-ing wa-ited on hand and fo-ot. It is only my due.” He pul-led the co-vers back up to his wa-ist and le-aned back aga-inst the pil-lows.

That was true eno-ugh...as far as it went. But with his fa-ce still the co-lor of clay, the-re was ob-vi-o-usly furt-her to go on the su-bj-ect. “Ni-ko sa-id it wasn’t that bad,” I sa-id, oddly ir-ri-ta-ted, alt-ho-ugh I wasn’t su-re if it was at my brot-her for not be-ing right or at Ro-bin for pro-ving him wrong. Not that I was wor-ri-ed.

Ah, shit.

I shot a bri-ef lo-ok at the do-or and es-ca-pe...es-ca-pe from con-cern and emo-ti-onal en-tang-le-ment. Ap-plying the-se things to ot-hers out-si-de of Ni-ko was still new and scary as hell to me. I didn’t know if I even knew *how* to do it.

But, in the end, that was not-hing but piss-po-or co-war-di-ce. Go-od-fel-low, who'd sa-ved my li-fe at le-ast twi-ce, de-ser-ved bet-ter. I lo-oked away from the do-or, sho-ved hands in je-an poc-kets, and scow-led. "So-met-hing's wrong. Tell me." And qu-ick be-fo-re I bol-ted.

"It's not-hing." He clo-sed his eyes and la-ced his fin-gers ac-ross the mo-und of co-vers.

"If it's not-hing, then tell me, god-damn it," I de-man-ded, "be-fo-re I kick yo-ur horny ass."

He crac-ked an eye. "Can you fe-el my wa-ves of una-dul-te-ra-ted ter-ror from the-re? I'm do-ing my best to sup-press them, but I fe-ar I'm wholly un-suc-ces-sful."

"Fi-ne." I ga-ve him the fin-ger and he-aded for the do-or, ma-king my es-ca-pe. "Screw you."

He sig-hed and un-tang-led his hands to push up to a mo-re up-right po-si-ti-on. "Wa-it."

I al-re-ady had one hand on the do-ork-nob, brass and cold, and I co-uld've kept go-ing. An obj-ect in mo-ti-on tends to re-ma-in in mo-ti-on. It's physics, that's all. It can't be co-war-di-ce or the easy way out if it's physics, right? I let myself be-li-eve that for se-ve-ral se-conds be-fo-re I drop-ped my hand to my si-de and tur-ned, ex-ha-ling, "Damn it."

"I do ha-ve that ef-fect on many, many pe-op-le. And I'm not used to any of them was-ting worry on me. I've not bu-ilt up a ha-bit of gra-ci-o-us ac-cep-tan-ce." He ga-ve a ti-red grin. "Altho-ugh in all ot-her as-pects of eti-qu-et-te, I am wit-ho-ut pa-ral-lel. The Don Ju-an of de-co-rum."

"Ye-ah, right, and I'm not wor-ri-ed. Just...gat-he-ring all the facts," I sa-id with obs-ti-na-te wa-ri-ness.

"Now gi-ve them to me al-re-ady."

He did. It was po-ison. The sir-rush was ve-no-mo-us with to-xic claws and fangs. It co-uld be fa-tal, but pucks we-re ext-re-mely re-sis-tant to po-ison, so for Ro-bin it was only pa-in-ful and slo-wed re-co-very by a few days. Now, the-re we-re so-me ni-ce mu-ta-ted su-per-ge-nes for you. What'd I get? Su-per-smel-ling. No won-der I didn't ha-ve my own co-mic bo-ok.

"And it's a ra-re ex-cu-se to ha-ve Se-rag-lio mot-her me and to catch a glimp-se down her pol-yes-ter shirt at the Pro-mi-sed Land. That's worth a lit-tle pa-in." He re-ac-hed for a half-empty glass of wi-ne on the night-s-tand and ad-ded smugly, "I told her I was inj-ured sa-ving a nun from be-ing mug-ged. The-re we-re orp-hans in-vol-ved as well. I'm qu-ite the he-ro."

"I'll bet." Se-rag-lio was far too sharp to swal-low that, I knew, but it was pos-si-ble she had a soft spot for her emp-lo-yer. "You're okay, then? A few days in bed and you'll be an-no-ying the hell out of us as usu-al?" The re-li-ef was sharp. This who-le ha-ving a fri-end thing, damn, it was work.

"It's my cal-ling in li-fe, and, yes, I will." Af-ter dra-ining the glass, he rol-led it bet-we-en his hands.

"Now that you're do-ne *not* wor-rying, shall we hug? Isn't that what one do-es in emo-ti-onal-ly fra-ught si-tu-ati-ons as this? I'll ke-ep my hands abo-ve the belt. I am still mo-oning af-ter yo-ur brot-her af-ter all. Blonds, they al-ways bre-ak my he-art."

He se-emed ri-di-cu-lo-usly ple-ased with him-self, grin-ning des-pi-te the li-nes of pa-in cre-asing his fo-re-he-ad. I strongly con-si-de-red grab-bing hand-fuls of she-et and blan-ket and yan-king his ass on-to the flo-or, but that was be-fo-re I fi-gu-red it out. Ro-bin had sa-id it him-self: He wasn't used to pe-op-le wor-rying abo-ut him. Con-cern-I wasn't in the ha-bit of gi-ving it and he wasn't ac-cus-to-med to re-ce-iving it. He wan-ted to be, tho-ugh. That was pla-in to see in the grin, the hu-mor-ligh-te-ned eyes, and the qu-irk of eyeb-rows un-der wild-ly curly bed ha-ir.

"I'm not hug-ging you. So shut up. Jesus." But I did stay and fil-led him in abo-ut Ham and how he was go-ing to in-ves-ti-ga-te the ho-me-less si-tu-ati-on for us. Na-tu-ral-ly, it wasn't the ho-me-less the-ory that he con-cent-ra-ted on.

"A mu-si-ci-an," he sa-id with in-te-rest. "Wild and wil-ling gro-upi-es, how can one go wrong?"

"Abo-ut that..." I was spraw-led in a cha-ir by the win-dow. "Re-mem-ber what we tal-ked abo-ut be-fo-re Ge-or-ge was ta-ken?" It se-emed fo-re-ver and it se-emed li-ke only yes-ter-day. And wasn't that a trick? "Abo-ut me not pas-sing on the fa-mi-ly na-me?"

The Aup-he might not ha-ve a fa-mi-ly na-me-I'd ne-ver bot-he-red to ask-but they did ha-ve ge-nes. They'd gi-ven them to me, but that's whe-re it stop-ped. I wasn't ta-king a chan-ce of ma-king any mo-re li-ke me...or wor-se than me. And wor-se than me was de-fi-ni-tely a pos-si-bi-lity. It was one re-ason Ge-or-ge and I we-ren't for each ot-her. Ro-bin had gi-ven me the usu-al op-ti-ons-rub-bers,

the big snip-but I didn't ha-ve the fa-ith in them that I had in the Aup-he will to be born.

"I re-mem-ber." He le-aned to-ward me. "Don't tell me. You're fi-nal-ly cas-ting asi-de ce-li-bacy and emb-ra-cing the nasty, oily arts. Thank the Mi-no-ta-ur's mas-si-ve mem-ber. It's abo-ut thri-ce-dam-ned ti-me."

Fa-cing down a sir-rush was not-hing com-pa-red to the le-vel of pre-da-tory at-ten-ti-on now aimed my way. "Hold up. I don't want or-gi-es or sa-do-ma-soc-his-tic ro-le-pla-ying we-ird-ness," I sa-id ca-uti-o-usly. "I just want to get la-id, pu-re and simp-le. Be-ing half Aup-he do-esn't me-an I want to spend my who-le li-fe not get-ting any." No one with a dick, wor-king or not, wan-ted that. And I was twenty. You co-uld *ma-ke* lit-tle blue pills out of what was run-ning thro-ugh me. I wan-ted Ge-or-ge mo-re than I'd ever wan-ted an-yo-ne, but I co-uldn't ha-ve her. May-be, tho-ugh, I co-uld ha-ve so-me-one el-se, even if they me-ant so much less. And if an-yo-ne knew so-me-one it wo-uld be im-pos-si-b-le for a hu-man-Aup-he hybrid to rep-ro-du-ce with, it wo-uld be Go-od-fel-low.

Ro-bin nod-ded and la-ced fin-gers to crack his knuck-les in pre-pa-ra-ti-on-the men-tal kind, I fer-vently ho-ped. "Actu-al-ly, I've be-en con-temp-la-ting yo-ur hor-rif-ying, nay, ca-tast-rop-hic si-tu-ati-on for a whi-le now and I'll be happy to-

I in-ter-rup-ted has-tily, "Ye-ah, thanks, but no, thanks."

He snor-ted, "You sho-uld be so pri-vi-le-ged. No, you bra-ying ass. As I was sa-ying, I'd be happy to int-ro-du-ce you to so-me open-min-ded fe-ma-les." Le-aning back, he re-la-xed. "Let me think on it. The-re are tho-se out the-re who wo-uld fit yo-ur si-tu-ati-on. Ho-we-ver..." He pa-used and the sly che-er fa-ded. "So-me wo-uld know abo-ut you and so-me wo-uldn't. Both co-me with is-su-es."

I ans-we-red the uns-po-ken qu-es-ti-on. "I'll stay in the Aup-he clo-set if I ha-ve to." So-me wo-uld know and so-me wo-uldn't, he'd sa-id. The ones that did know wo-uldn't fuck me on a bet. The ones that didn't know we-re my only chan-ce, and if I we-re stub-born abo-ut hi-ding what I was, Ro-bin wo-uld ha-ve a re-al chal-len-ge ahe-ad of him. Stub-born and stu-pid, I knew the dif-fe-ren-ce bet-we-en the two.

"Then ta-ke yo-ur vi-ta-mins and get re-ady, For-rest Hump," he or-de-red, che-er re-ig-ni-ted. "You're in for a wild ri-de."

I wasn't thin-king abo-ut that wild ri-de when I left. Okay, that was a lie and a half. I was thin-king abo-ut it all right, but I was thin-king abo-ut so-met-hing el-se too. I was thin-king abo-ut how the sir-rush ca-me out of now-he-re, and what if pucks we-ren't re-sis-tant to po-ison? I was al-so thin-king abo-ut all the ti-mes things co-uld've go-ne very dif-fe-rently for Ni-ko and me. The clo-se calls, the ne-ar mis-ses... we we-re go-od but we'd had them. And how one day a ne-ar miss might not be a miss at all. Ni-ko was one of the best out the-re, and I was go-od eno-ugh. But I tho-ught abo-ut the re-ve-nants. The best, the go-od eno-ugh, so-me-day that wasn't go-ing to get it. Get thirty or so re-al-ly pis-sed-off re-ve-nants or fif-te-en wol-ves or just one ne-arly un-de-fe-atab-le troll, get cor-ne-red by that, get bo-xed in and that very well co-uld be all she wro-te.

Unless we had an emer-gency exit, a way out.

And we did ha-ve it. If my Aup-he abi-lity sa-ved Ni-ko or Ro-bin, if it co-uld sa-ve us all, I didn't ca-re abo-ut he-adac-hes or if I bled li-ke a stuck pig. It was worth it, and if Ni-ko was right and my bra-in did go down for the co-unt, hell, it was still worth it.

Ro-bin's sta-ir-well was empty. Not surp-ri-sing. It was day-ti-me; most we-re at work. I to-ok ad-van-ta-ge of it, and sat on the lan-ding off Ro-bin's flo-or and let the do-or clo-se be-hind me. When I'd bu-ilt the ga-te aro-und Ro-bin and me to es-ca-pe the sir-rush, I'd do-ne it in a mix-tu-re of ef-fort and ins-tinct. I didn't ha-ve a mons-ter char-ging me now, so I was go-ing to ha-ve to de-pend on ef-fort. Every ga-te I'd ever se-en or bu-ilt had be-en big eno-ugh to walk thro-ugh. But may-be if I star-ted small the-re'd be fe-wer nasty si-de ef-fects.

I held out a hand, tri-ed not to think abo-ut the pa-in from last ti-me, and fo-cu-sed. It ca-me, a lit-tle slowly, but it ca-me. It was small li-ke I'd con-cent-ra-ted on-the si-ze of an oran-ge. Gun-me-tal gray, the light of it was a slug-gish whirl-po-ol-spin-ning as if it wan-ted to suck you in. It was an ugly thing. Ugly and re-pul-si-ve. And it li-ved in me. Hard to co-me to terms with that, but I was go-ing to ha-ve to.

Ga-te-ways had to le-ad so-mew-he-re, so this one went to the tiny clo-set in my ro-om. No one wo-uld see it the-re. Not Nik, who wo-uld be highly un-hap-py abo-ut my bre-aking my word...even if I'd ne-ver me-ant to ke-ep it in the first pla-ce.

I felt the to-uch of li-qu-id warmth on my up-per lip, but the he-adac-he that be-gan to throb was be-arab-le. So, okay, the big-ger the ga-te, the wor-se the si-de ef-fects. May-be easing up to a si-ze we co-uld get thro-ugh wo-uld help. A slow and ste-ady prog-ress.

And think what I co-uld do with it be-si-des es-ca-pe. I co-uld do what I'd do-ne to Hob, the puck kid-nap-per who'd ta-ken Ni-ko and Ge-or-ge. I co-uld bu-ild one bet-we-en us and our at-tac-kers and let them rush in-to the Aup-he ho-me away from ho-me. Tu-mu-lus. Hell. They'd be rip-ped to shreds the-re. Tur-ned to a pi-le of blo-od and guts and I ima-gi-ned they'd li-ve for a whi-le as it hap-pe-ned. Strang-led with the-ir own in-tes-ti-nes. The Aup-he did li-ke to play with the-ir fo-od. Why not get them to do the dirty work? Why not let them mur-der and ma-im? Why not let them mu-ti-la-te...

I blin-ked and let the ga-te go. Now, whe-re the hell had that co-me from? If you we-re at-tac-ked, if so-me-one wan-ted you de-ad, you did what you had to do. But ma-im? *Mu-ti-la-te*? I wo-uldn't do that. Wo-uldn't send so-me-one to that god-awful fa-te. That wasn't me.

Ne-ver mind that I'd do-ne it to Hob. That was dif-fe-rent. He'd de-fe-ated Ni-ko and hung him up li-ke an ani-mal to be sla-ugh-te-red. He had Ge-or-ge ti-ed up ac-ross the ro-om. I co-uldn't get to them both to get us out of the-re, and Hob wo-uld've de-fe-ated me. *Was* de-fe-ating me, sli-cing me to rib-bons. Ni-ko, one of the best. Me slightly less. I'd had no cho-ice. But to do that when I did ha-ve a cho-ice...no.

No.

I felt the blo-od drip down my chin, catc-hing it at the last mi-nu-te with a wad full of pa-per to-wels I'd sho-ved in my poc-ket be-fo-re I left Ro-bin's pla-ce. I'd known then what I'd plan-ned to do. I mop-ped up the blo-od and held the sta-ined to-wels to my no-se un-til the ble-eding stop-ped. With the pa-per sa-tu-ra-ted, I pul-led off my jac-ket and ca-re-ful-ly scrub-bed my lo-wer fa-ce with my sle-eve. It was black; any lef-to-ver blo-od wo-uldn't show, which in turn wo-uld ke-ep me from a Ni-ko ass-kic-king of righ-te-o-us pro-por-ti-ons.

Half of me tho-ught I de-ser-ved it. Half of me knew I was do-ing what I had to. All of me tho-ught the sa-me thing over and over.

That wasn't me.

Not me.

Ne-ver.

7

Whi-le Ro-bin re-cu-pe-ra-ted, plot-ting and plan-ning things for me that wo-uld ma-ke Hugh Hef-ner cry for his mommy, I en-ded up in an aban-do-ned wa-re-ho-use. I'll say it aga-in... It so-un-ded tri-te, and, hell, it was, but one pho-ne call from Pro-mi-se had sent Ni-ko and me to one. Ac-cor-ding to any mystery or cop show, the-se rat-infes-ted, ec-ho-ing pla-ces are a di-me a do-zen. They're not, but you can find one if you put yo-ur mind to it. Saw-ney had. How did I know?

Bo-nes.

Cha-ins and blo-ody bo-nes.

Li-ke wind chi-mes, they hung high from the raf-ters. But no wind wo-uld ma-ke them sing. The ske-le-tons we-re held to-get-her with li-ga-ments and thin stretc-hes of over-lo-oked flesh, just eno-ugh me-at to ke-ep them in-tact. Eit-her Saw-ney had plan-ned it that way or he hadn't be-en as hungry as he'd tho-ught. And they we-ren't bo-di-es of the ho-me-less. He wasn't be-ing ca-re-ful. Not yet. He was still enj-oying him-self way too god-damn much.

I lo-oked up to see a sta-ined bi-ke that hung be-si-de a small ske-le-ton. The-re was a sil-ver spark-le ba-na-na se-at, a bas-ket blo-oming with bright plas-tic flo-wers, and shiny brown ha-ir ti-ed aro-und the hand-les li-ke stre-amers.

That had had not-hing to do with hun-ger. That was evil, pu-re and simp-le.

“How did Pro-mi-se know this was he-re?” I drop-ped my eyes to the flo-or and the lar-ge dri-ed patc-hes of brown on it. It had be-en ho-urs at the very le-ast, this mor-ning or last night. Three sets of re-ma-ins, two adults and one child. A fa-mily...a bi-ke. It had pro-bably be-en the pre-vi-o-us eve-ning. A mom and dad ta-king the-ir lit-tle girl for a bi-ke ri-de in one of the parks. Ka-tie, Sa-rah, Mad-die...Ka-tie. Ye-ah, Ka-tie, a tom-boy with freck-les and brown ha-ir in a long pony-ta-il.

“A fri-end of a fri-end.” Ni-ko had knelt to to-uch a light fin-ger to the lar-gest po-ol of dri-ed blo-od as I wrenc-hed my tho-ughts back to the he-re and now.

“A re-la-ti-ve of a fri-end rat-her. Flay’s sis-ter told her.”

Flay was a we-re-wolf ac-qu-a-in-tan-ce of ours. On-ce an enemy, he was now...hell, I had no idea what he was now. Not an enemy, but not pre-ci-sely a fri-end eit-her. He was long go-ne from New York any-way, so it didn’t much mat-ter what la-bel you slap-ped on him. He was on the run from the Kin, the we-re-wolf ver-si-on of the Ma-fia. If he sho-wed his furry ass in the city aga-in, he was de-ad-the kind of de-ad that wo-uld ha-ve the hu-man La Co-sa Nost-ra sit-ting up in ad-mi-ra-ti-on and ta-king no-tes li-ke a de-di-ca-ted col-le-ge fresh-man.

“Flay has a sis-ter?” I drif-ted away as I be-gan to lo-ok for mo-re bo-di-es. Saw-ney might not ha-ve hung them all up. He might’ve got-ten ti-red of pla-ying his fes-ti-ve lit-tle ga-mes. “A scary pro-po-si-ti-on.” Flay was many things-unbe-li-evably strong, mur-de-ro-usly qu-ick, a ta-len-ted figh-ter-but he was one ho-mely son of a bitch. No, that wasn’t true. He wasn’t ugly, but he was unu-su-al, damn unu-su-al. Exo-ti-cal-ly stran-ge eno-ugh to draw an-yo-ne’s eye.

“Do not jud-ge.” Gray eyes moc-ked. “We can-not all be the vi-si-on you are.” He sto-od. “They’ve be-en de-ad aw-hi-le, that is cle-ar. What isn’t as cle-ar is whe-re they ca-me from.”

The wa-re-ho-use was ne-ar the pi-ers. It wasn’t the most li-kely pla-ce for lit-tle girls to ri-de the-ir bi-kes. And trans-por-ting three bo-di-es so-me dis-tan-ce in the city wo-uld be a trick for even a ho-mi-ci-dal-ly cle-ver bas-tard li-ke Saw-ney. He co-uldn’t put them un-der his arm and shamb-le along. Even in this city, that wo-uld be no-ti-ced. I sho-ok my he-ad. “No tel-ling.” The-re we-re se-ve-ral is-lands of stac-ked cra-tes, but no ot-her bo-di-es that I’d se-en yet. “Why is Flay’s sis-ter hel-ping us? For that mat-ter how’d she know we ne-eded help?”

“Pro-mi-se put out the word in the com-mu-ni-ty with Sang-ri-da put-ting up so-me of the mu-se-um’s mo-ney as a re-ward for in-for-ma-ti-on. They can’t jus-tify a fee for trac-king down a su-per-na-tu-ral se-ri-al kil-ler of co-ur-se, but can of-fer re-wards for the da-ma-ge do-ne to the ex-hi-bit. Cre-ati-ve ac-co-un-ting.” Nik kept scan-ning the area. “So-me wol-ves stumb-led ac-ross the bo-di-es a few ho-urs ago. Kin wol-ves. This is a Kin wa-re-ho-use, alt-ho-ugh they only use it off and on. De-li-lah is Kin in go-od stan-ding, un-li-ke her brot-her. On-ce she he-ard what had be-en fo-und, she con-tac-ted Pro-mi-se. As to why?” He he-aded to-ward the ot-her si-de of the in-te-ri-or. “Mo-ney, and we did sa-ve her nep-hew’s li-fe or did you for-get?”

Not li-kely. I still had the lit-tle fuzz-but’s bi-te marks scar-ring my calf to re-mem-ber him by. It did surp-ri-se me that this De-li-lah wo-uld be gra-te-ful eno-ugh to act on it, but the-re was the mo-ney. The Kin did lo-ve the-ir mo-ney. It was still risky for her, tho-ugh. We we-ren’t lo-ved by the Kin any mo-re than Flay was, but whi-le Nik and I we-re con-si-de-red ene-mi-es of the Kin, we didn’t hold the spe-ci-al pla-ce in the-ir ven-ge-ful he-arts that Flay did. Flay had bet-ra-yed his Alp-ha to out-si-ders. If the-re we-re a wor-se cri-me to a wolf, I didn’t know what it was.

“Kin will be back to cle-an up the area so-on eno-ugh, so we ne-ed to be qu-ick.” The Kin didn’t li-ke the-ir ter-ri-tory vi-ola-ted or cons-pi-cu-o-us. And it didn’t get much mo-re cons-pi-cu-o-us than bo-di-es han-ging from the ce-iling. Ni-ko had mo-ved out of sight be-hind a far to-wer of cra-tes, and se-conds la-ter he rap-ped out my na-me, “Cal.”

The to-ne was eno-ugh to let me know he’d fo-und so-met-hing in-te-res-ting. My gun was al-re-ady in my hand and had be-en sin-ce I’d en-te-red the bu-il-ding. I lo-ped af-ter Nik, se-e-ing what he’d fo-und so int-ri-gu-ing the mo-ment I ro-un-ded the cra-tes. It was a van. With its si-de do-or open and dri-ed blo-od wit-hin and wit-ho-ut, we’d dis-co-ve-red how Saw-ney had trans-por-ted the bo-di-es. It was so mun-da-ne, not to men-ti-on inexp-li-cab-le. “Okay, Cyra-no, rid-dle me this,” I sa-id. “How

the hell do-es a Red-cap from the fo-ur-te-en hund-reds know how to dri-ve a god-damn van?"

He frow-ned un-der his haw-kish no-se. "That is an ex-cel-lent qu-es-ti-on." As he clam-be-red in-to the back, I ope-ned the pas-sen-ger do-or and le-aned in the front for a whiff. Huh. Now, that was dam-ned pe-cu-li-ar. "Re-ve-nant," I an-no-un-ced alo-ud. Re-ve-nants we-ren't what le-gend ma-de them out to be...le-gend ne-ver got it right, but I co-uld see how easily it had be-en to go wrong with the-se slimy pi-eces of shit. They we-ren't the de-ad re-tur-ned to li-fe-unple-asant, rot-ting li-fe-but they did gi-ve an ama-zing imi-ta-ti-on. Re-ve-nants we-ren't hu-man and had ne-ver be-en, but they lo-ok-ed damn clo-se to a man...if that man had be-en dug from a not-so-fresh gra-ve. It wasn't dif-fi-cult to see how so-me-one had ma-de the mis-ta-ke. With milky whi-te eyes, clammy slick flesh, and a black ton-gue, they we-ren't na-tu-re's pret-ti-est or pro-udest mo-ment.

"It se-ems Saw-ney is rec-ru-iting a new fa-mily." Ni-ko fi-nis-hed exa-mi-ning the van and va-ul-ted back out.

"Lo-gi-cal. The-re are no ot-her Red-caps in New York, and re-ve-nants, li-ke Saw-ney, do not par-ti-cu-larly ca-re if the-ir me-als are ali-ve, de-ad, or de-com-po-sing."

"And re-ve-nants can dri-ve." They'd be-en aro-und New York ne-arly as long as the-re had be-en pe-op-le. With a co-at and a hat or a ho-oded swe-ats-hirt, they co-uld pass to the ca-su-al glan-ce thro-ugh a car win-dow. I'd se-en them do it, and it was the last cab ri-de you we-re li-kely to ta-ke. Fin-ding not-hing in the front, I step-ped back and shut the do-or. "I won-der why they didn't stick aro-und he-re. It's not a ca-ve, but it's empty and the-re's plenty of ro-om to ke-ep lef-to-vers." To ke-ep mo-re lit-tle girls and the-ir mom-mi-es and dad-di-es. "Even if the re-ve-nant knew it was Kin, I can't see Saw-ney gi-ving a shit. A few wol-ves wo-uld be a snack and rug com-bo to him. Di-ne and de-co-ra-te in one shot." So-met-hing glit-te-red by my fo-ot and I cro-uc-hed to pick it up with my left hand. It was a bar-ret-te, gold and yel-low. The lit-tle girl's last to-uch of sun. It had the ca-us-tic hu-mor lying li-ke le-ad on my ton-gue.

"The re-ve-nants may ha-ve known. And they wo-uld've known that if a few Kin wol-ves went mis-sing he-re, the rest wo-uld co-me en mas-se," Ni-ko co-nj-ec-tu-red as he watc-hed me put the bar-ret-te in my poc-ket.

"Too much light."

It ca-me from abo-ve. The words.

"Whe-re is so-ot-hing dark-ness?"

In the sha-dows whe-re the stray rays of sun-light didn't pe-net-ra-te.

"Whe-re are the shel-te-ring arms of sto-ne?"

A bright sli-ce of win-ter, sharp as ice and whi-te as a fa-tal bliz-zard, blo-omed.

"Whe-re is Saw-ney Be-ane's ho-me? Not he-re."

As my eyes adj-us-ted I saw mo-re...up in the raf-ters. An un-na-tu-ral-ly wi-de kil-ler grin. Tang-led ro-opes of ha-ir, whi-te sta-ined with red and brown. The-re was the imp-res-si-on of a swe-eping bulk of a clo-ak or co-at, but fa-ce and hands...they we-re not-hing but black-ness. Inky sha-dow co-me to li-fe.

The im-pos-si-b-le stretch of smi-le wi-de-ned. "I see you." Tiny em-bers spar-ked to li-fe, the che-ery red of an autumn fi-re. "Tra-ve-lers."

Tra-ve-lers. And we knew what Saw-ney Be-ane did with tra-ve-lers.

I fi-red ins-tantly. The bul-lets hit. I knew that alt-ho-ugh the mons-ter didn't mo-ve. The-re was no at-tempt at eva-si-on, only the ec-ho of gun-fi-re and that ever-pre-sent le-er. The bas-tard didn't flinch, didn't shift un-der the im-pact, didn't re-gis-ter the blows at all. If I didn't ha-ve the con-fi-den-ce of my aim, I wo-uld've won-de-red. But I hit him... It simply didn't mat-ter one damn bit.

"Edu-ca-ti-onal," Ni-ko mu-sed.

"Glad you think so," I grun-ted as I slam-med anot-her clip ho-me. Just anot-her day at the of-fi-ce...until the la-te af-ter-no-on sun cho-se that mo-ment to shift to twi-light, plun-ging the wa-re-ho-use in-to a dusky purp-le glo-om. What few lights had be-en on jo-ined the sun in di-sap-pe-ar-ing, de-epe-ning the glo-om to the im-pe-net-rab-le.

And then it be-gan to ra-in blo-od.

The color was impossible to discern in the thick murk, but I knew the smell, knew the slick consistency against my skin. “What the fuck?”

There was the sound of rushing air and then a meaty thump inches from me. Another body, and from the sound as it hit, this one had most of its flesh intact. There was another thump and another as the charnel house above continued to fall. I didn’t know how Sawney had kept them up, and I didn’t care. I only wanted to get my hands on the son of a bitch.

“I’m going up,” Nik said grimly. “You cover him here if he tries to escape.” There was no sound of departing footsteps—this was my brother after all—but he was gone.

I moved my own foot a few inches to one side to place the first body. As my eyes adjusted I could make out a vague outline, a crumpled form... arms, legs, a mound. Pregnant. She’d been pregnant. I couldn’t make out any more than that and I didn’t want to. She’d been alive; now she wasn’t.

When the next body fell, I thought I was ready for it. How much fucking worse could it be? Stupid god-damn question. Sawney was the stealer of mothers, children, and babies. The taker of lives, flesh, and hope, because in New York everyone was traveling. From place to place, everyone was on the move. And to someone who preyed on travelers, that meant everyone was fair game.

Sawney hit me from above... the one body that wasn’t dead, but we weren’t done yet. Not by a long shot. He hit hard and with a weight I wouldn’t have guessed. He was an avalanche—not one of rock, but of ice. Cold, wherever he touched me. The burn of dry ice on my neck and jaw as he tasted me. I felt the slide of the tongue over my carotid artery as hands pinned my head.

“Different, traveler. You taste different.”

I struggled to pull breath back into my lungs that curled abused and beaten beneath bruised ribs. But I didn’t need to breathe to pull a trigger. I jammed the muzzle of the 9mm into the mass that squatted on top of me and emptied the clip I had just put in. Like before, I got jack shit for my trouble.

“Full of sulfur spice and ancient earth and a world far from here.”

Aup-he, he was tasting it in me. That stunted my lungs to painful life. I wheezed and used the oxygen to propel my body into motion under him. I tried to roll, dropping my gun and pulling a knife from the calf sheath. My fingers passed through the slit in the denim and fastened around the rubber hilt. My roll was less successful. Flickers of scarlet light still burned into mine. Hanks of knotted hair smelled like a slaughterhouse and felt like rope against my skin. And that grin, that god-damned grin, was still inches from me.

Then it was in me.

Teth went through jacket and shirt, into my chest, and ripped a piece of me away. Sawney had succeeded where the Black Annis had failed, and he had done it so easily. Had made me food, and I hadn’t been able to do a damn thing about it. Food. There’s a special horror in that, a particular twisted terror in a part of you being *eaten*.

It hurt, but not as badly as it should. The shock of it muffled the pain, wrapped it in cotton, and let me plunge the knife into his back without hesitation. What it could do that the gun couldn’t I didn’t know, and when his grin widened, I got my answer. And with that answer came other things. There was blood on my face—my own blood—and the sound of a purring swallow.

“Soft and sweet, your flesh, traveler.” The cold tongue lapped blood from the wound. “Sweet and spiced with madness.” He laughed then. It wasn’t dark or deranged, deep or demonic. It was happy as a child with ice cream, and that was worse. So much fucking worse.

If ever there were a time for a gate, promise or not, this was it. But even if I could have managed one the size I needed, and I had head-splitting doubts that I could, Sawney would only have gone with me. Eat me here, eat me somewhere else, I didn’t know the difference. I did know panic, though. Sheer, kick-in-the-gut panic, and I used it. I twisted the fear into energy and momentum and I tried again to throw the bastard off. This time, I did it. I didn’t take the time to get to my feet. It was time I didn’t have. I got to all fours and scrambled backward with all the

spe-ed I co-uld mus-ter. When you can smell yo-ur blo-od on so-me-one's bre-ath, that's pretty damn fast.

He was fast too. Fas-ter than I was. Fas-ter than an-yo-ne I'd se-en. He was ten fe-et away and he was di-rectly in front of me, yan-king me up with a hand on my thro-at. Up, not to my fe-et-my fe-et we-ren't to-uc-hing the flo-or and ne-it-her we-re his. We hung in the air, the god-damn *air*, three fe-et of empty spa-ce be-ne-ath us. He had two smi-les now, one she-ened with my blo-od and one the gle-am of me-tal. It was the scythe from the mu-se-um. Sang-ri-da had ta-ken go-od ca-re of it. It was as ca-pab-le now of car-ving hu-man flesh as it had be-en six hund-red ye-ars ago. I'd se-en that in Saw-ney's re-cent vic-tims and I was abo-ut to fe-el it as well.

"Tra-ve-ler, abi-de with me." Red light bla-zed to blo-ody suns. "Abi-de *in* me. Spe-ci-al boy with the spe-ci-al tas-te. The tas-te of mad-ness, the tas-te of me." The che-er, the hor-ri-fi-cal-ly af-fec-ti-ona-te che-er, was the sil-ken to-uch of a spi-der's fa-tal web, and I wis-hed he wo-uld shut the hell up. I wis-hed I we-ren't so su-re it was Aup-he mad-ness he was tas-ting in me. I al-so wis-hed I had bro-ught my De-sert Eag-le with the exp-lo-si-ve ro-unds. Wish in one hand and shit in the ot-her and ho-pe you aren't fa-cing Saw-ney fuc-king Be-ane when you do it.

I was re-ac-hing for anot-her bla-de, kno-wing it pro-bably wo-uldn't do any go-od, but do-ing it any-way. Be-ca-use you don't gi-ve up and you don't gi-ve in. Ni-ko ta-ught me that. If they're go-ing to ta-ke you down, you ma-ke them pay. It was go-od ad-vi-ce. I'd be-en ta-ken down be-fo-re; I'd al-ways ma-de them sorry as hell. This bas-tard wasn't go-ing to be any dif-fe-rent.

And I wasn't a *boy-spe-ci-al* or ot-her-wi-se. I wasn't a lost lit-tle girl or ter-ri-fi-ed preg-nant wo-man eit-her. When he sli-ced me up with his scythe, pi-ece by pi-ece, I wo-uld ta-ke the sa-me from him. It might not kill him and it might not even hurt him, but I wo-uld ta-ke it any-way. I damn su-re ga-ve it my best shot. My kni-fe punc-hed thro-ugh cloth that felt li-ke flesh...co-uld ha-ve be-en flesh for all I knew. This thing had co-me back from bo-ne and ash. He re-ma-de him-self; who knew the li-mits to that re-ma-king? The bla-de slid in-to flesh, scra-ped bo-ne, and kept go-ing. This ti-me I twis-ted it, vi-ci-o-usly and with all the for-ce I co-uld ma-na-ge. And he let me. Gu-ests go first, right? It's when you're the gu-est and din-ner all in one that you run in-to tro-ub-le.

I twis-ted aga-in. The bas-tard was *cold*, li-ke ice, and I co-uld fe-el cold cre-eping up the me-tal to the hilt and in-to my hand. My knuck-les cram-ped, but I wrenc-hed the bla-de one last ti-me. Saw-ney's pa-ti-en-ce had run out, ho-we-ver, and so had that of his scythe. It flas-hed to-ward me. They we-re li-ke tho-se pa-in-tings-Saw-ney and the scythe-the ones from the mu-se-um, the abst-ract kind. A me-tal-lic glit-ter of iron, scar-let light, a jet gloss of flesh, all fog-ged by thick dark-ness-a jumb-led bit of art in mo-ti-on as the scythe slas-hed. I co-uldn't see the who-le, but it co-uld see me.

Too bad it didn't see Nik.

The bla-de of the scythe mis-sed my sto-mach by mil-li-me-ters. It to-re thro-ugh my le-at-her jac-ket as if it we-re no mo-re subs-tan-ti-al than an il-lu-si-on as Ni-ko hit Saw-ney from the si-de and car-ried him away from me. The icy clamp pe-eled from my thro-at and I fell. Lan-ding in a cro-uch, I co-ug-hed aga-inst the air that had curd-led in my fro-zen thro-at. Ni-ko and Saw-ney had lan-ded ten fe-et away: Ni-ko on his fe-et and Saw-ney on his back with a sword pin-ning him to a wo-oden pal-let. De-ad cen-ter thro-ugh his gut...or what I gu-es-sed to be his gut. The sword bla-de di-sap-pe-ared in-to the dark-ness that was Saw-ney, but Nik didn't stop the-re. His hand a blur of mo-ti-on, he slam-med a dag-ger in-to the Red-cap's neck to pin him furt-her. Then, be-ca-use he was lo-aded for be-ar, he drew his se-cond big bla-de. He'd se-en how much ef-fect my gun and my kni-fe had had, but he swung the mac-he-te any-way. When I saw whe-re he aimed, I knew what he was thin-king. If you can't kill it...

Di-sas-semb-le it.

My brot-her in ac-ti-on; it was so-met-hing to see. When he lif-ted his bla-de, he had the gra-ce and ele-gan-ce of Lan-ce-lot on the fi-eld of ho-nor, and when he bro-ught it down, he had the ef-fi-ci-ency of the fa-mily butc-her down the stre-et. The me-tal bit thro-ugh the sho-ul-der jo-int of the arm that cont-rol-led the scythe and then Nik kic-ked it away. Not the we-apon-the en-ti-re arm. Ye-ah, sa-fe to say that when Ni-ko di-sar-med so-me-one, he didn't fuck aro-und. Pro-of po-si-ti-ve was in the next

blow. He'd se-en how qu-ick Saw-ney was with that scythe, and he'd ta-ken ca-re of that first. Now the se-cond step was to end it. Saw-ney's he-ad was the next thing to be kic-ked ac-ross the flo-or or it sho-uld've be-en, but things we-re ne-ver that easy.

Be-fo-re Nik co-uld ta-ke that next blow, Saw-ney exp-lo-ded up-ward in-to the air abo-ve us, sud-denly up-right and with his fe-et at le-ast three fe-et abo-ve the flo-or. The sur-ge tos-sed Ni-ko back-ward with the for-ce of a vi-ci-o-us, storm-dri-ven wa-ve. Im-pa-led by a sword and dag-ger, the le-gend hung sus-pen-ded. Hung and gurg-led. It was only when he pul-led the dag-ger from his thro-at that I re-cog-ni-zed the gurg-le for what it was. La-ugh-ter.

I lun-ged at him as his hand, the one he had left, mo-ved to the hilt of Ni-ko's sword to pull it free. I re-ac-hed him as the bla-de ca-me lo-ose and the wo-oden pal-let clat-te-red to the flo-or. "Pretty." Saw-ney held the sword high. "A fetc-hing bla-de. Bonny. Bon-nybon-nybon-ny." The la-ugh-ter ratc-he-ted hig-her and hig-her in-to the cra-zed cack-le of a hye-na-blo-ody-mo-ut-hed, full-bel-li-ed, and happy. Two of a kind, be-ca-use Saw-ney was that, thro-ugh and thro-ugh. When I jum-ped up and hit him, the la-ugh-ter didn't stop. It kept on and on, all I co-uld he-ar.

My tack-le didn't mo-ve him, not an inch. How he ma-na-ged to flo-at the-re, I didn't know. Or ca-re. I just wan-ted him de-ad, down, or both. With my arms wrap-ped aro-und his tor-so, he and I hung sus-pen-ded in the air, li-ke fli-es in am-ber...until Ni-ko jo-ined us. He didn't add the we-ight of his body, tho-ugh. He was smar-ter the-re than I had be-en. He used a mo-re ef-fec-ti-ve we-ight, that of a ba-se-ball bat. At le-ast that's what it felt li-ke, even from the ot-her si-de of it. A mas-si-ve blow was slam-med ac-ross Saw-ney's back. It did what I hadn't. We tumb-led thro-ugh the air and hit the front of the van, the ho-od, and then the winds-hi-eld. It crac-ked un-der-ne-ath us, but held-just ba-rely. I grab-bed for the sword in Saw-ney's hand, but he was al-re-ady go-ne, di-sap-pe-aring up-ward in-to the dark-ness. Ni-ko was in his pla-ce al-most ins-tantly, a black me-tal rod in his hand. Te-les-co-ping and two fe-et long, it wasn't a ba-se-ball bat. It was an il-le-gal ver-si-on of a po-li-ce ba-ton and a hel-lu-va lot mo-re vi-ci-o-us than yo-ur ave-ra-ge Lo-u-is-vil-le Slug-ger.

"New toy?" I as-ked ho-ar-sely.

"I li-ke to tre-at myself on-ce in a whi-le." He held out a hand and pul-led me out of the hol-low my im-pact had for-med in the sa-fety glass. I ma-de it to my kne-es, con-si-de-red trying for my fe-et, and de-ci-ded aga-inst it. Bra-cing myself on the ho-od of the van, I lo-oked up and saw not-hing. Not a damn thing.

"Shit." I had his smell now, up clo-se and per-so-nal. Ice, bo-ne, and in-sa-nity. I hadn't known the lat-ter had a spe-ci-fic scent. It did. "He's go-ne." It was true. The ta-int in the air had fa-ded a frac-ti-on, from pre-sent to past.

"I'm not surp-ri-sed." Nik slip-ped off the ho-od and away to re-turn se-conds la-ter. "He to-ok his arm and scythe with him."

"So much for so-uve-nirs." My chest was be-gin-ning to hurt, the cot-ton wo-ol ac-he mig-ra-ting to a raw acid se-ar. It bur-ned so sa-va-gely that I didn't want to lo-ok at the da-ma-ge Saw-ney had left be-hind. Set-ting my te-eth aga-inst the pa-in, I eased my way from the ho-od down to the flo-or. It wasn't gra-ce-ful, but it wasn't a drun-ken stumb-le eit-her. It didn't mat-ter; Ni-ko spot-ted the he-si-ta-ti-on im-me-di-ately.

He didn't was-te ti-me as-king if I was hurt; he went stra-ight to the he-art of the mat-ter. "Whe-re?"

"He..." I ga-ve a re-luc-tant dark la-ugh as I la-id the flat of my hand on my chest. It was too stran-ge, too god-damn we-ird. And ter-rif-ying. It ma-de it hard to find the words and har-der to put them out the-re.

"Jesus. He ate me."

Ni-ko didn't la-ugh in turn. He didn't see the hu-mor, dark or ot-her-wi-se. Truth-ful-ly ne-it-her did I. With a pen flash-light from his poc-ket for the exa-mi-na-ti-on, he pus-hed asi-de my hand and spre-ad my jac-ket. He didn't ha-ve to lift my shirt. I gu-es-sed the ho-le in it matc-hed the one in me. Stra-ight-shot vi-ewing. For him...I didn't bot-her to lo-ok, not yet. Nik's fa-ce, calm, be-ca-me even mo-re so. It wasn't a go-od sign. "I sup-po-se I get to be the pretty one now," he sa-id light-ly. Mi-nu-tes la-ter, I had a thick bulk of ga-uze ta-ped to my up-per chest. The-re wasn't much blo-od so-aking

through and that didn't ne-ces-sa-rily se-em a po-si-ti-ve. And when Ni-ko's hand fas-te-ned on-to the back of my jac-ket to ur-ge me in-to a walk, that didn't se-em li-ke one eit-her.

"I'm okay," I in-sis-ted. I was. It hurt li-ke hell, but I was all right. I cer-ta-in-ly co-uld walk. One fo-ot in front of the ot-her-it's not that dif-fi-cult.

"I know," he sa-id ag-re-e-ably. Far too ag-re-e-ably, and he didn't let go as we wal-ked out-si-de and ha-iled a cab.

"You lost yo-ur sword." He'd lost it only on-ce be-fo-re...to Hob. Hob the kid-nap-per. Hob the me-ga-lo-ma-ni-ac. Hob the shit-he-ad. It wasn't a go-od me-mory. The ho-mi-ci-dal puck had ne-ar-ly kil-led Nik, and I'd used Nik's sword to re-turn the fa-vor. "You lost yo-ur sword," I sa-id aga-in, oddly sho-ok-up over it. Mo-re than I sho-uld've be-en. Af-ter all, Saw-ney wasn't Hob and Ni-ko was right he-re.

"I'll get it back or I'll get a new one. It do-esn't mat-ter." His grip on me tigh-te-ned as my legs went a lit-tle rub-bery...de-ve-lo-ped a mind of the-ir own. Yet one mo-re thing to add to the "not go-od" list.

"You know," I sa-id with a sud-den daw-ning of truth, "Mr. Golds-te-in wo-uld've kic-ked Lan-ce-lot's ass."

"The butc-her?" He ga-ve it the so-lemn con-si-de-ra-ti-on it de-ser-ved. "I be-li-eve you're right." Damn stra-ight I was, but the-re was no den-ying I had a new em-pathy for the cows that Mr. Golds-te-in chop-ped in-to ste-aks and rump ro-asts.

Be-ing the cow wasn't much fun.

8

We ma-de it ho-me in re-cord ti-me for New York traf-fic, which was ni-ce. I li-ked ho-me. Ho-me was go-od. Saw-ney wasn't the-re and mas-si-ve pa-in-kil-lers we-re. It was a win-win.

"We ne-ed a he-aler. Now."

"Yes, I *know* we ne-ed a he-aler, Ni-ko," Go-od-fel-low sa-id with a stra-ined pa-ti-en-ce. "But we don't ha-ve one."

We'd had a he-aler. Raf-ferty Jef-tic-hew. He'd sa-ved my li-fe on-ce upon a ti-me. Twi-ce upon a ti-me ac-tu-al-ly. But he'd di-sap-pe-ared in the past month. Clo-sed up his ho-use and va-nis-hed. When yo-ur he-aler to-ok off, it was bad news, es-pe-ci-al-ly if you didn't know if yo-ur in-si-des matc-hed yo-ur hu-man out-si-des. And a hos-pi-tal wo-uld know, Raf-ferty had told us, eit-her from ima-ging or blo-od work.

"A doc-tor, then." It was sa-id with de-ter-mi-na-ti-on alt-ho-ugh Ni-ko knew bet-ter...knew it wasn't pos-sib-le.

"And what?" Ro-bin shot back. "Tell them Ca-li-ban was at-tac-ked by a small be-ar in the park or per-haps a lar-ge ho-me-less man with a vo-ra-ci-o-us ap-pe-ti-te and a tas-te for the ot-her whi-te me-at?"

I ope-ned my eyes. "It's not that bad."

Go-od-fel-low sta-red at me inc-re-du-lo-usly whi-le Ni-ko po-in-ted out, "You ha-ven't lo-oked at it yet, Cal." His mo-uth tigh-te-ned. "Re-ser-ve judg-ment."

"Igno-ran-ce is bliss." I clo-sed my eyes aga-in and let the fuzz of co-de-ine carry me along as the dis-cus-si-on went on wit-ho-ut me. Af-ter the cab had drop-ped us off, we still had to get up to the apart-ment. I al-most hadn't ma-de it. On-ce he'd half car-ri-ed me ups-ta-irs, Ni-ko had cal-led in re-in-for-ce-ments and then tur-ned to cle-aning my wo-und. Or at-temp-ting to. It didn't so-und as if it had go-ne well. When Ro-bin had ar-ri-ved, the-re had be-en talk of pos-sib-le musc-le da-ma-ge, sur-gery, skin grafts. All im-pos-sib-le for me. Whi-le the dis-cus-si-on went on, I lay in bed and drif-ted; the-re wasn't much el-se to do. I sug-ges-ted on-ce that Ro-bin and Nik help them-sel-ves to a few pa-in pills too. It re-al-ly to-ok the ur-gency out of things. They didn't ta-ke me up on it. The-ir loss.

"He can't he-al li-ke this," Ni-ko dec-la-red emp-ha-ti-cal-ly. "Infec-ti-on alo-ne wo-uld kill him. We'll get a doc-tor, a sur-ge-on if ne-ces-sary."

"And by 'get' you me-an...?" Ro-bin as-ked du-bi-o-usly.

“You know what I me-an,” Ni-ko sa-id flatly.

That cut thro-ugh the hap-py-pill ho-edown. “Jesus, Nik.” This ti-me I strug-gled to sit up. The pa-in swel-led for se-ve-ral exc-ru-ci-ating mo-ments, then re-ce-ded as I ma-de it up-right and stop-ped mo-ving. I suc-ked in a bre-ath and held it un-til I co-uld spe-ak wit-ho-ut a rag-ged ed-ge sha-king my vo-ice. “You can’t kid-nap a doc-tor. That’s the kind of tro-ub-le we can’t de-al with.” Mons-ter tro-ub-le, ye-ah. That we co-uld do. Hu-man tro-ub-le was to be avo-ided at all cost. At best, we’d ha-ve to le-ave New York. We had li-ves he-re. Ni-ko and Pro-mi-se had a li-fe. I wasn’t go-ing to cost them that.

“It’s tro-ub-le *I’ll* de-al with. Lie back down.” It was sa-id in a to-ne that bro-ok-ed no ar-gu-ment. I ar-gu-ed any-way-go fi-gu-re.

“No way.” It was cold. Our land-lord wasn’t abo-ve skim-ping on the he-at. What land-lord was? I grab-bed a hand-ful of blan-ket and pul-led it up to-ward the lar-ge ban-da-ge on my ba-re chest. Or rat-her I tri-ed. My left arm was we-ak, func-ti-onal but only ba-rely. They’d sa-id it and I hadn’t lis-te-ned. Musc-le da-ma-ge. Nik’s eyes dar-ke-ned as he watc-hed my slow prog-ress. “No god-damn way,” I re-pe-ated stub-bornly as I fi-nal-ly got the blan-ket up. “Lo-man, you ha-ve to know a doc-tor. One who’d ke-ep his mo-uth shut. You know ever-yo-ne, right?” The co-de-ine hel-ped with the dis-com-fort, but it didn’t do anyt-hing for the we-ari-ness, the bo-ne-de-ep ex-ha-us-ti-on. I slum-ped back aga-inst the he-ad-bo-ard des-pi-te myself, ta-king the blan-ket with me.

“One wo-uld think.” He was still pa-le from his own wo-unds, but he lo-ok-ed bet-ter than he had. The po-ison was pas-sing out of his system. That was so-me go-od news any-way. “I met Hip-poc-ra-tes on-ce. I wo-uldn’t ha-ve let him tre-at a pig. Cross-eyed, fond of the bot-tle, and des-pe-ra-tely se-arc-hing for a cu-re for his own per-so-nal crotch rot.” That bre-ezy, cocky smi-le he was so very go-od at fa-ded. “I’m sorry.”

Knuck-les res-ted on my fo-re-he-ad and then my jaw. “Gi-ve him mo-re Tyle-nol in an ho-ur.” Ni-ko’s hand was as icy as the ro-om, as icy as I felt. It didn’t ta-ke a ge-ni-us to know that me-ant I was run-ning a pretty go-od fe-ver. And co-de-ine, as help-ful as it was in ot-her are-as, wasn’t go-ing to bring it down. “I’ll be back,” he went on, un-ben-ding in his go-al. It was easy to trans-la-te. Ni-ko was go-ing so-mep-la-ce whe-re he co-uld snatch a doc-tor. Hos-pi-tal, pro-bably. And that wo-uld be the be-gin-ning of the end.

I’d do-ne the sa-me for him on-ce. I’d strug-gled aga-inst that sa-me damn di-lem-ma. Alt-ho-ugh at the ti-me, I do-ubt I knew di-lem-ma was even a word. I’d be-en se-ven and Ni-ko ele-ven, back be-fo-re the Aup-he had snatc-hed me and I’d lost two ye-ars in the-ir di-men-si-on whi-le only two days had pas-sed in ours.

I didn’t get sick much when I was a kid. . . only on-ce in my li-fe that I re-mem-be-red and it had be-en Ni-ko who’d ta-ken ca-re of me. I’d ha-ve di-ed long be-fo-re Sop-hia ever no-ti-ced I was ill. Bo-ur-bon and whis-key are gre-at for glos-sing over the an-no-ying events of a pa-rent’s da-ily li-fe. When Ni-ko got sick, it wasn’t any dif-fe-rent.

What star-ted out as a cold be-ca-me bronc-hi-tis and fi-nal-ly pne-umo-nia. With that ca-me the di-lem-ma. We didn’t ha-ve in-su-ran-ce, and we didn’t ha-ve a mot-her wil-ling to ta-ke Nik to the doc-tor. If you show up at the doc-tor sick as a dog and wit-ho-ut a pa-rent, they no-ti-ce. They no-ti-ce eno-ugh to get So-ci-al Ser-vi-ces in-vol-ved. May-be fos-ter ca-re wo-uld’ve be-en bet-ter than what we had. It co-uldn’t ha-ve be-en much wor-se, but the-re we-re no gu-a-ran-te-es they wo-uldn’t split us up. Ni-ko was old eno-ugh to know that and he ma-de su-re I knew it too.

We we-ren’t go-ing to be split up. Pe-ri-od.

But when you’re se-ven and the brot-her who’s yo-ur who-le damn world is too sick to get out of bed, you ha-ve to do *so-met-hing*. Anyt-hing. I was too yo-ung for kid-nap-ping, but the-re we-re ot-her things I co-uld do. We li-ved in a tra-iler park then and we had a few el-derly ne-igh-bors. Old pe-op-le had me-di-ci-ne, lots of it. But tho-se sa-me old pe-op-le ha-ted to le-ave the-ir tra-ilers. Ha-ted it li-ke po-ison. I’d wan-ted Nik to tell me what to do, but he was so des-pe-ra-tely sick and even mo-re stub-born. He didn’t want me do-ing anyt-hing stu-pid. At se-ven ye-ars old, that was abo-ut all I *co-uld* do.

Old pe-op-le ma-ke an ex-cep-ti-on abo-ut le-aving the-ir ho-mes when the-re's a fi-re. I'd torc-hed an empty tra-iler two rows over with Sop-hia's ligh-ter and a half-empty bot-tle of Old Crow. When ever-yo-ne had run or hob-bled over to watch the bon-fi-re, I'd ra-ided me-di-ci-ne ca-bi-nets. I wo-uldn't ha-ve known an an-ti-bi-otic from blo-od pres-su-re me-di-ci-ne, so I'd ta-ken it all. Sho-ved bot-tle af-ter bot-tle in my back-pack, and af-ter hit-ting fo-ur tra-ilers, I'd run ho-me to po-ur them in Ni-ko's lap. They had cas-ca-ded down on-to the blan-ket, bright and shi-ning plas-tic re-ams of them. "Which one?" I'd de-man-ded des-pe-ra-tely. "Which *one*?"

It had wor-ked out then. I didn't ha-ve fa-ith that the sa-me wo-uld hold true now.

I ma-de a grab for his arm, using my right hand this ti-me. Bet-we-en the drugs and the fe-ver, it still wasn't much of an at-tempt. I mis-sed. Pro-mi-se didn't. She'd en-te-red the ro-om as qu-i-etly as she en-te-red all ro-oms. La-ying a hand on his arm, she slid it down to curl aro-und his own hand. "I've bro-ught as-sis-tan-ce." She re-le-ased Ni-ko to mo-ve clo-ser and rest a hand on the blan-kets over my leg. "She's not a doc-tor, but she can help." Glan-cing over her sho-ul-der, she cal-led, "De-li-lah?"

She ap-pe-ared in the do-or-way. Flay's sis-ter. I co-uld see the re-semb-lan-ce ins-tantly, alt-ho-ugh they we-re mo-re dif-fe-rent than ali-ke. She was of bet-ter bre-eding, which wo-uld ma-ke her Flay's half sis-ter. Flay co-uld ba-rely ma-na-ge a half-hu-man form. He was pla-inly a we-re-wolf for an-yo-ne who had the eyes and the in-tel-li-gen-ce to lo-ok. With De-li-lah you wo-uld ne-ve-r know. She al-so had a hint of Asi-an fe-atu-res in her al-mond-sha-ped am-ber eyes. Whe-re Flay had al-bi-no whi-te ha-ir, hers was sil-ver-blond, very ne-arly as pa-le. It was pul-led in-to a high pony-ta-il at the crown of her he-ad and hung ru-ler stra-ight to mid-back. A styli-zed neck-la-ce was tat-to-o-ed cho-ker-style aro-und her neck. The jewels set in Cel-tic swirls we-re eyes, wolf, all of them. Gold, red, gre-en, brown, pump-kin oran-ge...and the sof-ter am-ber of her own eyes. An un-be-li-evably ta-len-ted ar-tist had im-bu-ed them with emo-ti-on. So-me we-re full of la-ugh-ter, so-me cu-ri-osity, so-me hun-ger, all of them as-to-nis-hingly re-al.

She wo-re low-slung black je-ans, a matc-hing jac-ket, and a snug am-ber-co-lo-red shirt. Both jac-ket and shirt we-re crop-ped to re-ve-al a go-od se-ven or eight inc-hes of mid-riff, which was as de-co-ra-ted as her neck. But whe-re the one de-co-ra-ti-on had be-en ma-de of ink, the ones on her sto-mach we-re com-po-sed of scar tis-sue. Mul-tip-le slas-hes, thick and cru-el. As a wolf she'd be as pro-ud of tho-se as she was of her tat-too, may-be mo-re so. Ink was ink, but scars we-re bad-ges of sur-vi-val. They sa-id, "I'm he-re. I'm ali-ve. And I bu-ri-ed the son of a bitch who did this."

"You can help? How?" Ni-ko sa-id with ri-gid cont-rol.

Fi-ne blond eye-brows qu-ir-ked and she ra-ised a hand, palm to her mo-uth, to bi-te the he-el of it hard. Then she lic-ked the wo-und and tur-ned the hand to-ward us. The bi-te was he-aling al-re-ady. The blo-od had stop-ped flo-wing and the flesh was knit-ting slowly.

"Of co-ur-se," Go-od-fel-low sa-id. "We-re-wol-ves ha-ve a na-tu-ral pro-pen-sity for he-aling, but the-ir sa-li-va spe-eds the pro-cess."

De-li-lah ga-ve a sing-le re-gal nod, then mo-ved over to me and re-mo-ved my ban-da-ge. Light fla-red be-hind her eyes, tur-ning am-ber to bril-li-ant cop-per. "Ahhh." She so-un-ded imp-res-sed. When a wo-und imp-res-ses a wolf, it do-esn't bo-de well for the guy spor-ting it.

For the first ti-me I lo-oked. Imp-res-si-ve was one word for it. Hor-ri-fic was anot-her. A hunk of flesh ne-arly as ro-und as a child's fist was go-ne from my up-per chest, just...go-ne. Left be-hind was a rag-ged red cra-ter de-ep eno-ugh that I co-uld ima-gi-ne I co-uld see the shi-ne of musc-le. "You we-re right." I swal-lo-wed, lo-oked up at Ni-ko, and ga-ve him a cro-ok-ed smi-le. "You get to be the pretty one now."

"News flash, lit-tle brot-her, I al-ways ha-ve be-en," he re-tor-ted as he res-ted his hand on my sho-ul-der to squ-e-eze lightly.

From De-li-lah's snort, we we-re both fo-oling our-sel-ves. In that mo-ment I co-uld see the im-pa-ti-ent Flay in her cle-arly. Clim-bing on-to the bed, she strad-dled my thighs and strip-ped off her jac-ket. "Go," she or-de-red to the ro-om in ge-ne-ral. "Now." It was mo-re of Flay. I'd be-en wrong abo-ut De-li-lah; she wasn't what the old-scho-ol wol-ves con-si-de-red pu-re bre-eding af-ter all.

The com-mu-ni-ty was di-vi-ded among the wol-ves who che-ris-hed the old ways...pu-re hu-man to

pu-re wolf and back aga-in, and the ones who tho-ught the mo-re wolf you we-re, the bet-ter. And they me-ant all wolf all the ti-me with no ta-int of hu-man. Tho-se we-re the ones who bred for the re-ces-si-ve qu-ali-ti-es. Flay and De-li-lah had co-me from a pack who had emb-ra-ced that.

She had the nor-mal te-eth of hu-man form, whi-te, even, and stra-ight, un-li-ke Flay's mass of wolf te-eth cram-med in-to a hu-man mo-uth. But whi-le her te-eth we-re nor-mal, her vo-cal cords we-ren't. Tal-king was dif-fi-cult, not garb-led or co-ar-se, but raspy li-ke the ton-gue of a cat and thick as but-ters-cotch pud-ding. Yo-ur ave-ra-ge per-son wo-uld've pin-ned it on a he-avy ac-cent. Tho-se in the know wo-uld he-ar it for what it was-a she-wolf from the wild do-ing her best to talk.

"Go?" Ni-ko sho-ok his he-ad and re-fu-sed ada-mantly, "No."

"Ima-gi-ne it, Ni-ko," Pro-mi-se sa-id simply. "It will be rat-her...inti-ma-te."

On that no-te, Go-od-fel-low promptly of-fe-red to stay. Pro-mi-se marc-hed him out wit-ho-ut any ap-pa-rent sympathy, but she did pla-ce a sup-por-ti-ve hand on his back. They might ha-ve the-ir dif-fe-ren-ces, Ro-bin's thing for Ni-ko be-ing a big one, but Pro-mi-se did ca-re for the puck, which se-emed to shock the hell out of him.

"Call if you ne-ed me."

I ra-ised my ga-ze to Ni-ko and qu-ir-ked my lips. "If be-ing lic-ked gets to be too much, I'll yell."

"Smart-ass." A last firm clasp of my sho-ul-der and he left.

De-li-lah tur-ned her he-ad to watch him go, then lo-ok-ed down at me. "Still nur-sing?" Rusty and slow, but un-ders-tan-dab-le-the ca-ni-ne ver-si-on of a purr. It was so-ot-hing in its own way.

"He's a go-od mom," I res-pon-ded, unof-fen-ded.

"Oh," I ad-ded dif-fi-dently, "sorry abo-ut my scent." Wol-ves we-ren't wild abo-ut the Aup-he smell, and, con-si-de-ring the re-ac-ti-on I'd got-ten from Flay and the Kin, I had my fa-ir sha-re of it.

"Aup-he? You?" Her mo-uth cur-ved, dis-mis-sing me as an Aup-he cub-let at best. "Cocky pup. Clo-se yo-ur eyes."

I star-ted to pro-test, but bet-we-en the anc-hor of nar-co-tics and a lack of de-si-re to see the ga-ping pit in my chest any lon-ger, I went ahe-ad and obe-yed. I felt the to-uch of her ton-gue aga-inst the wo-und. It was warm, mo-ist, and gently met-ho-di-cal as it mo-ved. It was al-so odd as hell, and, as Pro-mi-se had sa-id, in-ti-ma-te.

It hurt as well, but only in the be-gin-ning. Her sa-li-va must ha-ve num-bed as it he-aled, be-ca-use the pa-in fa-ded, even the re-si-du-al pa-in that had bro-ken thro-ugh the pills. It wasn't long be-fo-re I drif-ted, not as-le-ep and not awa-ke. The-re was an inc-re-dib-le he-at gro-wing in my chest, cha-sing away the chill of fe-ver. The-re pro-bably wo-uld've be-en an inc-re-dib-le he-at in a lo-wer lo-ca-ti-on too, but it had be-en a long, hard day. Even twenty-ye-ar-old hor-mo-nes co-uldn't fight aga-inst this day. So-on eno-ugh, half sle-ep be-ca-me the ge-nu-ine de-al and I dre-amed. Long sil-ver ha-ir tur-ned to short red wa-ves, am-ber eyes to de-ep brown. The warm we-ight on top of me-De-li-lah to Ge-or-gi-na.

It was a ni-ce dre-am. Hot as hell and very ni-ce in-de-ed. And then the dre-am chan-ged. The-re we-re clot-hes in-vol-ved this ti-me.

It wasn't the only dif-fe-ren-ce. When I tho-ught of Ge-or-ge, I usu-al-ly pic-tu-red her, de-pen-ding on the sta-te of my wil-lpo-wer, in the sa-me dress. A brown silk sund-ress...cher-ry cho-co-la-te. I'd se-en her on-ce in it and ne-ver for-got-ten the ima-ge or the fe-eling I'd had. So it didn't mat-ter that it was fall and far too co-ol for that dress, I still tho-ught it, dre-amed it. Ex-cept this ti-me. This ti-me Ge-or-ge was we-ar-ing a fi-nely knit swe-ater, de-ep crim-son, and filmy skirt of gold, bron-ze, and cop-per. She al-so had a tiny ruby pi-er-cing in her no-se. It ma-de her lo-ok exo-tic, a pri-es-tess of a far-go-ne ti-me and pla-ce. A prop-het, and wasn't that what she was?

"A ruby," I sa-id in a vo-ice thick with sle-ep. "Li-ke yo-ur ha-ir."

"It's a gar-net," she cor-rec-ted with a smi-le. "A prac-ti-cal gem for a prac-ti-cal girl."

Her hand was hol-ding mi-ne, our fin-gers lin-ked. "I miss you, Ge-or-ge." It was so-met-hing I co-uld only say in a dre-am, be-ca-use ad-mit-ting it in the wa-king world wo-uldn't do eit-her of us any go-od.

"You don't ha-ve to." She le-aned to kiss me. We'd kis-sed be-fo-re, but not li-ke this. Our first had be-en with the re-li-ef of res-cue, the se-cond a bit-ters-we-et go-od-bye. This was the kiss of a

dif-fe-rent li-fe. He-at and ho-pe and all the ti-me in the world. The-re we-re only the two of us. No mons-ters, wit-ho-ut or wit-hin. Dre-ams can be that way, the go-od ones. Then you wa-ke up. You al-ways wa-ke up.

Be-ca-use they are only dre-ams.

“Stub-born.”

I ope-ned my eyes as Ge-or-ge’s vo-ice still lin-ge-red in the air. I ac-tu-al-ly he-ard it-he-ard her. She wasn’t the-re, yet I knew if I saw her...if she sho-wed up at my do-or at that mo-ment, she wo-uld be we-ar-ing crim-son, gold, and a gar-net.

But that was so-met-hing I wasn’t go-ing to think abo-ut. Co-uldn’t think abo-ut. I to-uc-hed the small pla-it of cop-per ha-ir ti-ed aro-und my wrist, a me-men-to of ti-mes past. Of do-ubts pre-sent.

No, I’d ma-de my de-ci-si-on, and it was the right one. I knew it. In my gut, I knew it, even if no one el-se did. I sat up and wa-ited for the pa-in to dist-ract me from use-less tho-ughts. It didn’t co-me. I lo-ok-ed down. The ban-da-ge was still go-ne; it hadn’t be-en rep-la-ced. The-re was no ne-ed to. The raw cra-ter was go-ne. In its pla-ce was an in-den-ta-ti-on, still fist-si-zed, but mo-re shal-low, abo-ut a qu-ar-ter of an inch de-ep-as if that fist had be-en gen-tly pres-sed aga-inst soft clay. The scar tis-sue was purp-le and thick and ugly as hell. I co-uldn’t ha-ve ca-red less. When I was a kid, Sop-hia had on-ce told me that, whi-le I was a mons-ter, I was a be-a-uti-ful one. I’d known from that mo-ment on that what was on the out-si-de didn’t co-unt for anyt-hing. Our mot-her had be-en be-a-uti-ful too, physi-cal-ly, but in-si-de she was as ugly as any An-nis or re-ve-nant. Ug-li-er in so-me ways. They had the-ir ex-cu-se. She’d had no-ne.

The-re was a rust-le of pa-per as I pus-hed the co-vers asi-de. A no-te star-ted to fall to the flo-or and I ca-ught it be-fo-re it co-uld...with my left hand. The we-ak-ness was go-ne, the musc-le da-ma-ge re-pa-ired. Un-fol-ding the pa-per, I re-ad words in an un-fa-mi-li-ar hand. *Now you are pretty.*

Ye-ah, the wol-ves did ap-pre-ci-ate a go-od scar. De-li-lah was no ex-cep-ti-on.

9

Ni-ko had fi-xed the kind of fo-od for bre-ak-fast that was nor-mal-ly ban-ned from the apart-ment. Pan-ca-kes, ba-con, gre-asy po-ta-to-es. Go-od, *go-od* fo-od-not the soy, whe-at, egg-subs-ti-tu-te crap he nor-mal-ly tri-ed to con-vin-ce me to eat. “I sho-uld be din-ner for a su-per-na-tu-ral pit bull mo-re of-ten,” I sa-id aro-und a mo-uth-ful of syrup and blu-eber-ri-es.

“Or not,” he sa-id mat-ter-of-factly, tur-ning a glass of ju-ice back and forth bet-we-en long, cal-lo-used fin-gers.

“Or not,” I sa-id apo-lo-ge-ti-cal-ly. I didn’t see the evi-den-ce of a sle-ep-less night in his fa-ce, but I knew it was the-re no-net-he-less. I sho-ve-led in anot-her fork-ful of po-ta-to-es. “You tell the ot-hers abo-ut Saw-ney’s new fa-mily?”

“The re-ve-nants? Yes. No one was pre-ci-sely thril-led.” It wasn’t a surp-ri-se. Re-ve-nants we-ren’t po-pu-lar with an-yo-ne or anyt-hing. Dumb, smelly, and me-an.

Le-aning back with my belly full, I con-si-de-red bur-ping, but my knee ga-ve a phan-tom twin-ge with the me-mory of the last ti-me I’d had that idea. Nik enj-oyed go-od man-ners and he enj-oyed them in ot-hers...with gre-at and oc-ca-si-onal-ly pa-in-ful ent-hu-si-asm. Pa-in-ful for me any-way. Pat-ting my chest lightly thro-ugh the T-shirt I’d slip-ped on, I sa-id, “De-li-lah did go-od work.”

“Ama-zing work.” He drank the ju-ice in se-ve-ral smo-oth swal-lows and then pus-hed the glass away.

“She was he-re ne-arly the en-ti-re night, but what she ac-comp-lis-hed...” He sho-ok his he-ad. “She was worth every penny.”

“I tho-ught she was hel-ping us be-ca-use of Flay.” I de-ci-ded I co-uld fit in one mo-re pi-ece of ba-con and sat back up to re-ach for the pla-te.

“Yes, but she *is* Kin. Fa-mily is im-por-tant, mo-ney is im-por-tant. The-re’s no re-ason she can’t ho-nor both. I ad-mi-re her ini-ti-ati-ve. Yo-ur ini-ti-ati-ve, ho-we-ver, is a dif-fe-rent story.” A fo-ot rap-ped my ank-le briskly. “I co-ok-ed. You cle-ar.”

“Hey, I’m wo-un-ded,” I pro-tes-ted. “Ha-ve a he-art.”

“You *we-re* wo-un-ded.” His fo-ot im-pac-ted aga-in, this ti-me with a lit-tle mo-re Eng-lish on it. “You *are* lazy. Let us work on ma-king that past ten-se as well.” He sto-od. “I te-ach three clas-ses to-day. I’ll be ho-me by six. We’ll go hun-ting then.”

The-re was a bar-ret-te on the dres-ser in my ro-om, all that was left of one of Saw-ney’s vic-tims. Ka-tie the tom-boy’s sunny ha-ir clip. “I’m re-ady for a lit-tle hun-ting trip,” I sa-id with de-ter-mi-na-ti-on. I co-uld call Is-hi-ah and ask to get my shift switc-hed from to-night to this af-ter-no-on. He wo-uldn’t ha-ve a prob-lem with it, and if he did, I’d sic Go-od-fel-low on him.

As it tur-ned out, Is-hi-ah wan-ted to spe-ak to me, the so-oner the bet-ter. I sho-wed up at the Ninth Circ-le an ho-ur la-ter, won-de-ring, not for the first ti-me, if it was Is-hi-ah’s dark sen-se of hu-mor or if the-re was mo-re to pe-ris than Ro-bin knew.

“Go-od. You’re he-re.”

I con-ti-nu-ed to wrap the bar ap-ron aro-und my wa-ist and nod-ded. “He-re I am,” I con-fir-med, puz-zled. Is-hi-ah wasn’t usu-al-ly one for be-ra-ting the ob-vi-o-us. “Altho-ugh, trust me, I de-ser-ved a sick day.”

“You fo-und the elu-si-ve Saw-ney Be-ane, then?” His wings we-re out in for-ce and rust-ling im-pa-ti-ently.

“Ru-mor mill’s al-re-ady wor-king over-ti-me, huh?” The bar was mostly empty, but last night it wo-uld’ve be-en full, and mons-ters li-ke to gos-sip the sa-me as an-yo-ne el-se. “Ye-ah, we fo-und him, and he pretty much kic-ked our as-ses.” I po-ured myself a glass of to-ma-to ju-ice. Not as man-ly as a slug of whis-key, but bet-ter at rep-la-cing iron from blo-od loss. “So, what’d you want to talk to me abo-ut? Am I go-ing to be emp-lo-yee of the month? Is the-re a pla-que in-vol-ved?”

“After im-pa-ling that Gu-lon with a be-er tap? It se-ems un-li-kely,” he sa-id with an-no-yan-ce.

“He bro-ught in out-si-de ap-pe-ti-zers. It’s aga-inst the ru-les.” Not to men-ti-on that the ap-pe-ti-zer had be-en a dog. A big play-ful mutt who hadn’t had a clue what was in sto-re for him. The be-er tap had cle-aned right up when I’d fi-nis-hed with it. No harm do-ne, alt-ho-ugh the Gu-lon prob-a-bly wo-uldn’t ag-ree with that as-ses-sment. “How is Ro-ver do-ing, by the way?”

“That is be-si-de the po-int,” he sa-id, eyes stony. I wasn’t bu-ying it. One of the ot-her bar-ten-ders, a pe-ri na-med Dan-ye-al-Dan-ny to me-sa-id Is-hi-ah had kept the dog, which was now fat, happy, and a ve-ri-tab-le fo-un-ta-in of uri-ne whe-ne-ver his mas-ter’s back was tur-ned.

“And what was the po-int aga-in?” I as-ked in-no-cently.

“Ne-ver mind.” He got out whi-le the get-ting was go-od and fol-ded his arms. “I want to talk to you abo-ut Ro-bin.”

“Go-od-fel-low?” I sa-id cu-ri-o-usly. “You’re not go-ing to ban him from the bar, are you? He’ll only show up mo-re of-ten if you do. Pro-ba-bly mo-ve the hell in.”

“No.” The wings we-re spre-ading now. It was the un-cons-ci-o-us re-ac-ti-on of pe-ris to stress or dan-ger. Danny fla-red his wings at even the hint of a bar fight, but as the ste-ely Is-hi-ah was abo-ut the furt-hest thing from high-strung as you co-uld get, I was bet-ting that dan-ger of the big and bad kind was the op-ti-on he-re.

“I’m he-ar-ing things,” he an-no-un-ced qu-i-etly.

“What kind of things?” I prod-ded.

“The-re’s word that Ro-bin is be-ing tar-ge-ted. I he-ard it just to-day.” Catc-hing a glimp-se of fe-at-hers from the cor-ner of his eye, he his-sed in exas-pe-ra-ti-on and the wings wa-ve-red li-ke a he-at mi-ra-ge and di-sap-pe-ared. “I don’t know who’s be-hind it. I don’t know if it’s true, but the ru-mor is out the-re. I wo-uld tell him myself, but his har-ri-dan ho-use-ke-eper won’t put my calls thro-ugh. And if I sho-wed up at his ho-me in per-son, I might ha-ve to tell him over cross-ed swords.”

I still wan-ted to know what had led to the pe-cu-li-ar ani-mo-sity on Ro-bin’s si-de ver-sus the ve-xed watch-ful-ness on Is-hi-ah’s, but now wasn’t the ti-me. “Tar-ge-ted?” The mu-se-um. “He was at-tac-ked two days ago by a sir-rush. We tho-ught it was a ran-dom thing. Shit.” I grab-bed my cell pho-ne. “You don’t know anyt-hing? Who’s be-hind it? Why?”

“No. Not-hing. It’s the flim-si-est of he-ar-say, the so-ur-ce of which I can’t de-ter-mi-ne.” His jaw set

as his eyes nar-ro-wed. “And I’ve ma-de the ef-fort.” His hand clenc-hed in-to a fist. “An ex-ten-si-ve ef-fort.”

Damn. If Is-hi-ah co-uldn’t get to the bot-tom of it, it was go-ing to be a hard nut to crack. Go-od-fel-low’s ans-we-ring mac-hi-ne pic-ked up and I swo-re aga-in. “I’ve got to go.” I rip-ped off the ap-ron as I ca-me aro-und the bar and tos-sed it on the co-un-ter.

“Ma-ke su-re the son of a bitch watc-hes his back,” he com-man-ded.

“I’ll do one bet-ter,” I res-pon-ded as I hit the do-or.

“I’ll watch it for him.”

When I ar-ri-ved, I was swe-aty and bre-at-hing hard from my run up twenty-fi-ve flights. I didn’t ta-ke ele-va-tors. A go-od fight was abo-ut de-fen-se and of-fen-se. It was hard to get a go-od de-fen-se go-ing in a ste-el box-a gi-ant mo-uset-rap, for all in-tents and pur-po-ses. And I wasn’t fond of anyt-hing with the word “trap” in it.

After I’d po-un-ded my fist aga-inst the do-or, Se-rag-lio ope-ned it and lo-ok-ed up at me with di-sap-pro-val. “You most su-rely are a lo-ud yo-ung man.”

“Sorry, ma’am. I ne-ed to talk to Rob.” I felt as if I we-re six and as-king if my fri-end co-uld co-me out and play.

Smel-ling of cin-na-mon and ho-ney, she pur-sed full lips pa-in-ted a glossy bur-gundy and sho-ok her he-ad. Her long, cas-ca-ding sil-ver ear-rings rang li-ke church bells. “He’s not he-re.” But she step-ped asi-de to let me in. “He may be at work or he may be out de-ba-uc-hing the in-no-cent. Lord abo-ve, I can-not ke-ep up with that man’s sche-du-le.”

“Who can?” I mut-te-red. Ro-bin had kept his non-hu-man ori-gins from the wo-man, but the-re was no way he co-uld con-ce-al his se-xu-al and al-co-ho-lic exp-lo-its. He didn’t even try. Hell, why wo-uld he? He was as pro-ud as if the-re we-re a No-bel ca-te-gory for high li-ving and he was up for con-si-de-ra-ti-on. Se-du-cing, swil-ling and just pro-ud to be no-mi-na-ted. I tri-ed his cell aga-in. Not-hing. “Do you know his of-fi-ce num-ber?”

Cluc-king her ton-gue, she went to the kitc-hen and ope-ned a dra-wer to pull out a le-at-her no-te-bo-ok. She then po-in-ted out a num-ber with a long na-il the sa-me co-lor as her lips-tick. It was ama-zingly pris-ti-ne for her pro-fes-si-on, I tho-ught as I cal-led the pro-vi-ded di-gits. He wasn’t the-re eit-her. “*God-damn it.*”

Fat-hom-less black eyes pin-ned me di-sap-pro-vingly as tho-se start-lingly im-ma-cu-la-te na-ils tap-ped aga-inst the co-un-ter. “Sorry, ma’am,” I sa-id aga-in. In the past ye-ar I’d fo-ught aga-inst an army of Aup-he and a mas-si-ve two-he-aded we-re-wolf and yet this wo-man had me bob-bing and we-aving. “I just ne-ed to find Rob.” I re-mem-be-red to use his “hu-man” na-me with ease. What Sop-hia hadn’t ta-ught us abo-ut lying and dis-semb-ling, a li-fe on the run had fil-led in.

The tro-ub-le was I co-uldn’t tell her that I was wor-ri-ed abo-ut him. She wo-uld ask why and Ro-bin wasn’t he-re to co-me up with one of the bril-li-ant and ut-terly fal-se sto-ri-es he was so go-od at spin-ning. I ten-ded to go with the “What’s it to you, as-sho-le?” res-pon-se to qu-es-ti-ons I didn’t want to ans-wer. And I co-uld only pic-tu-re which of the ho-use-hold ap-pli-an-ces aro-und us wo-uld be in-ser-ted in me if I used that li-ne with Se-rag-lio.

Her eyes we-re still mar-ked with ma-ter-nal di-sap-po-int-ment at my po-or eti-qu-et-te, but she re-len-ted eno-ugh to say, “I can’t help you, su-gar. I am not psychic, and, in this ho-use, thank the he-avens abo-ve for that.”

No, she wasn’t, but I knew so-me-one who was. This “god-damn it” I kept si-lent and wit-hin.

Ge-or-ge didn’t carry a cell pho-ne, so I ne-eded to show up with the rest of the sup-pli-cants at the ice cre-am shop ne-ar Pi-er 17 on the East Ri-ver. As usu-al, I was fresh out of cash for cab fa-re and it to-ok two tra-ins and a hi-ke to ma-ke it the-re from Ro-bin’s pla-ce.

Ge-or-ge used to hold co-urt at the ice cre-am shop af-ter scho-ol. On-ce she had gra-du-ated, she kept the sa-me sche-du-le. Pe-op-le ne-eded to be ab-le to find her, to de-pend on her, she sa-id. She hadn’t yet de-ci-ded whet-her col-le-ge was for her or not. Ser-vi-ce to ot-hers ca-me first. Of

co-ur-se, if she'd lo-ok in-to her own fu-tu-re, she'd know if col-le-ge was the-re. But she didn't lo-ok and she wo-uldn't. That wo-uld be che-ating and Ge-or-ge didn't che-at. Things hap-pe-ned as they we-re me-ant to, and whi-le the lit-tle events co-uld be chan-ged, the big ones ne-ver co-uld. Trying wo-uld be not only a was-te of ti-me, but al-so an in-sult to exis-ten-ce it-self. She co-uld tell tho-se who ca-me to her the small things and ke-ep to her-self the unc-han-ge-ab-le, but she didn't see any re-ason to tempt her-self by lo-oking past the dis-tant tur-nings of her own path. Be-si-des, she'd on-ce sa-id with che-cky smi-le and ear-nest he-art, it wo-uld ru-in the surp-ri-se.

The ice cre-am shop was run by a par-ti-al-ly blind, mostly de-af cod-ger who-se na-me I re-mem-be-red only half the ti-me. Ge-or-ge kept him in bu-si-ness. She didn't ta-ke anyt-hing from the pe-op-le who ca-me to her, but she did gently sug-gest pe-op-le buy an ice-cre-am co-ne or so-da as thanks for ha-ving a pla-ce out of the we-at-her. I'd yet to see a per-son say no to her.

Except for me.

I didn't ha-ve ti-me to mess with ice cre-am and I slap-ped a few bucks on the co-un-ter. "Tre-at the next co-up-le of kids," I or-de-red to the old guy half do-zing be-hind it on a high-bac-ked sto-ol, and he-aded for Ge-or-ge's tab-le. She sat se-re-nely, hands fol-ded on For-mi-ca. The Orac-le of Pe-arl Stre-et. Brown eyes warm, wi-de mo-uth softly cur-ved, she was crim-son, gold, and gar-net. . . just li-ke my dre-am, just li-ke I knew she wo-uld be. "Cal." She re-ac-hed out as I sat op-po-si-te her and to-ok my hand as easily as if she'd do-ne it a hund-red ti-mes be-fo-re. "Mr. Ge-ever has mis-sed you."

"I'll bet." He was comp-le-tely as-le-ep now, he-ad pil-lo-wed on the co-un-ter by my mo-ney. I lo-ok-ed down at her skin aga-inst mi-ne, sun-set am-ber aga-inst mo-on pa-le.

Mons-ter pa-le.

I slid my hand from be-ne-ath hers, mis-sing the warmth of it ins-tantly. I didn't lo-ok at her eyes or her short cap of wavy red ha-ir or the fa-int freck-les that spil-led ac-ross her no-se and the tops of her gold-brown che-eks. I didn't ha-ve to-I had them me-mo-ri-zed. "I ne-ed to find Ro-bin," I sa-id ab-ruptly. "He's in tro-ub-le."

"Tro-ub-le?" Her brow wrink-led. Ne-ver one to back down, she left her re-j-ec-ted hand on the tab-le as if it we-re only a mat-ter of ti-me be-fo-re I chan-ged my mind.

"Ye-ah. So-met-hing is af-ter him. I ha-ve no idea who or what, and now I can't find him." My own hands I drop-ped in-to my lap to rest on my thighs. Get thee be-hind me, Sa-tan, or get thee un-der the tab-le. Wha-te-ver.

"Ro-bin." She sa-id it as if she we-re cal-ling him, as if he we-re aro-und the cor-ner. Out of sight, but still wit-hin ears-hot. Clo-sing her eyes, she frow-ned, eyes mo-ving be-hind the cop-per-brus-hed lids as tho-ugh scan-ning the pa-ge of a bo-ok. Se-ve-ral se-conds pas-sed and then her eyes flew open. I tho-ught it was with dist-ress or fe-ar, but then she flus-hed. "Oh."

I got it im-me-di-ately. This *was* Go-od-fel-low she was trying for a pe-ek at. "Oh," I ec-ho-ed she-epishly be-fo-re apo-lo-gi-zing. "Shit. Sorry. I didn't think abo-ut that."

"He's very . . . lim-ber." She par-ted her lips, sho-wing small te-eth in a ga-min smi-le. "I'm imp-res-sed and edu-ca-ted."

"He's okay, then?" I le-aned back in my cha-ir, tri-ed not to think abo-ut the word "lim-ber" and that kno-wing smi-le she'd flas-hed, and ex-ha-led in re-li-ef.

"He's fi-ne." Eyes bright, she til-ted her he-ad. "And very happy right now. Among fri-ends-the fri-end-li-est of fri-ends."

"You're la-ug-hing at me," I snor-ted. "Go ahe-ad. So-me-one sho-uld get so-me enj-oy-ment out of this be-si-des Go-od-fel-low. Can you gi-ve me his ad-dress? He's sa-fe now. He might not be af-ter he le-aves." She wo-uld know if he wo-uld be or not, but I wasn't go-ing to ask. If she'd be-en wil-ling to lo-ok that far, she wo-uld've told me. Be-si-des, I re-fu-sed to be-li-eve in that who-le "everyt-hing hap-pens for a re-ason" bul-lshit. Any uni-ver-se that wo-uld ac-tu-al-ly *plan* my be-ing born of an Aup-he wasn't a uni-ver-se I wan-ted any part of. Des-tiny and fa-te co-uld kiss my ass.

"Yes. I can gi-ve you the ad-dress." She did and watc-hed as I sto-od up. "You *are* stub-born, you know."

Just as she'd sa-id that mor-ning in my dre-am. "So-me things are worth it," I sa-id qu-i-etly. And they

we-re...worth be-ing stub-born, worth the sac-ri-fi-ce. Li-ke ke-eping her sa-fe. Li-ke let-ting the Aup-he li-ne die with me.

“Cal.”

I sho-ok my he-ad and sto-od. “Thanks for the help, Ge-or-gie.” I ma-de it to the do-or be-fo-re she spo-ke aga-in.

“You’ve run all yo-ur li-fe, Ca-li-ban. You ha-ve to stop. So-oner or la-ter, you ha-ve to.” The bell over-he-ad rang as I ope-ned the do-or, but it didn’t drown out the next words. “Ple-ase ma-ke it so-oner.”

Sig-ni-fi-cant words. They de-ser-ved to be tho-ught abo-ut, to be con-si-de-red ca-re-ful-ly. I pus-hed them out of my he-ad the mo-ment I pas-sed thro-ugh the do-or. I ne-eded my re-sol-ve, which wo-uldn’t be hel-ped by mul-ling over what she had sa-id. Or by the fact that every ti-me I tur-ned my back on her felt li-ke I was tur-ning my back on a go-od por-ti-on of my li-fe. Tho-se things co-uldn’t mat-ter. Not if I wan-ted to ke-ep her sa-fe, and in my li-fe she ne-ver co-uld be.

It was the way it had to be.

The ad-dress was in the East Vil-la-ge, not too far from the fifth-flo-or walk-up Ni-ko and I used to li-ve in that ba-rely de-ser-ved to be cal-led an apart-ment. Go-od ti-mes. I had a fe-eling the-re wo-uld be wild-ly co-lo-red ha-ir, tat-to-os, and lots of black in the ne-ar fu-tu-re. Go-od-fel-low had al-ways li-ked ar-tists-they we-re open-min-ded, ad-ven-tu-ro-us, and wil-ling to wors-hip him in many me-di-ums, and what bet-ter pla-ce to find them than the East Vil-la-ge?

Ro-bin even had a fres-co of him-self han-ging on his apart-ment wall, tho-ugh the ar-tist who’d pa-in-ted that had do-ne that for the lo-ve of a be-a-uti-ful form in ge-ne-ral, not for the lo-ve of Ro-bin’s form spe-ci-fi-cal-ly. He’d be-en the brot-her of the wo-man Ro-bin was go-ing to marry. Go-od-fel-low wasn’t one for tal-king abo-ut his past-a sta-te-ment not as ri-di-cu-lo-us as it se-emed. He wo-uld talk wit-ho-ut end abo-ut every ca-su-al en-co-un-ter, every his-to-ri-cal fi-gu-re he’d ever met or scre-wed from the birth of ti-me on.

The key word was “ca-su-al.” Ro-bin wasn’t qu-ick to sha-re the things that truly to-uc-hed him. I tho-ught in the be-gin-ning that it was be-ca-use not-hing did to-uch him. When Ni-ko and I had first met him, I didn’t think the-re co-uld be a cre-atu-re mo-re su-per-fi-ci-al, shal-low, or self-absor-bed. I’d be-en wrong.

The puck had the depth of a long-aban-do-ned well, and if tho-se depths we-re de-so-la-te and murky, that was the re-sult of out-li-ving ever-yo-ne you ca-red for. Ro-bin was a hu-man-lo-ver, not a ni-ce turn of phra-se among mons-ters. So not only was he des-pi-sed for a puck’s na-tu-ral tric-kery and thi-e-ving ways; he was scor-ned as well for the com-pany he kept. His hu-man com-pa-ni-ons wo-uld die, and the non-hu-man wo-uld ha-ve lit-tle to do with him. Ro-bin bo-as-ted of his vast circ-le of ac-qu-a-in-tan-ces-how many he knew-but kno-wing and be-ing ac-cep-ted are far dif-fe-rent things.

I didn’t know when Ro-bin ga-ve up on hu-mans, when let-ting them go...when watc-hing them die got to be too much, but I sus-pec-ted it was aro-und the ti-me of that pa-in-ting. It had be-en cre-ated in Pom-pe-ii days be-fo-re he lost his cho-sen fa-mily, and now that hunk of an-ci-ent wall hung on a mo-dern-day one-a cons-tant re-min-der.

Why he’d ma-de an ef-fort to con-nect with Ni-ko and me, I’d not yet fi-gu-red out. Why he pic-ked that mo-ment to bre-ak a so-li-tary pat-tern of al-most two tho-usand ye-ars was still a mystery. I wasn’t su-re I co-uld’ve be-en bra-ve eno-ugh to ta-ke that chan-ce. Hell, I knew I wo-uldn’t ha-ve be-en.

I was bra-ve eno-ugh, tho-ugh, to knock at the do-or whe-re Ge-or-ge sa-id he wo-uld be, but only just ba-rely. I co-uldn’t be-gin to gu-ess what might be be-hind the do-or, but if I saw one don-key, I was go-ne. Ro-bin co-uld fa-ce cer-ta-in de-ath on his own. Two girls, na-ked ex-cept for the-ir body art, ope-ned the do-or, hu-man fe-ma-le, and from the twi-ning of arms and pres-sing of flesh, they we-re *very* clo-se. I swal-lo-wed thickly and to-ok a clo-ser lo-ok. I me-an, Jesus, who wo-uldn’t?

One was pa-in-ted in blu-es and gre-ens with wa-ves and le-aping fish. The ot-her was all over ra-ging fla-mes with the yel-low sca-les of pho-eni-xes shi-ning thro-ugh the red fi-re. As art went, it was pret-ty co-ol. As for the nu-dity, that was damn co-ol too.

“Is...ah...Ro-bin he-re?” I as-ked, for-get-ting his na-me for a se-cond as my bra-in de-ci-ded to send

my blo-od so-uth for the win-ter.

The red girl lo-oked blank and the blue one wrap-ped her arms aro-und the ot-her's scar-let neck and her legs aro-und a wa-ist pa-in-ted with the eter-nal fi-re li-zard. Her lips we-re busy suc-king lightly at an ear-lo-be and nip-ping the soft skin be-hind. It was dist-rac-ting. I did ne-ed to find Ro-bin, but how of-ten did you get a show li-ke this and not ha-ve to pay a big-ass cab-le bill for it?

"Bo-om chi-ka bow wow."

Ro-bin slid up, pat-ter-ned he-ad to toe in gre-en le-aves. He was a fo-rest and in the fo-rest we-re eyes-the ca-gey, wi-se ones of fo-xes pe-ering thro-ugh the fo-li-age. "So-me-one has you down pat," I snor-ted. "Who's run-ning aro-und he-re pa-in-ted li-ke a hen-ho-use?"

"They're res-ting." He grin-ned sha-me-les-sly. "They're very, very ti-red." The grin wi-de-ned. "But you, on the ot-her hand, are wi-de-awa-ke. Ca-re to help yo-ur-self?" He wa-ved an arm to-ward the in-si-de of the apart-ment. The-re we-re thirty pe-op-le at le-ast, all brightly co-lo-red and most of them ho-ri-zon-tal.

"Are they all hu-man?" I as-ked.

"Yes."

"Then no." I to-ok his arm and pul-led him in-to the hall. "I ne-ed to talk to you. The-re's tro-ub-le."

"Isn't the-re al-ways? It's ex-ha-us-ting. Per-haps I sho-uld dress first?" he sug-ges-ted dryly. "I'm per-fectly com-for-tab-le as Ze-us ma-de me, but not ever-yo-ne is as ame-nab-le."

With the two na-ked girls hol-ding my at-ten-ti-on, I hadn't even re-ali-zed Go-od-fel-low was we-aring the sa-me party at-ti-re as ever-yo-ne el-se...abso-lu-tely not-hing. "Crap," I gro-aned, blin-ked, then lo-oked away hur-ri-edly. "God-damn, Go-od-fel-low. You ha-ve a per-mit for that?" Talk abo-ut yo-ur we-a-pons of mass dest-ruc-ti-on. Jesus.

"Now you know pre-ci-sely why I'm so smug," he sa-id with mock ha-ute-ur. "Gi-ve me ten mi-nu-tes." He di-sap-pe-ared back in-to the in-te-ri-or of the apart-ment. I wa-ited in the hall, a lack of fa-ith in my own wil-lpo-wer ke-eping me the-re-not to men-ti-on a he-althy do-se of sur-vi-val ins-tinct. It wasn't only la-mi-as that co-uld dra-in a man un-to de-ath. The girls still fra-med in the do-or lo-oked en-ti-rely ca-pab-le of do-ing the sa-me. Not ne-ces-sa-rily a bad way to go, tho-ugh.

"All right, kid, I'm cle-aner than a nun's pa-ir of Sun-day pan-ti-es. What tro-ub-le are you spe-aking of?" Ro-bin, dres-sed with damp ha-ir, had step-ped back in-to the hall to clo-se the do-or be-hind him. The red and blue girls we-re still in-ter-ming-led clo-se eno-ugh to be only se-conds away from ma-king purp-le, and I cra-ned my he-ad to catch one last glimp-se as the me-tal swung to block them from sight.

"Ishi-ah." I stra-igh-te-ned and sa-id se-ri-o-usly, "He sa-id so-me-one is tar-ge-ting you. He do-esn't know who or why, but the word is out."

"The sir-rush," he an-no-un-ced af-ter a short stretch of si-len-ce as we wal-ked.

"Ye-ah." The bu-il-ding had the typi-cal fla-vor of ar-tist te-nants...old, dec-re-pit, and smel-ling of pot. The-re was one lo-nely light over-he-ad and it flic-ke-red un-cer-ta-inly. "So who's af-ter you? Who'd want to kill you?" I wa-ited a be-at and ad-ded, "Be-si-des me, I me-an."

"You must be joking," he sa-id inc-re-du-lo-usly. "I co-uldn't be-gin to gu-ess. Ex-lo-vers, ex-bu-si-ness part-ners, ex-marks...the-re isn't a PDA in the world big eno-ugh to com-pi-le that list."

The light ga-ve up the ghost en-ti-rely as we re-ac-hed the sta-ir-well. The-re was still il-lu-mi-na-ti-on from the stre-et co-ming thro-ugh a dis-tant, dirt-fil-med win-dow, but it was gray and wispy-a ghost among us. It re-min-ded me. "It can't be Ab-ba-gor. He's de-ad." Ab-ba-gor had be-en one of Ro-bin's ac-qu-a-in-tan-ce/infor-mants. A troll the si-ze of a Lin-coln, he'd li-ved and di-ed un-der the Bro-oklyn Brid-ge. And Ni-ko and I had ne-arly di-ed with him. He'd be-en one ma-le-vo-lent, flat-out *evil* son of a bitch and every ti-me I pas-sed the brid-ge I flip-ped it off in his me-mory.

"Even if he we-re ali-ve, it wo-uldn't ha-ve be-en him. Abby did his own dirty work. He enj-oyed it far too much to farm it out." He star-ted down the sta-irs.

"The Aup-he." I hadn't wan-ted to say it, be-ca-use I didn't want it to be true, but bur-ying yo-ur he-ad in the sand was only go-ing to le-ave yo-ur ass up and che-wed the hell off.

"No," Ro-bin de-ni-ed. "They're not abo-ve sub-cont-rac-ting, but they wo-uld be mo-re subt-le than a sir-rush. Aup-he are in-si-di-o-us, cun-ning, all the things a po-or, simp-le sir-rush is not." He sig-hed

as he mo-ved down-ward. “Thin-king abo-ut my own hor-ri-fic end, what a way to ru-in a go-od orgy.”

“Sorry abo-ut that.” I fol-lo-wed him. His hands we-re empty, but mi-ne we-re not...one of them at le-ast. I held the Glock aga-inst my de-nim-co-ve-red outer thigh. “I as-su-med you’d want to know you’ve be-en mar-ked for de-ath. I don’t know what I was thin-king.”

“When it co-mes to mur-der and as-sas-si-na-ti-on, it *is* the tho-ught that co-unts. I ap-pre-ci-ate the ef-fort.” The words we-re so-ber, the exp-res-si-on anyt-hing but...until he mo-ved on. “It’s hardly the first ti-me. Or the hund-redth for that mat-ter,” he sa-id ab-sently as he lo-oked back at me. “You’re well? Be-fo-re she left, De-li-lah sa-id you we-re re-co-ve-red. Do you ha-ve full strength in yo-ur arm?”

“Nor-mal-ly I’d flex, but af-ter what I saw ups-ta-irs, I’m ke-eping the se-xi-ness to a mi-ni-mum.” The sta-irs we-re conc-re-te and slick from ye-ars and ye-ars of po-un-ding fe-et. “And, ye-ah, I’m fi-ne.”

“Go-od-that’s go-od, be-ca-use yo-ur chest lo-oked...” He gri-ma-ced. “Ne-ver mind.” Hit-ting the lan-ding, he pa-used to say slyly, “I think she was at-trac-ted to you, our wolf girl. The si-tu-ati-on was too di-re for the cus-to-mary ass-snif-fing and leg-hum-ping that is so pri-zed on the wolf so-ci-al sce-ne, but the-re was de-fi-ni-tely a lo-ok in her eye.”

“Do you want mo-re than one per-son trying to kill you?” I draw-led. “I don’t re-al-ly ha-ve the ti-me, but the inc-li-na-ti-on is no prob-lem what-so-ever.”

He didn’t ha-ve ti-me to ta-ke me up on the of-fer. So-me-one...so-met-hing el-se spo-ke in his pla-ce.

“Gi-ve me drink.”

Go-od-fel-low had be-en abo-ut to mo-ve down anot-her step. He stop-ped, set his mo-uth ten-sely, and held up a hand be-fo-re I co-uld open my mo-uth. I tur-ned my he-ad and lo-oked up past the spi-ra-ling box pat-tern of sta-irs, then down past the sa-me. The-re was not-hing to see or he-ar ot-her than a fa-int drip-ping so-und and the flic-ker and buzz of el-derly light-bulbs.

The words we-re raspy as sand-pa-per aga-inst rock and ut-terly de-vo-id of hu-ma-nity. And then the-re was a clic-king so-und...na-ils aga-inst conc-re-te. A slow, pa-ti-ent tap-ping, si-len-ce, then the clic-king aga-in.

A rust-ling star-ted...sca-les or fe-at-hers, I co-uldn’t tell.

“Gi-ve me drink.”

“Go.” Ro-bin grab-bed a hand-ful of my jac-ket and hur-led us both to-ward the lan-ding do-or. I didn’t stop to pro-test or ask who was so damn thirsty. If Go-od-fel-low sa-id go, then go-ing was a damn go-od idea. I slam-med in-to the do-or and flung it open.

It was wa-iting for us.

It was a bird. Gray as ash, ro-und black eyes, and the si-ze of a half-grown Ger-man shep-herd. It used jet claws to sco-re the dirty ti-le, sen-ding chunks of it tumb-ling asi-de. The black be-ak, sharp as a sword, ga-ped to show an in-ner maw the pla-gue yel-low of ja-un-di-ced flesh. *“Gi-ve me-”*

“Drink,” gra-ted the one be-hind us.

I den-ti-cal to the ot-her, it ca-me up the sta-irs to-ward the do-or prop-ped open by Ro-bin. It didn’t wad-dle li-ke you wo-uld ex-pect from a bird. It stal-ked with the smo-oth ga-it of a cre-atu-re used to run-ning its prey in-to the gro-und. The flat-te-ned he-ad coc-ked to one si-de. The-re was red on this one’s be-ak and sta-ining the fe-at-hers of its chest black. Now I knew what it had a han-ke-ring for, and it wasn’t le-mo-na-de. I tur-ned. The one in the hall had sna-ked clo-ser, one cla-wed fo-ot held in the air li-ke the we-apon it was. The ta-lons we-re fo-ur inc-hes long and, if they we-re ca-pab-le of punc-hing thro-ugh the flo-or, they we-re ca-pab-le of punc-hing thro-ugh flesh.

“Bad?” I sa-id over my sho-ul-der.

“Bad,” Ro-bin af-fir-med tightly.

That was all I ne-eded. I ra-ised my gun and fi-red at the one in the hall. The gray he-ad exp-lo-ded, fe-at-hers fil-ling the air. So-me, co-ated with black blo-od, stuck to the wall and flo-or and me. The body po-ised mo-ti-on-less for a se-cond, then fell si-de-ways, ta-lons still ex-ten-ded in eit-her a last-gasp pur-su-it of prey or from post-mor-tem pis-si-ness. Ta-ke yo-ur pick.

I he-ard the scra-pe of me-tal aga-inst scab-bard as Go-od-fel-low pul-led his sword. Fol-lo-wing that

was a gurg-le of so-me-one not get-ting the drink they so des-pe-ra-tely wan-ted. I tur-ned just in ti-me to see the fe-at-he-red he-ad bo-un-ce down the sta-irs. “Bad,” I com-men-ted, “but not that bad.”

“Wrong.” He star-ted down the sta-irs at a run. I was star-ting to fol-low when I saw so-met-hing stir-ring in the po-ol of blo-od that had spre-ad from the neck of the bird I’d kil-led. No, it wasn’t so-met-hing *in* the blo-od; it was the blo-od it-self. Thick and vis-co-us, it crept along the flo-or, cur-led up in-to a ball, and be-gan shif-ting from red to gray. Be-gan to spro-ut fe-at-hers...be-gan to *grow* and grow damn fast.

“*Gi-ve...me...drink.*”

The fa-in-test of whis-pers, a garb-led cro-ak from in-comp-le-te vo-cal cords, but I didn’t wa-it aro-und to he-ar it imp-ro-ve. I va-ul-ted the ot-her de-ad one on the lan-ding and clat-te-red down the sta-irs af-ter the puck.

“What the fuck?” I yel-led as he sprin-ted ahe-ad, hit the next lan-ding, then di-sap-pe-ared aro-und the turn. Ro-bin was one hel-lu-va figh-ter, but when it ca-me to run-ning for yo-ur li-fe, he had ab-so-lu-tely no equ-al. I sped up, trying not to tumb-le my way in-to a bro-ken neck. I did ma-na-ge to shor-ten the dis-tan-ce bet-we-en us...slightly. “What are tho-se things?”

“Ha-meh. The story go-es they ari-se from the blo-od of a mur-de-red man and ta-ke re-ven-ge by drin-king the blo-od of the kil-ler. Blah, blah. Idi-otic ta-le.” The bas-tard wasn’t even bre-at-hing hard as he bol-ted, ta-king three and fo-ur sta-irs at a ti-me. “They ac-tu-al-ly ari-se from the-ir *own* blo-od and at-tack who-ever the-ir mas-ter cho-oses. And as sta-ying de-ad isn’t a par-ti-cu-lar hobby of the-irs, they’re very dif-fi-cult to es-ca-pe.”

“*Gi-ve me drink,*” ec-ho-ed from abo-ve us, full-vo-iced and imp-la-cab-le.

“We sho-uld’ve sta-yed at the orgy,” Ro-bin gro-aned as he hit yet anot-her lan-ding. “Bac-chus wo-uld ne-ver get him-self in this si-tu-ati-on. He’d still be fa-ce-de-ep in to-pog-rap-hi-cal mo-unds and I don’t me-an the Se-ven Hills of Ro-me eit-her.”

Abo-ve us the cry ca-me aga-in and it didn’t co-me alo-ne. A we-ight hit me hard, ta-king me down. I hit the sta-irs and rol-led but ca-ught myself be-fo-re I went down fart-her than three steps. I ig-no-red the pa-in of ban-ged el-bows and ribs and ra-ised the gun, but the Ha-meh was go-ne. It didn’t want me. I’d just be-en in its way. I twis-ted my he-ad to see it di-ve-bomb Go-od-fel-low. Ta-lons we-re spre-ad and a ra-zor be-ak was aimed at Ro-bin’s thro-at. Whe-re bet-ter to drink? Whe-re bet-ter to start the flow of blo-od?

I ope-ned my mo-uth to warn him, but he didn’t ne-ed it. He whir-led at the so-und of air rus-hing thro-ugh fe-at-hers and spe-ared the Ha-meh thro-ugh the chest. It didn’t squ-awk; didn’t scre-ech. It scre-amed-a hu-man scre-am. A child’s scre-am. That’s what it so-un-ded li-ke, as if a child had be-en run thro-ugh with Ro-bin’s bla-de. It was dis-con-cer-ting as hell and I un-cons-ci-o-usly tigh-te-ned my grip on the Glock. And it didn’t stop. The scre-aming went on and on as the Ha-meh thras-hed, sen-ding blo-od splat-te-ring.

“Christ, ma-ke it stop,” I his-sed. We co-uld scre-am our guts out all day long and no one wo-uld po-ke the-ir he-ad in-to the sta-ir-well, but a kid scre-aming? So-me-one was go-ing to show up, and that so-me-one might get a be-ak jam-med thro-ugh the-ir eye. Not much of a re-ward for be-ing a Go-od Sa-ma-ri-tan.

“Stop? But I’m enj-oying it so much,” Ro-bin snar-led as he whip-ped anot-her bla-de from his brown le-at-her dus-ter and slas-hed the thro-at of the bird. The blow was for-ce-ful eno-ugh that the he-ad was al-most comp-le-tely se-ve-red. The go-od news was that it stop-ped the scre-aming. The bad news was that it didn’t do a damn thing abo-ut the ot-her Ha-meh sto-oping on us li-ke a fal-con on a mo-use. I shot, mis-sed, and shot aga-in. This ti-me I na-iled it. It ve-ered, hit a wall, and plum-me-ted on-to the sta-irs abo-ve us. In the se-conds that to-ok, the blo-od of the first was al-re-ady twis-ting in on it-self and chan-ging co-lors.

“This is an-no-ying as hell.” This ti-me I to-ok the le-ad, mo-ving past him as he to-ok the ti-me to ext-ract his sword. “I’ve se-en Hitch-cock mo-vi-es. I don’t want to li-ve in one.”

“Did you know he wo-re wo-men’s-”

“I don’t want to know!” I grow-led, cut-ting him off. I kept go-ing un-til I re-ac-hed the do-or to the

“Watch,” he or-de-red with ven-ge-ful an-ti-ci-pa-ti-on.

The Ha-meh so-ared, circ-led, and one by one they be-gan to exp-lo-de. It wasn't lo-ud. Muf-pled by flesh and fe-at-hers, the *whump* was ba-rely audib-le. From the in-si-de out, they rup-tu-red, and pi-eces of them fell along with the ra-in.

“Blo-od is the only thing they can drink, the only li-qu-id they can even to-uch.” Te-eth flas-hed in the pel-ting wa-ter as he step-ped back un-der a dingy aw-ning and out from un-der a very dif-fe-rent kind of ra-in.

The-re was the scent of burnt fe-at-hers and scorc-hed flesh in the wet air as I fol-lo-wed him. It wasn't a ple-asant smell, in the or-di-nary sen-se, but at that mo-ment I didn't mind it at all. It was ap-ple pie and fresh cof-fee to my no-se. Swe-et and frag-rant ro-ses all the way. I con-ti-nu-ed to watch the fi-re-works show abo-ve. *Bo-om*. The-re went anot-her one.

And the ra-in con-ti-nu-ed to fall.

10

“I'm not su-re which dis-turbs me mo-re-that you co-uld ha-ve be-en kil-led or that you co-uld ha-ve be-en kil-led at an orgy. What pre-ci-sely wo-uld you ha-ve me put on the tombs-to-ne? He-re li-es Ca-li-gu-la Le-and-ros?”

“Oh, Jesus, that re-minds me. You sho-uld've *se-en* the si-ze of Go-od-fel-low's...” From the an-no-yed twist of Ni-ko's eyeb-rows, I de-ci-ded it was a su-bj-ect for anot-her ti-me.

“Anyway...bot-tom li-ne is Ro-bin's in tro-ub-le.” I fi-nis-hed lo-ading the Glock and hols-te-red it.

“So-me-one is pis-sed as hell at him and ap-pa-rently has a zoo in the-ir back-yard to pull from.”

“That in it-self is cu-ri-o-us.” Nik had just ma-de his fifth bla-de di-sap-pe-ar un-der his co-at and now had num-bers six and se-ven in his hand. “The Ha-meh and the sir-rush are from the sa-me ge-ne-ral ge-og-rap-hi-cal area. Sir-rush are Baby-lo-ni-an and the Ha-meh are men-ti-oned in Ara-bic mytho-logy, but they are mo-re li-ke ani-mals, not in-tel-li-gent en-ti-ti-es. It's as if so-me-one sic-ced a gu-ard dog on him. We sho-uld ask who in that part of the world Go-od-fel-low has ma-na-ged to so tho-ro-ughly an-noy.”

“That co-uld nar-row it down to a few tho-usand.” I le-aned aga-inst our kitc-hen tab-le. “If we're lucky.”

“When ha-ve we ever be-en es-pe-ci-al-ly sho-we-red with luck?” Ni-ko as-ked dryly as he dis-po-sed of kni-ves num-ber six and se-ven and con-si-de-red num-ber eight be-fo-re flip-ping it high in the air. It didn't co-me down aga-in as far as I saw. His hand flas-hed and it was go-ne.

I snor-ted. “No com-ment.” Ac-tu-al-ly I had plenty of com-ments abo-ut the rat-her bitchy Lady Luck, but we had things to do and Scot-tish as-sho-les to kill.

Ro-bin had dec-li-ned an in-vi-ta-ti-on to our hun-ting trip, but Pro-mi-se had co-me along. The three of us spent the night com-bing the parks, the pi-ers, and any con-dem-ned and aban-do-ned bu-il-dings we co-uld lo-ca-te. The parks we-re go-od hun-ting gro-unds and any lar-ge empty struc-tu-re co-uld func-ti-on as a subs-ti-tu-te for a ca-ve. It was a re-aso-nab-le plan...if this wasn't New York City. A city this si-ze? We we-re whist-ling in the wind and we knew it. But we kept it up. It was bet-ter than do-ing not-hing and we hadn't he-ard back from Ham yet.

Ye-ah, it was the best we co-uld do right now, but that didn't chan-ge the fact we ca-me up empty-that night and the two nights fol-lo-wing that. We didn't run ac-ross a sing-le Red-cap or re-ve-nant, which was unu-su-al. Re-ve-nants we-re plen-ti-ful in the city. A few of them wor-ked for the Kin do-ing jobs that the wol-ves con-si-de-red be-ne-ath them. The ot-hers wor-ked for them-sel-ves, eating what they co-uld catch. They we-ren't bright, but they we-re fa-irly qu-ick. They didn't go hungry too of-ten, and it was unu-su-al to go thro-ugh the park at night and not spot at le-ast three or fo-ur. We didn't see a sing-le one...anywhe-re.

But at one park we did run in-to se-ve-ral sylphs co-co-ning a low-li-fe for la-ter con-sump-ti-on. They we-re smal-ler cre-atu-res, the si-ze of a se-ven-ye-ar-old child, with pa-le gold skin and ha-ir and the ama-zing wings of gi-ant but-terf-li-es. Purp-les, blu-es, gre-ens, red, oran-ge, yel-low...any co-lor

you could think of. Their eyes were huge and the same gold as the skin. Beautiful, like the fairy tales in books...not the fairy-tale reality that stalked our streets. When you saw a sylph, it was enough to make you believe in Peter Pan, Tinkerbell, and a place built solely on magic.

And you'd keep believing it right up until they ate you.

It was at that same point you'd probably notice they had eight multi-jointed golden legs and were more spider than butterfly. And like the spider, they didn't drink blood or eat flesh, not separately. After consuming their prey, they injected a chemical that dissolved the internal organs to soup. Eventually there would be nothing but a dried husk hanging in a tree that would disintegrate in the first brisk breeze.

Frankly, I didn't care if the homicidal butterfly ate a hundred muggers or drug dealers. New York could use a little cheap crime control. But, as Niko logically explained while smacking the back of my head, it might not always be a petty criminal they snared.

There were many things I'd done and many things I'd killed, but there was something about killing a giant butterfly, even one with spider legs, that wasn't going to leave any fond memories. I'd never been one for pulling the wings off something smaller than I was. But when they opened their mouths and I saw poison-dripping pinchers and a circular gullet lined with tiny triangular teeth, I changed my mind. Tinkerbell took one in the gut, and, as it snarled with sizzling poison gushing from its mouth, the only thing I felt was gratitude I was out of spitting range.

Other than leaving scattered wings like ludicrously colored autumn leaves, we accomplished nothing. Not a damn thing. The only positive was there weren't any further attempts on Goodfellow's life. And I kept thinking it was positive up to the point he showed up at my door with a plan of his own.

Goodfellow tapped his watch when I opened the door. "Tick-tock. We have places to go and cherries to pop." He looked me up and down. "Could you change into something a little less...homeless-friendly?"

It was five in the afternoon and the last two hours had been spent working out with Niko. That wasn't anything I couldn't do in sweats and a T-shirt. Getting my ass kicked by my brother wasn't a black-tie event. I ducked as a lamp came hurtling from behind to bounce off my shoulder and shatter against the door frame.

"That could've been a dagger," Niko said reprovingly. It wasn't an idle observation, because the next one was. I caught a glimpse of it from the corner of my eye and dove to the ground. Robin caught it point-first and examined the blade. "It's dull. Now, what type of teething tool is that?"

"He's delicate," my brother offered gravely.

I growled and rose to my knees, and then tackled Goodfellow to the floor while snatching the thrown dagger from him as I did. I rolled to keep him between Niko and me and held the training blade to his throat.

"You have a hostage. Nicely done." Niko approached and held out his hand. I slapped the dagger into it. "Assuming someone cares for the hostage." His lips twitched as he extended his other hand to assist Robin to his feet. "Considering the past several days, that's not an assumption we would hold true for all. Goodfellow, are you sure you won't stay here with us until we find out who is behind this?"

"I couldn't afford the massive cramp in my style." But there was a fleeting glint of surprised appreciation behind his eyes as Robin straightened his coat and smoothed his hair. "Speaking of style or lack thereof..." He focused his gaze on me. "Would you change already? Even I can't get you laid looking like that."

The practical session was nearly over and I looked over at Niko. He exhaled, folded his arms, and gave the most minute of shrugs. He thought I was making a mistake that Georgia was for me, and that I was too stubborn by far for my own good. But while he thought I was wrong, he understood why I'd made the decision I had. He'd also seen it had actually given me some small measure of peace to have made *any* decision. I'd spent most of my life on the run. You

don't get to make a lot of decisions doing that. You react and brace yourself in case it isn't good enough. But giving up running meant standing yourself on all things. I'd made my choice-I was sticking with it, because I knew, even if no one else did, it was the right one.

The only one.

Ni-ko had suggested I wait. That there might be a non-human who could come to me and something to me. Someone safe to care about. The thing was, I didn't want to care about my first. If it couldn't be with George, then I didn't want it to mean anything. If I couldn't care for her in this case, then I didn't want to care at all. I wanted it to be just what it was, sex and nothing else.

"Yeah, okay," I said slowly. "I'll change."

Ni-ko lightly bumped my shoulder with his as I passed. I'd say that was the good thing about family: they supported you whether they agreed with you or not. But that was a lie. None of my other family had been remotely capable of that, and I was referring to the human half. I guess it would be more accurate to say that wasn't the good thing about family; that was the good thing about Ni-ko.

I dressed in jeans and a black pullover sweater. I imagined Robin would be massively unimpressed. I was right, but he was distracted enough by Ni-ko that when I walked back into the room he let the clothes pass with a minimal amount of ranting and raving.

"Beautiful would choke himself with his own cravat," Goodfellow said scornfully as he looked me up and down, then brightened. "The whole polishing his boots with champagne, he stole that from me, you know." He extended an expensive shod foot and rested it on the coffee table as he relaxed on the couch. "See the shine? Subtle but impeccable."

"While I'm immensely fascinated by your shoe-care regimen," Ni-ko commented as he leaned against the wall, "let's return to the discussion of who might be trying to kill you."

Robin admitted the sheen on his shoe for another moment before exhaling, "You have no idea what you're asking."

"Piss off that many people? I believe it." I dropped into the chair and hooked a leg over the padded arm.

"Smart-ass pup, fatal flash-in-the-pan," he grumbled, but it was all surface. Beneath that was a dark melancholy he was usually more cautious about concealing. "I'm a puck. Pissing off lesser creatures is what I do. How can I be blamed for those who have absolutely no humor and a marked inability to hold on to their wallet? But that, while significant, is not the problem."

"Then what is?" Ni-ko asked with the patience of a man who has all the time in the world. What we'd forgotten was that Robin was the one with that trait.

"I can't remember." He dropped his foot back to the floor. "I can't begin to recall all those I've practiced my trickery on over the years, because it is the years that are too many, not my victims. Although, to give credit where credit is due..." He flashed a happily predatory grin. When it faded, he added contemplatively, "I remember the highs and lows, naturally, but if I, for example, stole a bog-gle's treasure trove some ten thousand years ago, that I won't remember."

"But he would remember you," Ni-ko stated.

"Yes, I would definitely be a low for him and I'm sure it would stick quite clearly in his muddy speck of a brain cell, but for me?"

"Not so much?" I said.

"Yes, not so much," he responded impassively. "I have no idea where I was born or when. I've forgotten more of my life than I remember. There simply isn't a way to make a list of the usual suspects."

"Perhaps if we concentrate on the attempts themselves." Ni-ko straightened, pale eyes razor sharp in their persistence. "The Hamish birds and the sir-rush are all from the same general area. Did you do something memorable down Baby-lon way? Were you someone's rough beast?"

Robin met that gaze with an unwavering one of his own. He was either remembering

so-met-hing or do-ing his dam-ne-dest not to. “Po-etic.” He sto-od. “But not-hing that co-uld per-ta-in to this, I’m su-re.”

I co-uld see Ni-ko wasn’t bu-ying it, and ne-it-her was I. But what we be-li-eved didn’t mat-ter, be-ca-use the con-ver-sa-ti-on was over. Go-od-fel-low ma-de so-me no-ise abo-ut how he’d think on it, mull it over, ke-ep his he-ad down, and thanks so very much for our in-put, ca-re, and con-cern, and he was out the do-or. And the-re I sat, leg still dang-ling.

“Yo-ur ri-de on the de-ba-uc-hery exp-ress is le-aving wit-ho-ut you,” Ni-ko in-for-med me blandly.

“It lo-oks that way.” I he-aved myself up and grab-bed my jac-ket.

“You’re po-si-ti-ve abo-ut this?” he as-ked as I shrug-ged in-to it. “You sho-uld let Ge-or-gi-na ma-ke her own de-ci-si-on when it co-mes to this. She’s stron-ger than you gi-ve her cre-dit for.”

“I know she is.” I sho-ved my hands in my jac-ket poc-kets and cur-ved my lips wit-ho-ut hu-mor.

“Hell, she’s stron-ger than me. She can li-ve with the un-cer-ta-inty. I can’t.”

He dip-ped his chin and sa-id only, “You’re strong eno-ugh, just in all the mu-lishly obs-ti-na-te wrong ways.” Til-ting his he-ad to-ward the do-or, he con-ti-nu-ed. “Tell Go-od-fel-low if he gets you in tro-ub-le, he can lo-ok for-ward to a few mo-re at-tempts on his li-fe.”

“Co-me on, Cyra-no,” I sa-id lightly, “pe-op-le get la-id all the ti-me. What co-uld go wrong?”

Mo-re to the po-int... what co-uld go right?

Not a god-damn thing.

The first stop was a pent-ho-use apart-ment on the Up-per West Si-de. Ot-her than the do-or be-ing pa-in-ted black, it was an imp-res-si-ve pla-ce. Do-or-man. Soft, de-ep car-pe-ting in the halls with sub-du-ed ligh-ting. Very pri-cey. I lo-oked aro-und, fe-eling a lit-tle out of pla-ce. “You’re su-re she won’t know I’m half Aup-he?”

“If she do-es, she won’t mind,” Ro-bin as-su-red me.

“She’s qu-ite open-min-ded, a won-der-ful spe-ci-es, to-tal-ly wit-ho-ut judg-ment. And they ab-so-lu-tely can-not bre-ed with Aup-he, or hu-mans for that mat-ter. In fact, they lay eggs, which re-qu-ires fer-ti-li-za-ti-on at a much la-ter da-te. She lo-oks very hu-man, tho-ugh, so don’t pull a gro-in musc-le wor-rying over that one. I know you’re new to the non-hu-man da-ting sce-ne.” He chec-ked his watch. “Go-od. We’re right on ti-me.” He knoc-ked lightly on the do-or, then men-ti-oned ca-su-al-ly, “Oh, I ne-arly for-got. She may...*may*...try to eat you af-ter-ward, but it’s ra-re. Only if she finds you very, very char-ming, and with yo-ur per-so-na-lity I think we know what the odds are on that.”

On that no-te, I tur-ned and he-aded back down the hall away from the do-or...at a slightly fas-ter clip than when I’d ap-pro-ac-hed it.

The next stop was Cent-ral Park and the la-ke. Go-od-fel-low sto-od on the sho-re, ca-re-ful of his cham-pag-ne-scrub-bed sho-es. “Lyrlis-sa. She’s a lim-na-de, a la-ke nymph. On-ce aga-in, eggs, re-qu-iring the sperm of not one but *two*...well, that’s ne-it-her he-re nor the-re. You’re go-od to go.”

The mo-on had tur-ned the wa-ter in-to rip-ples of sil-ver aga-inst black, a spill of pla-ti-num cha-ins aga-inst vel-vet. It lo-oked be-a-uti-ful. It al-so lo-oked cold as hell. I cro-uc-hed down and slid a fin-ger in-to the wa-ter. “Huh. Is she co-ming out?”

“She’s a la-ke nymph, you une-du-ca-ted child. They don’t do that.”

“Well, he-re’s so-met-hing I don’t do,” I co-un-te-red, ir-ri-ta-ted, “get it up in fifty-deg-ree tem-pe-ra-tu-re wa-ter.”

“No?” Ro-bin frow-ned.

“Jesus Christ, no! At le-ast not and ke-ep it the-re. I might be only half hu-man, but the dick? That’s all hu-man, okay? It has its li-mits.”

“As if you ha-ven’t suf-fe-red eno-ugh.” He sho-ok his he-ad and squ-e-ezed my sho-ul-der sympat-he-ti-cal-ly.

“Per-haps it’s for the best. You wo-uld ha-ve to hold yo-ur bre-ath for the du-ra-ti-on, but I fi-gu-red with yo-ur phe-no-me-nal lack of ex-pe-ri-en-ce with the fe-ma-le of any spe-ci-es, you co-uld ma-na-ge to do that for the forty-fi-ve se-conds that it wo-uld ta-ke for you to fi-nish any-way.”

“You are such an ass.” I scow-led.

“I do my ut-most to li-ve up to ex-pec-ta-ti-ons.” He grin-ned, be-fo-re tur-ning away from the wa-ter. “All right. Third ti-me’s the charm, which is apt, be-ca-use that’s her na-me. Charm.”

“And she do-esn’t li-ve in fre-ezing wa-ter or will try to eat me?” I as-ked sus-pi-ci-o-usly.

“The most she will do is pla-it flo-wers in yo-ur ha-ir. She’s a le-ima-kid, anot-her kind of nymph. Me-adow. Grass, tre-es, flo-wers.” We wal-ked up the path un-til we hit the Gre-at Lawn. “And rep-ro-duc-ti-vely spe-aking, she spo-res. Ho-we-ver, prac-ti-ce sa-fe sex. The-re ha-ve be-en ca-ses of moss gro-wing on the north si-de of the wo-od af-ter-ward, if you get my drift. And ter-mi-tes are not yo-ur fri-end eit-her.”

“Thanks for ma-king the ex-pe-ri-en-ce so pa-in-less,” I grow-led.

He slap-ped my back. “Go-od-fel-low En-terp-ri-ses-we aim to ple-ase.” Then he drif-ted back in-to the tre-es. “I was ne-ver one much for mo-no-gamy,” his vo-ice flo-ated out, “but...it’s not too la-te to chan-ge yo-ur mind. If an-yo-ne is worth it, it wo-uld be Ge-or-gi-na.”

“Go-od-bye, Ro-bin,” I sa-id qu-i-etly. The-re was a de-ep si-len-ce and then I he-ard the rust-le of le-aves as he left, a co-ur-tesy-ordi-na-rily he wo-uld’n’t ha-ve ma-de any so-und.

Charm ca-me to me. If she knew I was Aup-he, she didn’t say. She didn’t say anyt-hing re-al-ly. She sang words I didn’t un-ders-tand and bro-ught blan-kets wo-ven of sup-ple grass. She was nu-de and had what I sus-pec-ted was gre-en ha-ir, alt-ho-ugh it was hard to tell for su-re in the mo-on-light. Her hands we-re su-re, her skin was soft, and she smel-led li-ke clo-ver.

Everyw-he-re.

11

Whi-le I’d be-en do-ing ot-her things, very in-te-res-ting things, Ni-ko had be-en thin-king. I got the re-sults of that the next mor-ning as I yaw-ned. I was not a mor-ning per-son, to say the le-ast. “The sub-way?” I fi-nis-hed ap-plying the gun oil and re-as-semb-led the De-sert Eag-le at the kitc-hen tab-le. I was do-ne pla-ying with that can-ni-bal son of a bitch Be-ane. Big gun, exp-lo-si-ve ro-unds, and one ven-ge-ful-ly pissy at-ti-tu-de-if that didn’t ta-ke ca-re of him, I might ha-ve to check out the go-ing pri-ce on a roc-ket la-unc-her.

“Mi-les and mi-les of tun-nels, so-me of them even aban-do-ned and unu-sed, it’s as clo-se to a ca-ve as one can get. Mo-re and mo-re, Saw-ney se-ems to be a cre-atu-re of ha-bit. But Ham may ha-ve nar-ro-wed down a lo-ca-ti-on for us. He cal-led last night whi-le you we-re out be-co-ming a man.” His lips twitc-hed, but he went out wit-ho-ut any mo-re rag-ging on the su-bj-ect. “He tur-ned down our in-vi-ta-ti-on to jo-in us for any bat-tles with Saw-ney, as ex-pec-ted, but he did ha-ve so-me in-for-ma-ti-on. Se-ve-ral of the ho-me-less ha-ve di-sap-pe-ared. All of them ha-ve be-en the mo-re ‘out-the-re’ ones. The schi-zoph-re-nics, the men-tal-ly ill. And all of them had be-en using the Se-cond Ave-nue Sub-way const-ruc-ti-on pro-j-ect for shel-ter.”

All the SAS const-ruc-ti-on and mess go-ing on the-re-it ma-de sen-se. Easy ac-cess to the lo-wer aban-do-ned le-vels for both the ho-me-less and Saw-ney. Tho-se po-or bas-tards co-uld’ve wal-ked right in-to his cup-bo-ard.

What al-so ma-de sen-se was him go-ing af-ter the ones who we-re a lit-tle off. “You know,” I sa-id dif-fi-dently, “Saw-ney’s ma-de it pretty cle-ar he has a thing for the nuts. Mad-ness se-ems to be a turn-on for him.” And I tas-ted just fi-ne.

“I’ve he-ard what he sa-id. You know it’s not true. And con-si-de-ring what you’ve be-en thro-ugh in the past ye-ar, the fact that you’re not is a tes-ta-ment to just how strong you are.” He fi-xed me with a sharp glan-ce. “Don’t ma-ke me emp-ha-si-ze that. My hand gets ti-red from swat-ting that hard he-ad of yo-urs.”

Ni-ko was at the tab-le op-po-si-te me do-ing a lit-tle cle-aning of his own. I wasn’t the only one bre-aking out the big guns. He was rub-bing a cloth ac-ross the me-tal of a do-ub-le-bla-ded axe. It was a so-mew-hat smal-ler ver-si-on than se-en in yo-ur ave-ra-ge bar-ba-ri-an mo-vie, but not by much.

“How the hell do you ho-pe to walk the stre-et with that?” I as-ked as I ca-re-ful-ly slid the clip ho-me. When an ac-ci-den-tal disc-har-ge can ta-ke out a two-by-two chunk of the wall, it pays to put sa-fety

first. New York land-lords are not es-pe-ci-al-ly un-ders-tan-ding of ho-meg-row-n ven-ti-la-ti-on systems.

“I’ve ta-ken up the cel-lo.” He hef-ted the axe and me-asu-red it with ap-pro-ving eyes. “And this sho-uld fit qu-ite ni-cely in the ca-se.” La-ying it on the tab-le, he be-gan to wrap it in soft felt far mo-re gently than was re-qu-ired. To me a gun was a gun, a hunk of ex-pen-si-ve me-tal-not-hing mo-re. To Ni-ko a we-apon was an obj-ect of res-pect. “Mu-si-cal as-pi-ra-ti-ons co-ver a wi-de num-ber of sharp-bla-ded sins,” he ad-ded with an un-der-cur-rent of dry hu-mor.

“I’m all for se-e-ing you sin away on that son of a bitch Saw-ney.” The-re was not-hing qu-ite li-ke ca-ta-pul-ting out of sle-ep with the ab-so-lu-te cer-ta-inty the-re we-re te-eth in yo-ur chest and hunks of yo-ur flesh be-ing torn away to be eaten whi-le you lay pa-raly-zed. It re-al-ly put a dam-per on the who-le god-damn mor-ning, let me tell you. “Pro-mi-se co-ming with us aga-in?”

“Yes.” He ti-ed a cord aro-und the felt with a simp-le slipk-not. “I think she wor-ri-es that two help-less cre-atu-res such as us ne-ed a body-gu-ard.” Nor-mal-ly, that wo-uld be a joke. I wasn’t so su-re it was this ti-me.

“And she fe-els a res-pon-si-bi-lity. It was she and her fri-end that drew us in-to this.”

“Res-pon-sib-le eno-ugh to ta-ke Ro-bin in and ke-ep an eye on him un-til we fi-gu-re out who’s af-ter him?” Whet-her it was the sur-vi-vor or the Rom in me, I’d ne-ver be-en one to over-lo-ok an op-por-tu-nity.

“Be-li-eve it or not, very pro-bably,” Ni-ko al-lo-wed.

“Ho-we-ver, Go-od-fel-low se-ems ext-re-mely lo-ath to gi-ve up his in-de-pen-den-ce, even with his li-fe at sta-ke. He’s as stub-born as you.”

Okay, may-be he wasn’t do-ne rag-ging on me af-ter all abo-ut the pre-vi-o-us night, but it was sa-id with ac-cep-tan-ce. Exas-pe-ra-ted ac-cep-tan-ce, but ac-cep-tan-ce still. I’d ma-de my de-ci-si-on, go-ne thro-ugh with it, and Ni-ko was go-ing to stand be-hind me on it. The swat he de-li-ve-red to the back of my he-ad as he sto-od and circ-led the tab-le didn’t chan-ge that. Ga-ve it a hel-lu-va punc-tu-ati-on, tho-ugh. “My hand’s not qu-ite as ti-red as I tho-ught,” he in-for-med me.

I rub-bed the area and scow-led, “You can’t smack out stub-born.”

“Oh, I think you’d be very surp-ri-sed what I can do when I put my mind to it. Pro-mi-se will me-et us he-re this eve-ning and then...” He lo-oked down at the swad-dled axe and smi-led. It was so-met-hing Ni-ko ra-rely did; he was usu-al-ly mo-re subt-le in ex-hi-bi-ting his emo-ti-ons-he-ad-smac-king asi-de. This smi-le, ho-we-ver, had its sha-re. An-ti-ci-pa-ti-on, ret-ri-bu-ti-on, and an icy an-ger. Ni-ko wo-uld walk out of he-re car-rying a cel-lo ca-se, but it didn’t lo-ok li-ke mu-sic was go-ing to so-ot-he his be-ast, not un-til Saw-ney was back whe-re he be-lon-ged. De-ad and in mi-nu-te pi-eces. Not surp-ri-singly, I didn’t ha-ve a prob-lem with that. And the mo-re old sub-way tun-nels we en-ded up splas-hing thro-ugh and the mo-re rats we dod-ged, the less prob-lem I had. Even if Saw-ney hadn’t kil-led the pe-op-le in the park and wa-re-ho-use, even if he hadn’t tri-ed, fa-irly suc-ces-sful-ly, to turn me in-to din-ner, I wo-uld’ve long lost any to-le-ran-ce for him.

That night, as plan-ned, we ma-de our way in-to the tun-nels thro-ugh the SAS. The ex-ten-si-on of the Q tra-in to Se-cond Ave-nue and Ni-nety-sixth Stre-et was a gre-at idea-and the city had be-en ha-ving that sa-me idea for lon-ger than I’d be-en ali-ve. Af-ter all the fal-se starts and fi-nan-ci-al di-sas-ters, the-re we-re eno-ugh half-bu-ilt and aban-do-ned tun-nels to hi-de a hund-red Saw-neys.

Now, that was one crappy tho-ught. One of that son of a bitch was plenty.

The wa-ter was thigh high in the la-test tun-nel we hit, a ma-in-te-nan-ce one long out of use, and cold eno-ugh that I’d lost the fe-eling in my fe-et and legs. This tun-nel it-self was inky black ex-cept for our flash-lights, and the rats we-re big eno-ugh that at so-me po-int they must’ve ma-ted with dogs. Gre-at Da-nes from the lo-oks of them. No-ne of this was the worst I’d co-me ac-ross in my li-fe, now-he-re ne-ar. But af-ter ho-urs and ho-urs of it, I was lo-sing my pa-ti-en-ce, and I had con-si-de-rably less of the com-mo-dity than my brot-her. It wasn’t so-met-hing I was go-od at.

“That last rat had a sub-way con-duc-tor in his mo-uth,” I grun-ted. “You saw that, didn’t you?”

“Don’t exag-ge-ra-te. It was a de-ad co-yo-te and only a me-di-um-si-zed one at that.”

I rol-led my eyes in Nik’s di-rec-ti-on to see if he re-al-ly tho-ught that ma-de it bet-ter. From the

ra-ised eyeb-row that met my ga-ze, ap-pa-rently he did, and I sig-hed and slos-hed on.

“The wild-li-fe is va-ri-ed and in-te-res-ting.” Pro-mi-se was do-ing the sa-me, to my left and slightly ahe-ad of me. Alt-ho-ugh she didn’t slosh when she mo-ved thro-ugh the wa-ter-she didn’t ma-ke any so-und at all. Even Ni-ko, qu-asi-ni-nja ext-ra-or-di-na-ire, ca-used the fa-in-test rip-ple now and aga-in, but when Pro-mi-se mo-ved, you wan-ted to rub yo-ur eyes to ve-rify that she was ac-tu-al-ly the-re at all. Then aga-in, dres-sed all in black as she was, wit-ho-ut the pa-le-ness of her ha-ir and skin, yo-ur eyes wo-uld’ve let you down too.

I didn’t know whet-her mo-ving that si-lently was a skill vam-pi-res we-re born with or one they ga-ined over the ye-ars of the-ir long li-ves. Whi-le I was cu-ri-o-us eno-ugh to ask, the cock-ro-ach as big as my hand that fell from abo-ve to land on my sho-ul-der dist-rac-ted me. The de-ad body that ca-me flo-ating by dist-rac-ted me even furt-her.

The mass slowly drif-ted to-ward us spe-ared by our flash-lights...a tang-le of clot-hes and limbs, pal-lid whi-te hands with fin-gers cur-led li-ke the legs of drow-ned spi-ders. As the body ca-me clo-ser, I got a bet-ter lo-ok, and sa-id with a gri-ma-ce, “Lef-to-vers?”

It wasn’t a body. It was pi-eces of one. Two blo-ated arms and a leg rip-ped off from be-low an ab-sent knee we-re wo-und up and trap-ped in sop-ping cloth as the en-ti-re mess of it flo-ated along. It wasn’t ple-asant to lo-ok at and less ple-asant to smell. The-re was no way to tell if Saw-ney’s scent was mi-xed in this to-xic so-up so-mew-he-re. I had a go-od no-se, but I wasn’t a blo-od-ho-und.

“I gu-ess ‘was-te not, want not’ isn’t a con-cept Saw-ney emb-ra-ces.” Ni-ko bent for a clo-ser exa-mi-na-ti-on.

“De-ath oc-cur-red so-mew-he-re aro-und two days ago from the lo-oks of the de-com-po-si-ti-on.”

It wasn’t just a gu-ess. The-re was a bo-ok sit-ting on one of our shel-ves that spel-led out the sta-ges of de-com-po-si-ti-on in a corp-se...dry corp-se, wet corp-se, sog-gy...wha-te-ver you we-re lo-oking for. I knew be-ca-use I’d on-ce used it to prop up one leg of the cof-fee tab-le. Nik, on the ot-her hand, had re-ad it, me-mo-ri-zed it, and on oc-ca-si-on the know-led-ge had co-me in very handy. Des-pi-te that, I still had no de-si-re to crack that bo-ok.

“Two days, gi-ve or ta-ke, yes,” Pro-mi-se ga-ve a con-fir-ming nod. Con-si-de-ring she was old eno-ugh to ha-ve li-ved thro-ugh a ti-me when vam-pi-res still fed on hu-mans, she wo-uld pro-bably know. She aimed her flash-light down the tun-nel. “The qu-es-ti-on now is the dis-tan-ce they’ve tra-ve-led. How far is the lar-der they slip-ped from?”

The-re was only one way to find that out and we mo-ved on. Pro-mi-se had her ha-ir in an int-ri-ca-te twist that was wo-und tightly aro-und her he-ad. Des-pi-te the de-li-cacy of it and her lar-ge sha-do-wed eyes, she didn’t lo-ok out of pla-ce in this hel-lho-le. She...I don’t know...fit, in so-me stran-ge way. From day one, if you’d as-ked me to pic-tu-re her li-fe, I wo-uld’ve ima-gi-ned that every day of it was spent in ele-gan-ce and qu-i-et lu-xury. That she was to the ma-nor born, as they say.

But she’d on-ce gi-ven me the hint that that wasn’t the truth, not her truth any-way. She hadn’t go-ne in-to any de-tail, but I got the imp-res-si-on Pro-mi-se had be-en born to dirt and hards-hip rat-her than silk and sa-tin. Not all vam-pi-res had li-ved in a cast-le with bug-munc-hing flun-ki-es to wa-it on them hand and fo-ot. I didn’t know Pro-mi-se’s age, but it was pos-sib-le she was old eno-ugh to ha-ve be-en born in-to so-me pretty ro-ugh ti-mes in his-tory...for vam-pi-re or hu-man. It wo-uld exp-la-in all the rich hus-bands with fastly ap-pro-ac-hing ex-pi-ra-ti-on da-tes she’d had. Our bo-di-es might es-ca-pe the con-di-ti-ons that ma-de us, but our minds ra-rely do.

Wha-te-ver her ori-gins, she mo-ved thro-ugh the tun-nel as if it we-re an ais-le in Sak’s-boldly and com-for-tably. I fol-lo-wed and Ni-ko pul-led up the re-ar. Every fif-te-en mi-nu-tes or so, Nik and I wo-uld switch off, but we kept Pro-mi-se, her flash-light now tur-ned off, in the le-ad. Vam-pi-re night vi-si-on was bet-ter than both of ours put to-get-her. When the re-ve-nants ca-me, she spot-ted them se-ve-ral se-conds be-fo-re we did and ra-ised a hand to halt us in our tracks.

To lo-ok at, they we-ren’t so dif-fe-rent from the body parts that had be-en car-ri-ed our way-de-com-po-sing and hi-de-o-us to be-hold. Na-tu-re’s imi-ta-ti-on of a corp-se-slick put-rid-app-e-aring flesh, whi-te-fil-med eyes, and yel-lo-wed, rot-ting te-eth fra-med by blo-od-less gums and a de-ad black ton-gue. So-me of them wo-re filthy clot-hing; so-me of them wo-re not-hing at

all. An ana-to-mi-cal-ly cor-rect re-ve-nant is not-hing to wri-te ho-me abo-ut...li-te-ral-ly. With all the-ir smo-oth mot-tled flesh, I had no idea how to tell the dif-fe-ren-ce bet-we-en ma-le and fe-ma-le. But kno-wing how to kill them was in-fo eno-ugh.

It wasn't too dif-fi-cult...kil-ling them. Alt-ho-ugh, if you just chop-ped a pi-ece off, it wo-uld grow back-gi-ven eno-ugh ti-me. Simp-le minds, simp-le ner-vo-us systems, Ni-ko had exp-la-ined dis-pa-ra-gingly. Up-right sa-la-man-ders with an at-ti-tu-de, that's what I sa-id. Bot-tom li-ne, not that hard to kill, but if you didn't fi-nish the job, a re-ven-ge-se-eking re-ve-nant wo-uld show up a few months la-ter spor-ting new limbs and a hard-on for a lit-tle mu-ti-la-ti-on of his own. The mot-to is "Ma-ke su-re the imi-ta-ti-on de-ad are the ge-nu-ine de-ad."

So, when the first re-ve-nant ap-pe-ared in-to the we-ak oran-ge light ahe-ad of us, I wasn't wor-ri-ed. When the next fi-ve sho-wed them-sel-ves, I only pul-led my Glock. I wasn't was-ting the .50 and ex-pen-si-ve ro-unds on the-se guys. But when the fol-lo-wing six-te-en slunk in-to sight, I did spend the ti-me to be gra-te-ful that I didn't see Saw-ney with them. A re-ve-nant was a walk in the park, a co-up-le of re-ve-nants...ca-ke, but twenty-two? I'd be-en ac-cu-sed of be-ing a lit-tle cocky, but I wasn't stu-pid. Cer-ta-inly not *that* stu-pid. Twenty-two was go-ing to be a wor-ko-ut, no way aro-und it. Be-ca-use re-ve-nants, when they wan-ted to be, we-re fast. They we-ren't the che-etahs of the pre-ter-na-tu-ral world, but they we-re the hye-nas. The-ir as-ses co-uld *mo-ve*.

Ni-ko, al-ways up for a lit-tle aero-bic exer-ci-se, had left the cel-lo ca-se be-hind at a junc-ti-on of se-ve-ral tun-nels and now hef-ted his axe. "How un-for-tu-na-te for them that they can't reg-row the-ir he-ad." Which was the pla-ce to aim on a re-ve-nant. If they had a he-art, I had no idea whe-re it was. The-ir cir-cu-la-tory system was a lot mo-re pri-mi-ti-ve than a hu-man's. Wha-te-ver pum-ped the-ir vi-tal flu-ids didn't se-em to be cent-ra-li-zed, and ta-king out the bra-in, a` la every zom-bie mo-vie ever ma-de, was yo-ur best bet.

They we-re unu-su-al-ly qu-i-et as they ca-me. Re-ve-nants we-ren't the big-gest tal-kers aro-und, but they we-ren't abo-ve the oc-ca-si-onal din-ner con-ver-sa-ti-on...of the usu-al "I'll rip you to shreds and enj-oy every mo-uth-ful" type. Not the-se, tho-ugh...they we-re si-lent and comp-le-tely on-task. Saw-ney ap-pe-ared to be a mons-ter who va-lu-ed dis-cip-li-ne in his clan. The-re was no spe-aking, only de-ter-mi-ned whi-te eyes, and a ran-dom jag-ged la-ugh he-re and the-re.

Which was dis-tur-bing in its own right. Be-ca-use that la-ugh...that crazy, ner-ve jang-ling, comp-le-tely over-the-edge-and-dog-pad-dling-in-the-pit-of-insa-nity cack-le...was pu-re Saw-ney Be-ane. "So-und fa-mi-li-ar?" I mur-mu-red to Nik.

"Yes," he ans-we-red flatly. "Yes, it do-es."

That's when they spo-ke. Every last one of them...si-mul-ta-ne-o-usly.

"Tra-ve-lers."

Okay, that was cre-epy. I'd se-en a lot of shit in my day, but that was de-fi-ni-tely pretty damn fre-aky, but wor-se? It was Saw-ney's vo-ice...almost. Not exactly, but li-ke a dis-tor-ted ec-ho of it.

I shot the le-ad one in the he-ad and he-ard anot-her ec-ho-this ti-me in my mind. He'd sa-id I tas-ted li-ke in-sa-nity. And I wasn't. I wasn't li-ke that. Wasn't li-ke him or the Aup-he. I ga-ve a si-lent snarl and fi-red aga-in, the flash-light in my ot-her hand. Af-ter that they we-re on us and the gun was no lon-ger the best op-ti-on. They we-re too clo-se, mo-ist skin aga-inst my clot-hes. Ni-ko was swin-ging his axe with de-vas-ta-ting ef-fect and Pro-mi-se had a sword-sil-ver, slen-der, and de-adly. The one I drew was mo-re along the li-nes of a Ro-man short sword. Long eno-ugh to ta-ke off a he-ad, short eno-ugh for clo-se qu-ar-ters. Ugly, but func-ti-onal...much li-ke the re-ve-nants them-sel-ves.

I pus-hed hard at the one on me, sho-ving it away be-fo-re sli-cing open its gut. That didn't kill it, but the wo-und dist-rac-ted it long eno-ugh to let me whirl and ta-ke the he-ad off the one co-ming from my ot-her si-de. Par-ti-al-ly any-way. Anot-her two chops and then I flip-ped the first one over my sho-ul-der. I co-uld fe-el the drench of wha-te-ver flu-id es-ca-ping his sli-ced guts hit my back. It was hot, slick, and that was mo-re than I ever wan-ted to know abo-ut the in-ter-nal ju-ices of a re-ve-nant.

From the cor-ner of my eye I saw Pro-mi-se ta-ke the he-ad of one re-ve-nant with her sword whi-le tos-sing anot-her of the cre-atu-res fif-te-en fe-et stra-ight up to smash aga-inst the ce-iling of the tun-nel. A third hit her as she hand-led the first two and to-ok her down to di-sap-pe-ar un-der the wa-ter. I only

had ti-me to ta-ke one step to-ward her be-fo-re she sur-fa-ced...alo-ne. Three for her, three for me, at le-ast six for Nik, which left only ten.

Unless you co-un-ted the next twenty that ap-pe-ared from the glo-om.

And be-hind tho-se...I stop-ped co-un-ting. When it ca-me to mat-he-ma-tics, the-re we-re three nu-me-ri-cal con-cepts I was in-te-res-ted in: ba-rely worth the ti-me, do-ab-le, and stra-te-gic fuc-king ret-re-at. I didn't ne-ed a cal-cu-la-tor to know we we-re lo-oking at the lat-ter.

"Pro-mi-se, go," Ni-ko rap-ped. "Cal, co-ver us."

"Got it." The big gun was co-ming out af-ter all. I pul-led out the .50 and emp-ti-ed the clip. I hit the re-ve-nants in the le-ad and con-cent-ra-ted the rest of my fi-re on the ce-iling. It didn't fall, but chunks of it did.

Bet-we-en that and the he-ads of the-ir com-pa-ni-ons exp-lo-ding li-ke a Fo-urth of July event go-ne ca-tast-rop-hi-cal-ly wrong, they did he-si-ta-te slightly. It was eno-ugh to gi-ve us a he-ad start and we to-ok it. I stop-ped on-ce mo-re in my he-ad-long rush to sli-de anot-her clip ho-me and fi-re aga-in. Nor-mal-ly this wo-uld've be-en eno-ugh to put off a gro-up of re-ve-nants, even one this lar-ge. They we-ren't bright, but they we-ren't usu-al-ly su-ici-dal eit-her.

The-se we-re dif-fe-rent. Saw-ney, not the-ir own ins-tincts and in-tel-li-gen-ce, cont-rol-led them. I didn't know if it was thro-ugh she-er for-ce of his ma-ni-acal per-so-na-lity or thro-ugh so-met-hing mo-re un-na-tu-ral in its do-mi-na-ti-on. And in the end, the "how" didn't re-al-ly mat-ter; it was the re-sults that con-cer-ned me. The ones that we-re left kept co-ming and co-ming, no mat-ter how many I drop-ped. The-re we-re pro-bably clo-se to thirty-fi-ve to forty of them still re-ma-ining by the ti-me I ran out of the exp-lo-si-ve ro-unds.

"Cal."

"I'm co-ming." I tur-ned and ran aga-in. Ni-ko was wa-iting a short dis-tan-ce ahe-ad as I splas-hed along. The re-ve-nants we-ren't far be-hind me...li-ke I'd sa-id, they we-re fast. "All out of the go-od shit," I pan-ted as we both ra-ced along. As we ap-pro-ac-hed, Pro-mi-se sto-od still in a sickly po-ol of yel-low light by a me-tal do-or she'd pri-ed open. I saw the re-ma-ins of the lock han-ging, shat-te-red by her de-cep-ti-vely slim hands. It was ni-ce ha-ving a vam-pi-re on yo-ur si-de when it ca-me to bre-aking and en-te-ring, es-pe-ci-al-ly when the bre-aka-ge in-vol-ved was fa-irly high.

"This way," she sa-id, se-emingly unt-ro-ub-led by the hor-de be-hind us. As the three of us pas-sed thro-ugh, she slam-med it be-hind us and tur-ned the hand-le with a flick of her wrist. That flick led to a cre-aking of me-tal and one se-ri-o-usly jam-med do-or. Body af-ter body hit it be-hind us. It held, but it wo-uld'n't for long. We didn't wa-it aro-und to ti-me it. This tun-nel was hig-her than the ot-her, the wa-ter only ank-le de-ep.

"Think Saw-ney is ma-king this his per-ma-nent he-ad-qu-ar-ters?" I as-ked as we mo-ved. We ne-eded him to set-tle in, to cho-ose his ter-ri-tory-the one he wo-uld'n't be ab-le to aban-don. The one he'd be for-ced by his own na-tu-re to stick aro-und in so we co-uld kick his ass, the ho-me he'd de-fend to the de-ath...ho-pe-ful-ly his.

"Dif-fi-cult to say. He's long-li-ved and the long-li-ved tend to be ca-uti-o-us. Es-pe-ci-al-ly, I ima-gi-ne, tho-se who've be-en bur-ned to de-ath." Ni-ko had slo-wed to a fast lo-pe and Pro-mi-se and I fol-lo-wed su-it. "Even if that de-ath was only tem-po-rary. I think it's mo-re li-kely he'll try se-ve-ral lo-ca-ti-ons be-fo-re cho-osing the one most su-ited to his par-ti-cu-lar li-festy-le."

If you co-uld call eating ran-dom stran-gers a li-festy-le-can-ni-ba-lis-ti-cal-ly inc-li-ned se-eks open-min-ded ca-ve dwel-ler. No ve-ge-ta-ri-ans ple-ase.

Nik's conc-lu-si-on wasn't what I wan-ted to he-ar, but he was pro-bably right. Saw-ney was cun-ning. He wasn't go-ing to pick a pla-ce wit-ho-ut chec-king out all his op-ti-ons. As for the re-ve-nants... "We're go-ing to ne-ed mo-re fi-re-po-wer or mo-re hands or both," I po-in-ted out. "I swe-ar, that son of a bitch has every last re-ve-nant in the city wor-king for him. The li-ne at Mons-ter Man-po-wer must be short as hell now."

In the dis-tan-ce, I he-ard the so-und of a me-tal do-or slam-ming back aga-ainst conc-re-te, and it was ti-me for mo-re se-ri-o-us run-ning-not to men-ti-on a lit-tle se-ri-o-us cur-sing. By the ti-me we re-ac-hed one of the tun-nels clo-se to the sur-fa-ce, I was torn bet-we-en bar-fing up a lung and lying

down to die of a wel-co-me he-art at-tack. Damn, tho-se bas-tards co-uld run. They'd pul-led back at the last se-cond when we'd fi-nal-ly re-ac-hed the lights and so-unds of ci-vi-li-za-ti-on. It was a go-od thing we we-ren't in ac-ti-ve tun-nels. Va-ul-ting off the ra-il fol-lo-wed by a mob of ra-ve-no-us re-ve-nants wo-uld've ru-ined the eve-ning of any ave-ra-ge com-mu-ter who hap-pe-ned to be stan-ding on the plat-form.

I sat on the flo-or and le-aned aga-inst a squ-are pil-lar. "Enter"-I whe-ezed-"ta-ining."

Vam-pi-res did bre-at-he. They we-ren't de-ad, un-de-ad, any of that-a com-mon mis-con-cep-ti-on, no mat-ter how much it ma-de for go-od li-te-ra-tu-re. They did ha-ve a lar-ger lung ca-pa-city than hu-mans, tho-ugh. Pro-mi-se was ba-rely bre-at-hing de-e-ple. At le-ast Ni-ko, who tho-ught the New York Ma-rat-hon was for tho-se wit-ho-ut the com-mit-ment for ge-nu-ine exer-ci-se, was pul-ling in the oc-ca-si-onal he-avy bre-ath of his own. It ma-de me fe-el a lit-tle bet-ter abo-ut my bur-ning chest.

"So..." I suc-ked in a bre-ath and the oxy-gen dep-ri-va-ti-on spots be-gan to fa-de aro-und the ed-ges of my vi-si-on. "What now?"

"That is a go-od qu-es-ti-on." Ni-ko lo-oked back to-ward the tun-nel. "A very go-od qu-es-ti-on in-de-ed."

12

Cha-ri-ty work in the tun-nels didn't me-an I got to skip the "day job." Two ho-urs la-ter I'd cle-aned up af-ter the tun-nel bat-tle, was back at the bar, and fa-cing so-met-hing wor-se than a hor-de of hun-gry re-ve-nants. A who-le lot damn wor-se.

"Let me tell you a story."

Go-od-fel-low was drunk. Not buz-zed, not a lit-tle lo-ose, but ab-so-lu-tely shit-fa-ced. I'd long lost co-unt of the num-ber of drinks he had. What was the po-int? He ne-ver pa-id for them any-way-a-not-her way of thum-bing his no-se at Is-hi-ah.

"How abo-ut I tell you one? It's abo-ut the mo-ron who got lo-aded when the-re was so-me-one out the-re trying to kill him." I kept my eyes on the rest of the bar. I al-ways did, but this ti-me I did it with a men-tal tar-get bran-ded on every pat-ron's vul-ne-rab-le are-as. Ro-bin se-emed to ha-ve for-got-ten abo-ut the at-tempts on his li-fe, but I hadn't.

"Why don't you stop ser-ving him?" Is-hi-ah sa-id at my sho-ul-der be-fo-re fi-nis-hing acidly, "Altho-ugh the al-co-ho-lic fu-mes ema-na-ting from his po-res sho-uld drop any cre-atu-re in its tracks."

"I tri-ed. He thre-ate-ned to go so-mew-he-re el-se and guz-zle." I chec-ked my watch. It was ne-arly three thirty a.m. I'd go-ne to the apart-ment to chan-ge af-ter the tun-nel fi-as-co, then had co-me to work. I'd be-en de-ad on my fe-et be-fo-re I even got the-re. Now I was won-de-ring just how dif-fi-cult it wo-uld be to drag the puck back ho-me with me, be-ca-use it was do-ubt-ful he was up for figh-ting off a fo-ot fun-gus, much less yo-ur ge-ne-ric in-hu-man kil-ling mac-hi-ne. The tho-ught didn't ma-ke me fe-el any less be-at. "At le-ast I can ke-ep an eye on him he-re."

"And why do you bot-her? Most do not. He's an ext-ra-or-di-nary amo-unt of tro-ub-le. He al-ways has be-en. He al-ways will be." It was sa-id wit-ho-ut an-ger or ac-cu-sa-ti-on. Is-hi-ah sa-id it as if it we-re not-hing mo-re than the truth-the sky is blue, the earth is ro-und. Ne-it-her go-od, nor bad. It simply was what it was. Alt-ho-ugh the-re did se-em to be a tra-ce of mo-re per-so-nal ob-ser-va-ti-on of this par-ti-cu-lar puck than simp-le ge-ne-ral know-led-ge of the ra-ce at lar-ge.

"He sa-ved my li-fe." I ca-ught the glass that ca-me tumb-ling thro-ugh the air ac-ross the bar, re-fil-led it, and set it back in front of Ro-bin. "He sto-od with me and Nik aga-inst so-me pretty nasty shit when he damn well sho-uld've run the ot-her way." I wo-uld ha-ve. At the ti-me I didn't gi-ve a shit abo-ut an-yo-ne but Nik and myself. Go-od-fel-low, the ul-ti-ma-te self-ser-ving cre-atu-re, had ri-sen abo-ve in a way I know I wo-uldn't ha-ve. Not then.

"Ro-bin's chan-ging. Af-ter all this ti-me." I co-uldn't re-ad the emo-ti-on on Is-hi-ah's fa-ce. A co-ma vic-tim wasn't as de-ad-pan as my boss co-uld be when he wan-ted. Wha-te-ver lur-ked be-hind the cur-rent stony fa-ca-de was well hid-den, but from the phra-se "after all this ti-me," I co-uld gu-ess.

“And I do ha-ve many ye-ars of pers-pec-ti-ve on our fri-end,” Is-hi-ah ap-pri-sed us as he stu-di-ed Go-od-fel-low’s slum-ped form. “Mo-re than he wo-uld pro-bably li-ke, and I don’t me-an that in a neg-”

He didn’t get a chan-ce to fi-nish. Ro-bin had star-ted tal-king aga-in, se-eming ob-li-vi-o-us of both Is-hi-ah and the crowd no-ise that swel-led at his back li-ke a wa-ve. “Let me tell you a story,” he mut-te-red in-to his glass.

Se-cond ver-se, sa-me as the first.

“Ye-ah,” I gro-aned. “You’ve be-en tel-ling it aw-hi-le now.” And he’d yet to get past the word “story.”

“*This* story”-his ga-ze me-an-de-red up, then in an un-cer-ta-in circ-le un-til it ma-na-ged to find me and at-temp-ted to scorch me with a fuzzy gla-re-“fe-atu-res a god of un-pa-ral-le-led charm, un-sur-pas-sed wit, with a ma-le be-a-uty un-se-en in this or any ot-her world...” He to-ok anot-her swal-low of his drink. “And who was hung li-ke the Tro-j-an hor-se.”

“No re-la-ti-on to you, I’m su-re,” I com-men-ted blandly.

Ishi-ah had mo-ved from my back to be-si-de me at the bar to say with qu-i-et in-ten-sity, “Ro-bin, you don’t want to tell this one.”

It was rat-her se-ri-o-us talk for what so-un-ded li-ke one of Go-od-fel-low’s usu-al cock-and-bull sto-ri-es-he-avy on the cock, light on the truth. His gla-re ex-pan-ding to inc-lu-de Is-hi-ah, he ig-no-red the war-ning and went on. “And this god, so very per-fect in every damn way as he’d be the first to tell you, met a pe-op-le. Warm, fri-endly, open-min-ded...always a plus...and too un-be-li-evably stu-pid to pos-sibly kn-”

“*Eno-ugh!*” Is-hi-ah’s hand slam-med down on the bar with a for-ce that tem-po-ra-rily hal-ted all con-ver-sa-ti-on in the ro-om. If he had ac-tu-al-ly be-en fe-eling so-me sort of sa-tis-fac-ti-on, it was go-ne now. His wings we-re vi-si-b-le as well and that wasn’t a go-od sign. “Ca-li-ban, ta-ke him out of he-re now. Do not let him ne-ar anot-her drop of al-co-hol. And”-as he le-aned in to-ward Ro-bin, the scar at his jaw blanc-hed bo-ne whi-te-“if this se-ems to be a prob-lem for you, Puck, if you wish to be dif-fi-cult, I’ll be happy to help yo-ur fri-end carry yo-ur shift-less, cor-rupt, and *un-con-s-ci-o-us* body out of he-re.”

The next few mi-nu-tes pro-ved to be a le-ar-ning ex-pe-ri-en-ce.

First: Bar fights are the sa-me, hu-man or ot-her-wi-se. The ent-hu-si-asm is iden-ti-cal; only the le-vel of vi-olen-ce chan-ges. Se-cond: Pe-ris can fly. Re-al-ly. Third: Pe-ris, flying or gro-un-ded, ha-ve hel-la-ci-o-us tem-pers. Fo-ur: Pucks don’t let an-yo-ne tell them what to do. Fi-ve: Even blind drunk, sa-id pucks can kick so-me se-ri-o-us ass.

Be-fo-re it was all over, the-re we-re chunks of fur, sca-les, fe-at-hers, and so-me things I didn’t re-cog-ni-ze lit-te-ring the flo-or. The-re we-re al-so po-ols of blo-od and splat-ters of vo-mit, all co-ve-red with the glit-ter of shat-te-red glass in an unp-le-asant ka-le-idos-co-pe that I had no in-ten-ti-on of cle-aning up. Fi-nal-ly, the-re we-re Is-hi-ah and Dan-ye-al. They we-re flin-ging drun-ken figh-ters thro-ugh the do-or whi-le ho-ve-ring in mi-da-ir with wings fi-er-cely be-ating, and it was so-met-hing to see: The bib-li-cal exit from Eden me-ets a ca-ged de-ath match. I pus-hed up, sat on the bar, drank half a be-er, and enj-oyed the show. Me-anw-hi-le, Go-od-fel-low to-ok on two wol-ves with a bar sto-ol and a glass mug. One fur ball en-ded up cho-king on gro-und glass, whi-le the ot-her po-or fuzzy bas-tard en-ded up im-pa-led with a wo-oden sto-ol leg. Both wo-uld li-ve...we-re-wol-ves we-re sturdy.

“I chal-len-ge you all.” One of the re-ma-ining legs of the sto-ol was wa-ved aloft, Ex-ca-li-bur in the hands of Art-hur. Af-ter all, if an-yo-ne co-uld’ve se-du-ced it out of the Lady of the La-ke, it wo-uld be Ro-bin. “Every last one of you im-po-tent, pa-ra-si-te-rid-den, Ye-ti-toe-lo-ving...yes, I sa-id it. You suck the-ir ha-iry to-es. You suck them with enor-mo-us re-lish. Now co-me to me! Co-me to me, you...*ga-ma mou*,” he ab-ruptly cur-sed, and duc-ked.

I was ta-king anot-her swal-low rich in hops when I de-ci-ding duc-king wasn’t such a bad idea. As I did, Dan-ye-al ca-me hurt-ling over my he-ad. He hit the wall be-hind the bar wings-first and slid down. He twitc-hed on-ce, then lay fro-zen, cop-per he-ad til-ted to one si-de, but eyes still blin-king slowly.

The Amadán who'd do-ne the thro-wing star-ted to-ward the bar to fi-nish the job. Amadán, so-me sort of fa-ery if I re-mem-be-red right, we-re nasty. They exc-re-ted a ve-nom thro-ugh the-ir skin. One to-uch and you'd be pa-raly-zed for at le-ast an ho-ur. It ma-de hand-to-hand com-bat rat-her tricky, as Dan-ye-al had be-en so help-ful in de-monst-ra-ting. Hand-to-hand com-bat al-ways had be-en se-ri-o-usly over-ra-ted in my bo-ok. I pul-led the Glock, po-in-ting it bet-we-en opa-li-ne al-mond eyes, and pe-eled my lips back in a wel-co-ming grin. "Inte-res-ting fact. I get pa-id whet-her the cus-to-mers are ali-ve or not."

With shi-ning wa-ves of sil-ver and black ha-ir, lit-he fi-gu-res, and ever-chan-ging eyes, the Amadán we-re the su-per-mo-dels of the un-na-tu-ral world. Skinny, hungry as hell, and co-uld'n't buy a bra-in cell with a buc-ket-ful of cre-dit cards. For-tu-na-tely for this one, he was ca-pab-le of wrap-ping the empty spa-ce bet-we-en his ears aro-und the fact that a bul-let bo-un-cing abo-ut in the con-fi-nes of his skull might be un-de-si-rab-le. He fa-ded back in-to the se-et-hing mass of the crowd, ever-yo-ne he to-uc-hed skin to skin fal-ling at his fe-et as he mo-ved.

Go-od-fel-low, who had fal-len du-ring his lun-ge to avo-id Danny, was stag-ge-ring back up and still lo-oking to de-fend King and Co-untry. "Co-me to me..." Then as Ca-me-lot fell, so did Ro-bin. I ca-ught him by the back of his shirt be-fo-re he hit the flo-or. His he-ad hung as slackly as that of the pa-raly-zed Dan-ye-al with his chin res-ting on his chest. He was out cold, but un-cons-ci-o-us or not, he still kept tal-king. "I was a god," ca-me the ba-rely de-cip-he-rab-le mur-mur.

"I'm su-re you we-re," I snor-ted as I pul-led him up and over the bar. De-po-si-ting him in re-la-ti-ve sa-fety be-si-de Dan-ye-al, I went to help Is-hi-ah shut the pla-ce down. What was left of it.

Two ho-urs la-ter I was ho-me, Go-od-fel-low was on the co-uch, and I ba-rely ma-de it to bed. I pa-used only to to-uch the bar-ret-te on my dres-ser. A re-min-der... a pro-mi-se to a de-ad lit-tle girl. Ne-it-her Nik nor I had ever got-ten to be a nor-mal kid with a nor-mal li-fe. Ours had be-en ta-ken away be-fo-re we even had one. This girl's had be-en ta-ken away too, and in a far mo-re bru-tal fas-hi-on. I wasn't go-ing to for-get that and I wasn't go-ing to for-get her.

I strip-ped, fell in-to bed, and fi-ve se-conds la-ter was lis-te-ning to Ni-ko exp-la-in his plan. At le-ast it se-emed li-ke fi-ve se-conds-six, if you we-re ge-ne-ro-us. De-fi-ni-tely not the ho-urs it had be-en. Blin-king aga-inst harsh day-light, I felt the co-ol rub of the she-et aga-inst my fa-ce and roc-ked a lit-tle at the firm nud-ge to my sho-ul-der. "Then we're cle-ar?" Ni-ko sa-id.

"What? Ye-ah. Cle-ar," I mumb-led. "Crystal. Bye."

"You've com-mit-ted every word to me-mory?"

"Right next to 'The Ro-ad Not Ta-ken.' Swe-ar." I rol-led over and pul-led the she-et over my he-ad. I hadn't he-ard Nik co-me in or the do-or shut-ting. It didn't worry me. I hadn't he-ard him pre-ci-sely be-ca-use he was Nik. The do-or wo-uld've be-en shut with comp-le-te si-len-ce, and I tu-ned out the so-und of the key tur-ning in the lock as only he, Pro-mi-se, and Ro-bin had a key. If I'd he-ard a dif-fe-rent so-und, the ste-althy one of claws skit-te-ring aga-inst wo-od or the scra-pe of a me-tal pick aga-inst the lock, I'd ha-ve wo-ken up ins-tantly. I wo-uld'n't ha-ve ans-we-red that do-or alo-ne eit-her. I slept with a kni-fe un-der my pil-low, a gun un-der the mat-tress, and a sword un-der the bed. If I co-uld ha-ve lit-ter-box-tra-ined an al-li-ga-tor, I wo-uld've had one of tho-se un-der the-re as well.

But sin-ce my sub-cons-ci-o-us did know it was Ni-ko-he-re we we-re. I'd slept thro-ugh the plan and was at-temp-ting to sle-ep thro-ugh the post-ga-me. I knew bet-ter, but ho-pe and la-zi-ness spring eter-nal.

"Go-od. Then I'll le-ave the rec-ru-iting the bog-gle up to you."

That wo-ke me the hell up. A buc-ket of ice wa-ter and a shot of ad-re-na-li-ne co-uld'n't ha-ve do-ne it any fas-ter. I rol-led back and pro-pel-led up to a sit-ting po-si-ti-on. "No," I re-fu-sed as qu-ickly as I co-uld snap the word out. "We ag-re-ed. No mo-re bog-gles."

"Did we?" He had sho-we-red at Pro-mi-se's. Damp blond ha-ir, clo-sely sha-ved fa-ce-the go-atee of se-ve-ral months pri-or had di-sap-pe-ared not too long ago. The-re was the smell of a dif-fe-rent sham-poo, but the scent of the so-ap was the sa-me as what we had in our bath-ro-om. So-me sort of all-na-tu-ral her-bal, go-at-milk con-coc-ti-on wit-ho-ut the fa-in-test tin-ge of ar-ti-fi-ci-al che-mi-cals. I didn't know whe-re he got it. I just used it and went on with my li-fe. Pro-mi-se ob-vi-o-usly did know

which sto-re sold it or Nik had star-ted ta-king stuff over with him. Eit-her way...

I ga-ve him a cro-ok-ed grin. "You're nes-ting, Cyra-no. That's cu-te as hell." The de-si-re to yank his cha-in fa-ded as qu-ickly as it had co-me. "And, ye-ah, we did ag-ree. No mo-re god-damn bog-gles." I'd on-ce hi-red we-re-wol-ves to kill Ge-or-ge when I was "under the inf-lu-en-ce" so to spe-ak. And I'd do-ne the sa-me to Ni-ko and Ro-bin, un-der the sa-me inf-lu-en-ce, using a bog-gle ins-te-ad. Ni-ne fe-et of sca-les, mud, and kil-ling fury, a bog-gle didn't ha-ve to be pus-hed very hard to do what was al-re-ady na-tu-ral ins-tinct. That I'd per-so-nal-ly known that par-ti-cu-lar bog-gle had only ma-de it easi-er.

"It wasn't you," my brot-her sa-id, kno-wing the twis-ted la-ne my me-mo-ri-es had tra-ve-led down, "and this bog-gle won't be that one."

"Why are we tal-king abo-ut bog-gles any-way? Shit." I swung my legs to the flo-or and res-ted my he-ad in my hands. "What was that plan aga-in?"

As plans went, it was simp-le. Ni-ko had ne-ver felt the ne-ed to over-comp-li-ca-te. The mo-re tang-led the ap-pro-ach, the equ-al-ly tang-led yo-ur body parts we-re li-kely to be when it all went wrong. The-re we-re mo-re re-ve-nants in the tun-nels than we co-uld hand-le; the-re-fo-re we'd do a lit-tle rec-ru-iting. The-re we-re tho-se who wo-uldn't mind snac-king on a hor-de of re-ve-nants...that wo-uld be pay eno-ugh for them. Then the-re we-re a few spe-ci-es who hap-pe-ned to li-ke mo-ney and ex-pen-si-ve things.

Bog-gles, for one, we-re suc-kers for jewelry. Gold, sil-ver, pre-ci-o-us or se-mip-re-ci-o-us, as long as it was bright and shiny, they co-ve-ted it. It was rat-her amu-sing to see a hu-ge hul-king fi-gu-re ca-res-sing chunky gold cha-ins that wo-uld ba-rely fit aro-und one of his enor-mo-us fin-gers. Go-od for a chuck-le, right up un-til you re-mem-be-red whe-re the jewelry ca-me from: pe-op-le.

"Sin-ce when do we de-pend on an-yo-ne but our-sel-ves?" I lo-oked up. "And what are we go-ing to pay? We go-ing to hock yo-ur to-fu col-lec-ti-on?"

"Sin-ce do-ing it alo-ne co-uld ta-ke us months or get us kil-led. As for fi-nan-ci-al in-cen-ti-ve, Pro-mi-se says she has far mo-re jewelry than she co-uld we-ar in two li-fe-ti-mes. Vam-pi-re li-fe-ti-mes," he ad-ded with a qu-ir-ked eye-b-row.

A bog-gle wo-uld de-fi-ni-tely de-mand a go-od chunk of Pro-mi-se's col-lec-ti-on. Se-emed fa-ir. She had got-ten us in-vol-ved in this bit of com-mu-ni-ty ser-vi-ce. On-ce it was de-ter-mi-ned Saw-ney was out of the mu-se-um, Sang-ri-da hadn't se-emed to con-si-der it her prob-lem any lon-ger. She'd was-hed her Valky-rie hands and tur-ned her at-ten-ti-on to cle-aning up her sir-rushs-plat-te-red ba-se-ment. And Pro-mi-se co-uldn't jus-tify anyt-hing to the rest of the *hu-man* bo-ard of di-rec-tors ot-her than the "re-ward" mo-ney for in-for-ma-ti-on, and the re-ward mo-ney wasn't re-al-ly eno-ugh to ma-ke it worth our whi-le fol-lo-wing Saw-ney's sla-ugh-ter from be-gin-ning to end. Yet he-re we we-re.

Back in the old days when we we-re on the run, we'd be-en right along with Sang-ri-da-not our res-pon-si-bi-lity, not our prob-lem.

When had that chan-ged?

"We can al-so en-list a few wol-ves. We're not po-pu-lar with the Kin, but not all we-re-wol-ves are Kin."

True-tho-ugh the bet-ter figh-ters ten-ded to be. "Okay, wol-ves are fi-ne. Wol-ves, I get." I hadn't had the op-por-tu-ni-ty to avo-id wol-ves in the past ye-ar li-ke I had bog-gles. Wol-ves we-re everyw-he-re. Let a prob-lem with them get to you and you wo-uldn't be ab-le to le-ave the apart-ment. "But the-re's pro-bably only one bog-gle in the park." They we-re tre-men-do-usly ter-ri-to-ri-al. Cent-ral Park wo-uld only be big eno-ugh for two, and Ni-ko and Ro-bin had al-re-ady kil-led the one we knew of. "Just one isn't worth the tro-ub-le." It was a lie. One bog-gle alo-ne co-uld ta-ke out his we-ight in re-ve-nants.

"It's worth the tro-ub-le," Nik cor-rec-ted with pa-ti-en-ce, but as his pa-ti-en-ce ten-ded to be of the ironc-lad va-ri-ety, it didn't do me much go-od.

I tigh-te-ned my lips. The bog-gle had not-hing to do with the re-ve-nants. We co-uld hi-re do-ub-le the wol-ves, hsi-gos, or who-ever el-se we ca-me ac-ross. No, this was abo-ut me. I was get-ting over

Dark-ling and it was ti-me to do the sa-me with bog-gles. “Jesus, fi-ne,” I sur-ren-de-red with ill tem-per. “I’ll de-li-ver the in-vi-ta-ti-on. Happy?”

“Actu-al-ly smug wo-uld be mo-re pre-ci-se. Now”-he tos-sed me a shirt from my bu-re-au-“the-re is a po-ol of puck vo-mit on the li-ving ro-om flo-or. Enj-oy.”

I did not.

I ne-it-her enj-oyed it nor cle-aned it up. I slap-ped a scrub brush in the slack hand of a ble-ary-eyed, swe-aring, and pa-in-ful-ly so-ber Go-od-fel-low be-fo-re sho-we-ring, and ta-king off in-to the la-te-mor-ning sun. It was an unu-su-al-ly warm day for No-vem-ber and I wo-uld’ve be-en ab-le to get by with only a T-shirt as long as I didn’t mind my hols-ter sho-wing. I min-ded, and I tho-ught New York’s fi-nest pro-bably wo-uld as well. I en-ded up we-aring the light-we-ight we-at-he-red de-nim jac-ket that I wo-re in the sum-mer for the sa-me pur-po-se. As for Ni-ko, as ac-ces-so-ri-es went, I wasn’t su-re if he co-un-ted as sum-mer or fall. I wasn’t the type of guy in-to lug-ging aro-und ext-ra crap un-less it was a we-apon, alt-ho-ugh Nik de-fi-ni-tely did fall in-to that ca-te-gory. “I’m trying to think of you as a back-pack or a lit-tle dog in a ni-nja out-fit,” I sa-id fi-nal-ly, “but it’s not wor-king. I tho-ught I was sup-po-sed to do this myself. To-ugh lo-ve and all that shit.”

“Cal,” he res-pon-ded with vast to-le-ran-ce for my idi-ocy, “it is a bog-gle.”

“Je-sus,” I grow-led. Thre-ading thro-ugh the crow-ded si-de-walk, I plan-ted a rib-crack-ing el-bow in-to the ribs of a well-dres-sed pa-le man with a satc-hel, a Ro-lex, and hung-rily twitc-hing fin-gers who was fol-lo-wing with vo-ra-ci-o-us in-tent an ob-li-vi-o-us thir-te-en-ye-ar-old girl. He stumb-led, snar-led, and fa-ded back. He co-uld’ve be-en hu-man; he co-uld’ve be-en so-met-hing el-se. So-me-ti-mes you can’t tell the mons-ters from the ma-ni-acs, and so-me-ti-mes the-re’s no dif-fe-ren-ce at all.

Bog-gles ca-me down on the mons-ter si-de. They we-ren’t smart, but they we-ren’t stu-pid. They we-re dri-ven by lo-gi-cal ne-eds: gre-ed and hun-ger. You co-uld re-ason with a bog-gle...as long as you we-re on equ-al fo-oting. We’d la-id that gro-und-work with our bog-gle, alt-ho-ugh in the end it hadn’t wor-ked out too well for eit-her party, but this ot-her bog-gle-he was new ter-ri-tory. Fri-end, foe, or fo-od, we’d ha-ve to pro-ve it all over aga-in.

We to-ok the 6 tra-in up-town from As-tor Pla-ce, got off ne-ar the park, and wal-ked east, enj-oying the sun. In the park, free of the city’s crush of hu-ma-nity du-ring the we-ek, I’d be ab-le to smell the bog-gle out. It might ta-ke a whi-le and mo-re exer-ci-se than I ca-red to in-vest, but I co-uld do it. That was the easy part. Af-ter that, it was hard to say what wo-uld hap-pen. An in-vi-ta-ti-on to party with re-ve-nants in a sub-way tun-nel, that wasn’t ne-ces-sa-rily a uni-ver-sal pas-si-on, whet-her you got pa-id for it or not. Bog-gles we-re ho-me-bo-di-es as well. But if ba-ub-les we-re what got you thro-ugh the day, Pro-mi-se co-uld of-fer far mo-re va-ri-ety than the bog-gle was li-kely to get from ran-dom vic-tims.

I co-uld see it go-ing eit-her way-if, and this was a big if-he wasn’t pis-sed abo-ut what had hap-pe-ned to his fel-low mud-dwel-ler. It’s one thing to be ter-ri-to-ri-al; it’s anot-her for the only ot-her mem-ber of yo-ur spe-ci-es in three hund-red squ-are mi-les to end up de-ad. Very tho-ro-ughly de-ad. If I we-re a bog-gle, I knew I’d be won-de-ring how long it wo-uld be un-til who-ever had do-ne that ca-me af-ter me. He was abo-ut to get his ans-wer, just not in the way he pro-bably wo-uld’ve gu-es-sed.

“You think bog-gles ha-ve na-mes?” I step-ped off the path in-to a wi-de grassy area and sha-ded my eyes from the sun. We’d cal-led ours Bog-gle and he’d ne-ver of-fe-red up anyt-hing el-se. It wasn’t surp-ri-sing. Snitc-hes don’t lo-ve the-ir cops, and Bog had cer-ta-inly ne-ver lo-ved us. We hadn’t exactly lo-ved him eit-her, but I’d...hell, got-ten used to him, I gu-ess.

“I ima-gi-ne they do. I do-ubt they call them-sel-ves Bog-gle One and Bog-gle Two as in the hig-hest le-vel of li-te-ra-tu-re you ca-re to pick up.” Ni-ko still hung back in the tre-es, his black on gray blen-ding in with the sha-dows.

“You we-re the one who ho-mesc-ho-oled me, Cyra-no. If I’m af-ra-id of big words, you ha-ve no one to bla-me but yo-ur-self.” I in-ha-led de-eply and af-ter an ho-ur of ro-aming the park I fi-nal-ly ca-ught a whiff. Mud and bog-gle. “Got him.”

I'd long pas-sed Charm's par-ti-cu-lar me-adow. It was im-pos-sib-le to dis-tin-gu-ish her scent from that of yel-lo-wing grass and the dri-ed rem-nants of clo-ver war-ming un-der the sun, and I hadn't se-en or he-ard her as we'd go-ne by. I to-ok it as a sign. As with Is-hi-ah's opi-ni-on of the pucks, it was ne-it-her go-od nor bad. It was what it was. The bit-ters-we-et reg-ret had not-hing to do with her; that all be-lon-ged to me. I knew I had fuc-ked up, but I'd me-ant to. Aimed to. Ama-zing how for the best re-ason, you do the worst thing. And Ge-or-ge was my re-ason, in mo-re ways than one.

"Which di-rec-ti-on?"

I pul-led the sung-las-ses out of my poc-ket and slip-ped them on. "Past the far end." The-re we-re mo-re tre-es the-re. Thro-ugh tho-se wo-uld be a small area, abo-ut twenty-fi-ve by twenty-fi-ve. Big eno-ugh for a wal-low, but hid-den by the tre-es-that's how bog-gles li-ked it. "May-be Ham wo-uld help us out with Saw-ney. I don't know if he's a figh-ter, but we co-uld ask. If you trust him aro-und Pro-mi-se," I ad-ded with a grin.

"You know I trust Pro-mi-se." I did trust her too, at le-ast when it ca-me to Ni-ko. She'd do any-thing for him, and I me-ant it. Any-thing, and God help you if you got in her way. "The-re's not much she wo-uldn't do to sa-ve yo-ur neck. But she do-esn't se-em too fond of Ham." I grin-ned wi-der.

"That wo-uld be Pro-mi-se's bu-si-ness, and, as we've se-en, she is very go-od at bu-si-ness. If Ham ig-no-red her thre-at..." A mil-li-me-ter sli-ce of whi-te te-eth flas-hed, then di-sap-pe-ared. "I only ho-pe I'm the-re to see the end re-sult."

"Ye-ah. I'd buy that tic-ket." But his fe-eling for the ho-me-less or not, I do-ub-ted Ham wo-uld go down in the tun-nels with us. He'd met us on-ce. No way was he that in-ves-ted in our prob-lem.

Just as we went be-yond the next li-ne of tre-es, we ca-me ac-ross a who-le mess of them. Or it might've be-en mo-re ac-cu-ra-te to say a lit-ter of them-bog-lets...se-ven of them, sun-ning them-sel-ves aro-und the ed-ge of the muddy wa-ter. They we-re mud-encrus-ted cre-atu-res the si-ze of a full-grown bull al-li-ga-tor, mi-nus the ta-il. With lazy yel-low eyes, flic-ke-ring ton-gu-es, and claws sta-ined with old blo-od-they we-re pre-da-tory tod-dlers in a wi-de-open play-pen. "Gre-at," I mut-te-red as over a half do-zen shark-li-ke he-ads tur-ned to-ward us with a cu-ri-osity that was be-co-ming mo-re and mo-re avid by the se-cond. "Whe-re's she go-ing to get a baby-sit-ter?"

The mo-re im-por-tant qu-es-ti-on-the truly per-ti-nent one-wo-uld be whet-her the bog-gle we'd kil-led had be-en the-ir fat-her. I co-uldn't re-call any in-for-ma-ti-on on bog-gle ma-ting ha-bits off the top of my he-ad. Did they ha-ve two se-xes? One? Se-ven? I didn't know. If they went with the usu-al two, I al-re-ady knew this fe-ma-le didn't ha-ve much of a da-ting po-ol to cho-ose from. As odds went for our bog-gle be-ing her bog-gle...shit.

"Abo-ut bog-gle birds and be-es..." I sa-id, mo-ving a ca-su-al hand to-ward my hols-ter. "Ca-re to do a lit-tle in-for-ming?"

"Bog-gles ma-te for li-fe."

It didn't get mo-re in-for-ma-ti-ve than that.

As avid cu-ri-osity be-gan to chan-ge to avid hun-ger, the bog-gle of-fsp-ring be-gan to shift. The slit pu-pils of the-ir eyes di-la-ted as they ro-se to mus-cu-lar cro-uc-hes. And as they mo-ved, so did the muck on the ed-ges of the wa-ter. The sur-fa-ce qu-ive-red, then ab-ruptly exp-lo-ded up-ward.

She was big. Easily the ni-ne-fo-ot stan-dard, the sa-me flat he-ad and back-ward cur-ving rows of te-eth that I re-mem-be-red from Bog-gle. If the-re was a dif-fe-ren-ce in su-per-fi-ci-al ap-pe-aran-ce bet-we-en the ma-le and fe-ma-le, I co-uldn't see it. Clas-sic brown dap-pled sca-les glin-ted he-re and the-re thro-ugh the co-ating mi-re, and the claws we-re iden-ti-cal as well. Over a fo-ot long and the black of vol-ca-nic glass, they co-uld cut a tree in half with one swi-pe, and if they co-uld do that to so-lid wo-od, it didn't ta-ke much ima-gi-na-ti-on to pic-tu-re what they co-uld do to less sturdy flesh.

When the Gre-at Whi-te mo-uth ope-ned, li-qu-id mud stre-amed from bet-we-en the te-eth and be-ca-me a brown mist in the air as she ro-ared. The smal-ler ones im-me-di-ately ec-ho-ed the ro-ar, over and over aga-in, un-til the air was full of the re-ek of the half-di-ges-ted flesh of the-ir last me-al.

"Gu-ess what, Nik," I mut-te-red, squ-e-ezing the grip of my gun with whi-te-ned knuck-les, "I'm now even less over bog-gles than I was be-fo-re."

It was li-ke be-fo-re too, only this ti-me the bog-gle wasn't figh-ting simply for the sa-ke of the

ad-re-na-li-ne-pum-ping vi-olen-ce; this one was fight-ing for her child-ren. Eyes as big as hu-man fists fo-cu-sed on us, and a cla-wed fo-ot ca-me out of the mud and wa-ter to slam on-to so-lid earth. The gro-und sho-ok un-der my fe-et, and I bro-ught my gun up. We had op-ti-ons, su-re. We co-uld run. But ma-ma bog-gle co-uld run too, and as qu-ickly.

We co-uld stay and fight. Ni-ko and Ro-bin had be-en ab-le to ta-ke one bog-gle. Ni-ko and I co-uld do the sa-me. But the-re wasn't just one-the-re we-re eight. Se-ven we-re only half the si-ze of what had spaw-ned them, but that didn't chan-ge the fact that they we-re kil-lers, or that from the-ir ste-althy si-de-ways slit-her, they we-re al-re-ady prac-ti-ced ones.

Run or fight.

Li-ve or die.

Or we co-uld just gi-ve them a pre-sent.

I had to ad-mit, I hadn't tho-ught of that. As cho-ices went, it had sa-iled cle-anly un-der my ra-dar. The re-sult was that I was al-most as mes-me-ri-zed as the bog-gles by the drip-ping cas-ca-de of di-amonds and ru-bi-es that hung from Ni-ko's hand. The jewels bla-zed in the sun li-ke ra-in-drenc-hed pop-pi-es. My sung-las-ses dim-med the co-lors and siz-zling glory by ba-rely a frac-ti-on.

"Pretty." "Pretty." "Shiny." The bog-lets had stop-ped mo-ving and we-re sta-ning at the neck-la-ce with ro-un-ded eyes and un-cons-ci-o-usly gras-ping claws. Mom wasn't as easily imp-res-sed. Her ot-her fo-ot hit the gro-und and she thrust her he-ad clo-ser with bru-tal for-ce. The gems we-re ref-lec-ted in the cold she-en of her eyes and she gnas-hed her te-eth re-pe-ti-ti-vely. Fi-nal-ly, the let-hal we-a-pon that was her hand was held out.

"Tif-fany's?" The qu-es-ti-on oozed out with splin-te-red shards of bo-ne and mo-re rem-nants of mud.

Ni-ko step-ped for-ward and de-po-si-ted the neck-la-ce ac-ross her scaly palm. "Of co-ur-se. We wo-uld not in-sult you with anyt-hing less."

She bro-ught it clo-ser to study it. Held it ne-ar to her eyes, up to the sun, let it dang-le in the air, and then fi-nal-ly...she pur-red. Or may-be it was only the grin-ding of mo-re bo-nes ca-ught in her thro-at. As so-unds went, they we-re re-mar-kably si-mi-lar. "You ha-ve mo-re?"

"Many mo-re. Anyt-hing you can ima-gi-ne." Nik lo-oked up at her and ad-ded wit-ho-ut he-si-ta-ti-on, "You sho-uld be awa-re, ho-we-ver, that we did kill the ot-her bog-gle he-re in the park."

The-re was no sof-te-ning of the blow, no at-temp-ted exp-la-na-ti-on...no "He tri-ed to kill us first. It was self-de-fen-se. Sorry for yo-ur loss and I'm po-si-ti-ve he's in a bet-ter pla-ce." He simply ga-ve her the in-for-ma-ti-on and wa-ited to see what she wo-uld do with it. I think for every lie our mot-her had told in her fa-irly short li-fe, Ni-ko had rac-ked up an equ-al num-ber of truths...often in si-tu-a-ti-ons whe-re de-cep-ti-on wo-uld've be-en the easi-er and far sa-fer cho-ice. Con-si-de-ring how many ye-ars we'd spent on the run and li-te-ral-ly li-ving a lie, it was a pe-cu-li-ar dic-ho-tomy. Nik had do-ne a lot of things to ke-ep me ali-ve that cut ac-ross the na-tu-ral gra-in of who he was. He'd told the truth when he co-uld. When he ab-so-lu-tely co-uldn't, he'd used les-sons Sop-hia had un-wit-tingly ta-ught us to ke-ep me from the hands of the Aup-he, and he'd not on-ce hin-ted he'd reg-ret-ted what he'd do-ne for me.

I did. I reg-ret-ted the hell out of it, but right now? We-aring a fi-ne spray of bog-gle mud on my jac-ket, smel-ling old blo-od and de-com-po-sing flesh, I ho-nestly wis-hed he'd pic-ked this mo-ment to lie li-ke a fuc-king dog.

"You." Trans-pa-rent lids blin-ked over her eyes as the he-ad be-gan to we-ave slowly. "You kil-led him. You." Not a qu-es-ti-on, but a tas-ting of the words and the re-a-lity be-hind them. "My ma-te. The-ir si-re."

I still had the .50 up and the trig-ger half-way ho-me when she clac-ked her te-eth aga-in and sa-id ab-ruptly, "Opals. Black opals. Do you ha-ve black opals?"

And that was that. Bog-gles might ma-te for li-fe, but ap-pa-rently they didn't mo-urn for it.

Altho-ugh I'd be-en dis-patc-hed to ex-tend the in-vi-ta-ti-on, Nik did most of the tal-king. I'd say he'd plan-ned for that the en-ti-re ti-me. I had cer-ta-in ta-lents and skills, but ne-go-ti-a-ti-on of the non-vi-olent kind wasn't one of them. So whi-le the dis-cus-si-on of pri-ce went on, I pla-yed with the kid-di-es-which me-ant I hid in the tre-es whi-le they tri-ed to eat me. Fif-te-en mi-nu-tes la-ter, I was

so-aked with swe-at, han-ging in the lo-wer limbs of an oak, and pis-tol-whip-ping two bog-lets who we-re abo-ut to ta-ke chunks out of my legs.

“Cal, play-ti-me is over. Let’s go.”

The juve-ni-le kil-lers, who’d be-en sha-king off what they con-si-de-red lo-ve taps, mo-aned in di-sap-po-int-ment and lo-ped back to-ward the muck at the-ir mot-her’s bec-ko-ning snarl. I drop-ped to the gro-und and did so-me snar-ling of my own as I hols-te-red the gun.

“You know, Cyra-no, as a the-ra-pist, you suck out the ass.”

“It’s a hit-or-miss pro-cess,” he res-pon-ded so-lemnly as we wo-ve thro-ugh the tre-es. “Cons-tantly chan-ging and de-ve-lo-ping. Jung on-ce wro-te...”

What I had to say abo-ut Jung wasn’t hit or miss at all. It was very pre-ci-se, grap-hic, and in-vol-ved Ni-ko’s in-tes-ti-nal tract.

“You didn’t enj-oy yo-ur-self? Why not? Child-ren are al-ways ena-mo-red of you.”

Ye-ah, kids lo-ved me. Lo-ved to eat me. We-re-cubs, bog-lets, I was wal-king milk and co-oki-es for them all, but I wasn’t thin-king abo-ut that, and I wasn’t con-cent-ra-ting on Ni-ko’s dry te-asing eit-her. Se-e-ing bog-gles aga-in had bro-ught up so-me bu-ri-ed emo-ti-ons all right, but not the one my brot-her had plan-ned on. No, that wasn’t true. It was the emo-ti-on...gu-ilt...that he’d ho-ped to re-sol-ve, but this ti-me the gu-ilt was fo-cu-sed el-sew-he-re. Ni-ko and Ro-bin hadn’t en-ded up the ca-su-al-ti-es as in-ten-ded a ye-ar ago, but so-me-one el-se had.

“I miss Bog-gle,” I sa-id qu-i-etly. And I did in a way. Not for who he’d be-en, but for *what* he’d be-en. He’d be-en our in-for-mant and li-ke Ro-bin’s ten-ded to be, he was ho-mi-ci-dal as hell, but he’d be-en a pi-ec-e of our li-ves. When you li-ved li-fe on the run you didn’t ha-ve many cons-tants. Bog-gle had be-en one for two ye-ars and I’d got-ten him kil-led. He’d de-ser-ved it, no do-ubt, but I didn’t ha-ve to li-ke the fact it had be-en be-ca-use of me.

Nik, li-ke Bog’s ma-te, didn’t was-te any te-ars as he sa-id wit-ho-ut a tra-ce of do-ubt, “He was a kil-ler, Cal. Thro-ugh and thro-ugh, a kil-ler.”

I lo-ok-ed away, sa-id, “Not the only one,” and kept wal-king.

13

Rec-ru-iting isn’t as easy wit-ho-ut the glossy pamph-lets and te-le-vi-si-on ads. I’d be-en thrown out of so many wolf bars and so-ci-al clubs that night I was be-gin-ning to lo-se co-unt. I ne-ver wo-uld’ve tho-ught the bog-gle wo-uld be the easy part. It was se-ven in the mor-ning when we fi-nal-ly drag-ged our-sel-ves to Ro-bin’s pla-ce in Chel-sea, cho-osing it only be-ca-use it was clo-ser than ours. I had a black eye, Ro-bin was lim-ping aga-in, and Ni-ko had a ha-ir or two slightly out of pla-ce. Nor-mal-ly I wo-uld say it was be-ca-use he was the bet-ter figh-ter, but the re-al-ity was it co-uld well be a toss-up bet-we-en him and Go-od-fel-low. Ni-ko’s abi-li-ti-es we-re not-hing less than as-to-un-ding, but Ro-bin had had many mo-re tho-usands of ye-ars of prac-ti-ce. It wasn’t a lack of skill that had Ro-bin on the short end of the stick this ti-me.

Wol-ves had only scorn for hu-mans. They we-re not-hing but she-ep...we-ak and exis-ting only to be pre-yed upon. It wasn’t an at-ti-tu-de you wan-ted to be on the re-ce-iving end of. Then aga-in, when it ca-me to pucks and the Aup-he-ta-in-ted, be-ing a she-ep was a step up.

As Nik set-tled on the co-uch, long black-clad legs stretc-hed out and cros-sed at the ank-le, Go-od-fel-low as-ked him acidly, “Co-uld I get you a comb per-haps? At le-ast un-til the pa-ra-me-dics ar-ri-ve?”

“I told you eight bre-asts in a se-qu-ined hal-ter was not our top pri-ority,” Ni-ko of-fe-red mildly as he clas-ped hands ac-ross his ab-do-men, “did I not?”

“Mo-no-ga-mo-us sex is rot-ting yo-ur bra-in.” Ro-bin flic-ked both arms in a ges-tu-re that wasn’t qu-ite obs-ce-ne, but de-fi-ni-tely full of out-ra-ge. “They we-re all on the *sa-me* wo-man.”

“We we-re the-re to en-list wol-ves, not gro-pe them. And of-fe-ring to inc-lu-de her ma-te in on the exer-ci-se did not imp-ro-ve mat-ters any.”

I ig-no-red them both and went to the fre-ezer for ice. Ap-plying a to-wel-ful of the crus-hed stuff to

my eye, I le-aned aga-inst the co-un-ter as the dis-cus-si-on con-ti-nu-ed. “Oh, don’t let him fo-ol you. He was comp-le-tely in-to it. He simply fe-ared he’d be overs-ha-do-wed by my pro-wess and en-dow-ments. Alt-ho-ugh, to be just, his se-emed imp-res-si-ve be-hind the le-at-her. Ma-le wol-ves.” Gre-en eyes gle-amed. “They do lo-ve the-ir le-at-her.”

Truth-ful-ly, the fight hadn’t had much to do with Ro-bin hit-ting on two wol-ves, but it was easi-er on the sto-mach than dis-cus-sing how our two kinds we-re so lo-at-hed. Not all wol-ves felt the sa-me, abo-ut me at le-ast, but eno-ugh did to ma-ke things un-com-for-tab-le. To be ha-ted was one thing. To be con-si-de-red a worth-less, ut-terly de-tes-ted thi-ef or a mi-xed-bre-ed abo-mi-na-ti-on that ins-pi-red dis-gust and re-vul-si-on...it was less un-com-for-tab-le to talk abo-ut the re-sults of gaw-king at wolf bo-obs.

Then the-re was the fact that we’d kil-led a Kin Alp-ha.

Ye-ah, no-ne of us we-re too po-pu-lar. Ni-ko just hap-pe-ned to be a lit-tle less un-po-pu-lar than Ro-bin and me. So far we hadn’t fo-und a sing-le wolf wil-ling to work with us, no mat-ter what the pay. And Go-od-fel-low trying to inc-lu-de him-self as a bo-nus wasn’t hel-ping. If he kept it up, he wo-uldn’t ha-ve to worry abo-ut a myste-ri-o-us as-sas-sin en-ding his li-fe; Ni-ko wo-uld hand-le that him-self.

It was a go-od chan-ge of su-bj-ect be-ca-use the lin-ge-ring ima-ge of eight lightly fur-red, se-is-mi-cal-ly bo-un-cing bre-asts was still ma-king me mildly mo-ti-on sick. “Anyo-ne try to kill you in the past three days?”

Ro-bin dra-ped him-self over a cha-ir and rub-bed a calf that I as-su-med was just bru-ised. No blo-od sho-wed thro-ugh the ex-pen-si-ve slacks. “Only that new res-ta-urant on Co-lum-bus. The chef the-re is far de-ad-li-er than any Ha-meh bird.”

“I tho-ught we ag-re-ed you’d stay clo-se to ho-me un-til we dis-co-ve-red who’s be-hind this.” Ni-ko didn’t mo-ve or chan-ge the to-ne of his vo-ice, but the he-avy we-ight of di-sap-pro-val was evi-dent no-net-he-less.

Go-od-fel-low ga-ve him a bril-li-ant smi-le in re-turn. “Yo-ur con-cern warms.” He didn’t say spe-ci-fi-cal-ly what or whe-re it war-med. “I al-so ha-ve a pa-ir of le-at-her pants. I can go chan-ge right-”

The do-or ope-ned and Se-rag-lio en-te-red, sa-ving eit-her Go-od-fel-low or Nik. I wasn’t at all su-re who wo-uld co-me out ahe-ad in that con-test. At the sight of us, she sho-ok her he-ad and, to-uc-hing a small hand to the im-ma-cu-la-te pi-led ha-ir, sig-hed in re-sig-na-ti-on. “If I fe-ed you, will you le-ave? I can’t pos-sibly work with yo-ur lazy bo-di-es pi-led abo-ut.” She pas-sed Ro-bin and ruth-les-sly sho-ved his leg off the arm of the cha-ir. “And you all are skinny as they co-me. Who-ring and drin-king will ke-ep you that way. A man-a re-al man-sho-uld ha-ve flesh on his bo-nes.”

Stan-ding, Ro-bin-who had ne-ver be-en a hu-man man, re-al or ot-her-wi-se-sho-ok his he-ad. “Thank you, but no. Bed is what I ne-ed, un-less you ca-re to jo-in...” Al-re-ady in the kitc-hen on a step sto-ol, Se-rag-lio, at his words, tra-ced a con-temp-la-ti-ve fin-ger over the hand-le of a kni-fe em-bed-ded in a butc-her’s block. “Ah, that wo-uld be a no? Yo-ur in-con-so-lab-le loss, then.”

As he di-sap-pe-ared down the hall, his ga-it une-ven, I as-ked po-li-tely, “Do you ma-ke pan-ca-kes, ma’am?”

An ho-ur la-ter, my sto-mach was ple-asantly full of pe-ach waf-fles, and my eye ac-hed so-mew-hat less. Se-rag-lio had gi-ven me a plas-tic bag full of ice and anot-her to-wel to wrap aro-und it. It had las-ted un-til we ma-de it to the sub-way be-fo-re be-co-ming not-hing but an empty bag and a damp to-wel. I’d sho-ved the cloth in my poc-ket, and now I was le-aning my he-ad back aga-inst the win-dow of the sub-way car, re-ady to ta-ke what I’d known was co-ming.

“Ma’am? You cal-led her ma’am?”

“Li-ke I told her, you ta-ught me go-od man-ners.” I kept my eyes shut, on the ver-ge of do-zing to the roc-king of the car. Then I flas-hed my left arm up to block the blow. The-re had be-en the fa-in-test rust-le of cloth to warn me, one that Ni-ko wo-uldn’t ha-ve gi-ven an-yo-ne el-se. The tra-ining ne-ver stop-ped, and it ne-ver wo-uld. It was what had kept me ali-ve this long.

“I ta-ught them, yes, but I had no idea you’d ac-tu-al-ly in-cor-po-ra-ted them in-to yo-ur da-ily li-fe.”

I felt his arm drop away. "I've se-en you in-te-ract with hu-mans and non-hu-mans, and I've not se-en you show an-yo-ne the res-pect you show Ma-da-me Se-rag-lio."

"She sca-res me," I ad-mit-ted frankly. "I've yet to see her mo-re than three fe-et from a butc-her's kni-fe. And I show you res-pect, Cyra-no. I res-pect the hell out of you."

"For the sa-me re-ason?"

"Pretty much," I con-fir-med, this ti-me pro-tec-ting my ribs with a qu-ickly shel-te-ring fo-re-arm. Ope-ning my eyes, I ad-ded, "A he-althy do-se of hu-mi-li-ati-on do-esn't hurt. That you chan-ged my di-apers when I was a baby isn't so-met-hing I'll ever get over."

"Trust me, it wasn't that me-mo-rab-le." He snor-ted as he pe-net-ra-ted my gu-ard and slap-ped my ab-do-men with just eno-ugh stin-ging for-ce to ma-ke the les-son stick. "I wo-uld bring up the si-ze of the ex-ces-si-vely lar-ge guns you carry, but that wo-uld be un-ne-ces-sa-rily cru-el."

"Ass," I grumb-led.

After that, we ro-de in com-pa-ni-onab-le si-len-ce un-til the tra-in ma-de a stop. When the do-ors clo-sed aga-in, I sa-id, "I'm gu-es-sing it's the fo-ur of us and the bog-gle in the tun-nels, then. Flea-free." No-body li-ked the smell of wet dog any-way, and I per-so-nal-ly tho-ught the she-bog-gle was eno-ugh to worry abo-ut ke-eping track of.

"We're not the-re yet. We ha-ve one mo-re ave-nue yet to try." Ni-ko le-aned his he-ad back as well, but he didn't clo-se his eyes. He didn't ta-ke chan-ces, big, small, or in bet-we-en.

"Ye-ah?" I as-ked. As far as I co-uld tell, we we-re stan-ding at the end of the ro-ad. It was ti-me to co-pe with the lack of asp-halt and grab the hi-king bo-ots. "What?"

"Wa-it and see, lit-tle brot-her. Wa-it and see."

The wa-it and see tur-ned out to be De-li-lah, and we met her at a strip club in Chel-sea con-ve-ni-ently lo-ca-ted a few sub-way stops from Ro-bin's con-do. She was the bo-un-cer. The dan-cers we-re all ma-le, musc-le-bo-und, and bo-red. I was re-li-eved that Ni-ko hadn't told Ro-bin that's whe-re we'd be-en he-ading. He was pro-bably a re-gu-lar, and it had be-en a long night. I wasn't re-ady for a lon-ger mor-ning of dol-lar bill wa-ving and mo-re dis-cus-si-on of le-at-her pants or the re-mo-val the-re-of.

Whi-te-blond ha-ir still in the high pony-tail, De-li-lah was we-aring le-at-her her-self. Pants and a sco-op-nec-ked top, both the am-ber of her eyes, clung to her lit-he fi-gu-re, but it was the type of snug fit me-ant for figh-ting, not for show. "Pretty boy," she sa-id with lazy re-cog-ni-ti-on. "Twenty dol-lars."

"We've no in-te-rest in the show, De-li-lah," Ni-ko exp-la-ined with a slight bow of his he-ad. "We're he-re to spe-ak with you."

"Ah." She nod-ded and held out an un-re-len-ting palm. "Twenty dol-lars."

We pa-id the ten api-ec-e and went in out of the mor-ning light. Ni-ne a.m. and so-me guy was al-re-ady ons-ta-ge. That early and nor-mal-ly I was still in bed, but this po-or bas-tard was up the-re sha-king...wha-te-ver you had to sha-ke for ten bucks' ad-mis-si-on. The pla-ce was dark and small with red spot-lights and a few glas-sy-eyed pat-rons. We sat at a tab-le clo-se to the do-or, but with a go-od vi-ew of the ro-om as well. De-li-lah co-uld ke-ep watch for cus-to-mers and tro-ub-le si-mul-ta-ne-o-usly.

"Yo-ur chest? Do-ing well?" A fin-ger with a na-tu-ral, un-po-lis-hed na-il to-uc-hed my shirt.

"No prob-lems." Which was true. It wasn't much to lo-ok at, from a hu-man po-int of vi-ew, but it was he-aled and mostly pa-in-less. The-re was the oc-ca-si-onal pull of skin that was tigh-ter than it sho-uld be, but it wo-uld lo-osen up even-tu-al-ly-stretch li-ke the ma-j-ority of scar tis-sue ca-me to do. If I did ha-ve a prob-lem, it was drif-ting awa-ke in the mid-dle of the night with the dis-tinct sen-sa-ti-on of a so-ot-hing ton-gue ras-ping at my chest and a warm we-ight pin-ning me firmly to the bed. And that-well, that wasn't re-al-ly what I'd call a prob-lem.

"Go-od." Sa-tis-fi-ed, she prop-ped a bo-oted fo-ot on the tab-le. "You are he-aled. You are pretty. So why co-me he-re?"

"Ye-ah, well, abo-ut that." I sho-ok my he-ad at the shirt-less wa-iter as did Nik. "We're not too po-pu-lar with wol-ves, and we ne-ed to do so-me hi-ring."

"Not po-pu-lar." She smi-led with tho-se per-fect te-eth. "Puck, Aup-he-ling, hu-man. Kin kil-ler. Not

wan-tered, not emb-ra-ced. So mi-sun-ders-to-od.” Thro-wing back her he-ad, she la-ug-hed. The bar was dark and only a fo-urth full, but ever-yo-ne tur-ned at the so-und to lo-ok at her with fa-int exp-res-si-ons of surp-ri-se. She ca-ught them sta-ring, pin-ned them with oval eyes, and the men has-tily lo-ok-ed away, con-cent-ra-ting on the-ir drinks or the sta-ge. Do-mi-nan-ce, hu-mans pic-ked up on it as qu-ickly as dogs, whet-her they wan-tered to ad-mit it or not. “Hu-man she-ep,” she sa-id scorn-ful-ly. “Ba-rely prey.”

Til-ting her he-ad, she le-aned in and smel-led Ni-ko. She didn’t get clo-se eno-ugh to to-uch, but samp-led the air aro-und him. “But not you. You are as they say. War-ri-or.” Then she was at his thro-at in a mo-ve-ment so flu-id and qu-ick that I do-ub-tered the iden-ti-fi-ed she-ep ca-ught the shift in po-si-ti-on. I know they didn’t see the ed-ge of Ni-ko’s kni-fe bet-we-en De-li-lah and him or her te-eth click pur-po-sely aga-inst the me-tal.

“Alpha,” she iden-ti-fi-ed de-ci-si-vely as she set-tled back. “You le-ad yo-ur pack. Pro-tect yo-ur pack.”

She wasn’t wrong. Ni-ko had be-en born an Alp-ha. If you scre-wed with him, scre-wed with his own, the-re wo-uldn’t be much left of you to reg-ret that de-ci-si-on.

Ni-ko flip-ped the bla-de and ma-de it va-nish un-der his co-at. He didn’t com-ment on her conc-lu-si-ons. Alp-has had no ne-ed to brag. “We wo-uld li-ke yo-ur help. Yo-urs and an-yo-ne el-se you co-uld con-vin-ce to ac-cept our pay.”

She drop-ped her bo-oted fo-ot to the sticky flo-or and lic-ked away the sing-le drop of blo-od on her up-per lip. “You co-me abo-ut Saw-ney Be-ane?” His pre-sen-ce in the city was evi-dently not a sec-ret, not any-mo-re. “He kills.” The-re was a shrug that sa-id cle-arly, “Who do-esn’t?” “He was-tes.” That was en-ti-rely dif-fe-rent from the ha-ughty lift of her chin, a sin se-en only with con-tempt. I re-mem-be-red the body parts flo-ating in the wa-ter, dis-gus-ting to us, squ-an-de-red to De-li-lah. It re-min-ded me. She had hel-ped us, she might help us aga-in, but she al-so was a wolf. So-me wol-ves didn’t eat pe-op-le, but she was al-so Kin. Kin ate wha-te-ver the hell they wan-tered. I wan-tered to li-ke her, and I ra-rely wan-tered to li-ke an-yo-ne, but li-king in-vol-ved trust and truth, things I’d only star-tered to put in-to play in the past ye-ar. I wasn’t go-od at eit-her one yet, and I didn’t know that De-li-lah even de-ser-ved eit-her one.

But this was abo-ut Saw-ney and the re-ve-nants. If and how she co-uld help us now was what was im-por-tant, not won-de-ring abo-ut the et-hi-cal imp-li-ca-ti-ons of her di-et. “He’s in the sub-way tun-nels,” I sa-id, ho-oking a leg aro-und the cha-ir leg and we-arily res-ting my el-bows on the tab-le, “with a who-le shit-lo-ad of re-ve-nants.”

“We saw at le-ast forty.” Ni-ko pic-ked up the story.

“And the-re co-uld be mo-re. They’re oddly or-ga-ni-zed. They act as one with no-ne of the usu-al re-ve-nant squ-ab-bling and in-figh-ting. We’ve en-lis-tered a bog-gle, but I don’t be-li-eve that even she will be eno-ugh. Not if Saw-ney is the-re with them this ti-me.”

De-li-lah tap-ped her fo-ot aga-inst the flo-or with eyes dis-tant for se-ve-ral se-conds. “Saw-ney is Saw-ney. Not Kin bu-si-ness. But...” Her up-per lip, now blo-od-free, lif-tered with dis-tas-te. “He is ca-re-less. He brings at-ten-ti-on. Bad at-ten-ti-on. Kin will not help, not you.” Tra-cing a ref-lec-ti-ve fin-ger along the tat-to-o-ed wolf eyes aro-und her neck, she sa-id, “But I will help.” She to-ok a drink from a pas-sing tray and pop-ped a sli-ce of oran-ge in her mo-uth. “If pri-ce is ac-cep-tab-le.”

“I tho-ught the Kin wo-uldn’t help us. You are Kin,” Ni-ko po-in-tered out, gray eyes fo-cu-sed with skeep-ti-cal ca-uti-on. It had be-en his plan to ask for her as-sis-tan-ce, but whi-le he was ca-pab-le of trust and truth, you had to earn it.

“I am Kin, but I am al-so free,” she an-no-un-ced as if it we-re com-mon know-led-ge.

“Free be-ing?” I as-ked.

She tos-sed back the rest of the drink and ga-ve a sly smi-le. “Not ca-ught.”

as shown on the map of the Se-cond Ave-nue sub-way pro-j-ect Ni-ko had sketc-hed on a bar nap-kin. She al-so bro-ught fo-ur ot-her wol-ves with her. Big ones, all half-and-halves and we-aring ho-oded swe-ats-hirts to co-ver the fact. It didn't stop an ex-pe-ri-en-ced eye from spot-ting the glit-ter of gol-den-brown iri-ses, thic-ke-ned black na-ils, and jag-ged te-eth ma-de for the rip-ping out of thro-ats.

Ni-ko, Pro-mi-se, Ro-bin, Bog-gle, De-li-lah with her wol-ves, and me, if we co-uldn't ta-ke ca-re of the prob-lem, we might as well grab a wal-ker, mo-ve so-uth with the snow-birds, and let Saw-ney ha-ve New York.

"Did you le-ave the kid-di-es with a nanny?" Ro-bin as-ked as he lo-oked up at the bog-gle. He didn't ha-ve any bet-ter me-mo-ri-es from the fight with her ma-te than Ni-ko or I did. It sho-wed in the wary dis-tan-ce he kept from her.

From the con-temp-tu-o-us snap of her jaw and ga-le-for-ce snort of ran-cid air, she ma-na-ged to say wit-ho-ut words that the bog-lets wo-uld do just fi-ne on the-ir own. I wasn't su-re whe-re she'd got-ten in-to the tun-nel system to even-tu-al-ly me-et us, but I do-ub-ted it had in-vol-ved a Met-ro-Card.

"This is qu-ite the mix." Pro-mi-se's ha-ir was in a bra-id this ti-me, one wo-ven with black cord, then wrap-ped in a thick club at the ba-se of her neck. She smi-led to show the tips of po-in-ted ca-ni-nes. "The very best par-ti-es al-ways are."

In cont-rast, De-li-lah was al-re-ady frow-ning in im-pa-ti-en-ce. "We go now. Skip-ped din-ner. Me-al-ti-me is now."

"You didn't eat simply to work up an ap-pe-ti-te for this?" Ni-ko had bro-ught his axe aga-in and ra-ised it slightly in res-pect-ful sa-lu-te. "*You* are the war-ri-or."

"De-vi-o-us and ra-vis-hing." Ro-bin sid-led clo-ser. He'd ma-de the sac-ri-fi-ce cal-led for by filthy tun-nel wa-ter and wo-re je-ans. My je-ans. He didn't own any. Hit men af-ter his ass he had plenty of, but ca-su-al we-ar for re-ve-nant hun-ting-that he was lac-king.

"De-vi-o-us, ra-vis-hing." She snuf-fled his ha-ir, neck, and sho-ul-der and it wasn't in what I wo-uld call a se-xu-al way. "*Hungry.*"

"All right, then. Mo-ving along. Let us re-turn Saw-ney to the hell from when-ce he ca-me."

Go-od-fel-low was in the le-ad and mo-ving with alac-rity. He was ar-med with a sword, as was Pro-mi-se. I had my guns, and the wol-ves and the bog-gle had what na-tu-re ga-ve them. As we mo-ved, Bog-gle...if she had a na-me, she al-so wasn't sha-ring...slid un-der the wa-ter with the slow gra-ce of a cro-co-di-le. When she sur-fa-ced, the mud was go-ne, and her mot-tled sca-les held the pat-tern of an en-ti-re de-sert full of rat-tles-na-kes. Then she went un-der aga-in. The wa-ter he-re had be-en thigh de-ep; now it was al-most wa-ist high. It didn't co-ver her comp-le-tely. You co-uld still see the rid-ge of her spi-ne and the glow of her eyes in the dim light, but she mo-ved fast. So fast that wit-hin se-conds she had di-sap-pe-ared-past Go-od-fel-low and go-ne.

"You know, I'm not qu-ite su-re she'll ne-ed the rest of us af-ter all," Ro-bin re-mar-ked.

She had so-met-hing be-yond what her ma-te had pos-ses-sed-mo-re spe-ed, mo-re de-ci-si-ve-ness, mo-re of a pre-da-tory na-tu-re. I'd tho-ught how our past in-for-mant had be-en con-tent to sit and wa-it for his prey to co-me to him. This bog-gle, she wo-uld'n't be. I'd ma-de an as-ump-ti-on that all bog-gles we-re happy to dwell in the-ir mud un-til din-ner wan-de-red by to be mu-ti-la-ted. It wasn't true. She wo-uld ran-ge, she wo-uld hunt...she cha-sed down her prey, and ha-ving se-en her in mo-ti-on, I didn't think she wo-uld ha-ve it any ot-her way.

It'd be fuc-king fan-tas-tic if she we-re the ans-wer to our Saw-ney prob-lem, but I knew bet-ter. Things we-re ne-ver that easy. And in-sa-nity, li-ke Saw-ney had in spa-des, car-ri-ed you a long-ass way.

We fo-und that out in less than an ho-ur. The tun-nel we en-ded up in was long aban-do-ned and most li-kely long for-got-ten. The lights had go-ne dark who knew when and re-ma-ined that way. No one had co-me to rep-la-ce bur-ned-out bulbs. No one ca-me for anyt-hing as far as I co-uld tell. Ni-ko, Ro-bin, and I car-ri-ed flash-lights. No one el-se ne-eded them. The wol-ves and Pro-mi-se got by easily on our ref-lec-ted light and I didn't know if the bog-gle ne-eded light at all. As for what the re-ve-nants re-qu-ired...bump in-to it in the dark. If it's not cold and clammy, ta-ke a bi-te out of it. You

didn't ne-ed light for that. Re-ve-nants we-ren't smart, but they didn't ha-ve to be, and the fact that Saw-ney had so-me-how lif-ted them an IQ po-int or two only ma-de things wor-se for us. Wor-se be-ing?

They ca-me out of the wa-ter.

I tho-ught the mas-si-ve swell was the bog-gle at first, be-ca-use they ro-se as one. Bog-gle was what my mind ex-pec-ted and so for a split se-cond that's what I saw. Then re-ality-at le-ast forty mo-re re-ve-nants, six inc-hes from us. Six inc-hes. They co-uldn't ha-ve sur-ro-un-ded us as at le-ast one of us wo-uld've felt them un-der the wa-ter as we pas-sed them, but this...this was right up the-re with be-ing the next best thing. I co-uldn't ha-ve smel-led them se-pa-ra-tely from the ever-pre-sent rank de-com-po-si-ti-on al-re-ady in the-se unu-sed tun-nels any-way. The wol-ves might ha-ve, tho-ugh, if tho-se re-ve-nant sons of bitc-hes hadn't be-en co-ve-red with se-ve-ral fe-et of slug-gishly flo-wing, hor-ri-fi-cal-ly ri-pe wa-ter. Now that se-ve-ral fe-et had be-co-me six god-damn inc-hes and we we-re be-yond scre-wed.

Ni-ko and I we-re in the le-ad, ha-ving just tra-ded off with De-li-lah and Pro-mi-se ten mi-nu-tes ago. The fo-ur ot-her wol-ves we-re strung out lo-osely be-hind the-ir sil-ver-ha-ired Alp-ha, and Ro-bin was pul-ling re-ar gu-ard.

Six inc-hes. I kept thin-king it, but it bo-re re-pe-ating. I was so clo-se to the re-ve-nant that I co-uld see the po-re-less stretch of pal-lid skin stretc-hed ac-ross bo-ne. I co-uld see that be-hind the thick co-at-ing of whi-te that co-ve-red the-ir eyes was a fi-ne tra-cery of purp-le ve-ins, the si-ze of a stre-am of spi-der silk, and that the lips had no li-nes in them. Lastly, I saw that every to-oth in every yel-lo-wed grin was flec-ked with dri-ed blo-od li-ke speck-ling on a qu-a-il's egg.

Such a short dis-tan-ce, and it let me see mo-re de-tail than I wan-ted. It al-so let me jam the Glock in the belly of the re-ve-nant be-fo-re me and blow his spi-ne in half. Six inc-hes...six mi-se-rab-le inc-hes, it isn't the spa-ce you want bet-we-en you and a hungry foe, but at le-ast you don't ha-ve to aim. Un-for-tu-na-tely, the sa-me was true for them. They pas-sed over us in a wa-ve. No spe-ci-fic at-tacks on in-di-vi-du-als-ti-dal wa-ves don't do that. They just ta-ke you the hell down. Drow-ning in the oce-an's ver-si-on of a suc-ker punch wo-uldn't be ple-a-sant; drow-ning in ta-in-ted tun-nel wa-ter and mo-istly put-rid flesh wasn't any bet-ter.

I lost the flash-light. I lost the Glock too, but that was pur-po-se-ful. I let it go and went for my bla-des. One was the ser-ra-ted kni-fe, a mer-ce-nary ma-ga-zi-ne spe-ci-al, and the ot-her a kuk-ri. Ni-ko had shown me how to be ef-fec-ti-ve with the mi-ni-mac-he-te. Now I was re-ady to gi-ve the sa-me les-son to a re-ve-nant or ten. I ca-me up from the wa-ter, the thras-hing bo-di-es, and rip-ped thro-ugh everyt-hing so-lid aro-und me. Ever-yo-ne in our tem-po-rary qu-asi te-am was ex-pe-ri-en-ced eno-ugh to gi-ve ever-yo-ne el-se the-ir ro-om. Per-so-nal spa-ce, it's yo-urs-kill at will.

It wasn't easy get-ting back up to air-air to bre-at-he, air to slash me-tal thro-ugh. It was a pro-cess of cla-wing and stab-bing and bi-ting. If you wan-ted to gi-ve a la-bel to so-met-hing that al-re-ady had the per-fect one: Sur-vi-ve. Pro-cess. Met-hod. Sur-vi-val. When I sur-ged up-ward, I was spit-ting out so-met-hing ot-her than wa-ter. They we-ren't de-ad, they we-ren't de-com-po-sing, but dam-ned if they didn't tas-te as if they we-re.

I kept both hands in mo-ti-on, do-ing my best to cle-ar the area aro-und me. The ser-ra-ted kni-fe to-ok out one thro-at; the kuk-ri did the sa-me but with a cle-aner sli-ce. All aro-und was...what? The dim-mest flic-ke-ring of il-lu-mi-na-ti-on from flash-lights drop-ped un-der-wa-ter, a hor-de of whi-te-eyed zom-bie wan-na-bes, fi-ve gi-ant wol-ves le-ap-ing and sen-ding shred-ded in-tes-ti-nes spil-ling thro-ugh the air, a so-aked and blo-ody puck and hu-man with sword and axe, a vam-pi-re rip-ping an en-ti-re he-ad from a re-ve-nant's sho-ul-ders. What did you call that?

Hell. You cal-led it hell, be-ca-use cha-os was far too pretty a word.

And whe-re the *fuck* was our bog-gle?

"Tra-ve-lers."

Once aga-in, they sa-id it as one. And, I was sorry to no-te, that with re-pe-ti-ti-on, it did not get any less fre-aky. It was still wrong and un-na-tu-ral, even for a re-ve-nant.

De-li-lah ca-ta-pul-ted over my he-ad as I dod-ged one re-ve-nant's rush and per-ma-nently en-ded

anot-her's abi-lity to mo-ve at all. I re-cog-ni-zed her as she was the only whi-te wolf among the mi-ni-pack. The sil-ver-blond fur was a start-ling glow as she so-ared over. Her brot-her Flay ma-na-ged abo-ut three-fo-urths wolf when he chan-ged. He co-uld run on all fo-urs but co-uld walk on two as well. De-li-lah, as far as I co-uld see, went all the way. Wolf thro-ugh and thro-ugh and big as hell. When she lan-ded, she did what Pro-mi-se had do-ne. She re-mo-ved a he-ad, but she did it using her jaws. And then she did anot-her and anot-her and anot-her. The ot-her wol-ves, one with the re-ma-ins of a ho-oded swe-ats-hirt still tang-led aro-und his neck, we-re cut-ting the-ir own swath, and do-ing the job we pa-id them for. All ex-cept one. Whet-her he was a sha-de slo-wer, slightly less agi-le, the re-ason didn't mat-ter. What did was that he got ca-ught. Se-ve-ral sharp-na-iled hands ma-na-ged to fas-ten on to him, and even mo-re mo-uths bit thro-ugh brow-nish fur to flesh and didn't let go.

When he di-sap-pe-ared un-der the wa-ter, he didn't co-me back up. I tri-ed to ma-ke my way over in his di-rec-ti-on and I saw Nik do the sa-me. It was too la-te. The wolf was go-ne. Des-pi-te that, we we-re hol-ding our own. We we-ren't kic-king ass and ta-king na-mes, but we we-re ali-ve, most of us, and right now that was go-od eno-ugh for me.

Saw-ney had an en-ti-rely dif-fe-rent idea of what was go-od, and he bro-ught that idea with him. Car-ri-ed it along as he slit-he-red along the wall and up on the ce-iling over our he-ads. The knot-ted ha-ir hung down over the black emp-ti-ness of his fa-ce, but the amu-sed red shim-mer of his eyes ga-ve away his mo-od easily.

"He-ads up!" I cal-led to the ot-hers.

"Tra-ve-ler."

The word ca-me from only Saw-ney this ti-me with just the fa-in-test ec-ho-ing mur-mur from his cho-ir. "Tra-ve-ler with the fren-zi-ed tas-te. Mad-ness and cre-am and but-ter."

"Cre-am and but-ter, my ass" I sa-id flatly. Aup-he and in-sa-nity, may-be that went as hand in hand as it did with Saw-ney, but I damn su-re didn't want to he-ar abo-ut it. "You bas-tard."

Over the snarls of wol-ves, the splas-hing of wa-ter, and the thud-ding of me-tal chop-ping thro-ugh flesh, he sho-uld'n't ha-ve he-ard me. My vo-ice didn't ha-ve the car-rying pro-per-ti-es his did and I hadn't sho-uted it, but it didn't mat-ter. He he-ard.

"Yes, tra-ve-ler, cre-am and but-ter." The-re was a to-ne of lazy con-tent-ment, as if he wasn't hungry at the mo-moment, not for an en-ti-re me-al, but a ca-su-al tas-te wo-uld be all right. He wo-uld'n't be abo-ve that, not a con-no-is-se-ur li-ke him. Whet-her he wo-uld've tri-ed for it or not, I didn't find out, as anot-her con-no-is-se-ur, one of gems and me-tal, fi-nal-ly sho-wed up.

She ca-me thro-ugh the wall. Brit-tle ti-le shat-te-red as conc-re-te sho-ok, sho-ok aga-in, crac-ked, and the-re she was in all her glory. And right then, that was a hel-lu-va lot of glory in my eyes. Gra-ce as well, no mat-ter that she'd en-ded up in the wrong tun-nel. She flo-wed thro-ugh the lar-ge ho-le and up the wall, spi-king her claws ne-arly half a fo-ot de-ep thro-ugh the ti-le to pro-pel her-self along with mo-re spe-ed than I wo-uld've tho-ught pos-sib-le for her bulk.

The-re are mo-ments in li-fe to sa-vor and che-rish, to ke-ep and warmly re-call at a la-ter da-te. The fla-re of surp-ri-se in Saw-ney's scar-let eyes was one of them. Se-e-ing that smug bas-tard ca-ught off gu-ard for on-ce-ye-ah, it was the go-ods. It was the shit. The ab-so-lu-te shit.

I flip-ped a re-ve-nant over my sho-ul-der, pin-ned it with a knee in its back, and star-ted to ta-ke his he-ad. It to-ok so-me do-ing sa-wing un-der-wa-ter, even with the com-man-do kni-fe, but the ones who-se thro-ats I'd slas-hed we-re slowly stag-ge-ring back up the-ir fe-et. They we-ren't in pri-me figh-ting con-di-ti-on, but they we-re mo-ving, they we-re in the way, and the-re was no ti-me for that in-con-ve-ni-en-ce. When, with wa-ter up to my col-lar-bo-nes, I jer-ked my at-ten-ti-on up from the writ-hing re-ve-nant be-ne-ath me, I saw Bog-gle lun-ge and co-ver Saw-ney al-to-get-her. The shi-ne of his scythe and crazy smi-le va-nis-hed un-der the rip-ple of sca-les and sur-ging flesh.

May-be we we-re go-ing to luck out. May-be it was go-ing to be that easy. She wo-uld rip Saw-ney to pi-eces and we wo-uld bat-he in a ra-in of his blo-od. May-be I'd even catch a drop on my ton-gue li-ke a snowf-la-ke. See what he tas-ted li-ke.

Fi-nal-ly, I felt the spi-nal discs se-pa-ra-te un-der my kni-fe, and the par-ting of a re-mar-kably to-ugh spi-nal cord; then I was stan-ding with my eyes still on the bog-gle. She was mo-ving. The claws of her

hands and fe-et we-re em-bed-ded in the ce-iling, ke-eping her aloft, but her he-ad was whip-ping back and forth. The mo-ve-ment was too qu-ick for me to see him in her mo-uth, but I knew he was the-re. The only thing that wo-uld've ma-de this any bet-ter was if the bog-gle had be-en we-aring the pe-arl and di-amond ti-ara that had be-en inc-lu-ded in Pro-mi-se's pay-ment. That wo-uld've be-en the cherry on the god-damn sun-dae.

"She has him."

Ni-ko was at my sho-ul-der, the axe drip-ping in his hand. "Ye-ah, she has his ass," I sa-id with a warm glow in my gut that be-at Christ-mas mor-ning all to hell.

The-re was a par-ti-cu-larly vi-ci-o-us snap of the sca-led he-ad, a sen-se of flight, and a bru-tal thud as a dark mass hit a far wall. Sco-re one for Ma-ma. "Don't notch a po-int in the air," ca-me the war-ning. "It's crass." The axe to-ok out one of my shamb-ling re-ve-nants, who was suc-king in air thro-ugh his thro-at with a shrill whist-le.

"I wasn't go-ing to." An ut-ter lie. "I do plan on pun-ting his de-ca-pi-ta-ted he-ad li-ke a fo-ot-ball, tho-ugh." I flung wa-ter and go-re from both kni-ves and star-ted to-ward the wall whe-re Saw-ney ad-he-red li-ke a drying clot of blo-od.

Ni-ko mo-ved with me. "Stab-bing a fo-ot-ball isn't the sa-me as pla-ying it, I ho-pe you're awa-re."

I hadn't pla-yed well with ot-hers when I was a kid. In-vi-ta-ti-ons to ba-se-ball or fo-ot-ball ga-mes didn't of-ten co-me af-ter the "Yo-ur mom's a thi-ef and a who-re." That type of thing is hard to ta-ke from anot-her kid, es-pe-ci-al-ly when it's true. It ten-ded to le-ad to las-hing out. So-me of that las-hing out was ver-bal; so-me in-vol-ved a switchb-la-de. Bet-ter to spe-ar a fo-ot-ball to the gym flo-or than so-me juni-or high as-sho-le's po-iso-no-us ton-gue to the sa-me po-lis-hed wo-od. "I can kick. I kick yo-ur ass on a re-gu-lar ba-sis, don't I?"

"No. Not on-ce," he shot me down ruth-les-sly as he swung the axe lo-osely, up and over. "And wit-ho-ut vast imp-ro-ve-ment, not ever."

Not my day for get-ting the bul-lshit thro-ugh. I didn't mind. Put-ting an end to that child-kil-ling mons-ter put a rosy glow over the en-ti-re sce-ne. De-ad and in-ca-pa-ci-ta-ted re-ve-nants, who-le and less than, flo-ated in the wa-ter. The-re we-re wol-ves...eating. Ro-bin and Pro-mi-se ga-ve them a ca-uti-o-us berth as they mo-ved to-ward us thro-ugh the wa-ter. The fur balls we-re on our si-de for the mo-ment, but they had dif-fe-rent di-ning man-ners than the rest of us. Get too clo-se to the-ir fo-od and they might ta-ke a chunk out of you by pu-re ins-tinct. Auto-ma-tic and unt-hin-king. As they we-re with us, they might be sorry af-ter-ward. Se-ve-ral sets of lam-bent am-ber eyes fo-cu-sed at us over mo-uths fil-led with flesh. Then aga-in, they might not.

I tur-ned my at-ten-ti-on back to Saw-ney. The red-ness of his eyes was ba-rely de-tec-tab-le and the scythe hung limply from the ebon-skin-ned hand. His back was to the wall, and how he was sta-ying sus-pen-ded the-re, I co-uld'n't ha-ve gu-es-sed and didn't bot-her to try. I was mo-re in-te-res-ted in how he was go-ing to co-me down. It was go-ing to be hard and it was go-ing to be messy, and I wan-ted to be in-vol-ved in both of tho-se.

Bog-gle wasn't do-ne with him yet, ho-we-ver. She so-ared ac-ross the open spa-ce-a ca-ve-in, fal-ling in a comp-le-tely imp-ro-bab-le di-rec-ti-on. She hit Saw-ney and the wall and to-ok both down. The-re was a cas-ca-de of ti-le and conc-re-te, flesh and bo-ne, and it all di-sap-pe-ared un-der the wa-ter abo-ut thirty fe-et away. Re-ve-nants and the-ir parts bob-bed in the re-sul-ting ti-dal rush.

"She's not li-ke the old bog-gle, is she?" Ro-bin was un-wo-un-ded ex-cept for a long scratch along his jaw, and if Pro-mi-se we-ren't wet, she wo-uld've be-en as pris-ti-ne as be-fo-re we'd en-te-red the sub-way tun-nel.

"He was a lazy cre-atu-re." He con-ti-nu-ed wat-ching the wa-ter ro-il fran-ti-cal-ly whe-re Bog-gle and Saw-ney had va-nis-hed. "De-adly, but con-tent with the sta-tus quo. I do-ubt this one wo-uld be. She's be-yond mag-ni-fi-cent."

"Thin-king of as-king her out?" I as-ked with a snort. Not even Go-od-fel-low had the balls for that.

"I don't da-te tho-se with child-ren." He to-uc-hed a fin-ger to his jaw and wi-ped me-ti-cu-lo-usly at the blo-od. "It ta-kes the fo-cus from whe-re it sho-uld truly lie."

"With you." Pro-mi-se car-ri-ed it with a he-avy do-se of irony to its na-tu-ral conc-lu-si-on.

“Am I wrong?” Fi-nis-hing with the blo-od, he used his free hand to comb ca-re-ful-ly thro-ugh his curls. He was gro-oming him-self. In the af-ter-math...hell, it wasn’t yet an af-ter-math...du-ring, he was gro-oming him-self *du-ring* a bat-tle. “The-re are tho-se who wish to ex-pe-ri-en-ce me and tho-se who wish to kill me. If that’s not exc-lu-si-ve fo-cus, what is? You can’t be con-si-de-red self-cen-te-red, if you sin-ce-rely are the cen-ter of all at-ten-ti-on, now, can you?”

I didn’t res-pond. The vi-olent dis-tur-ban-ce of the wa-ter had stop-ped, and as I to-ok a step for-ward, Ni-ko’s hand set-tled on my sho-ul-der. “Wa-it,” he or-de-red. “She do-esn’t ne-ed us get-ting in her way.” That we didn’t par-ti-cu-larly ne-ed to be torn apart by a blo-od-en-ra-ged bog-gle, he left uns-po-ken. The wa-ter rip-pled, cal-med...

Then it tur-ned blac-ker than it al-re-ady was. The will-o’-the-wisp of our lost flash-lights was slowly van-qu-is-hed by bil-lo-wing dark-ness. I didn’t know what co-lor Saw-ney’s blo-od was-des-pi-te tem-po-ra-rily ha-ving his arm chop-ped off, Saw-ney hadn’t felt it ne-ces-sary to ble-ed a drop for us. What I did know was that bog-gle blo-od was black. A spill of oc-to-pus ink, just li-ke this.

“I’ll pass on pick of her lit-ter. Ra-ising car-ni-vo-ro-us of-fsp-ring do-es not fit my li-festy-le.” Ro-bin, along with Ni-ko, had fis-hed a se-con-dary flash-light from her jac-ket poc-ket and lit the pla-ce up. But the light wo-uld’n’t to-uch so-me things and Saw-ney was one of them.

He ro-se out of the wa-ter and hung inc-hes abo-ve it. In one hand he held eit-her a hand-ful of cloth, a blan-ket, or...shit. Sca-les. The ma-te-ri-al rip-pled with sca-les and was li-ned with the black vel-vel of blo-od. “The-se ca-ves”-drop by drop that sa-me black fell from the po-int of the scythe to the wa-ter be-low-“they are not the chill of the sea ca-ves of ho-me.” He sho-ok it, his new blan-ket, to the rust-le of the lar-gest pi-ece of sna-kes-kin in the world. He’d skin-ned her, and, from the blo-od that had po-pured free, he’d do-ne it whi-le she was ali-ve. The de-ad didn’t ble-ed. I ima-gi-ned, al-so, that the skin-ned didn’t li-ve long af-ter the pro-cess.

“I shall wrap myself in it when the cold fi-nal-ly co-mes.” The bright bla-ze of his eyes was back as he pul-led the skin up to his fa-ce and ro-se hig-her in the air. “Ahhh, the swe-et smell of a mot-her. The in-com-pa-rab-le scent of orp-hans. I che-rish yo-ur gift, tra-ve-lers.”

I’d let the Glock go, but ne-ver the Eag-le-not with what it held. I pul-led, fi-red, and with three shots, I saw De-li-lah co-ming up be-hind and be-low Saw-ney... I saw it *thro-ugh* him. The ho-le was not qu-ite the si-ze of a gra-pe-fu-it, alt-ho-ugh the ro-unds sho-uld’ve blown him in half. The-re sho-uld’ve be-en Saw-ney on one si-de of the tun-nel and fuc-king Be-ane on the ot-her. Wha-te-ver he was ma-de from was as hard as sto-ne...har-der. De-li-lah wasn’t de-ter-red. She hit him. Lan-ded on his back and wrap-ped her jaws aro-und his neck with ro-om to spa-re. He was man-si-zed. She was not. She was Wolf and Kin and she dwar-fed him. Not as Bog-gle had, but eno-ugh that she co-uld’ve torn thro-ugh his thro-at as if it we-re pa-per. Co-uld’ve.

Sho-uld’ve.

Didn’t.

She le-aped free a split se-cond be-fo-re the scythe wo-uld’ve ope-ned her up. When she lan-ded, she was sha-king her he-ad hard as if her jaws or te-eth ac-hed. Grit-ting my own te-eth, I aimed and pul-led the trig-ger aga-in, this ti-me aiming for his he-ad. But he was go-ne. Bet-we-en one blink and the next, he’d fa-ded li-ke smo-ke. He was fast, Ni-ko and I had se-en how fast in the wa-re-ho-use, but this...Christ. How can you ho-pe to kill so-met-hing you can’t pos-sibly catch?

Qu-ick or not, he co-uld’ve go-ne in only one di-rec-ti-on. I re-fu-sed to be-li-eve he co-uld’ve go-ne over our he-ads wit-ho-ut us se-e-ing at le-ast a flic-ker of mo-ti-on. I star-ted for-ward down the tun-nel, only to be knoc-ked back-ward by a wa-ve of wa-ter and flesh. Raw, we-eping flesh. Hor-ri-fi-cal-ly in-jured, she’d be-en strip-ped of skin from neck to crotch. Fla-yed and still ali-ve.

“Whe-re?” Bog-gle ro-ared, arms up-lif-ted, fists clen-c-hed. “Whe-re? Whe-re? Whe-re?” Tur-ning, she po-un-ded tho-se fists aga-inst a wall to bring down anot-her sec-ti-on next to the ro-ugh ent-ran-ce she’d ma-de. “Whe-re? *Whe-re? **Whe-re?***” Whir-ling, she snatc-hed up the ne-arest cre-atu-re, which hap-pe-ned to be a wolf, and pul-led him in-to two pi-eces li-ke a tasty pi-ece of taffy. The lu-pi-ne jaw snap-ped fe-ebly for se-ve-ral se-conds af-ter-ward, and it was far mo-re dis-tur-bing than I wan-ted to ad-mit.

“As the Irish, a bril-li-ant pe-op-le, say, a go-od ret-re-at is bet-ter than a bad stand. Al-so the Bard on-ce pon-ti-fi-ca-ted that the bet-ter part of va-lor is disc-re-ti-on. I am not-hing if not lo-aded with disc-re-ti-on. Shall we?” Ro-bin tur-ned and be-gan to sprint back the way we had co-me.

I co-uld’n’t say he had the wrong idea. At-tac-ked by our own wo-un-ded, cra-zed ally and Saw-ney go-ne...things we-ren’t go-ing as plan-ned. One half of the wolf, a gray ma-le, fell from Bog-gle’s hand and the ot-her was thrown aga-inst the far wall. The back legs and hind-qu-ar-ters slap-ped limply aga-inst the sur-fa-ce, then drop-ped in-to the wa-ter.

“*Whe-re?*”

“For-tu-ne may fa-vor the bra-ve, but pucks are re-mar-kably long-li-ved. I say we go with the lat-ter ad-vi-ce.” Ni-ko yan-ked me the rest of the way aloft as I was pus-hing up from the wa-ter. And for the se-cond ti-me in a we-ek we we-re run-ning thro-ugh a tun-nel. This ti-me we had the ad-di-ti-on of Ro-bin and three wol-ves-as well as the world’s most pis-sed-off bog-gle.

We co-uld ha-ve kil-led her. She was mo-re sa-va-gely fi-er-ce than her ma-te had be-en, but she was inj-ured and the-re we-re se-ven of us. It wo-uld’ve be-en eno-ugh, but...she was our part-ner. We’d got-ten her in-to this. It didn’t se-em right to fi-nish off what Saw-ney had star-ted. Alt-ho-ugh in the end, it wo-uld’n’t ha-ve mat-te-red what our mo-ral stan-ce was on skin-ned bog-gles and the-ir mur-de-ro-us ram-pa-ges. If she had cha-sed us, that stand Ro-bin wan-ted to avo-id wo-uld’ve ta-ken pla-ce, bru-tal-ly and ins-tantly. If she cha-sed us.

She didn’t.

She cho-se to go af-ter Saw-ney. He was long go-ne, I had the fe-eling, but I wis-hed her the best of luck. I al-so ho-ped she li-ved. I co-uld’n’t spend every day tos-sing raw me-at at a mud pit full of baby bog-gles. I had a job. I had things to do. I was res-pon-si-ble for the-ir fat-her’s de-ath. I didn’t want to go the-re with the-ir mot-her too. Gu-ilt gets old. It gets so damn old.

Be-si-de me ran the whi-te wolf, who wit-hin six steps trans-for-med to a na-ked hu-man fe-ma-le. Ex-cept for the scars on her sto-mach and the cho-ker tat-too aro-und her neck, she was wet and glo-ri-o-usly nu-de. I han-ded her my jac-ket as we ran and her up-per lip lif-ted to show her te-eth in an amu-sed smi-le. She al-so tho-ught abo-ut pat-ting me on the he-ad, I co-uld see it, but she to-ok the jac-ket and slip-ped it on.

I li-ked De-li-lah-why, I wasn’t su-re. Per-haps be-ca-use she was li-ke Ni-ko...if he we-re a comp-le-tely im-mo-ral fe-ma-le. Let-hal and la-co-nic. The fa-mi-li-ar is al-ways com-for-tab-le. The fact she was sexy as hell didn’t hurt.

She wasn’t Ge-or-gi-na. Ne-ver wo-uld be-I knew that. But I’d ha-ve to le-arn to set-tle for a warm to-uch or a sec-ret smi-le from so-me-one el-se, and it wo-uld ha-ve to be eno-ugh. Or I co-uld spend that part of my li-fe alo-ne. Not only did I ha-ve hor-mo-nes that strongly di-sag-re-ed with that, but wit-ho-ut that wall bet-we-en us, Ge-or-ge might even-tu-al-ly con-vin-ce me.

And then she wo-uld die. Or wor-se. De-li-lah or Charm wo-uld ne-ver die for me, not if they co-uld avo-id it.

We all ran on, slo-wing when it was cle-ar Bog-gle wasn’t fol-lo-wing us but del-ving fart-her in-to the depths for Saw-ney. When we fi-nal-ly hit a ma-in-te-nan-ce tun-nel, we had three half wol-ves-one in my jac-ket and two na-ked. No-ne of them min-ded. The two ma-les we-re par-ti-al-ly co-ve-red with patc-hes of fur he-re and the-re, one with a stub of ta-il and the ot-her with a mis-sha-pen jaw and jo-ints. Badly bred or not, they ran far fas-ter than the rest of us did, alt-ho-ugh I knew Pro-mi-se co-uld’ve kept up.

They di-sap-pe-ared aro-und a turn and I tur-ned to De-li-lah. “Sorry abo-ut yo-ur fri-ends.”

She was we-ar-ing my jac-ket with ca-su-al fla-ir. It fell past her hips and hung open eno-ugh that I saw the cur-ve of her ap-ri-cot-co-lo-red bre-asts. I’d al-re-ady se-en them in the-ir en-ti-re-ty; it didn’t chan-ge the fact I was still lo-oking.

“Fri-ends?” Her am-ber eyes slan-ted in my di-rec-ti-on. Af-ter she’d chan-ged back from what Wol-ves con-si-de-red the-ir true sha-pe, her sil-ver-blond ha-ir had fal-len free to hang li-ke a wed-ding ve-il in co-lor and swe-ep. “Ke-ep up with the pack or don’t. Die for the pack when ne-eded. Pack is all. The-re are no fri-ends.” With that, she was go-ne too. Des-pi-te her sly glan-ces and my

ha-zily half-ass tho-ughts on the mat-ter, I didn't know if I'd see her aga-in or not. De-li-lah was De-li-lah. She li-ved, li-ke most fur cre-atu-res, in the he-re and now. Plan-ning ahe-ad wasn't a pri-ority or a con-cern.

"Furry wo-men are tricky, kid." Ro-bin was wa-iting for us. "I sug-gest a spo-on-ful of but-ter be-fo-re and af-ter any snor-ke-ling ac-ti-vi-ti-es. Ha-ir-bal-ls. Al-so, di-amond-stud-ded flea col-lars? They are a bitch to find for an-ni-ver-sary gifts." He'd put away his sword un-der his co-at and con-ti-nu-ed with a mo-re se-ri-o-us and un-cer-ta-in shrug. "On the ot-her hand, her ab-do-men. You know...she may be in-fert-"

I wa-ved him off with a growl. "I think the fact Saw-ney got away aga-in is a lit-tle mo-re pres-sing, okay?" We we-re let-ting down a de-ad lit-tle girl right and left. It was in my poc-ket, my re-min-der-the sunny bar-ret-te of a girl who wo-uld ne-ver see the sun aga-in. My so-ci-al li-fe and the lack the-re-of pa-led in com-pa-ri-son to that.

"And he ne-arly sla-ugh-te-red a bog-gle to do it. Sing-le-han-dedly." Ni-ko had ret-ri-ved his cel-lo ca-se from whe-re he'd left it, dry and sa-fe. We hadn't be-en hit with a ran-dom se-arch yet, but our luck wo-uld run out so-oner or la-ter. If Saw-ney sta-yed down he-re, we we-re go-ing to ha-ve to find a dif-fe-rent ac-cess.

"The fact that he did it with a ho-le that ran the en-ti-re depth of his body isn't en-co-ura-ging eit-her." Clo-sing the ca-se with a snick of buck-les, he lo-oked at me ste-adily. "Next ti-me, go for the he-ad shot."

I was a go-od shot, not Olym-pic qu-ality or anyt-hing, but com-pe-ti-ti-on-wi-se, I co-uld've held my own. A he-ad shot, tho-ugh, on a mo-ving tar-get wasn't easy un-der the best of cir-cums-tan-ces, and I'd yet to see anyt-hing re-mo-tely less than ab-so-lu-tely crappy cir-cums-tan-ces de-monst-ra-ted du-ring our re-cent bat-tles. Ni-ko knew that as well as I did, if not bet-ter.

"He-ad shot," I con-fir-med so-lidly.

"No wi-se-ass re-marks?" he as-ked, hef-ting the ca-se. The-re was no moc-kery in the com-ment, no fa-ked surp-ri-se; he knew what he was as-king of me.

"Too bad Hal-lo-we-en's over. We co-uld use his he-ad as a pump-kin. Stick a cand-le in the-re and sca-re the kid-di-es." I put the Eag-le in its hols-ter. "That work for you?"

It wasn't much of an at-tempt, a let-down of my smart-ass ton-gue. But the en-ti-re night had be-en a let-down. Ot-her than ta-king out mo-re re-ve-nants and lo-sing two wol-ves and a fa-ir pi-ecce of Bog-gle, we hadn't ta-ken ca-re of Saw-ney, hadn't le-ar-ned anyt-hing new. That the rest of us we-re ali-ve was our only ac-hi-eve-ment.

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The walk from for-got-ten to aban-do-ned and ma-in-te-nan-ce tun-nels, then to the new const-ruc-ti-on to-ok a whi-le, and De-li-lah had pe-eled off af-ter her Wol-ves long be-fo-re that po-int. Wit-ho-ut my jac-ket to hi-de it, I han-ded off my hols-ter to Ni-ko to con-ce-al in the cel-lo ca-se. I tuc-ked my gun in the back wa-ist-band of my je-ans and co-ve-red it up with my swe-ats-hirt be-fo-re we hit the stre-et le-vel. Then mi-nu-tes la-ter it was back un-derg-ro-und to hit the 6 tra-in ho-me. We had just stop-ped to stand on the plat-form, ig-no-ring the si-de-ways glan-ces at our so-aked clot-hing, when I he-ard it.

It wasn't lo-ud, the bang. Ba-rely audib-le over the tra-in that ro-ared out. A small so-und, a stumb-le, and then Ro-bin was fal-ling fa-ce-first on the flo-or. It lo-oked as if he had trip-ped. Only now, ins-te-ad of bitc-hing and gro-aning abo-ut scra-pes and bru-ises, he was un-mo-ving.

God.

I co-uld tell that his tor-so wasn't mo-ving be-ca-use he wasn't bre-at-hing and he wasn't tal-king. You don't bre-at-he, you don't talk. Go-od-fel-low-with no words? Not a sing-le one? I be-li-ved in mons-ters, I be-li-ved in the grim-mest of fa-iry ta-les, but I co-uldn't be-li-eve that.

Stran-ge that I wasn't bre-at-hing eit-her, but I was still ali-ve, co-uld still fe-el the rag-ged pump of my he-art, the acid burn in my lungs. And when I ra-ised my eyes from that un-mo-ving back to sta-re at

Ni-ko, I co-uld still see. If I co-uld do all tho-se things wit-ho-ut bre-at-hing, why co-uldn't Ro-bin?

Ni-ko's fa-ce was comp-le-tely blank and de-vo-id of anyt-hing...kil-ling mac-hi-nes don't ne-ed emo-ti-ons to get the job do-ne. "Left," he sa-id with a vo-ice as empty as he tur-ned and mo-ved in that di-rec-ti-on.

"Right." My fa-ce wasn't empty. It was full of bad things, hid-den things that I hadn't let myself fe-el sin-ce Ge-or-ge was ta-ken, Ni-ko al-most sac-ri-fi-ced. They'd be-en sho-ved down, smot-he-red, dis-mis-sed, but they we-re still the-re. They'd be-en wa-iting for the-ir chan-ce, and he-re it was.

With spe-aking ca-me oxy-gen and with that ca-me the abi-lity to dri-ve my body to the right thro-ugh the mass of pe-op-le. So-me had pic-ked up on the fa-int so-und of the shot and run, but most hadn't ca-ught it and we-re ho-ve-ring aro-und Ro-bin. May-be it was his he-art, may-be drugs, may-be god-damn mu-ta-ted pi-ge-on flu...the mut-te-ring and whis-pe-ring swel-led. I dro-ve thro-ugh the vul-tu-res with lo-we-red sho-ul-ders and vi-ci-o-us el-bows as I went right.

Ni-ko had al-re-ady go-ne in the op-po-si-te di-rec-ti-on. I tho-ught I he-ard Pro-mi-se call from be-hind me as she bent pro-tec-ti-vely over Ro-bin's body, but it was lost in the so-und of the crowd, the rush of the tra-in, and the blo-od ra-ging in my ears. I ran on. He wasn't get-ting away, the mur-de-rer who had do-ne this. Saw-ney had, but he wo-uld'n't. It didn't mat-ter that I hadn't se-en who had pul-led the trig-ger; I wo-uld re-cog-ni-ze him when I saw him. I wo-uld *know* him.

I tack-led a cop mo-ving to-ward me with wary eyes and ste-ely in-tent, ro-de him to the gro-und, cho-ked him out, and kept go-ing. That the bas-tard as-sas-sin was hu-man wo-uld'n't sa-ve him.

And he was hu-man.

I saw him-wal-king a lit-tle fas-ter than tho-se aro-und him. As I got clo-ser I co-uld see and smell the hu-man in the tiny be-ads of swe-at win-ding down the back of his neck from his ha-ir-li-ne. He didn't he-ar me be-hind him. It's al-most im-pos-sib-le to run si-lently ac-ross conc-re-te and ti-le, sne-akers or not, but with pe-op-le mil-ling and stom-ping abo-ut li-ke cat-tle, I had the per-fect audi-tory ca-mo-uf-la-ge. Per-fect, yet it fa-iled me. Alt-ho-ugh the kil-ler didn't he-ar me be-hind him, he lo-oked over his sho-ul-der any-way. Pro-fes-si-onals don't lo-ok and they don't swe-at. Ama-te-urs hold the pa-tent on that. They al-so run ins-te-ad of ta-king the of-fen-si-ve, as my ama-te-ur did. He bol-ted the mo-ment his eyes ca-ught mi-ne. Not used to kil-ling. Too bad for him I was.

Let the bas-tard run. Let him run all god-damn night. At the end of it, he wo-uld still be de-ad. A sir-rush, Ha-meh birds, this son of a bitch-they we-re all the sa-me. Mons-ters. I co-uld'n't get rid of my ge-ne, but that didn't me-an I ga-ve a shit if his we-re one hund-red per-cent nor-mal. For what he'd do-ne...

He was de-ad.

I al-most pul-led out the Eag-le, but that was bo-und to at-tract its fa-ir sha-re of at-ten-ti-on from at le-ast so-me of the com-mu-ters. As it was now, they we-re only cle-aring a path for us as we ran. The de-ad man, so god-damn *de-ad*, snatc-hed anot-her lo-ok over his sho-ul-der, sho-ved a wo-man who hadn't me-an-de-red out of his way qu-ickly eno-ugh, and then va-ul-ted her when she fell to her hands and kne-es. He hadn't ta-ken out his gun eit-her, which led me to be-li-eve he'd al-re-ady dum-ped it. He didn't want to be ca-ught by the cops with a we-apon, now, did he?

He sho-uld be that lucky.

The next ti-me he lo-oked for me I was ne-arly on top of him. Ba-rely three fe-et away I co-uld smell the fe-ar co-ming off of him. I co-uld al-so smell de-ter-mi-na-ti-on and re-sol-ve or may-be I was se-e-ing it in his dark eyes. I was so fo-cu-sed on him, so fe-ro-ci-o-usly awa-re, that I co-uld'n't tell whe-re one of my sen-ses be-gan and the ot-her en-ded. The sa-me went for my sa-nity and so-met-hing a lit-tle less than. He'd ta-ken my fri-end. He had ta-ken the first per-son I'd le-ar-ned to trust asi-de from my brot-her.

Months ago I'd be-en on the ed-ge of lo-sing it ut-terly when I'd tho-ught Ge-or-ge and Ni-ko we-re go-ne for go-od. Ro-bin had told me then that the fro-zen cont-rol I'd used simply to be ab-le to func-ti-on wo-uld co-me back to bi-te me in the ass. Told me that when you bury emo-ti-ons li-ke that, you're only pis-sing them off...ma-king them stron-ger, be-ca-use you're bur-ying them ali-ve. They don't li-ke that, and one day they'll ma-ke su-re that you don't li-ke it eit-her. He'd be-en right. But

aga-*inst* the odds and my own scre-wed-up psyche, I had fo-*und* Ge-or-ge and Ni-ko.

I'd ne-*ver* find Ro-bin aga-*in*.

But I'd fo-*und* his kil-*ler*. Right he-*re*. Right now. And rest-*ra-int* and com-*po-su-re*, they we-*re* just words to me. Me-*aning-less* so-*unds*, worth-*less* con-*cepts*.

I've felt sa-*va-ge* ra-*ge*. What I felt now was be-*yond* that. When he jum-*ped* down to the tracks and to-*ok* off down the tun-*nel*, I was with him. On him. I saw only him, felt only him when I tack-*led* him. I didn't fe-*el* the thud of the gro-*und* ri-*sing* to me-*et* us, him twis-*ting* be-*ne-ath* me or the fists that ham-*me-red* my ribs. I didn't fe-*el* the gun that I had in my hand eit-*her*, but I know he did. The mat-*te* black ste-*el* dug in-*to* the flesh un-*der* his chin un-*til* a small ri-*vu-let* of blo-*od* wel-*led* aro-*und* the gun-*sight* and wo-*und* down to po-*ol* in the hol-*low* of his thro-*at*. And be-*ca-use* I co-*uld* see only him, I co-*uld* see the ra-*pid* pul-*se* be-*ating* be-*ne-ath* the red with start-*ling* cla-*rity*. The-*re* was the blo-*od* rich with cop-*per*, swe-*at* so-*ur* with dre-*ad*, and bre-*ath* he-*ated* and harsh.

"What you do to me do-*esn't* mat-*ter*. My task is do-*ne*," he pan-*ted*. So-*me-how*, out-*si-de* of his fe-*ar*, the bas-*tard* had fo-*und* sa-*tis-fac-ti-on*. "The bet-*ra-ye-r* is de-*ad*."

I sho-*uld've* pul-*led* the trig-*ger*. The cle-*an* jerk of it, the kick of the re-*co-il*, I wan-*ted* that. But I al-*so* wan-*ted* so-*met-hing* el-*se*. "Are you the only one I get to kill?" I as-*ked*, the qu-*es-ti-on* le-*aden* and gut-*tural* in my thro-*at*. I jam-*med* the gun bar-*rel* har-*der* in-*to* his neck un-*til* he gag-*ged* aga-*inst* the pres-*su-re*. "Are you? Or is the-*re* so-*me-one* el-*se*? Die hard and alo-*ne* or easy and with com-*pany*. Which is it go-*ing* to be, you son of a bitch?"

He spat in my fa-*ce*, con-*tor-ted* his body, and sho-*ved* me off in a mo-*ve* that I'd not se-*en* be-*fo-re*, not even from Ni-*ko*. I stag-*ge-red* as he lun-*ged* up-*ward*, but I ma-*na-ged* to stay on my fe-*et* as I aimed the Eag-*le* at his chest from six fe-*et* away. "No, not yet," I sa-*id* mo-*re* to myself than to him. "Not that easy for you." I lo-*we-red* the muz-*zle* to po-*int* at his knee. If I fi-*red*, he'd be an ins-*tant* am-*pu-tee*, but he'd tell me whet-*her* he was in this alo-*ne*. That was worth a leg to find out. He was de-*ad* any-*way*. He co-*uld* bun-*ny-hop* his way thro-*ugh* the Ga-*tes* of Hell, for all I ca-*red*, and think of me whi-*le* he did it.

"You can't ma-*ke* me tell you anyt-*hing*." He was a study in cont-*ra-dic-ti-on*. Af-*ra-id*, but pro-*ud*. A mur-*de-rer*, but so fuc-*king* na-*ive*.

"Think aga-*in*, as-*sho-le*." I ga-*ve* a fe-*ral* grin. "I can ma-*ke* you do anyt-*hing*. *An-y-t-hing*. All I ne-*ed* is ti-*me*." I pul-*led* the trig-*ger*, and it felt as go-*od* as I knew it wo-*uld*. "You don't ha-*ve* anyw-*he-re* you ne-*ed* to be, right?" I fi-*nis-hed* as the ec-*ho-ing* bo-*om* of the ro-*und* fa-*ded* away.

His scre-*am* was slo-*wer* to wa-*ne*. He sho-*uld've* be-*en* gra-*te-ful*. He still had his leg. I'd used my left hand to throw my com-*bat* kni-*fe*. I wasn't as go-*od* with my left as my right, but I was go-*od* eno-*ugh* and go-*od* eno-*ugh* was all it to-*ok*. Half the bla-*de* bu-*ri-ed* it-*self* in his thigh. The guns-*hot* and cra-*ter* in the far wall a few inc-*hes* over had be-*en* for emp-*ha-sis*; the-*re's* not-*hing* qu-*ite* li-*ke* an exp-*lo-si-ve* ro-*und* for high-*ligh-ting* the six inc-*hes* of ste-*el* in yo-*ur* body. The-*re's* not-*hing* qu-*ite* li-*ke* it for emp-*ha-si-zing* any damn thing you can think of.

The cops wo-*uld* be co-*ming* but go-*od* luck get-*ting* thro-*ugh* the pa-*nic-ked* crowd that that exp-*lo-si-on* wo-*uld* ha-*ve* mil-*ling* li-*ke* wild ani-*mals*. It wo-*uld* ta-*ke* a whi-*le* and a whi-*le* was lon-*ger* than I ne-*eded*. We we-*re* far down the tun-*nel* and I was mo-*ti-va-ted*. Very mo-*ti-va-ted*.

I watc-*hed* as he fell to his kne-*es*, his hands fin-*ding* and loc-*king* on to the rub-*ber* hand-*le*. Lo-*oking* up at me, he swal-*lo-wed* the last of his harsh cry and his mo-*uth* wor-*ked* so-*und-les-sly* be-*fo-re* he mumb-*led* so-*met-hing* too slur-*red* to un-*ders-tand*.

"I can't ma-*ke* you tell me anyt-*hing*, is that what you sa-*id*?" I step-*ped* for-*ward*, put my hand over his tightly clen-*ched* ones. "It's ser-*ra-ted*, so very sorry abo-*ut* that. But don't worry. It'll be just li-*ke* pul-*ling* off a Band-*Aid*." I le-*aned* in and of-*fe-red* a moc-*kery* of sympathy. "I'm happy to do it for you. But if I we-*re* you, I'd try not to lo-*ok* at what co-*mes* out with it."

"My task is do-*ne*," he re-*pe-ated*, my words ig-*no-red*. The fe-*ar* was go-*ne*; the-*re* was not-*hing* to smell but the rem-*nants* of it now. "I will be re-*mem-be-red*."

The tracks be-*ne-ath* us be-*gan* to vib-*ra-te*, fol-*lo-wed* by a bril-*li-ant* light cut-*ting* thro-*ugh* the sha-*dows*. Piss-*po-or* ti-*ming*-I li-*ved* for it. Or, rat-*her*, it li-*ved* for me.

“I will be ho-no-red.” He ma-na-ged to get to his fe-et and step-ped back, using an un-tap-ped and des-pe-ra-te energy to pull his hands and the hilt from my grip. He to-ok two mo-re steps, lo-ok-ed down and back, then to-ok that one last step. He res-ted his left fo-ot on the third ra-il wit-ho-ut he-si-ta-ti-on. Im-me-di-ately, his body arc-hed be-fo-re snap-ping back so ri-gidly up-right and with a for-ce so ana-to-mi-cal-ly im-pos-sib-le that I tho-ught I he-ard his back bre-ak. I al-so smel-led the co-oking of flesh and the stench of bur-ning ha-ir, but only for a se-cond. I flung myself back aga-inst the wall as the tra-in to-ok him. Af-ter that the-re was only the sharp scent of ozo-ne, empty spa-ce, and a hund-red wild-ly ra-ging emo-ti-ons with now-he-re to go.

I slid down aga-inst the conc-re-te wall un-til I was sit-ting, the gun still in my hand. He’d be-aten me to it. The bas-tard had go-ne out his own way and wit-ho-ut tel-ling me a damn thing.

“Shit.” I pul-led up my kne-es and res-ted my fo-re-he-ad on them. “Sorry,” I ras-ped ro-ughly, “so god-damn sorry.” The cur-se was for me, the rest for Ro-bin.

“Did you kill him?”

Ni-ko wo-uld’ve qu-ickly re-ali-zed that he’d as-sig-ned him-self the wrong di-rec-ti-on when the mil-ling of the crowds and the yel-ling and scre-ams star-ted from the op-po-si-te end. My end. He’d ca-ught up with me, but not in ti-me.

“No.” I stra-igh-te-ened and le-aned my he-ad back. “A mil-li-on volts and a tra-in be-at me to it.”

“De-ad is de-ad,” he sa-id with a dark sa-tis-fac-ti-on as he held down a hand to me. “And that, lit-tle brot-her, is qu-ite tho-ro-ughly de-ad.”

I sho-ok my he-ad and didn’t ta-ke the of-fe-red hand. He was right. De-ad was de-ad, but it wasn’t eno-ugh. “Ro-bin’s go-ne.” I lo-ok-ed blindly at the smo-king ra-il. “That stu-pid, horny pi-ec-e of shit is...” I drop-ped the gun be-si-de me and rub-bed hard at my fo-re-he-ad with the he-els of one hand. I co-uldn’t say the word. I pic-ked the Eag-le back up, threw it ac-ross the tun-nel with as much for-ce as I co-uld mus-ter, and didn’t bot-her to ca-re when not-hing blew up from the ca-re-less tant-rum. “In the back. Jesus, he got it in the god-damn back. He’s sup-po-sed to be bet-ter than that. Smar-ter than that.”

“He told us so of-ten eno-ugh, didn’t he?” Nik sat be-si-de me. To ke-ep it out of his eyes, he’d drawn the top half of his jaw-length ha-ir back tightly and se-cu-red it just be-low the crown with a black rub-ber band. But wit-ho-ut the we-ight of his bra-id to pull the rest of it stra-ight, the damp bot-tom half that fell free had dri-ed with a subt-le wa-ve whe-re he had pus-hed it back be-hind his ears. That wa-ve must’ve be-en the-re for months now, and I hadn’t no-ti-ced. It se-emed im-por-tant, my blind-ness; it se-emed al-most mo-men-to-us, be-ca-use Ni-ko was my brot-her. My *brot-her*, and I hadn’t no-ti-ced. I co-uldn’t be-gin to grasp the things I’d not ta-ken the ti-me to no-ti-ce abo-ut Ro-bin.

“Ye-ah,” I sa-id rag-gedly. “He did. Smar-ter than Soc-ra-tes, qu-ic-ker than Her-mes...”

“With the sta-mi-na of Her-cu-les and Pri-apus com-bi-ned,” the fa-mi-li-ar vo-ice cro-aked from se-ve-ral fe-et away. From the glo-om, Ro-bin ap-pe-ared. He was le-aning he-avily on Pro-mi-se, but he was mo-ving un-der his own po-wer. Mo-ving, bre-at-hing, brag-ging...he was ali-ve. The son of a bitch was *ali-ve*. All tho-se ro-iling emo-ti-ons te-ar-ing thro-ugh me fi-nal-ly had an out-let, and un-til I re-ac-hed Go-od-fel-low I had no idea if they wo-uld re-sult in vi-olen-ce or so-met-hing wor-se.

It was the so-met-hing wor-se.

I’d jum-ped to my fe-et and mo-ved in to push him hard. Then I grab-bed a hand-ful of his shirt to pull him back and sha-ke him, and fi-nal-ly, grow-ling as lo-udly as any wolf, I wrap-ped an arm aro-und his neck and squ-e-ezed un-til his fa-ce be-gan to turn va-gu-ely purp-le.

Ye-ah, I hug-ged him. It didn’t get any wor-se than that, did it?

Sho-ving him back aga-in be-fo-re he had ti-me to blink in surp-ri-se, I de-man-ded harshly, “Why aren’t you de-ad?”

“At this ra-te, I so-on will be.” He ra-ised a hand bet-we-en us, wary at any furt-her wel-co-me. “I can tell you are over-co-me with re-li-ef at the re-uni-on, Ca-li-ban, but, ple-ase, don’t stra-in any hit-her-to unu-sed emo-ti-onal musc-les on my be-half. I’m not su-re my neck can stand it.” Mat-ted brown ha-ir stuck to his swe-aty fo-re-he-ad as he le-aned back with a win-ce to gi-ve mo-re we-ight to Pro-mi-se’s sup-por-ti-ve arm. “And I’m not de-ad be-ca-use of Bog-gle.” His pa-le fa-ce be-ca-me a lit-tle mo-re

ani-ma-ted be-ne-ath the dis-com-fort. “Also be-ca-use of that bas-tard Dark-ling. Wo-uld’n’t he ha-ve lo-ved to know that, that wretc-hed wad of li-zard mu-co-us?”

“I think this wo-uld be bet-ter exp-la-ined in a lo-ca-ti-on whe-re our chan-ces of be-ing ar-res-ted”-Ni-ko res-ted a hand on my sho-ul-der-“and dis-sec-ted are a lit-tle less.” The hand grip-ped and then po-in-ted.

“Gun. Only ru-de lit-tle boys le-ave the-ir toys lying abo-ut.”

And I wo-uld’n’t want to be ru-de, wo-uld I? Or dis-sec-ted. I wal-ked over, avo-iding the third ra-il that still siz-zled with le-at-her and flesh, and re-co-ve-red the we-a-pon with fin-gers that felt oddly clumsy. Hard fight, long night, fri-ends dying and ri-sing aga-in, that sort of thing pla-yed hell on a per-son’s ner-vo-us system. Un-ders-tan-ding that didn’t stop me from cur-sing my numb fin-gers, the sud-denly much he-avi-er than nor-mal Eag-le, and La-za-rus frig-ging Go-od-fel-low. Af-ter tuc-king the gun in my je-ans, I pul-led off my shirt, tur-ned it in-si-de out, and put it back on. I’d go-ne from a dark-ha-ired ma-ni-ac in a black shirt, to just an ave-ra-ge guy in a red one. The dif-fe-ren-ce was eno-ugh to fo-ol any nonp-ro-fes-si-onal eye, and he-re was ho-ping that cop I to-ok out was still un-cons-ci-o-us.

We did ma-ke it out, blen-ding in-to the pa-nic-ked whi-le ta-king turns hel-ping Ro-bin along. This ti-me, we shel-led out the bucks for a cab and he-aded to Pro-mi-se’s pent-ho-use at Park Ave-nue and Six-ti-eth to re-cu-pe-ra-te. Pro-mi-se had of-fe-red. I was be-gin-ning to think she was fon-der of Ro-bin than she let on. They we-re both long-li-ved, alt-ho-ugh he was much ol-der by far. They had a com-mon bond that Ni-ko and I co-uld’n’t be part of. Ac-tu-al-ly, the jury was still out on whet-her I had in-he-ri-ted the Aup-he lon-ge-vity. It co-uld stay out as long as it wan-ted. I wasn’t out-li-ving Ni-ko; I wasn’t out-li-ving my only true fa-mily, not by hund-reds or tho-usands of ye-ars. No. Just...no.

By the ti-me we clim-bed out of the ta-xi and we-re us-he-red in-to the bu-il-ding by an im-po-sing, sil-ver-ha-ired do-or-man with an equ-al-ly im-po-sing swe-ep of mus-tac-he in pu-re whi-te, Go-od-fel-low’s cur-sing had grown lo-uder, but his mo-ve-ments ca-me with mo-re ease. A bru-ised or crac-ked rib, that was what he’d ma-na-ged to es-ca-pe de-ath with-a dark purp-le splotch on the left of his back...pre-ci-sely over whe-re his he-art wo-uld be.

The key to his sur-vi-val had be-en the me-mo-ri-es of our bog-gle, which had be-en trig-ge-red by his ma-te, and by Dark-ling. Dark-ling, at one with my body and my mind, had set up an am-bush in Cent-ral Park. Whi-le Bog-gle had at-tac-ked Go-od-fel-low, Dar-k-ling...I...we had shot Ni-ko. Po-int-blank ran-ge. I le-aned to-ward guns. Kni-ves we-re okay, but guns we-re the top of my com-fort le-vel, and Ni-ko hadn’t for-got-ten that. When I’d be-en ta-ken by Dark-ling, my brot-her had worn a bul-letp-ro-of vest in an-ti-ci-pa-ti-on of just such an event. It had sa-ved his li-fe.

Ro-bin knew that he was an as-sas-si-na-ti-on tar-get of two at-tempts al-re-ady. When we’d told him we we-re brin-ging in anot-her bog-gle, it had bro-ught the fight of the past ye-ar to mind. Whi-le Ni-ko had ex-pec-ted the gun then, Go-od-fel-low hadn’t. Dark-ling wasn’t hu-man; he wo-uld ha-ve no par-ti-cu-lar at-tach-ment to a gun. Non-hu-mans ra-rely did. That type of thin-king wo-uld’ve got-ten Ro-bin kil-led if he’d be-en in Nik’s pla-ce. As les-sons went, it had ma-de an imp-res-si-on on the puck.

Ha-meh birds, a sir-rush...a man with a gun was a long way from cre-atu-res such as tho-se. Long way, long odds. But pucks, gamb-lers to the last one, knew all abo-ut odds and they knew the-ir pa-yof-fs. I’d won-de-red how so-me-one as long-li-ved as him had go-ne down so easily. Now I knew. He hadn’t. Af-ter the Ha-meh, he’d bo-ught a bul-letp-ro-of vest and star-ted we-aring it un-der his fi-nely wo-ven fall swe-aters. The dam-ned things pro-bably matc-hed, cash-me-re and Kev-lar.

Rec-li-ning on overs-tuf-fed pil-lows and a sa-ge gre-en silk co-ver, Ro-bin was lo-un-ging in Pro-mi-se’s gu-est ro-om with a dis-tinctly su-pe-ri-or smirk on his po-in-ted fa-ce. Lo-ok at me. Lo-ok how cle-ver. The bre-adth and re-ach of my in-tel-li-gen-ce are so un-fat-ho-mab-le to the ave-ra-ge bra-in that I must ap-pe-ar god-li-ke to you les-ser mor-tals. Whet-her it was only in my he-ad that I he-ard it or he’d ac-tu-al-ly sa-id it alo-ud, it didn’t mat-ter. My hand was al-re-ady clo-sing aro-und so-met-hing on the dres-ser to toss at him. Gil-ded French va-se, crystal de-can-ter, sta-tue of Ve-nus, I didn’t lo-ok. I didn’t ca-re. I hef-ted it and coc-ked my arm back as if I we-re trying out for the

ma-j-ors when Ni-ko to-ok me by the scruff of my shirt and be-gan to hust-le me out of the bed-ro-om.

“He re-al-ly do-esn’t de-al with the unex-pec-ted well, do-es he?” Ro-bin com-men-ted as if I and my ma-kes-hift we-apon we-ren’t the-re. Rol-ling on-to his sto-mach, he his-sed at the cold as Pro-mi-se, who didn’t lo-ok par-ti-cu-larly ple-ased to be pla-ying nur-se, pla-ced an ice pack over the spre-ading bru-ise. Fond-ness only went so far. Se-e-ing a half-na-ked Go-od-fel-low was ap-pa-rently the outer li-mits of that af-fec-ti-on. “In his world the-re are no go-od surp-ri-ses and all pi-ña-tas are fil-led with evil-tem-pe-red ta-ran-tu-las and po-ison-spit-ting sna-kes.” I he-ard the cluc-king of his ton-gue be-fo-re he res-ted his fa-ce in the pil-lows for a muf-fled fi-nish. “We do ne-ed to work on that at-ti-tu-de or he’ll ne-ver be ab-le to enj-oy the true...”

I didn’t he-ar anyt-hing furt-her as the bed-ro-om re-ce-ded be-hind us. Pro-mi-se’s ho-me had soft and glo-ri-o-usly wo-ven rugs, dra-pe-ri-es, and ta-pest-ri-es on the wall that all wor-ked to so-ak up no-ise li-ke a spon-ge. I lo-oked at what was in my hand as Ni-ko kept marc-hing me along. A can-de-lab-ra, sil-ver and gold. It wo-uld’ve ma-de a ni-ce dent in that curly he-ad. “He de-ser-ves it,” I sa-id, knuck-les whi-te-ning as my grip tigh-te-ned.

“Why?” At the end of the hall, we went down the win-ding sta-irs as the me-tal was deftly wor-ked from my clen-ced hand. “Why do-es he de-ser-ve it? For be-ing a self-righ-te-o-us ass, which is not-hing new, or”-he put the can-de-lab-ra on the ne-arest tab-le-

“for sca-ring you?”

“I ha-ve Saw-ney and the Aup-he to sca-re the shit out of me,” I dis-mis-sed stiffly. “Go-od-fel-low do-esn’t co-me clo-se to ma-king that list.” Af-ter dep-ri-ving me of my ex-pen-si-ve puck swat-ter, Nik re-le-ased me, and I promptly be-gan to prow-l the li-ving ro-om in ever-wi-de-ning circ-les. I plun-ked the keys of an ivory-co-lo-red small pi-ano, glan-ced at se-ve-ral pic-tu-res in simp-le po-lis-hed sil-ver fra-mes, and kept wal-king.

“The-re is mo-re than one type of fe-ar, lit-tle brot-her. You had a not so he-althy tas-te of that with Ge-or-gi-na and me, and you did yo-ur best to for-get abo-ut it.” His ga-ze dril-led in-to mi-ne, let-ting me know what he had tho-ught and still did think of that idea. Very damn lit-tle. “To push it down whe-re you wo-uldn’t ha-ve to lo-ok at it, to think abo-ut it.” He le-aned aga-inst the wall as I shif-ted my wary glan-ce away from him to the flo-or and kept pa-cing. “Or to de-al with it.”

I had exactly ze-ro de-si-re to talk abo-ut this, but I knew the dif-fe-ren-ce that wo-uld ma-ke. When I pas-sed the pi-ano this ti-me, I slam-med a fist down ins-te-ad of a few fin-gers. The dis-cor-dant crash didn’t ma-ke me fe-el any bet-ter, but it did ma-ke me fe-el li-ke I had com-pany in my cha-os. “I de-al,” I grit-ted. “I de-al just fi-ne.”

“Yes, you’re de-al-ing. You’re de-al-ing a path of dest-ruc-ti-on thro-ugh a ho-me that Pro-mi-se is qu-ite fond of.” Fin-gers tap-ped lightly aga-inst fol-ded arms as he led in-to what he’d sa-id be-fo-re, mo-re than on-ce, alt-ho-ugh he hadn’t sa-id it as of-ten as I’d ex-pec-ted him to. He knew bet-ter than I that I wasn’t re-ady to he-ar it. Not then. “Cal, Ro-bin is ali-ve. Ge-or-gi-na and I are ali-ve. That is what’s im-por-tant-what did hap-pen, not what co-uld’ve hap-pe-ned.”

What did hap-pen, not what co-uld ha-ve. Ye-ah, it was all very Tao and ac-cep-ting and all that. But, Zen crap asi-de, it co-uld easily ha-ve go-ne the ot-her way. Over the past ye-ar and a half we’d be-en lucky so many ti-mes. That luck, so-oner rat-her than la-ter, wo-uld ha-ve to run out. The law of ave-ra-ges wasn’t go-ing to be our bitch fo-re-ver.

I to-uc-hed a fin-ger to the co-ol keys aga-in, this ti-me ten-ta-ti-vely, and then I sat down to play. It wasn’t pretty mu-sic. It wasn’t ugly eit-her. Yet, in a way, it was both. It was ali-en-that was the best desc-rip-ti-on. Dis-so-nant and il-lo-gi-cal-ly strung to-get-her, wild no-te to wil-der yet, but it hung to-get-her so-me-how. A symphony from swamps and ca-ves, jewe-led bo-nes and for-got-ten dun-ge-ons, li-ving tombs and empty gra-ves-the Dark-ling pla-ces. He had be-en re-la-ted to the bans-he-es, a ma-le ver-si-on who-se his-tory had ne-ver be-en re-cor-ded, who-se true na-me along with the rest of his gen-der was lost in ti-me. But li-ke his fe-ma-le co-usins, he li-ked mu-sic, and he li-ked to sing.

On the ot-her hand, des-pi-te in-he-ri-ting our mot-her’s ho-ney and rum vo-ice, I co-uldn’t play or sing a no-te. That hadn’t stop-ped Dark-ling from le-aving me a pre-sent. Un-wel-co-me, un-wan-ted,

and unk-nown up un-til now. It didn't mat-ter. He was de-ad, chop-ped to the fi-nest of pi-eces. I'd do-ne the chop-ping. I knew for a fact he was go-ne.

But the ref-lec-ti-on ca-me be-fo-re I co-uld stop it, at le-ast when he'd be-en in me, no mat-ter who left, I wasn't ever alo-ne. Schi-zo as hell, but not alo-ne. It was a tho-ught that left me so re-pul-sed and ex-po-sed that I ve-ered away from it ins-tantly. Fol-ding arms on the top of the pi-ano, I res-ted my chin on them. "I'm used to ha-ving all my eggs in one bas-ket." That wo-uld be Ni-ko. One ste-el-shel-led egg, one unb-re-akab-le bas-ket. God, I ho-ped.

It was an obs-cu-re sta-te-ment and co-ming af-ter an ex-hi-bi-ti-on of a fre-akish mu-si-cal ta-lent I sho-uld'n't ha-ve had, you had to gi-ve Ni-ko cre-dit for catc-hing on to it. "The mo-re eggs you ha-ve, the mo-re li-kely one is to bre-ak."

"Po-ac-hed. Scramb-led. Pu-re-ed in a blen-der for an over-the-hill bo-xer. Wha-te-ver." I ex-ten-ded an arm and to-uc-hed the cor-ner of the ne-arest fra-me. Pro-mi-se and a dark-ha-ired lit-tle girl, both co-lo-red se-pia and dres-sed in clot-hes from at le-ast a hund-red ye-ars ago. For the things that I did know of Ro-bin and Pro-mi-se, the-re we-re tho-usands upon tho-usands of things that I didn't and might ne-ver ha-ve the chan-ce to le-arn.

"I'm not go-od at this shit, Cyra-no. I'm not go-od at ca-ring, and I'm su-re as hell not go-od at all the crap that co-mes with it." I lo-oked up at the ce-iling, eg-gshell with a hint of ro-se. It re-min-ded me of the in-ner cur-ve of a shell sco-ured cle-an by salt wa-ter. Full of dawn's pu-rity and glow. "He ma-de me *li-ke* him, the son of a bitch. And I don't li-ke...didn't li-ke an-yo-ne but you. But Go-od-fel-low ma-de me li-ke him and then he go-es and pro-ves he's mor-tal af-ter all. It sucks. It just god-damn sucks." I pus-hed away from the baby grand and sto-od. "I'm hungry. You hungry? Want a sand-wich? Gre-at. Sand-wic-hes co-ming up."

"I think you ne-ed to avo-id sharp obj-ects for a whi-le," Ni-ko or-de-red as he mo-ved away from the wall. "I wo-uld ha-te for you to ram a butc-her's kni-fe in Go-od-fel-low's leg in the ho-pes he wo-uld'n't for-ce you to li-ke him any-mo-re. Alt-ho-ugh the abor-ted at-tempt to bra-in him with a can-de-lab-ra might al-re-ady ha-ve him tip-ped off to yo-ur cun-ning plan."

"I am so scre-wed." I sat back down, this ti-me on the flo-or. Dirty red shirt, damp je-ans, and black sne-akers, I was a de-fi-ni-te test to the sta-in-re-pel-ling skills of the oys-ter gray, vi-olet, and ebony rug be-ne-ath me. "Why do I li-ke him?" I mut-te-red, mo-re to my-self than to Nik. "Pro-mi-se...I ha-ve to li-ke her. I get that. She's yo-urs. You're hers. It's a pac-ka-ge de-al. Ge-or-ge..." I shut my mo-uth. The-re was no way to con-ti-nue that sen-ten-ce wit-ho-ut reg-ret, not a sing-le one.

"We sho-uld've left New York. Even af-ter Dark-ling was de-ad and we tho-ught the Aup-he we-re, we sho-uld've kept mo-ving." I ex-ha-led he-avily as I she-at-hed fin-gers in my ha-ir and sa-id by ro-te, "You don't get at-tac-hed, you ne-ver tell an-yo-ne yo-ur re-al na-me, and you al-ways le-ave. Tho-se we-re the ru-les." *You al-ways le-ave* be-ing the most im-por-tant of them.

Ni-ko sat ac-ross from me on the flo-or. His legs we-re fol-ded in a style that ma-de mi-ne ac-he just to see it. He lo-osely res-ted his hands on his kne-es. His wrists we-re ban-ded with what lo-oked li-ke a do-ub-le row of Ti-be-tan me-di-ta-ti-on be-ads, ex-cept the-se we-re ma-de of ste-el and wo-uld def-lect the blow of ne-arly any bla-de easily. "I know," he sa-id. "I ma-de tho-se ru-les." The cor-ners of his mo-uth de-e-pe-ned down-ward bri-efly. "And Sop-hia tho-ught I scor-ned the old ways."

Sop-hia didn't ha-ve much ro-om to talk. She'd bro-ken ti-es with her clan when she'd run off, and they'd do-ne the sa-me to her ye-ars la-ter when they fo-und out what per-ver-se bar-ga-in she'd ma-de with the Aup-he. As for the "old ways," she had ne-ver pur-po-sely ta-ught us a thing, not on-ce Ni-ko had re-fu-sed to be part of her scams. As yo-ung as the age of six, Nik al-re-ady had an un-wa-ve-ring mo-ral com-pass; he was a re-gu-lar Da-lai La-ma of the tra-iler park. Whet-her we we-re in-vol-ved or not, tho-ugh, it didn't mat-ter-the les-sons we-re still the-re for the ta-king. She'd run a for-tu-ne-tel-ling con at the kitc-hen tab-le whi-le we watc-hed car-to-ons fo-ur fe-et away. At night she'd run a dif-fe-rent kind of con and the walls we-re much thin-ner than fo-ur fe-et.

"Her ru-les, yo-ur ru-les." I sho-ok my he-ad. "I don't ca-re. We sho-uld've li-ved by them. I sho-uld've. You wan-ted to le-ave. I was the one who sa-id we sho-uld stay in New York." I frow-ned at him. "Usu-al-ly when I'm an idi-ot, you don't lis-ten to me."

“If that we-re true, I wo-uld be se-lec-ti-vely de-af every ho-ur out of the day,” he sta-ted, hit-ting my knee with a not-qu-ite-pa-in-ful flick of his fin-ger. “Be-si-des, you we-re right. We tho-ught the enemy dest-ro-yed and we had ma-de a li-fe he-re. Gran-ted it was a li-fe of only a few months and we both bro-ke the ru-les in do-ing so, but it was still a li-fe. We had an ally and fri-end in Ro-bin. We had the po-ten-ti-al for mo-re in Pro-mi-se and Ge-or-gi-na. Why gi-ve that up for no re-ason at all?”

“Sa-nity is a re-ason,” I co-un-te-red, scra-ping a bru-ised knuck-le along the sil-ken fi-bers of the rug. “Pretty go-od one too.”

We sho-uld’ve known bet-ter. Se-e-ing the-ir dest-ruc-ti-on with our own eyes asi-de, we still sho-uld’ve known bet-ter. The Aup-he we-re still out the-re, and they wo-uldn’t stay hid-den fo-re-ver. Then the-re was Ro-bin. So-me-one wan-ted him de-ad, and that was pro-bably a fa-irly fre-qu-ent event. Jesus. As for Saw-ney...we’d ma-de him our prob-lem and it was pos-sib-le he co-uld ta-ke one or mo-re of us out. I’d ma-na-ged to sur-vi-ve the un-cer-ta-inty of Ge-or-ge’s and Nik’s di-sap-pe-a-ran-ce months ago. Ma-na-ged, as in, just god-damn ba-rely, and only by be-co-ming the col-dest son of a bitch that I co-uld be.

De-al?

What a lie. Af-ter sit-ting, pa-cing, sit-ting aga-in, and thin-king of ot-her things to bash over Ro-bin’s he-ad whi-le he slept, I ob-vi-o-usly wasn’t de-al-ing.

“I ha-ve to get out of he-re for a whi-le.” I got up mo-re qu-ickly from the co-uch than I sho-uld ha-ve, my body gro-aning from mul-tip-le re-ve-nant blows.

“It’s fo-ur a.m.,” Ni-ko po-in-ted out, un-mo-ving.

“Whe-re will you...ah.” He ga-ve an ap-pro-ving nod.

“An ex-cel-lent idea, if she co-ope-ra-tes. If she will ‘lo-ok.’”

“Ye-ah.” I star-ted to-ward the do-or. “That’s a big if.” But if I had my way, she wo-uldn’t get away with not lo-oking.

Not this ti-me.

16

Ge-or-ge was sit-ting on the sto-op of her apart-ment bu-il-ding wa-iting for me. For that, she had lo-oked. Or may-be for the lit-tle things, she didn’t lo-ok. May-be she just knew wit-ho-ut any ef-fort at all.

She was wrap-ped in a ro-be. Hund-reds of patc-hes we-re stitc-hed to-get-her in a ta-pestry of vel-vet, silk, simp-le po-lis-hed cot-ton-any ma-te-ri-al you co-uld think of. So-me we-re emb-ro-ide-red, so-me not; the only re-qu-ire-ment was they we-re all a sha-de of red. Scar-let, gar-net, crim-son, ruby, candy-apple, every hue you co-uld ima-gi-ne was the-re. That com-bi-ned with her de-ep gold-brown skin and cop-per ha-ir re-min-ded me of a pa-in-ting we’d pas-sed in the mu-se-um whi-le lo-oking for Saw-ney. So-me ar-tist, the na-me be-gan with a *K*, but I re-mem-be-red the re-pe-ating pat-tern of squ-a-res, the vib-rant co-lors, the tran-qu-il fa-ce.

At al-most fi-ve a.m. we we-re as alo-ne as you co-uld be in the city, and I lo-oked at her si-lently. She knew. Abo-ut Charm, she knew, and I didn’t think that had anyt-hing to do with be-ing psychic. It had to do with be-ing a wo-man. I duc-ked my he-ad and then sat two steps be-low her.

She res-ted a hand on my ha-ir, smo-ot-hing it. “We all ha-ve to le-arn our own way. Ma-ke our own pas-sa-ge.” She drop-ped her hand and sa-id with an-ger and di-sap-po-int-ment, “You al-ways we-re and al-ways will be one for the dif-fi-cult path.” She squ-a-red her sho-ul-ders and sho-ok her he-ad. “The-re is the ro-ad tra-ve-led, the ro-ad less so, and the cliff. You he-ad stra-ight for the cliff, Ca-li-ban. Every ti-me. Every sing-le ti-me.”

She tigh-te-ned the ro-be a-ro-und her and clas-ped hands a-ro-und her kne-es. “When you ti-re of hit-ting the bot-tom, let me know. May-be I’ll still be he-re. May-be I won’t, but I can tell you this: The only things that you’ll find on the dif-fi-cult path that aren’t on the smo-ot-her one are bru-ises and reg-rets.”

Li-ke I didn’t know that.

How she knew that now, there was a different question altogether. “You finally looked, then?” I asked cautiously, uncertain if I really wanted to know the answer to that and feeling like the absolute shit she meant me to. I’d turned her away once. I couldn’t take a chance; I couldn’t be with her if I didn’t know how things would end up. I couldn’t risk her like that. I had to know...if she were with me, did she survive the Auphe who were still running free out there? More importantly, did she survive the Auphe *in* me?

“Caliban,” she said, her anger fading slightly to a resignation over an argument we’d had time and time again.

Of course she hadn’t looked. She never looked at her own life and she never tried to change the truly monumental aspects of the lives of others. What was supposed to happen would happen. It was only the little things that could be played around with. She wasn’t the only one who was angry. I’d pushed her away to save her and she wouldn’t even look to tell me if it was necessary. I cut her out of my life to keep her safe, to keep her alive, and she wouldn’t... *god-damn it.*

I looked away.

I didn’t want to see the red and gold or the hurt, the anger, and the reluctant understanding that ran under it all. If I couldn’t have it, I didn’t want to see it. “Robin’s in trouble. Someone is trying to kill him and doing a pretty good job of it. We need to know who it is.” Across the street, a garbage truck rumbled. It was easier to watch than what I could sense crossing George’s face. “I want to know. Robin wants to know. Even Niko, the only person more Zen than you in this world. We want to save Good-fellow, so who the hell is behind it? We got one human. Was he in charge? Was he the last one?” If she wouldn’t look at the future, maybe looking at the past and present could help us.

I heard her shift and stand, her robe a rustle of warm velvet and cool silk. “Robin did something once, something quite...” Her voice trailed off, the anger now buried. This wasn’t about us anymore. This was about a friend. “I imagine he has a lesson to learn. Life seems to be like that,” she continued, her sympathy for him plain. “I can’t change that, and I shouldn’t try.” Which was her way of saying she wouldn’t try. “Try to have faith. Robin is clever and he has loyal friends. Trust that that will be enough.”

That was the problem with George, one of many. She saw the big picture, and a single life was only a small part of that picture, only one of many lessons. For me, that wasn’t good enough. Life might be all we got, as far as I knew, no matter what George sensed or thought. Ligh-ting in-cen-se and staring at my navel while Robin got this life’s lesson rammed down his throat via an axe through his neck or a sword into his gut, that just wasn’t going to happen. Unlike those of George, my pictures were small, colored with finger paints, and in the here and now.

“Caliban?” she said from the door.

My eyes still on the street, I didn’t look, but she knew she had my attention. She was a psychic after all.

“I won’t wait forever.” Then the door shut on me, just as I’d once shut it on her. It wasn’t a good feeling...no matter what side you were on.

It was two hours later, six a.m., and my turn to open the bar. Sleep-who needed it? The Ninth Circle kept irregular hours. Some patrons like the night, some the early morning, some all damn day long. Ishiah switched it around enough that everyone could find what they needed on one day or another. It made for weird hours, a weird schedule, and no damn dental either. *Fi-gu-red.*

Delilah showed up barely twenty minutes after I unlocked the door. She looked the same as when she’d healed me...god-damn amazing. Wild and exotic, polished and lethal as a sword. She sat on one of the stools, picking up a feather from the bar. No matter how often you cleaned the place, there were always feathers. This one was Cambriel’s-Cam’s, cream and copper. He had the same copper hair in a long plait and a scowl that could clear the bar in a second. He also

mol-ted li-ke an ost-rich with man-ge. Con-si-de-ring the pe-ri tem-per, I didn't men-ti-on it...much.

"Pretty boy." Funny that I min-ded Saw-ney cal-ling me a boy, but with her I didn't mind so much. She twir-led the fe-at-her and smi-led at me. De-li-lah's smi-le wasn't yo-ur usu-al smi-le. It was mo-re that of the cat that ate the ca-nary or the fox that ate the hen-ho-use-then had the far-mer for des-sert. It was sa-tis-fi-ed and mo-re than a lit-tle wic-ked.

"De-li-lah." I was surp-ri-sed. I hadn't be-en su-re I'd see her af-ter the sub-way fight. Not that I hadn't se-en a lot of her then. A who-le lot. "Co-me to gi-ve me my jac-ket back?"

"No. I li-ke the jac-ket. I ke-ep it," she an-no-un-ced.

I'd li-ked it too, but what are you go-ing to do? She li-ked it, I'd se-en her na-ked...it was a fa-ir tra-de.

I shrug-ged. "It did lo-ok go-od on you." And damn, had it. "You want a drink?" Six a.m... It was la-te for the vamps, early for the wol-ves, but you ne-ver knew.

"No. Want this." She drop-ped the fe-at-her, re-ac-hed ac-ross the bar, pul-led me clo-ser, and kis-sed me. It wasn't li-ke Ge-or-ge. That kiss had be-en warmth and sun and the gent-le silk of ton-gue. This was hot, with te-eth and a tas-te li-ke night un-der a blo-od-red mo-on. It was eno-ugh that when we bro-ke apart I didn't ha-ve a clue how much ti-me had pas-sed. I didn't much ca-re eit-her.

Okay, now I was in the de-ep end of the po-ol. Aup-he rug rat pho-bia and all, I hadn't had much ex-pe-ri-en-ce in this area. Well, be-ing hun-ted, and De-li-lah was de-fi-ni-tely a hun-ter-that I had plenty of ex-pe-ri-en-ce in. But this...it de-fi-ni-tely wasn't a com-for-ting warmth and a red and gold girl on a pe-des-tal. It wasn't the clo-ver and swe-et songs of a nymph eit-her. It se-emed li-ke I sho-uld've sa-id so-met-hing; I *know* I sho-uld've sa-id so-met-hing, but "holy shit" didn't se-em ap-prop-ri-ate. I sa-id it any-way-with fe-eling and a stin-ging lo-wer lip that I sus-pec-ted had the fa-int dents of sharp te-eth in it.

She smi-led aga-in. "You smell of her. One who co-uld not run with you in the dark pla-ces." She slid off the sto-ol. "You smell li-ke her but now you tas-te li-ke me."

And with that she left. The-re was the swing of the long sil-ver pony-tail as she mo-ved and the shut-ting of a do-or. If you co-uld say one thing abo-ut De-li-lah, it was that she sa-id what she had to say, did what she had to do, and then she was do-ne. Bo-om. Go-ne.

I sa-id it aga-in. "Holy shit." The kiss com-bi-ned with the still very vi-vid men-tal pic-tu-re of her nu-de in the tun-nels had me glad the-re we-re only two cus-to-mers so far and that the bar ca-me up wa-ist high. By the ti-me Pro-mi-se ca-me in an ho-ur had pas-sed. Luc-kily.

De-li-lah and now Pro-mi-se. I was Mr. Po-pu-la-rity this mor-ning.

Pro-mi-se ca-me in-to the pla-ce dres-sed in a snug sco-op-nec-ked swe-ater, sle-ek pants, bo-ots, and a matc-hing ho-oded clo-ak to pro-tect from the sun. Gray, vi-olet, and black, it all had re-min-ded me of her rug I'd sat on, the one un-der her pi-ano. Al-so the one that was pro-bably be-ing cle-aned qu-ite tho-ro-ughly at this very mo-ment.

She smi-led, sat on the sa-me sto-ol De-li-lah had, ca-re-ful-ly ar-ran-ged her clo-ak on the one be-si-de her, and star-ted in on me abo-ut Ge-or-ge be-fo-re I co-uld get a word out. Not that my word-slin-ging abi-lity was so hot at the mo-ment. It'd be-en one hel-lu-va mor-ning.

"So." She til-ted her he-ad slightly. "What of Ge-or-gi-na? What did she tell you?"

I shif-ted my sho-ul-ders. "Not-hing." The bar was fil-ling up a bit and I han-ded off a drink to a vod-ya-noi in a trench co-at, scarf, and hat that had him pas-sab-le on the stre-et, just ba-rely.

"She wo-uldn't tell you a sing-le thing?"

Run-ning on ab-so-lu-tely no sle-ep, I ga-ve Pro-mi-se a we-ary glan-ce over the bar. I was be-gin-ning to slo-uch, as you co-uld be whi-le still tech-ni-cal-ly be-ing co-un-ted as up-right.

"Ge-or-ge isn't big on hints. Ro-bin did so-met-hing bad. Kar-ma is kic-king his ass. Les-sons to be le-ar-ned. Emb-ra-ce the wha-te-ver. In ot-her words, we get squ-at in the way of help. Why are you he-re any-way?" I as-ked cu-ri-o-usly. "Nik is usu-al-ly the one who li-kes to po-int out my tac-ti-cal er-rors. You know, the whe-re and why of how I fuc-ked up. You're dep-ri-ving him."

"I'm su-re he'll dis-cuss that with you la-ter," she sa-id with amu-se-ment and ab-so-lu-tely no pity.

“Right now he’s pla-ying nur-se-ma-id to Go-od-fel-low. Tho-se pity-me eyes of Ro-bin’s.” She cast her own up-ward in ve-xa-ti-on. “He do-esn’t know how to stop, I swe-ar. It’s pat-he-tic. I re-fu-se to suf-fer any lon-ger.” She res-ted pe-arl-co-lo-red na-ils on the bar sur-fa-ce. “And I nur-sed in the war. I ha-ve put in my ser-vi-ce se-ve-ral ti-mes over. I am do-ne with that.”

“Which war?” I stra-igh-te-ned up a few inc-hes with in-te-rest. Long eno-ugh ago and Pro-mi-se co-uld’ve dra-ined as many sol-di-ers as she tri-ed to sa-ve. I didn’t know when the vam-pi-res had star-ted li-ving hunt-free li-ves. It in-vol-ved hu-man-style nut-ri-ti-on, fo-ur fo-od gro-ups and all, com-bi-ned with mas-si-ve sup-ple-ments of iron and se-ve-ral ot-her ele-ments. It wor-ked...now. It wasn’t so-met-hing ava-ilab-le over a hund-red ye-ars ago. I wo-uld’ve li-ked to think that if the war had be-en be-fo-re the ni-ne-te-en hund-reds, Pro-mi-se had only ta-ken the li-ves of tho-se who wo-uld’ve di-ed any-way. I li-ked to think, but what did I know re-al-ly? Be-si-des that, it was no-ne of my bu-si-ness. “World War Two? The Ci-vil War?”

“Asking a wo-man her age. You sha-me yo-ur gen-der. And, Ca-li-ban?” Sab-le las-hes drop-ped over lan-gu-id eyes. “The-re is not eno-ugh wi-ne in this es-tab-lish-ment,” she sa-id with an insc-ru-tab-le smi-le. “Per-haps not in the en-ti-re city.”

I tho-ught abo-ut as-king her of the lit-tle girl in the pic-tu-re that had be-en pla-ced so ca-re-ful-ly on the pi-ano, but I had a fe-eling the qu-es-ti-on wo-uldn’t be any bet-ter re-ce-ived than the ot-her.

“Okay,” I ga-ve in, “no wi-ne, then. You want so-me fancy mor-ning thing with cham-pag-ne?”

“Yes, a Bel-li-ni wo-uld su-it, if you wo-uld be so kind.” The bar had few win-dows and they we-re co-ve-red with blinds and cur-ta-ins for the sun-into-le-rant among the cli-en-te-le. Pro-mi-se had used the op-por-tu-nity to re-mo-ve her clo-ak and sha-ke her ha-ir free. It wasn’t of-ten I saw it lo-ose and un-bo-und. It was so-met-hing to see. The stri-pes po-ured and rip-pled down her back to past her hips as she sat...a ti-ger on a wo-oden perch.

By the ti-me I re-tur-ned with her drink, she was re-ady to re-ve-al why she was re-al-ly at the bar. “So”-she to-ok the smal-lest of sips-“you got what you wan-ted, then. Ni-ko told me whe-re you we-re go-ing, and on-ce Ge-or-gi-na saw you, she wo-uld know.” She stu-di-ed me over the glass fil-led with sun and cham-pag-ne. “And she did, didn’t she? Do-es that ma-ke you happy, get-ting what you wan-ted?”

The words we-re un-comp-ro-mi-sing, but be-hind them I he-ard a re-luc-tant sympathy. Pro-mi-se knew my re-aso-ning, but she al-so tho-ught I was a twenty-ye-ar-old idi-ot han-ging on to past te-en angst for all I was worth-li-ke a baby with a pa-ci-fi-er. She knew my re-asons we-re va-lid, but she, li-ke the ot-hers, tho-ught the-re we-re ways aro-und them. Va-sec-tomy, cont-ra-cep-ti-on, cross yo-ur fin-gers and ho-pe for a bo-un-cing baby non-flesh-eater. Let’s say I didn’t trust any of the three. No one knew what the Aup-he body was ca-pab-le of re-ge-ne-ra-ti-on-wi-se; con-doms bro-ke-as Sop-hia had on-ce ca-re-les-sly sa-id, Ni-ko was pro-of of that; and as for the last op-ti-on: No. No way.

The only thing that wo-uld work, Ge-or-ge wo-uld n’t do. She wo-uld n’t lo-ok. She wo-uld n’t che-at. And as much as I ca-red for her, so-me-ti-mes I didn’t much li-ke her.

“Ye-ah, I’m happy. I got exactly what I wan-ted.” I didn’t snap or snarl. I sa-id it in a per-fectly even to-ne, which in so-me way was wor-se than the ot-her two wo-uld’ve be-en. It was true. I’d got-ten what I wan-ted. Ge-or-ge sa-fe. Sa-fe from me. Sa-fe from mons-ter of-fsp-ring. Sa-fe from the Aup-he, be-ca-use if I didn’t ca-re abo-ut her, then ne-it-her wo-uld they. If I didn’t see her, then they wo-uld n’t no-ti-ce her. It was very much in her best in-te-rest not to be no-ti-ced.

She dip-ped her he-ad in apo-logy. “I, who ne-ver ha-ve the sligh-test ur-ge to med-dle in an-yo-ne’s per-so-nal af-fa-irs, can-not se-em to help myself with you.” She ex-ten-ded a hand to lay it ac-ross mi-ne. “After all, Ca-li-ban, you are fa-mi-ly.” She’d sa-id that, do-ne that, the hand thing, on-ce be-fo-re and I hadn’t re-ac-ted very po-li-tely. I tri-ed to do bet-ter now. I left my hand un-der hers for three se-conds (I knew...I co-un-ted) and then tur-ned it to clasp hers bri-efly be-fo-re qu-ickly let-ting go. Li-ke I’d sa-id to Ni-ko, I wasn’t go-od at this shit. I just wasn’t, but I wo-uld try. For Pro-mi-se, I wo-uld try.

“Want anot-her Bel-li-ni?” I as-ked gruffly, ig-no-ring the fact hers was still three-fo-urths full.

She pon-de-red the glass gra-vely, then sa-id be-fo-re ta-king anot-her small sip, “Per-haps in a mo-ment.”

A hand ab-ruptly lan-ded on the junc-ti-on of my sho-ul-der and neck. It wasn’t a fri-endly grip eit-her. “What now, boss?” I sa-id with a gro-an. “I ha-ven’t im-pa-led a cus-to-mer in days.”

“No,” he ag-re-ed with bunc-hed jaw. “You did, ho-we-ver, ser-ve a vod-ya-noi a mar-ga-ri-ta on ice.”

“So?” I shrug-ged, not se-e-ing the prob-lem.

“With salt,” he ad-ded.

“And?” I twir-led my fin-gers in an im-pa-ti-ent co-me-on-alre-ady ges-tu-re.

“*And* half his fa-ce mel-ted on-to the bar.” He bent slightly to put his he-ad even with mi-ne. “Salt tends to do that to them.”

“Oh.” I win-ced. I hadn’t do-ne it on pur-po-se, alt-ho-ugh it was a go-od one to re-mem-ber. As a mat-ter of fact, Ro-bin had men-ti-oned that on-ce the last ti-me we’d de-alt with them-sal-ting them li-ke a gar-den slug-but I’d tho-ught he’d be-en joking.

“But, ho-nestly, how can you tell abo-ut his fa-ce? I me-an, co-me on.” I gri-ma-ced. A vod-ya-noi was not pretty by any stretch of the ima-gi-na-ti-on. Mytho-logy says they lo-ok li-ke scaly old men with gre-en be-ar-ds. In re-al-ity, they ap-pe-ared mo-re li-ke hu-ma-no-id le-ec-hes. Neck-less, they did ha-ve a sketch of a hu-man fa-ce to draw in the-ir prey. A mot-ting of co-lors. Small li-qu-id eyes, a dark mark on gray flesh to imi-ta-te a no-se, and a suc-ker mo-uth they used to slurp out yo-ur blo-od. Qu-ick in the ri-vers and la-kes, they we-re slow and awk-ward on land, which is why they ra-rely left the wa-ter. Why this one had don-ned a co-at and hat and lum-be-red his rub-bery way to the Ninth Circ-le for a drink, I had no idea, but I wo-uld’ve tho-ught he wo-uld at le-ast know what salt lo-oked li-ke...for fa-ci-al pre-ser-va-ti-on if not-hing el-se.

A wad of rags and a spray bot-tle of in-dust-ri-al cle-aner we-re slap-ped on the bar be-si-de me. “I’ll su-per-vi-se,” he an-no-un-ced with stony im-pa-ti-en-ce.

I nod-ded a go-od-bye to Pro-mi-se and he-aded down the bar. It cur-ved li-ke the bow of a ship and by the ti-me we re-ac-hed the end of it, I co-uld he-ar the shrill ke-ening co-ming from the unis-pe-ci-es bath-ro-om down the hall. “Je-ez, he’s not still mel-ting, is he? That’ll be one hel-lu-va mess, and you can bet yo-ur ass it won’t go down the dra-in in the flo-or.” Ac-tu-al-ly, I did fe-el bad...a lit-tle. A vod-ya-noi wo-uld eat you if you dip-ped as much as a god-damn pinky toe in his par-ti-cu-lar wa-tery ter-ri-tory, but this guy had be-en he-re for a drink, not-hing el-se, and I’d mel-ted the po-or son of a bitch.

“You worry abo-ut the cle-anup. I’ll worry abo-ut the vod-ya-noi.” Is-hi-ah watc-hed me wi-pe a slick, snot-li-ke subs-tan-ce from the bar be-fo-re I be-gan wor-king on the set-in gray-gre-en sta-ins. Af-ter a few mi-nu-tes of watc-hing me apply the el-bow gre-ase, he sa-id grimly,

“Ro-bin was shot, wasn’t he?”

You had to hand it to the pe-ris; if it was worth kno-wing, so-me-how they knew it. It ca-me from run-ning bars. If the-re was in-for-ma-ti-on ava-ilab-le, it was go-ing to pass thro-ugh a bar be-fo-re anyw-he-re el-se.

I ra-ised my eyes to his. “Why you as-king if you al-re-ady know?”

“Exer-ci-se yo-ur so-ci-al skills for a mo-ment, wo-uld you?” He le-aned ac-ross the bar, no-se to no-se. “I know he sur-vi-ved. I know he wal-ked away. What I don’t know is how badly he’s hurt.”

“Not bad.” I con-ti-nu-ed scrub-bing and snor-ted,

“The son of a bitch was we-ar-ing a bul-letp-ro-of vest. Can you be-li-eve it?”

“So he *was* shot and by a hu-man.” He mo-ved back, eyes dis-tant and spe-cu-la-ti-ve. “I gu-ess that sol-ves that, then.”

That stop-ped my cle-aning. “You me-an you know who the hell is be-hind this?” The cloth, he-avy and ri-pe with vod-ya-noi flesh, fell to the flo-or. “You *know*?”

“The sir-rush, the Ha-meh birds, now a hu-man.” The wings we-re out in full for-ce. “Ro-bin Go-od-fel-low on-ce did a...he did a thing that was not qu-ite et-hi-cal. It was a long ti-me ago and he’s grown sin-ce then. Chan-ged. I ho-pe.” The wings wa-ved, dis-tur-bed.

“And it was so very long ago that I can’t ima-gi-ne an-yo-ne se-eking ret-ri-bu-ti-on now, but...” He sho-ok his he-ad, scar whi-te-ning at his jaw. “Obvi-o-usly that isn’t the ca-se.”

“Let me get this stra-ight. You know who’s be-hind this and Ro-bin do-esn’t?” I sa-id with dis-be-li-ef.

The wings di-sap-pe-ared ins-tantly as cont-rol re-tur-ned to fa-ce and body. “He knows. He may even ha-ve known be-fo-re he was shot, sus-pec-ted at le-ast. But he’s cer-ta-inly not go-ing to tell you or yo-ur brot-her.”

“And why the hell not?” The qu-es-ti-on may ha-ve so-un-ded bel-li-ge-ment. It sho-uld ha-ve; it was.

“He res-pects the two of you,” Is-hi-ah ans-we-red slowly as if he co-uldn’t qu-ite be-li-eve it him-self.

“He con-si-ders you fri-ends-Ro-bin Go-od-fel-low who has had very few of tho-se in his li-fe. He do-esn’t want to chan-ge that. He do-esn’t want to di-sap-po-int you.”

Now, the-re was a con-cept to bog-gle. Ro-bin didn’t want to di-sap-po-int us? Ro-bin who cha-sed my brot-her re-lent-les-sly be-fo-re Pro-mi-se sta-ked her cla-im. Ro-bin who li-ed, che-ated, and pic-ked poc-kets just to stay in prac-ti-ce, who had kil-led a suc-cu-bus in cold blo-od be-ca-use she wo-uldn’t gi-ve him the in-for-ma-ti-on we ne-eded? Ro-bin who sold *used* cars? That Ro-bin didn’t want to di-sap-po-int us?

I li-ked that Ro-bin, I’d fi-nal-ly be-en for-ced to ad-mit to my-self, but did I think he’d worry abo-ut di-sap-po-in-ting us? No. I didn’t buy it. Un-less...

“Just how not qu-ite et-hi-cal was this thing he did?” I as-ked with ap-pre-hen-si-ve cu-ri-osity.

“You do not want to know, and, re-gard-less, it’s not my story to tell.” He fol-ded his arms ac-ross his chest. “I wo-uld gi-ve you mo-re in-for-ma-ti-on on at le-ast who the-se bas-tards are, but ge-ne-ral know-led-ge isn’t spe-ci-fic. Kno-wing the why and the very bro-ad who do-esn’t get us any clo-ser than if I knew not-hing at all.” The cont-rol flic-ke-red and I saw mo-re than wings. I saw light and fi-re and my ears ac-hed from the pres-su-re, and then it was go-ne. “Go. Ask him. May-be you can con-vin-ce him whe-re I can’t. Stub-born bas-tard.”

Jaw still a lit-tle lo-ose from the light show, I was sud-denly alo-ne as he di-sap-pe-ared in-to the back ro-om. I pe-ered over the bar ex-pec-ting to see smo-king fo-otp-rints bur-ned in-to the flo-or, but the-re was not-hing. Pe-ris.

I still had to won-der.

Ha-ving gi-ven the unp-re-ce-den-ted go-ahe-ad to cut out of work early, Pro-mi-se and I did just what Is-hi-ah sug-ges-ted. We ar-ri-ved at her apart-ment at ten a.m. to find out from Ro-bin what Is-hi-ah wo-uldn’t tell us. We wal-ked in, I told him what Is-hi-ah had sa-id, and wa-ited for the res-pon-se. He was comp-le-tely co-ope-ra-ti-ve. Threw buc-kets of in-fo at us fas-ter than we co-uld so-ak it up.

Ye-ah, right. He wasn’t tel-ling us shit.

“I ha-ve no idea what that ca-nary with the ove-rac-ti-ve pi-tu-itary gland is on abo-ut,” Ro-bin sa-id lof-tily from the so-fa as he po-in-ted the re-mo-te at the te-le-vi-si-on that was nor-mal-ly disc-re-etly hid-den be-hind a rep-ro-duc-ti-on of what was Wa-ter-ho-use’s *Win-d-f-lo-wers*, or so I was told. It was a wo-man with blo-wing brown ha-ir, a vi-olet and ivory dress, and flo-wers all aro-und her ba-re fe-et. It was Pro-mi-se, I knew it was. She had be-en the mo-del. May-be not sketc-hed or pa-in-ted out-si-de on that sunny mor-ning, but she’d be-en the ins-pi-ra-ti-on.

“Porn, whe-re is the porn?” Go-od-fel-low comp-la-ined.

“Do-es the wo-man not ha-ve a sing-le exo-tic en-ter-ta-in-ment chan-nel in her pac-ka-ge? Un-be-li-evab-le.”

“Ro-bin, we ne-ed to spe-ak with you. Pay at-ten-ti-on.” Ni-ko, pla-ying part body-gu-ard, part nur-se, re-mo-ved the re-mo-te and tos-sed it with brisk for-ce over his sho-ul-der to me.

For-tu-na-tely, I both ex-pec-ted and ca-ught it or I wo-uld’ve cho-ked on it. Not one mo-ment of one day co-uld I ho-pe not to be tes-ted at my brot-her’s slich-test whim. It was se-cond na-tu-re to us both, but it didn’t stop me from tos-sing it back. Ni-ko duc-ked gra-ce-ful-ly and it bop-ped Ro-bin in the fo-re-he-ad.

“Cha-ron’s pasty whi-te balls.” Ro-bin gla-red and rub-bed a fa-int red spot abo-ve his eyeb-row, but tur-ned the te-le-vi-si-on off. “Not-hing hap-pe-ned in so-me for-sa-ken sand-rid-den land, and I ha-ve

no idea who might want to kill me. Well..." His eye-brows twitc-hed. "Let's emb-ra-ce re-ality. I ha-ve no idea who might want to kill me as a con-cer-ted plot. How abo-ut that?"

"You're lying," sa-id Ni-ko. The-re wasn't a sing-le do-ubt to be he-ard in his vo-ice.

"And how do you know?" The he-ad til-ted, chin lif-ted, eyes nar-ro-wed-all in chal-len-ge.

"Be-ca-use you al-ways lie," Nik sa-id with dark exas-pe-ra-ti-on. "Why wo-uld that pos-sibly chan-ge now?"

"Ah." Ro-bin slid down a lit-tle on the co-uch and fol-ded his arms. "Go-od po-int."

"Then stop be-ing an as-sho-le and tell us al-re-ady," I de-man-ded.

"Or what?" he as-ked moc-kingly. "You'll hug me?"

"You son of a bitch," I grow-led. Ni-ko ca-ught me as I lun-ged, still cur-sing, to-ward the co-uch.

Cun-ning fox eyes grin-ned at me, but the ac-tu-al cur-ve of his mo-uth was un-cer-ta-in, as if that half-assed hug was so far out-si-de his world that he ba-rely re-cog-ni-zed it for what it was. Ye-ah, you and me both, pal, I tho-ught as I gla-red at him over Nik's sho-ul-der. Le-ar-ning how to be a fri-end was a bitch and a half.

"Ro-bin, just tell us. If you tell us, we can help stop this. I wo-uld think you wo-uld want that." Ni-ko pus-hed me back with a war-ning gla-re of his own. His gla-re was mo-re of an imp-li-ca-ti-on...a le-vel glan-ce, but I knew it for what it was.

"No."

Ni-ko tur-ned back to Go-od-fel-low at the puck's res-pon-se. "No? You...no?" I hadn't se-en my brot-her at a loss for words of-ten. If not for the si-tu-ati-on, it wo-uld've be-en en-ter-ta-ining. "No, you won't tell us," he went on, "or no, you don't want the at-tempts to ce-ase?"

"The first." Ro-bin aimed the re-mo-te and tur-ned the te-le-vi-si-on back on and the so-und up.

"Now, why don't you run along and find yo-ur Scot-tish pal? Whi-le you're was-ting ti-me he-re, he's pro-bably scar-fing up a bus-lo-ad of kid-di-es as we spe-ak."

It was a low blow, and it was me-ant to be.

"Ro-bin," I grow-led.

"No."

"Go-od-fel-low..." my brot-her in-sis-ted.

"No."

"You tiny-dic-ked pi-ece of shit." I cur-led my fin-gers in-to a fist.

"Not very in-ven-ti-ve, pro-ven fal-se, and no."

"This is a se-ri-o-us mat-ter." That was Nik aga-in with the calm re-ason.

"No."

"Lo-man."

He lo-oked at me, but he didn't say no this ti-me. He didn't say anyt-hing at all. The-re was not-hing but si-len-ce from him un-til we ga-ve up and left. From a *puck*...si-len-ce.

Which me-ant, for now, we we-re shit out of luck.

17

After a few ho-urs of ne-eded un-cons-ci-o-us-ness, I wo-ke that eve-ning, to-ok a sho-wer, and went whe-re Ni-ko was sit-ting on the co-uch lo-oking at the pa-per spre-ad out on our bat-tle-scar-red cof-fee tab-le. He must've go-ne out to buy one, be-ca-use he didn't tend to swi-pe the one from that as-sho-le downs-ta-irs li-ke I did. Al-ways bitc-hing to the ma-na-ger abo-ut the no-ise, and I had to ad-mit when you hit the flo-or af-ter be-ing thrown over yo-ur brot-her's sho-ul-der, that do-es ma-ke so-me no-ise. So I pla-yed lo-ud mu-sic when we spar-red to co-ver up the flo-or po-un-ding, lamps bre-aking, and tab-les over-tur-ning, but ap-pa-rently he wasn't a fan of al-ter-na-ti-ve mu-sic eit-her. The ma-na-ger ca-me by and squ-aw-ked at us on-ce a we-ek or so and the as-sho-le un-der us lost a pa-per or three. Ni-ko didn't ap-pro-ve but as Thou Shall Not Ste-al wasn't kis-sing co-usins with Thou Shall Not Kick Yo-ur Brot-her's Ass in Spar-ring, I ig-no-red him.

"What's up?" I as-ked. "You lo-oking for 'Ni-nja ne-eded, soy-eating, anal-re-ten-ti-ve re-qu-ired' in

the clas-si-fi-eds?”

“No.” He didn’t raise his eyes from the pa-per. “It se-ems Saw-ney fi-nal-ly re-ce-ived so-me pub-li-city af-ter all.”

I sat be-si-de him and to-ok a lo-ok for myself. The pic-tu-re wasn’t so bad. Just a gur-ney and a full body bag. That’s a hel-lu-va li-fe to le-ad, isn’t it, when a body bag is just one of tho-se things? No big de-al. The he-ad-li-ne ma-de up for it, tho-ugh: EIGHT SLA-UGH-TE-RED AT MAN-HAT-TAN PSYCHI-AT-RIC CEN-TER. “Oh, shit,” I mur-mu-red.

It se-emed two se-cu-rity gu-ards and six of the men-tal pa-ti-ents had be-en kil-led. Two mo-re pa-ti-ents we-re mis-sing. Fo-ur we-re de-ca-pi-ta-ted and the ot-her fo-ur had the-ir thro-ats slit. All we-re sli-ced to hell and back. “Hell, we knew the son of a bitch do-es ha-ve a tas-te for the psychi-at-ri-cal-ly chal-len-ged.” And for me. I re-ad the rest of the ar-tic-le. The two mis-sing pa-ti-ents we-re as-su-med to be res-pon-sib-le for the de-aths...with what? The-ir damn fin-ger-na-ils? Tho-se po-or bas-tards had be-en ta-ken away eit-her de-ad to be eaten la-ter or ali-ve for Saw-ney’s fun and ga-mes. I ho-ped for the-ir sa-kes they we-re de-ad. “Want I sho-uld ta-ke a smell a-ro-und?” I didn’t see we co-uld do anyt-hing el-se ex-cept ma-ke su-re it was Saw-ney.

“I think that is an ex-cel-lent idea.” He re-fol-ded the pa-per and slap-ped it aga-inst my chest. “Ta-ke that down to Mr. Ar-nold. He’s no do-ubt be-en lo-oking for it.”

My brot-her, oc-ca-si-onal-ly he did surp-ri-se me.

We wa-ited un-til a-ro-und mid-night un-til dres-sing in black-jac-ket and co-at, shirt and pants-and to-ok the tra-in up to East Twenty-fifth Stre-et. Ni-ko had do-ne so-me re-se-arch on-li-ne abo-ut the pla-ce, but stan-ding ac-ross the stre-et lo-oking at the fen-ce top-ped with con-cer-ti-na wi-re, I didn’t get a warm fuzzy fe-eling thin-king abo-ut the men-tal he-alth fi-eld. At le-ast se-ven-te-en sto-ri-es tall, the bu-il-ding was a brown lo-oming mass stra-ight out of a Step-hen King bo-ok. Hund-reds of glo-wing hungry eyes mas-qu-era-ding as win-dows, the do-ub-le do-ors that to-ok you in ne-ver to spit you out aga-in, and the Kings-ter him-self do-ing the body ca-vity se-arc-hes. Then off you’d go to the do-ub-le-lock-down ward whe-re cri-mi-nal-ly in-sa-ne was al-re-ady prep-rin-ted on yo-ur na-me tag. *Hi, my na-me is Cal! I li-ke to knit and kill, and I ha-ve fat-her is-su-es.*

I kept lo-oking up at the pla-ce, hypno-ti-zed, then shud-de-red slightly and lo-oked over at Nik. “Okay, if the-re’s un-der-co-ver work in-vol-ved he-re,” I sa-id, “Saw-ney can eat ever-yo-ne in the damn city.”

Ni-ko snor-ted and we cros-sed the stre-et. The-re was still yel-low po-li-ce ta-pe flut-te-ring he-re and the-re, but the cops had co-me and go-ne. The hos-pi-tal was bo-und to ha-ve up-ped the se-cu-rity, but if we co-uldn’t avo-id them, then we we-re in the wrong job. We fo-und an area whe-re the tall se-cu-rity lamp had a shat-te-red bulb...co-ur-tesy of a si-len-ced shot from my Glock. The Eag-le I was sa-ving for Saw-ney or any re-ve-nants. I do-ub-ted I’d ne-ed it-they’d co-me and go-ne, but you ne-ver knew. Ni-ko pul-led a pa-ir of bolt cut-ters and we we-re thro-ugh the fen-ce in less than a mi-nu-te. The gro-unds we-ren’t all that big in and of them-sel-ves, but the bu-il-ding was hu-ge. It to-ok a whi-le to cir-cum-na-vi-ga-te the pla-ce whi-le dod-ging the oc-ca-si-onal gu-ard, so-me of who lo-oked pretty damn sca-red. Co-uldn’t say I bla-med them. Whet-her the kil-lers ca-me from in-si-de or out, I do-ub-ted the sce-na-rio had be-en in the emp-loy-ment broc-hu-re. We we-re mo-re than half-way a-ro-und the pla-ce be-fo-re I smel-led him...Saw-ney and the re-ve-nants. I pres-sed clo-se thro-ugh the bus-hes, put a hand on the cold sto-ne, and lo-oked up.

“See it?” I as-ked.

“Yes,” Ni-ko res-pon-ded. “I see.”

Abo-ut fi-ve sto-ri-es up was a brand-span-king-new win-dow. Cris-scros-sed with wi-re the sa-me as the ot-hers, this one was a lit-tle mo-re cle-ar, a lit-tle less clo-uded with age. They had go-ne thro-ugh the-re and back out aga-in from the smell. The scent was strong, stron-ger than a one-way trip. “Did you want to ni-nja yo-ur way up the wall or so-met-hing?” I dug my hand in my poc-ket. “I think I ha-ve so-me do-ub-le-si-ded sticky ta-pe in he-re. You co-uld wrap it a-ro-und yo-ur hands and-” I dod-ged the el-bow only to end up with the he-el of a cal-lo-used hand mil-li-me-ters from my no-se. Bus-ted car-ti-la-ge, bo-ne shards in-to the bra-in...les-son le-ar-ned for the day.

“You don’t play fa-ir,” I grumb-led.

“Ha-ve I ever?” He drop-ped his hand and kept lo-oking up at the win-dow. “And the-re’s not-hing up the-re to see.” He was pro-bably right. Only freshly scrub-bed ti-le flo-ors and gro-ut sta-ined a blo-ody brown that wo-uld’n’t co-me cle-an aga-in no mat-ter how much ble-ach ho-use-ke-eping used.

“Can you fol-low the-ir scent? See whe-re they left?”

“I’m not a su-per-na-tu-ral Las-sie.” Hell, I wasn’t even as go-od as yo-ur ave-ra-ge be-ag-le, much less blo-od-ho-und, but-“I’ll gi-ve it a shot.” Ke-eping an eye out for the gu-ards, I mo-ved ac-ross the grass. The-re was mo-re than Saw-ney and the re-ve-nants to track; the-re was blo-od and lots of it. So-aked in-to the gro-und and the fa-ding grass, it ma-de it-self known just as well. It led to the north si-de of the fen-ce. Up at the top you co-uld still see the mot-tled sta-ins of blo-od on the con-cer-ti-na wi-re. “Up and over.”

We went thro-ugh, and from the-re I wa-ve-red. The sla-ugh-ter had hap-pe-ned last night. A lot of pe-op-le had co-me and go-ne sin-ce then. “Okay, you’re go-ing to ha-ve to of-fer me a Sna-usa-ge or so-met-hing, be-ca-use I’ve lost it.”

“Try har-der.”

“What?” I de-man-ded. “No ‘I know you’ve got it in you’? At le-ast gi-ve me so-me sort of ins-pi-ra-ti-onal spe-ech.”

“I did.” He re-pe-ated it: “Try har-der.”

Gre-at. I scow-led at him and did exactly that. I tri-ed har-der. To my surp-ri-se I pic-ked up so-met-hing... a fa-int spo-re. Blo-od, bo-ne, and Saw-ney’s coldly che-er-ful in-sa-nity. I only ca-ught tra-ces of it every fif-te-en or so fe-et for a block or so and then not-hing. I stop-ped and lo-oked down.

“Ah.” Ni-ko cro-uc-hed and to-uc-hed fin-gers to me-tal.

“He’s go-ne to gro-und.”

Mo-re exactly, un-derg-ro-und. It was a man-ho-le co-ver.

Mo-re cold conc-re-te, mo-re wa-ter, mo-re dark-ness. I ex-ha-led, wis-hed Saw-ney’d had a thing for tree ho-uses ins-te-ad of ca-ves, and pul-led the Eag-le. Using the bolt cut-ters Ni-ko pri-ed up the co-ver, jum-ped se-ve-ral rungs down, and hung on the lad-der for a split se-cond, then kept clim-bing down. I fol-lo-wed, pul-ling the co-ver not qu-ite in pla-ce, but eno-ugh to fo-ol the ca-su-al eye.

It had ra-ined a few days ago and I co-uld he-ar the rush of wa-ter be-ne-ath us. It wasn’t much bet-ter than the tun-nels had be-en-NYC wasn’t known for its pu-re mo-un-ta-in stre-ams-and the only things I co-uld smell didn’t ha-ve anyt-hing to do with Saw-ney and everyt-hing to do with co-ur-tesy flus-hes. It was a storm se-wer, not a was-te one, but the things wa-ter swept off the stre-ets we-ren’t al-ways le-mony-fresh. I bre-at-hed thro-ugh my mo-uth and kept mo-ving down. When I hit the bot-tom, the wa-ter was cold, knee high, but it wasn’t fil-led with flo-ating de-ad body parts. In com-pa-ri-son to the SAS tun-nels, we co-uld grab a ca-noe and call this a va-ca-ti-on.

Still, de-ad body parts or not, Saw-ney might use the se-wers as a ho-me ba-se. Cold, dank-it was a pos-si-bi-lity, which was mo-re than we had be-fo-re. Now that we’d be-en at the Se-cond Ave-nue Sub-way const-ruc-ti-on, he was bo-und to ha-ve left the-re. Saw-ney wan-ted his spi-der-ho-le sec-ret. We didn’t know whet-her he’d ac-tu-al-ly set-tled on that lo-ca-ti-on or not be-fo-re we’d shown up, but re-gard-less we’d spo-iled it for him.

Ni-ko switc-hed on his flash-light. “Do you re-mem-ber when you we-re fi-ve and flus-hed yo-ur fish?”

“He was de-ad and that was in So-uth Ca-ro-li-na.” I slo-s-hed thro-ugh the wa-ter.

“Mmmm.” The light dip-ped and I saw a si-nu-o-us sha-pe be-ne-ath the sur-fa-ce of the wa-ter mo-ve past us. It was ba-rely three fe-et long and it was not Freddy. Go-od thing too. Freddy had be-en a pi-ran-ha.

We kept mo-ving and truth-ful-ly I was surp-ri-sed when we didn’t co-me ac-ross any pi-eces of pa-ti-ents. Saw-ney wasn’t the ne-atest of eaters. Un-less he’d in-ves-ted in a bib and a co-ur-se in tab-le man-ners, then this wasn’t ho-me or ho-me was much fart-her down. I was re-al-ly ti-red of tram-ping thro-ugh tun-nels and se-wers, but it lo-oked li-ke this wasn’t go-ing to be an easy one. “Jesus. We might ha-ve days of this ahe-ad of us,” I sa-id. “We’ll ha-ve to get mo-re help, bring pa-int to mark the off branc-hes we co-ver, mo-re lights.” I tur-ned and shot the re-ve-nant be-hind me in the

sto-mach. “And get so-me rub-ber bo-ots. My god-damn fe-et are fre-ezing.”

It fell in the wa-ter with a gurg-le of blo-od and wa-ter rus-hing from its mo-uth. Its ab-do-men was pretty much go-ne-a blo-ody ru-in of shred-ded flesh and the car-ti-la-ge that pas-sed for the-ir bo-nes. But the-re we-re still arms, a he-ad and neck, part of a chest, and a fran-ti-cal-ly thras-hing set of legs still jo-ined, just ba-rely, at the pel-vis.

“I was be-gin-ning to won-der if you we-re ever go-ing to sho-ot it,” Ni-ko sa-id, “or we-re thin-king of gi-ving it a pig-gyback ri-de ins-te-ad.”

I rol-led my eyes. “Assho-le. The-re’s no ple-asing you.” I nud-ged the legs with my fo-ot as the he-ad went un-der wa-ter. “I think I sho-uld’ve used the Glock.”

“It wo-uld’ve be-en mo-re con-ve-ni-ent for qu-es-ti-oning pur-po-ses,” Nik po-in-ted out with mild exas-pe-ra-ti-on as he dip-ped his hand un-der the wa-ter, grab-bed the neck, and lif-ted the he-ad up out of the wa-ter. “We wo-uld li-ke to ha-ve a word with you, if you’re not too oc-cu-pi-ed at the mo-ment.”

The he-ad whip-ped back and forth, arms mo-ved in jerky di-sj-o-in-ted mo-ve-ments, the up-per tor-so drip-ped flu-id. Be-en se-e-ing a lot of that la-tely. It was get-ting bo-ring. “I can qu-es-ti-on the bot-tom half if you want, but un-less it can do sign lan-gu-age with its to-es, I think I’m out of luck.”

An even mo-re exas-pe-ra-ted gray glan-ce hit me, then tur-ned back to the re-ve-nant. “Whe-re is Saw-ney?” The gurg-ling tur-ned to a scre-am, then a whe-ezing la-ugh. “Tra-ve-ler.”

The-re was anot-her gurg-le as the he-ad went back un-der the wa-ter. Ni-ko sig-hed as he held it un-der. “I’m a pa-ti-ent man, but this is all get-ting to be rat-her an-no-ying.” Corp-se gray hands cla-wed at Ni-ko’s arms. He ig-no-red them. “And if you can’t use yo-ur exp-lo-si-ve ro-unds res-pon-sibly, I’ll ha-ve to ta-ke them away.”

“It co-uld’ve be-en Saw-ney,” I de-fen-ded. “I can’t smell shit down he-re. Okay, that’s not tech-ni-cal-ly true. I can smell shit down he-re, but it re-al-ly is sh...”

The ga-ze nar-ro-wed and I hols-te-red the Eag-le wit-ho-ut fi-nis-hing. “Ye-ah, any-way, he’s lo-oking a lit-tle mo-re co-ope-ra-ti-ve now,” I sa-id, nod-ding to-ward flo-ating arms and a lack of air bub-bles.

The he-ad was jer-ked back up and sha-ken briskly by the neck. Wa-ter gus-hed from its mo-uth and over its chest. “Now”-Ni-ko’s fin-gers tigh-te-ned aro-und the neck-“you’re ob-vi-ously go-ing to die. Re-ge-ne-ra-ting is not much of an op-ti-on for you, mis-sing one-third of yo-ur body. Ho-we-ver.” He smi-led, and even I felt the ice cre-ep down my spi-ne at the sight of it. “You can die now or you can die la-ter. I think you’d much pre-fer now.”

“Hu-man.” The word bub-bled thro-ugh the blo-od and wa-ter. “Worth-less me-at. I don’t fe-ar you.”

That was all re-ve-nant the-re. A lit-tle bit ar-ro-gant and a who-le lot stu-pid. He went back un-der. “I do-ubt that he knows anyt-hing,” Ni-ko sa-id ab-sent-ly as he tos-sed me his light and used his ot-her hand to draw his shor-ter sword-the tan-to bla-de. “If he did, Saw-ney wo-uldn’t ha-ve let him fall be-hind.”

“May-be the re-ve-nants are sho-wing so-me mo-re will now,” I of-fe-red, catc-hing the flash-light and hol-ding it on the re-ve-nant. “They’re not that bright and they’ve got an at-ten-ti-on span...” I wag-gled my ot-her hand back and forth.

“Much li-ke yo-urs, you me-an,” Ni-ko sug-ges-ted.

I gla-red but went on. “Saw-ney’s fe-eding them so-me go-od stuff right now, but I do-ubt they’re much in-to plan-ning the-ir fu-tu-re. He might be lo-sing so-me of his cont-rol.”

“Hmm. In-te-res-ting tho-ught. Let us see.”

It to-ok a whi-le.

I didn’t think it was so much lo-ya-lty for Saw-ney as a hat-red of hu-mans. It’d be li-ke a big-eyed lamb co-ming out of a fi-eld, kic-king my ass, and ma-king me its bitch. Re-ve-nant ar-ro-gan-ce just co-uldn’t be-li-eve it or gi-ve in to it. Not for a long ti-me. Freddy and so-me fri-ends sho-wed up now and aga-in to carry chunks of newly fo-und fish fo-od away in the-ir mo-uths.

When it did talk, and with Ni-ko it re-al-ly was only a mat-ter of ti-me, it didn’t ha-ve much to say. Yes, they’d ta-ken the pa-ti-ents thro-ugh he-re. We knew that. They we-re al-re-ady de-ad when

they'd be-en drop-ped in-to the wa-ter. It was the best that co-uld be ho-ped for. As for the se-wers and Saw-ney, it didn't know. Didn't know if he plan-ned to stay or go. Didn't know if this was ho-me or just anot-her lo-ok at curb ap-pe-al.

It had wan-de-red off from the ot-hers with a pi-ece of flesh to gnaw on, got-ten full and sle-epy, and ne-ver fol-lo-wed the ot-hers on. Re-ve-nants we-re the sa-me as pe-op-le. The-re we-re smart ones (re-la-ti-vely), ave-ra-ge ones, and the-re was this guy. Dumb as a fuc-king rock. But to gi-ve it cre-dit-post-hu-mo-us, but cre-dit all the sa-me-even a smart re-ve-nant might not be on to wha-te-ver Saw-ney was up to. That twis-ted bra-in-he wo-uld gi-ve an Aup-he a run for its mo-ney. Mur-der, may-hem, and mad-ness, and that was just what he saw in his re-ar-vi-ew mir-ror. What was ahe-ad, I don't think any of us co-uld know.

But when we ca-me back to the se-wers we might just find out.

18

The next mor-ning-actu-al-ly, the next su-nup. Su-nup is not mor-ning. It's hell and not fit for any hu-man be-ing, but Ni-ko, ha-ving as-cen-ded to a hig-her pla-ne of exis-ten-ce be-yond simp-le things li-ke ti-me, wasn't hu-man when it ca-me to exer-ci-se. He drag-ged my ass out of bed and off we we-re to run a tho-usand laps aro-und Was-hing-ton Squ-are Park. Okay, may-be not a tho-usand, but it felt li-ke it. Was-hing-ton Squ-are Park was the ne-arest park to our apart-ment, but it was not a very big park and we had to run a lot of laps for Ni-ko to fe-el li-ke we'd got-ten a go-od wor-ko-ut.

The-re wo-uld al-ways be things we co-uld'n't out-run: vam-pi-res, the wol-ves...De-li-lah wo-uld catch me in fi-ve se-conds easy, but Ni-ko ma-de damn su-re I co-uld out-run things li-ke re-ve-nants. He ran me at le-ast on-ce a day; mor-ning, af-ter-no-on, night-it va-ri-ed. He ran all three ti-mes, which ma-de him fas-ter than me and less li-kely to ha-ve his lungs turn in-si-de out. Go-od for him. Me? If I co-uld've fi-gu-red out a way to get out of the one run, I wo-uld've. That's why I had a gun. Sho-oting is easy; run-ning with Ni-ko was hard. He al-ways ran me in-to the gro-und, un-til I was so-aked in swe-at and co-uld'n't ta-ke anot-her step wit-ho-ut my legs fol-ding be-ne-ath me to dump me on the gro-und. Be-ca-use that was re-al li-fe for us-run-ning to sa-ve it.

I still ha-ted it.

After that and a sho-wer, Ni-ko and I sat in the kitc-hen and tri-ed to fi-gu-re things out re-gar-ding Go-od-fel-low. Fin-ding Saw-ney was so-met-hing we we-re le-aving to the end of the dis-cus-si-on, fri-end be-fo-re foe and a bet-ter su-bj-ect than dwel-ling on the Psychi-at-ric Cen-ter sla-ugh-ter.

Ni-ko star-ted by gril-ling me on the guy who'd shot Ro-bin. He gril-led me yes-ter-day af-ter the at-tack, but bet-we-en my job at the bar, ho-ping Ro-bin didn't gro-pe him when he to-ok in ice packs, and the kil-lings at the Psychi-at-ric Cen-ter, we'd be-en a lit-tle busy for a re-pe-at gril-ling. He was ho-ping I'd re-mem-ber so-met-hing new and I did.

"Black ha-ir and dark eyes. Skin a lit-tle dar-ker than yo-urs. What I think was so-me kind of Ara-bic ac-cent. Fa-int, tho-ugh. And he kept sa-ying his task was do-ne. That he was ho-no-red to die." Well, he got his wish the-re. "He al-so cal-led Ro-bin a bet-ra-yer. He didn't get in-to any spe-ci-fics the-re. Wo-uld'n't say if he was alo-ne or not and I ga-ve him plenty of re-ason to spe-ak up." And I wasn't sorry for one damn bit of it. "Oh, wa-it. Hell, the-re is so-met-hing el-se. The son of a bitch used so-me fancy mo-ve to throw me off of him-one that you've de-fi-ni-tely ne-ver ta-ught me," I sa-id be-fo-re pop-ping the tab on the Co-ke and ta-king a swig.

"Hol-ding out on me, Cyra-no?"

He frow-ned. "A mo-ve I've ne-ver shown you? Desc-ri-be it." He had so-me soy, ri-ce-pow-der, mud-co-lo-red drink he was nur-sing. He'd long ago le-ar-ned not to of-fer me one. It was all I co-uld do to ke-ep my own down watc-hing him drink his.

I got up and went ahe-ad to il-lust-ra-te the mo-ve a few ti-mes from the flo-or. He hel-ped by as-su-ming my ro-le, strad-dling me with a fin-ger po-in-ted un-der my chin. Fi-nal-ly when he was sa-tis-fi-ed, I re-tur-ned to my cha-ir. "Hmm. And an Ara-bic ac-cent, you sa-id." Ni-ko mo-ved over to the gro-aning bo-oks-helf aga-inst the li-ving ro-om wall and scan-ned the con-tents. He cho-se a

bo-ok, sat, and thum-bed thro-ugh it. Af-ter a few mi-nu-tes of re-ading, he sa-id with sa-tis-fac-ti-on, “*Var-zesh-e Pah-la-va-ni*. An an-ci-ent form of Ira-ni-an mar-ti-al arts, alt-ho-ugh in tho-se days it wo-uld’ve be-en cal-led Per-si-an arts. It’s well over two tho-usand ye-ars old.”

“The ac-cent, Per-sia, and Ro-bin de-fi-ni-tely twitc-hed when you men-ti-oned Baby-lon a few days ago.” I wrung a no-te from the me-tal of the can. “I think we ha-ve a lo-ca-ti-on pin-ned down.” It was all right, this. Just me and Ni-ko-li-ke back in the old days. Re-se-arch, le-ar-ning crap I didn’t ca-re abo-ut, prac-ti-cing obs-cu-re mo-ves. Ye-ah, the old days...the days be-fo-re I had to worry abo-ut an obs-ti-na-te car sa-les-man who co-uld’n’t be bot-he-red to worry abo-ut him-self.

Damn it.

Wit-hin se-conds Nik was back with anot-her bo-ok. Un-der his bre-ath he was mut-te-ring na-mes...Tam-muz, Utuk-ku. I drank my Co-ke and let it drift in one ear and out the ot-her. When he hit on so-met-hing, he wo-uld let me know. He didn’t. Sig-hing, he clo-sed the bo-ok. “We’ll ha-ve to push Ro-bin on it aga-in, but now for Saw-ney.” His eyes dar-ke-ned to match the grim curl of his lips. “I think I ha-ve so-met-hing.”

“Ye-ah?” I sa-id, surp-ri-sed. “What?”

“I cal-led the TA who sha-res the of-fi-ce with me whi-le you we-re sho-we-ring. I wan-ted her to pick up mo-re clas-ses for me un-til this is do-ne. She had news.”

“Go-od or bad?”

“Bad.” He rep-la-ced the bo-ok on the shelf. “But in-for-ma-ti-ve. Stu-dents are di-sap-pe-aring at Co-lum-bia. Se-ve-ral. It hasn’t hit the pa-pers in a big way yet as they are stu-dents. Pro-ne to wan-de-ring off af-ter par-ti-es and not sho-wing up for a day or two. But Shan-non sa-id she he-ard the-se stu-dents we-re re-li-ab-le, not the kind to ta-ke off wit-ho-ut tel-ling so-me-one.”

“That co-uld be an-yo-ne. Co-uld be yo-ur ave-ra-ge se-ri-al kil-ler.” I knoc-ked the salt and pep-per sha-kers to-get-her. “Saw-ney’s not the only pre-da-tor aro-und.”

“True. But I ha-ve a fe-eling abo-ut this. The-re’s so-met-hing abo-ut Co-lum-bia I can’t put my fin-ger on. So-met-hing I think I re-ad on-ce and ha-ve for-got-ten. We ne-ed to lo-ok in-to this.”

“Mo-re so than the se-wers?” I sa-id skep-ti-cal-ly and rap-ped the sha-kers aga-in. I was equ-al-ly skep-ti-cal that Ni-ko for-got anyt-hing he ever re-ad, but it was pos-sib-le. He had a lot of in-for-ma-ti-on cram-med in that he-ad. “It’s a *col-le-ge*,” I went on. “I do-ubt he’s shac-king up in the dorms.”

He to-ok the clan-king sha-kers out of my hand and put them out of re-ach. “Trust me, and it’ll cer-ta-in-ly ta-ke less ti-me than ro-aming mo-re mi-les of se-wers.”

The-re was no do-ubt Ni-ko was hell on whe-els when it ca-me to trac-king and fin-ding pre-da-tors. That we hadn’t fo-und this one yet bug-ged the hell out of him...he’d go-ne from Zen to ice-cold and that didn’t spell well for Saw-ney. “We’ll ne-ed so-me sort of in. The po-li-ce might not be the-re in full for-ce, but the stu-dents will be on ed-ge. Fa-culty too. I’m too yo-ung to pass for a cop.” Alt-ho-ugh it’d be easy eno-ugh to get the fa-ke ID. We’d be-en get-ting it sin-ce I was six-te-en and Ni-ko eigh-te-en. Any Rom worth his salt co-uld find a way easy eno-ugh and we had. Our clan might not ac-cept us thanks to my Aup-he half, but Sop-hia knew the tricks. And from watc-hing her all tho-se ye-ars we knew them too. “And you’re too...” I shrug-ged.

“Too what?”

“Hell, you’re li-ke a James Bond vil-la-in. Co-ol, col-lec-ted, let-hal, and not a do-nut in sight. No one wo-uld buy you as a cop eit-her.” Be-si-des, even tho-ugh at twenty-two he co-uld pass for twenty-six or twenty-se-ven easy, that was still too yo-ung for him to be con-vin-cing as a pla-inc-lot-hes de-tec-ti-ve. And his chin-length ha-ir wo-uld im-me-di-at-ely brand him as an im-pos-ter if he we-re in a uni-form.

He snor-ted. “When I start drin-king my soy-milk sha-ken, not stir-red, then we’ll talk. As for an in, if the-re is one, Pro-mi-se will know.”

And she did. Bet-we-en her rich de-ad hus-bands and be-ing a vam-pi-re, Pro-mi-se was pro-mi-nent on the so-ci-al/cha-ri-tab-le and non-hu-man sce-ne. If it was a fat, fe-eb-le-min-ded rich guy you ne-eded or a man-star-ved so-ci-ali-te, she just had to pick up a pho-ne. The su-per-na-tu-ral world

was a lit-tle tric-ki-er to na-vi-ga-te be-ca-use of trust is-su-es, al-li-an-ces, and cre-atu-res that didn't think the-re was a damn thing wrong with mur-der. But in the end she ca-me thro-ugh for us.

A long ri-de up-town on the A tra-in la-ter, we we-re at Co-lum-bia Presby-te-ri-an tal-king with a Japa-ne-se he-aling en-tity, O-Ku-ni-Nus-hi, known to his ob-li-vi-o-us hu-man col-le-agu-es as Ken Nus-hi, doc-tor and spe-ci-al se-mi-nar inst-ruc-tor for the pre-med up-perc-las-smen at Co-lum-bia Uni-ver-sity.

A he-aling spi-rit, mo-re po-wer-ful than a hu-man he-aler by far, wo-uld've co-me in handy not so long ago, but he didn't know Pro-mi-se at the ti-me and vi-ce ver-sa. He knew of so-me-one who knew so-me-one who knew so-me-one and so on. As it tur-ned out, he co-uld still do us a fa-vor. First, he was ac-tu-al-ly wil-ling to pay us. Se-cond, he was ab-le to con-firm the stu-dents we-re mis-sing and the col-le-ge was mo-re con-cer-ned than the cops we-re at this po-int.

"You are cor-rect. Two stu-dents ha-ve di-sap-pe-ared on cam-pus over the past two days, al-so a ma-in-te-nan-ce man." Be-hind his desk, Dr. Nus-hi ste-ep-led long, thin fin-gers, two of which we-re ban-ded with jade rings. One was whi-te, one red. He had a fa-ce that was oddly mon-key-li-ke-lar-ge ears, black ha-ir in a wi-dow's pe-ak, bro-ad no-se, and so-ul-ful eyes. Even mo-re oddly, in-dif-fe-rent stu-dent that I was, I hap-pe-ned to re-mem-ber a mytho-logy les-son from ye-ars be-fo-re. In the Japa-ne-se mythos, mon-keys we-re tho-ught to bring go-od for-tu-ne. If you ne-eded a doc-tor, go-od for-tu-ne wo-uld be a ni-ce bo-nus along with a che-er-ful bed-si-de man-ner.

"I can-not say what has ta-ken them," Dr. Nus-hi con-ti-nu-ed. "But the-re is so-met-hing he-re. A pre-da-tor, hu-man or not, I can't say. But the-re is a stil-lness...an air..." He lo-ok-ed at me, then ope-ned his hands in a "who knows?" ges-tu-re. I had an air abo-ut me too, he se-emed to think, but he re-ma-ined si-lent on that su-bj-ect. Luc-kily. Ni-ko ca-red for com-ments abo-ut my Aup-he he-ri-ta-ge even less than I did. "I can-not put a fin-ger on it," he sa-id, "but I know. De-ath is he-re. A go-od physi-ci-an re-cog-ni-zes it. This is wal-king, tal-king De-ath and it is using our cam-pus as a fe-eding gro-und. Hu-man or non, I want it go-ne. This is a pla-ce of know-led-ge, not de-ath. But I didn't know what to do with the po-li-ce sa-ying we must wa-it forty-eight ho-urs. I didn't know who to con-tact, not un-til Mrs. Not-tin-ger cal-led with the of-fer of yo-ur ser-vi-ces." He nod-ded his he-ad to-ward Pro-mi-se.

"Saw-ney Be-ane." Ni-ko had bo-wed to Dr. Nus-hi be-fo-re he'd ta-ken a se-at. Now, in black on black, he sat stra-ight in the de-ep blue bro-ca-de cha-ir with fa-ce im-pas-si-ve. "It may be the one we're lo-oking for hunts he-re now. It may be, as you say, a hu-man. Eit-her way, we will lo-ok in-to it." He lo-ok-ed at Pro-mi-se, then back at me. "The tun-nels and se-wers might not be to his li-king. He'll no do-ubt ha-ve se-ve-ral pros-pects go-ing at one ti-me, trying to find the best pos-si-b-le lo-ca-ti-on for his true ho-me. On-ce he set-tles on one he'll stay the-re, but I don't think he has yet. He co-uld be hun-ting he-re and ta-king his vic-tims back to whic-he-ver lo-ca-ti-on he's trying out now. Whic-he-ver ca-ve."

"If that is true, you will cer-ta-in-ly be mo-re help than the po-li-ce," Nus-hi sa-id.

"The po-li-ce aren't he-re, then?" Pro-mi-se as-ked. We knew they wo-uldn't find Saw-ney, if he was hun-ting he-re, but if they we-re pat-rol-ling the cam-pus in for-ce, they co-uld ma-ke things dif-fi-cult for our in-ves-ti-ga-ti-on. The-re sho-uld've al-re-ady be-en ram-pant spe-cu-la-ti-on abo-ut a se-ri-al kil-ler with as many bo-di-es as Saw-ney was le-aving aro-und.

But the thing was, bo-di-es *we-ren't* be-ing left aro-und. We'd se-en that, ha-ving chec-ked the pa-per for se-ve-ral days af-ter fin-ding the bo-di-es in the tre-es. The-re'd be-en not-hing un-til the sla-yings at the men-tal ins-ti-tu-te. No sto-ri-es on the ones in the tre-es or on the va-ri-o-us body parts flo-ating in the tun-nels that co-uld've be-en stumb-led ac-ross by the const-ruc-ti-on crews. Myste-ri-es. We had too much on our pla-te al-re-ady, but it was so-met-hing we'd ne-ed to co-me back to-even-tu-al-ly. Right now...it co-uld wa-it, but we'd lo-ok in-to it. May-be in a few we-eks...or months. Af-ter Sawny, a va-ca-ti-on was the only thing I wan-ted, not myste-ri-es.

"They are pe-rip-he-ral-ly in-vol-ved, but as I sa-id, the stu-dents are adults le-gal-ly, as well as is the ma-in-te-nan-ce man, and it has not yet be-en two days. They are in-ves-ti-ga-ting, but as the-re are no signs of fo-ul play as of yet..." He spre-ad his hands wi-der, then pla-ced them on the desk. "They are

cer-tainly not he-re in for-ce.” The brown eyes so-ught out us all one by one. “This is my ho-me, but I am no war-ri-or. Mrs. Not-tin-ger has sa-id you are for hi-re. I will pay wha-te-ver you re-qu-ire to ta-ke ca-re of this si-tu-ati-on be-fo-re it wor-sens.”

So-me-one was ac-tu-al-ly go-ing to pay us to risk our li-ves. Hot damn. It ma-de hor-ri-fic, ne-ar-de-ath ex-pe-ri-en-ces a sha-de less an-no-ying. I sho-ved my hand in-to the poc-ket of my black le-at-her jac-ket and fin-ge-red a well-worn rip. I’d gi-ven De-li-lah my go-od one, but I li-ked this one too. I co-uld’n’t rep-la-ce it; it was a clas-sic, but I did ne-ed to rep-la-ce the Glock, and exp-lo-si-ve ro-unds for the Eag-le didn’t co-me che-ap.

“Re-sults will not ne-ces-sa-rily be im-me-di-ate. We will do our best, but Saw-ney is a one-cre-atu-re sla-ugh-ter-ho-use, qu-ite li-te-ral-ly,” Ni-ko ca-uti-oned. “And if the kil-ler is hu-man, the po-li-ce wo-uld pro-ba-bly find him be-fo-re we did.”

“Then yo-ur best is all that I can ask.” Dr. Nus-hi bo-wed. Nik bo-wed. And the me-eting was mostly over. Ex-cept for Pro-mi-se po-li-tely but firmly as-king for Nus-hi’s ho-me ad-dress for bil-ling pur-po-ses. She flas-hed a bit of fang in eit-her strong in-cen-ti-ve or flir-ta-ti-o-us be-ha-vi-or. With vam-pi-res it was hard to tell. As the tips of Nus-hi’s lar-ge ears flus-hed pink, I went with flir-ta-ti-o-us.

We we-re gi-ven fal-se stu-dent ID that wo-uld pass anyw-he-re on eit-her cam-pus if we we-re stop-ped for any re-ason. Alt-ho-ugh I co-uld’n’t ima-gi-ne why we wo-uld be. I lo-oked the twenty-ye-ar-old punk-ass kid that I was. Ni-ko, twenty-two, lo-oked twenty-six, and co-uld pass for a grad stu-dent or the TA that he was easily eno-ugh. Pro-mi-se...Pro-mi-se had an age-less qu-ality, but no one wo-uld stop her be-ca-use they tho-ught she was a se-ri-al kil-ler.

One stu-dent had di-sap-pe-ared on the way to French class, one whi-le do-ing la-undry in the ba-se-ment of one of the dorms, and the ma-in-te-nan-ce man was a mystery. He’d go-ne out on a call, but ta-ken the do-cu-men-ta-ti-on with him. No one con-fes-sed to put-ting in a re-qu-est and no one knew whe-re he’d go-ne.

We se-pa-ra-ted to co-ver the most gro-und, ming-ling among the po-ten-ti-al me-als and lo-oking for de-ad bo-di-es and/or mons-ters. I to-ok a map. Ni-ko na-vi-ga-ted by eit-her the stars or his in-na-te sen-se of pla-ce on the pla-net. It was past se-ven and dark; Pro-mi-se car-ri-ed her clo-ak over one arm and drif-ted. Two se-conds la-ter I’d lost sight of her. She knew how to mo-ve. I only knew the di-rec-ti-on she’d va-nis-hed by the tur-ning of ma-le he-ads and one or two fe-ma-le ones.

I lo-oked down at the map, con-si-de-red it for a se-cond, and then wad-ded it up to toss it in-to the ne-a-rest trash can. It wo-uld’n’t help me find Saw-ney. Smel-ling him wo-uld and thin-king li-ke him wo-uld. I wasn’t en-ti-rely happy with the fact that I tho-ught each wo-uld be an iden-ti-cal exer-ti-on. I’d be-en a hap-py-go-lucky ma-ni-ac myself for over a we-ek on-ce. It wasn’t dif-fi-cult at all to re-mem-ber the cur-ve and sli-de of that par-ti-cu-lar tho-ught pat-tern. Far too easy, in fact. One jump and you we-re on the ri-de, whiz-zing along with the wind cack-ling li-ke in-sa-ne la-ugh-ter in yo-ur ears.

I tri-ed my no-se first. It felt sa-fer.

Co-lum-bia is big-ger than it lo-oks, and it lo-oked plenty big eno-ugh. We we-re con-cent-ra-ting on the Mor-ning-si-de He-ights cam-pus, whe-re the stu-dents and emp-lo-yee had all di-sap-pe-ared. Not-hing had yet hap-pe-ned at the med scho-ol and hos-pi-tal fifty blocks up. The-re was Mor-ning-si-de Park bor-de-ring one si-de of the cam-pus and Pro-mi-se sa-id she wo-uld in-qu-ire of any non-hu-mans wit-hin, a po-li-te way of sa-ying she’d ask the lo-cal yo-kels if they’d se-en a new mons-ter in the ne-igh-bor-ho-od.

I went from bu-il-ding to bu-il-ding, and first I tho-ught it was go-ing to be easy, be-ca-use I smel-led him right off the bat. But it wasn’t long be-fo-re I re-a-li-zed that, ye-ah, his scent was pre-sent...everyw-he-re. Rank and un-mis-ta-kab-le. He was hun-ting he-re all right. From what I co-uld tell he’d ro-amed every no-ok and cranny of the scho-ol. Ke-eping to the sha-dows, avo-iding the se-cu-rity lights, but *ow-ning* it...every inch.

Hot damn. We we-re fi-nal-ly on to so-met-hing. From the smell of it he was he-re al-most if not every night. Every night...but not that many stu-dents we-re mis-sing. This co-uld’n’t be it, co-uld it? One of his pos-si-b-le lo-ca-ti-ons? Or his new ho-me? He li-ked ca-ves, and the-re wasn’t much ca-ve-li-ke

abo-ut this pla-ce. Still, so-met-hing was go-ing on. All we ne-eded to do was find the bas-tard, sli-ce off parts, and ask him what.

But fin-ding him was a prob-lem. With his smell li-te-ral-ly everyw-he-re, I wasn't su-re how to pin-po-int it. It's ne-ver easy, is it? "Well, shit." I stop-ped and cro-uc-hed on the long strip of grass bet-we-en Bro-ad-way and Ams-ter-dam that con-nec-ted two sec-ti-ions of the cam-pus.

"Pretty boy." A hand tick-led be-hind my ear. "Frust-ra-ted?"

De-li-lah.

"You co-uld say that," I grun-ted, surp-ri-sed. I hadn't he-ard her co-ming; she was Kin af-ter all, but I'd smel-led her be-hind me. Wolf and va-nil-la, but what in the hell she was do-ing he-re I had no idea. I tur-ned my he-ad and lo-oked up at her as she twir-led a lock of my black ha-ir aro-und her fin-ger. "That son of a bitch Saw-ney."

She wrink-led her no-se, eyes tur-ning new-pen-ny bright. "He is he-re. He is everyw-he-re. The stench of in-sa-nity." Which was true. He de-fi-ni-tely had the stink of crazy all over him. Of co-ur-se he had the sa-me to say abo-ut me. She sat be-si-de me. "Ra-bid, but that is nor-mal for him. Stop lo-oking." She sho-ok her he-ad di-sap-pro-vingly. "He will eat you." Her fa-ce, her mo-uth mo-ved inc-hes from mi-ne. "Let me eat you"-her ton-gue to-uc-hed my lo-wer lip-"inste-ad."

Okay, that was even mo-re of a surp-ri-se than her sho-wing up-not so much the of-fer, as the ti-ming. I wasn't Ro-bin-Jesus, who was?-but I knew when so-me-one was in-te-res-ted in me or at le-ast in-te-res-ted in parts of me. And my parts and I felt the sa-me way abo-ut her, alt-ho-ugh half of that com-bo felt gu-ilty as hell abo-ut it. Not that that mat-te-red. This wasn't the ti-me or the pla-ce. Two stu-dents pas-sed, girls, blond and bru-net-te. They lo-oked at us and hur-ri-ed on, the-ir long legs stri-ding fas-ter. I might lo-ok li-ke a punk-ass twenty-ye-ar-old kid and De-li-lah a cross bet-we-en a mo-del and a kick-yo-ur-ass bi-ker chick, but we still didn't pass in the hu-man world. Not re-al-ly. Tho-se girls wo-uldn't know why they felt the way they did abo-ut us, but they sen-sed the dif-fe-ren-ce in us so-me-how.

"Lit-tle girls," De-li-lah sa-id with a de-ri-si-ve toss of her pony-ta-il. "Sca-red of mons-ters in the big bad wo-ods."

I hung my he-ad for a mo-ment. She didn't mind be-ing dif-fe-rent. I won-de-red why I did. "How'd you know I was he-re any-way?"

She sat be-si-de me, her own long legs clad in le-at-her. She stretc-hed and rec-li-ined on her el-bows in the grass. "Cal-led Pro-mi-se. Puck ans-we-red. Says Co-lum-bia. From the-re." She to-uc-hed a fin-ger to her small, stra-ight no-se. "I find yo-ur scent."

"And what do I smell li-ke?" I as-ked with a re-luc-tant cu-ri-osity. "Flay didn't se-em to ca-re for it, wha-te-ver it is."

The cop-per of her eyes dar-ke-ned back to light brown as she puz-zled on the qu-es-ti-on. "Stran-ge. In-te-res-ting. Go-od and bad. Right and wrong." She ga-ve an ac-qu-isi-ti-vely hungry smi-le. "Swe-et and so-ur."

I re-ac-hed over and ran a thumb along the lo-wer cur-ve of that smi-le. "I ho-pe that's abo-ut sex and not ma-king me a me-al. You wo-uldn't be the first we-re-wolf that tri-ed to ma-ke me din-ner, and you wo-uldn't be the first one I kil-led."

She wasn't imp-res-sed, snor-ting. "Pups."

"Not all of them. Cer-be-rus was no Red Ri-ding Ho-od re-j-ect." Ne-ver mind that it had ta-ken all three of us...Flay, Ni-ko, and me...to ta-ke him down. We'd do-ne it. I wasn't su-re an-yo-ne el-se co-uld ha-ve.

"Cer-be-rus." The smi-le was comp-le-tely dif-fe-rent now, dark and glo-ating. She lif-ted the snug whi-te shirt she wo-re to ba-re her scars. "Not fit to be-ar his cub. Flay and I, our fa-mily, to Kin Alp-has we are not go-od eno-ugh. Not high eno-ugh in pack. Not pu-re. *We* are bet-ter than pu-re. *We* are Wolf." She res-ted a hand on her flat sto-mach. "But Cer-be-rus sa-id the-re wo-uld be no cub." Her lips tigh-te-ned and she pul-led the shirt back down. "No cubs ever now."

I co-uld think of ab-so-lu-tely not-hing to say at first, alt-ho-ugh I'd sus-pec-ted be-fo-re from the ex-tent of the da-ma-ge that co-uld be se-en that she wo-uldn't be ma-king her nep-hew, Slay, any lit-tle

co-usins. Sorry se-emed wholly lac-king, and I fi-nal-ly went with my ins-tinct. “He di-ed pa-in-ful-ly, in one god-awful blo-ody mess.”

It was the right thing. The smi-le re-tur-ned, bla-zing bright as her eyes. “Sex. Now.” She to-ok my hand, sto-od, and yan-ked me up with such strength that both of my fe-et al-most left the gro-und.

Not that it wasn’t ni-ce to be wan-ted, to be used and abu-sed, but the scre-ams that rip-ped thro-ugh the air emp-ha-si-zed that so-me things ha-ve to wa-it. Hey, I’d al-re-ady got-ten la-id on-ce this ye-ar...okay, on-ce in a li-fe-ti-me. What was my hurry?

One of the girls who’d wal-ked past us ca-me run-ning back. She was alo-ne this ti-me, with blo-od on her fa-ce and jac-ket. I didn’t bot-her to ask what had hap-pe-ned. It was self-evi-dent eno-ugh. Saw-ney or a re-ve-nant had co-me cre-eping out of the sha-dows for an eve-ning snack. She kept run-ning past us with whi-te-rim-med, un-se-e-ing eyes. I ran in the di-rec-ti-on she had co-me from. De-li-lah fol-lo-wed, mo-re out of bo-re-dom than any de-si-re to sa-ve a hu-man, I tho-ught. She sta-yed in hu-man form, but kept up with me easily re-gard-less. As we ran, I pul-led out my cell pho-ne, ga-ve Nik the ter-se facts, and tri-ed for mo-re spe-ed.

We pas-sed se-ve-ral stu-dents go-ing in both di-rec-ti-ons. They ve-ered away from us; it was ob-vi-o-us we we-ren’t jog-ging for our he-alth. We co-ve-red the length of the grass-co-ve-red walk, va-ul-ted the small iron po-le and cha-in fen-ce that fra-med the grass, and fol-lo-wed the blo-od. It was the only way we fo-und her...by the smell of her blo-od. It was thick in the air, as thick as the ines-ca-pab-le scent of Saw-ney and re-ve-nants.

And it was a re-ve-nant that had her, not Saw-ney. Whi-le Saw-ney’s spo-re was ho-urs old, that of the re-ve-nant was as fresh as the girl’s blo-od. Both ca-me from a bu-il-ding of red brick, nar-row win-dows, and chim-neys. It lo-oked li-ke a ho-use, not a cam-pus bu-il-ding. It was sur-ro-un-ded by low hed-ges and that’s whe-re we fo-und them-the vic-tim and three re-ve-nants. In a cro-ok of hed-ge and bu-il-ding, sha-do-wed and pro-tec-ted from a ca-su-al glan-ce, they we-re fe-eding on her. One was at her thro-at, one at her chest, and one at her sto-mach, and the-re wasn’t a damn thing we co-uld do for her. The re-ve-nants had ma-de scraps of her in a mat-ter of mi-nu-tes. It was the dark-ha-ired one. Her short cap of ha-ir didn’t show the blo-od, but what strips of skin re-ma-ined did.

I grow-led and kic-ked the he-ad of the re-ve-nant from her thro-at. I wasn’t we-ar-ing sne-akers to-day. I was we-ar-ing scuf-fed black com-bat bo-ots, thick-so-led and he-avy, and I bro-ke the bas-tard’s neck ins-tantly with the blow. Not that that stop-ped him. His body stag-ge-red up and to-ward me whi-le his he-ad was bent at an acu-te ang-le. I’d bro-ken the bo-ne, but the spi-nal cord was still in-tact. Da-ma-ged pro-bably, but not eno-ugh to ma-ke a dif-fe-ren-ce in the pri-mi-ti-ve or-ga-nism that was a re-ve-nant. De-li-lah, ap-pa-rently for-go-ing the wolf this ti-me, to-ok one out with a kni-fe. To-ok him down, out, and had him in pi-eces wit-hin se-conds. Why worry abo-ut lo-sing a per-fectly go-od set of clot-hes in the trans-for-ma-ti-on for a me-re three re-ve-nants-I co-uld see her po-int. The le-at-her pants...and what they con-ta-ined...ye-ah, that wo-uld be a cri-me...*shit*.

I wor-ri-ed less abo-ut my hor-mo-nes and mo-re abo-ut the third re-ve-nant that jum-ped me with claws and te-eth as sharp as any kni-fe and a lot less hygi-enic. I duc-ked and he slam-med in-to the one with the ca-tast-rop-hic crick in his neck, and they both tumb-led down. I didn’t use my gun. It was dif-fi-cult eno-ugh scuf-fling in the mid-dle of cam-pus wit-ho-ut be-ing no-ti-ced, even at night, and I used my own kni-fe and to-ok one he-ad whi-le De-li-lah to-ok the ot-her.

“And you le-ave me not-hing. You are an in-con-si-de-ra-te brot-her, to say the le-ast.”

I lo-oked over my sho-ul-der at Ni-ko, who sto-od with ka-ta-na drawn. “You’re get-ting slow, old man. Get a sco-oter and we’ll talk abo-ut sa-ving you so-me ass to kick.”

I ba-rely saw the swat, but I cer-ta-inly felt it. Re-sis-ting the ur-ge to rub the back of my sho-ul-der, I lo-oked down at the de-ad girl, then away. “Our new boss isn’t go-ing to be happy.” I didn’t bla-me him one bit. I wasn’t happy eit-her.

“No, he won’t be. They’re get-ting bol-der.” Ni-ko knelt be-si-de the girl. “They drag-ged her off the path, but whe-re did they co-me from? He-re?” He lo-oked up at the bu-il-ding.

“Kin-da small,” I com-men-ted and it was true. It simply wasn’t lar-ge eno-ugh. If re-ve-nants and Saw-ney had set up shop the-re, so-me-one wo-uld’ve no-ti-ced. It wasn’t li-ke they co-uld hi-de out in

ye ol-de at-tic li-ke first co-usins' flip-per kids.

"Yes, it is," he sa-id ab-sently, stan-ding. "But se-e-ing is not al-ways be-li-ving. Tell me what you smell." He glan-ced over at De-li-lah. "You as well."

I in-ha-led de-eply as De-li-lah did the sa-me. It re-eked. The who-le god-damn pla-ce stunk to high he-aven of Saw-ney and the re-ve-nants, far mo-re so than any ot-her pla-ce on cam-pus, which was sa-ying so-met-hing, and far mo-re than any ot-her pla-ce he'd be-en: the wa-re-ho-use, the se-wers, the Se-cond Ave-nue sub-way. That was it for the se-wers, then. It was kind of a re-li-ef that the-re'd be no mo-re trud-ging thro-ugh wa-ter. "This is it all right," I con-fir-med, trying not to gag.

De-li-lah ag-re-ed with a nod. "The Den. They co-me he-re. Go from he-re. Li-ve he-re."

Not exc-lu-si-vely, but from the she-er con-cent-ra-ti-on of odor, he-re mo-re than anyw-he-re el-se.

"Well then, Ale-xan-der Saw-ney Be-ane." Ni-ko smi-led, that ra-re, an-ti-ci-pa-tory smi-le that didn't bo-de well for who-ever was at the end of his sword.

"Knock, knock."

We had left cam-pus be-fo-re any stu-dents or se-cu-rity spot-ted us. Pro-mi-se and Ni-ko no-ti-fi-ed Dr. Nus-hi of the events and the bo-di-es-which I sus-pec-ted wo-uld so-on di-sap-pe-ar. Saw-ney or mo-re re-ve-nants co-uld co-me for them or that myste-ri-o-us wha-te-ver that se-emed to ha-ve a li-cen-se in body col-lec-ti-on. Nik and Pro-mi-se went back to our apart-ment for re-se-arch and ot-her things. And for on-ce, ot-her things we-re in my sche-du-le as well. Damn, twi-ce in a ye-ar-whe-re we-re the Gu-in-ness pe-op-le when you ne-eded them?

De-li-lah had an apart-ment...of sorts. Wol-ves we-ren't re-al-ly all that go-od at things li-ke rent and da-ma-ge-de-po-sits and uti-li-ti-es. Not yo-ur ave-ra-ge wolf any-way. That's what Alp-has we-re for. Alp-has to-ok ca-re of the pack. Told them whe-re to li-ve, fo-und the fo-od to ta-ke down...the mem-bers of an Alp-ha's pack we-re, in a way, his child-ren. In we-re-wolf so-ci-ety, es-pe-ci-al-ly in the Kin, the Alp-ha of a par-ti-cu-lar pack wo-uld buy up a bu-il-ding or two-ye-ah, they had that kind of mo-ney-and ta-ke ca-re of the po-wer and wa-ter. Then the-ir pack wo-uld mo-ve in. They might set-tle in one cor-ner of a wa-re-ho-use or they might set-tle in a se-ri-es of apart-ments, mo-ving from flo-or to flo-or every month or so. It de-pen-ded on the wolf.

They al-ways lo-ok-ed aban-do-ned from the out-si-de with blac-ko-ut cur-ta-ins or blinds on the win-dows to ke-ep up the imp-res-si-on. The do-ors we-re al-so kept cha-ined, but if any ho-me-less hap-pe-ned to be smart eno-ugh to find anot-her way in...well, yummy man-na from doggy he-aven.

De-li-lah's pla-ce had on-ce be-en a scho-ol. The-re was a rusty cha-in-link fen-ce and graf-fi-ti everyw-he-re. Old graf-fi-ti. Any ne-wer as-pi-ring ar-tists wo-uldn't do any bet-ter than the ho-me-less. She used the key to open the cha-ins and re-loc-ked them thro-ugh a small ho-le fas-hi-oned in the ste-el-bar-enhan-ced sa-fety glass. Snif-fing me qu-ickly, she nod-ded. "Co-me."

Be-fo-re we'd got-ten wit-hin ten blocks of the pla-ce, she had pro-du-ced a small spray con-ta-iner, li-ke a tiny per-fu-me bot-tle, and squ-ir-ted me li-be-ral-ly with it. "From the puck," she had sa-id. And I re-mem-be-red it from our pre-vi-o-us run-in with the Kin. "Will ma-ke you smell dif-fe-rent. Not li-ke you. Not hu-man fo-od. Not Aup-he." Not hu-man, be-ca-use so-me-one might want to jo-in in on the me-al. And not Aup-he, be-ca-use...hell, that didn't ne-ed exp-la-na-ti-on.

She had cho-sen a ro-om on the third flo-or and we ma-de our way qu-i-etly up dar-ke-ned sta-irs, stop-ping if she he-ard any ot-her wol-ves. I might not ha-ve the scent of a hu-man or an Aup-he, but I had to *be* so-met-hing, and if they saw me, they wo-uld know it wasn't wolf. Ma-na-ging to avo-id that, we re-ac-hed her pla-ce. It was a big ro-om that had on-ce be-en two. A wall had be-en knoc-ked down with a sled-ge-ham-mer from the lo-oks of the rag-ged conc-re-te fra-me. The ins-ti-tu-ti-onal walls had be-en pa-in-ted an um-ber co-lor, smol-de-ring in the low light of the oc-ca-si-onal lamp. The sha-des we-re light red-dish brown glass run thro-ugh with hund-reds of ran-dom frac-tu-res, Tif-fany in a post-mo-dern world.

The-re was no co-uch, only cus-hi-ons. A nest of six lar-ge cus-hi-ons ma-de up what I gu-es-sed to be the equ-iva-lent. Three fe-et by three fe-et, they we-re fo-rest gre-en, de-ep brown, rusty red.

"Ni-ce pla-ce," I sa-id po-li-tely and then got to the po-int. "You don't eat pe-op-le, do you?" For

nut-ri-ti-on, I me-ant. I knew the vast ma-j-ority of the Kin did as well as so-me non Kin wol-ves. “I might ha-ve is-su-es with that.”

“Pe-op-le.” She slip-ped off her jac-ket, then her shirt. She wasn’t we-aring a bra and sud-denly pe-op-le pi-tas se-emed a lit-tle less im-por-tant than they had be-en. But I held on, be-ca-use it *was* im-por-tant. I wasn’t Aup-he and I wasn’t sle-eping with so-me-one who wo-uld do the things Aup-he wo-uld do. “No chal-len-ge,” she dis-mis-sed. “I am a hun-ter. *Hun-ter*. I am not jac-kal li-ke so-me Kin.”

Okay, that was go-od to know. The-re was anot-her pi-le of cus-hi-ons, slightly lar-ger ac-ross the ro-om, and they we-re whi-te, every one of them-the ba-rest sha-de pa-ler than De-li-lah’s ha-ir. “You sle-ep as a wolf, don’t you?”

She pe-eled my jac-ket off me in one smo-oth mo-ti-on. “Wolf dre-ams.” Her eyes we-re bright. “They are ric-her, shar-per. You tas-te, smell, he-ar, to-uch. The very sa-me as this world he-re.” She shrug-ged, which did in-te-res-ting things to very in-te-res-ting parts of her.

“May-be that is the world. May-be this is only the dre-am.”

“Dre-am-ti-me.” I con-si-de-red the hols-ter, then slip-ped out of it. Ro-bin wo-uld no do-ubt say she’d li-ke me to ke-ep it on. Kinky and all, but sho-oting off yo-ur own balls du-ring sex is mo-re kink than I ca-red to think abo-ut. And was I bab-bling in my he-ad ner-vo-usly? Ye-ah. So what? It was my se-cond god-damn ti-me. I co-uld be ner-vo-us if I wan-ted. “So-unds si-mi-lar to so-met-hing that Abo-ri-gi-nes in Aust-ra-lia be-li-eve. Nik told me abo-ut it on-ce, sa-id it was...” Gre-at, I was bab-bling out-si-de my he-ad now.

But it was the last word I sa-id that night as I was tack-led to the flo-or. Last string of co-he-rent words any-way. I did say a few sing-le exp-lo-si-ve ones. De-li-lah was no nymph. She wasn’t soft and slow, me-an-de-ring and mild. De-li-lah was a whirl-wind of wants and ne-eds and de-mands, and be-fo-re the night was over, she ta-ught me how to be the sa-me.

I was glad, tho-ugh, that she co-uldn’t smell me thro-ugh Ro-bin’s con-coc-ti-on. Co-uldn’t smell the lin-ge-ring do-ubt un-der the sa-va-gely sharp ple-asu-re. The fa-int re-mor-se be-ne-ath the she-er *holy shit* spi-ne-knot-ting eup-ho-ria.

The to-uch of gu-ilt be-hind every bi-te, thrust, and ca-ress.

The reg-ret.

19

The New York Met-ro-po-li-tan Mu-se-um was big. I knew that. But it was so-met-hing I knew in the back of my he-ad...li-ke that the sky is blue. That fi-re burns. That a man can’t get it up in fifty-deg-ree wa-ter no mat-ter what Ro-bin tho-ught. Ba-sic, com-mon-sen-se know-led-ge.

So whi-le I knew the mu-se-um was big, I ne-ver tho-ught abo-ut it-not un-til early the next mor-ning when I was lost in the ba-se-ment un-der the ma-in bu-il-ding. I had got-ten Sang-ri-da’s per-mis-si-on over the pho-ne to be the-re, just chec-king for mo-re sir-rush, I’d sa-id, and she’d ma-de su-re the sa-me do-or to the ba-se-ment was un-loc-ked, but that was it. And it wasn’t as if I co-uld re-qu-est a se-cu-rity gu-ard to help me find the mummy. First, I didn’t know which men we-re hers and not yo-ur ave-ra-ge rent-a-cop, and, se-cond, I didn’t know if she was awa-re that Wa-han-ket had ma-de a bur-row un-der her fe-et.

I didn’t think pis-sing off the mummy wo-uld be a go-od idea. I’d se-en the cold ra-ge lur-king be-hind the yel-low glow that fil-led tho-se eye soc-kets. He hadn’t tri-ed to kill us, but he still wasn’t what I’d call an easy-go-ing guy. And if he lost his ho-me, I damn su-re didn’t want him sle-eping on my co-uch.

Ro-bin had led us con-fi-dently thro-ugh a ma-ze of stac-ked cra-tes and dusty, for-got-ten ex-hi-bits. I’d pa-id at-ten-ti-on, but ap-pa-rently not eno-ugh. And now, lac-king a tra-il of bre-ad crumbs, I was tho-ro-ughly lost. The lights we-re back on this ti-me, and I wan-de-red thro-ugh row af-ter row of de-li-ca-te gilt fur-ni-tu-re co-ve-red with he-avy plas-tic dra-pes, can-va-ses of all sha-pes and si-zes, marb-le sta-tu-ary, dra-ma-tic black-and-whi-te masks, and gri-me-co-ve-red ca-se af-ter ca-se of we-a-pons. Swords, dag-gers, even axes. It was ama-zing. You didn’t even ne-ed to be a puck to get

itchy fin-gers at the sight of it.

But that wo-uld be wrong, and, mo-re im-por-tantly, dif-fi-cult to smug-gle out past the gu-ards at the ent-ran-ce. Now, that was a Ro-bin tho-ught and it bro-ught me back to the re-ason I was the-re. Ti-me to stop win-dow-shop-ping and get to it.

Ne-it-her he nor Nik wo-uld be happy to know whe-re I was or what I was do-ing. Ro-bin be-ca-use I was po-king my no-se whe-re he'd ma-de it very cle-ar he'd as so-on chop it off. Nik...Nik wo-uld not be en-t-hu-si-as-tic-*strongly* not ent-hu-si-as-tic-abo-ut the fact I was ro-aming aro-und the lo-ca-ti-on of a sir-rush at-tack. The-re co-uld be a hund-red of tho-se damn things down he-re; the-re was ro-om.

Fi-nal-ly stop-ping be-si-de a Japa-ne-se scre-en, I ga-ve in to the ine-vi-tab-le and cal-led out, "Wa-han-ket."

Not-hing.

I tri-ed aga-in, lo-uder this ti-me. "Wa-han-ket!"

This ti-me the-re was a rust-ling and the-re was a sen-se of mo-ti-on in the cor-ner of my eye. I tur-ned, gun in hand. Sang-ri-da had left one of her gu-ards' 9mms for me at the ba-se-ment ent-ran-ce I'd used, un-der the sta-irs. It wasn't the Vi-king bro-ads-word I'd ex-pec-ted, which was fi-ne by me. They we-re he-avy as hell. Du-ring the mu-se-um's wor-king ho-urs, get-ting my own gun thro-ugh se-cu-rity wasn't fe-asib-le, but this one wo-uld do.

The mo-ti-on and flic-ker I'd se-en ma-te-ri-a-li-zed in-to a small fi-gu-re. It was cat-si-zed, no do-ubt be-ca-use it *was* a cat. It sat and sta-red at me with black-and-whi-te eyes. Pa-in-ted eyes. The rest of it was a de-ep tar-nis-hed bron-ze with the glim-mer of gold aro-und its neck. It sta-red for a few mo-re se-conds, then sto-od and di-sap-pe-ared smo-othly in-to the sha-dows with the clink of me-tal paws aga-inst the flo-or. It was an in-vi-ta-ti-on and I ac-cep-ted it.

An ani-ma-ted me-tal cat. It was bi-zar-re and then so-me. How co-uld it mo-ve? Was it ali-ve or so-me sort of an-ci-ent Egyp-ti-an sor-ce-rer's mind trick? I didn't know, alt-ho-ugh I was le-aning to-ward the lat-ter. I be-li-eved in mons-ters-hell, ye-ah. But ma-gic? If the-re wasn't so-me form of flesh or bo-ne be-hind it, I had a hard ti-me bu-ying in-to it. I did know that I pre-fer-red the wal-king sta-tue idea to the tho-ught that it was so-me dri-ed-up cat mummy.

Fa-ke ma-gic or re-al, it led me to Wa-han-ket. With his pre-oc-cu-pa-ti-on with tech-no-logy, I sho-uld've pic-tu-red him sur-fing the Net or watc-hing cab-le, but I co-uldn't. The men-tal ima-ge was too in-cong-ru-o-us. It was much easi-er to ima-gi-ne him plun-ging an an-ci-ent dag-ger in-to the chest of so-me po-or schmuck writ-hing on an al-tar. Or may-be drag-ging his fo-ot and mo-aning as he shamb-led to-ward his prey. Shamb-le, drag. Very sham-bo-lic. Was that even a word?

Pro-bably not, but I was right abo-ut one thing: He wasn't sur-fing the Net. He was...dis-sec-ting so-met-hing-a rat, I tho-ught. A re-al-ly big rat. Hu-ge. I ma-de a fa-ce and draw-led, "Sup-per?"

"You, une-du-ca-ted ba-bo-on, sho-uld not mock the ways of yo-ur bet-ters." The curd-led sha-dows ins-te-ad of a sickly glow in his eye soc-kets must ha-ve me-ant he was fe-eling mel-low. "Which wo-uld be ever-yo-ne in-ha-bi-ting this in-fes-ted world, inc-lu-ding my new pet." He in-di-ca-ted the ro-dent with the flo-urish of an an-ti-que scal-pel.

Pet? And I re-ali-zed he wasn't ta-king it apart; he was put-ting it back to-get-her. I wasn't su-re if that was less dis-tur-bing or mo-re so, and I de-ci-ded to ig-no-re it al-to-get-her. Shif-ting my ga-ze slightly away from the blo-ods-ta-ined cra-te do-ub-ling as an ope-ra-ting tab-le, I sa-id, "I'm he-re abo-ut Go-od-fel-low."

"The puck." The scal-pel was dis-car-ded for a ne-ed-le thre-aded with a fi-ne sil-ver wi-re that gle-amed bet-we-en hard black fin-gers. "His ton-gue is im-per-ti-nent, but his gifts are ac-cep-tab-le. What ha-ve you bro-ught me?"

For-tu-na-tely I'd tho-ught of that. Un-for-tu-na-tely that early in the mor-ning the stre-et ven-dor sup-pli-es had be-en skimpy. "Ye-ah, abo-ut that..." I lo-oked down at the gun in my hand. Nor-mal-ly I didn't ma-ke a ha-bit of gi-ving up a we-apon to a cre-atu-re I ba-rely knew and didn't trust, but I'd be fo-oling myself to think Wa-han-ket wo-uld ne-ed a gun to try to kill me. Or to ta-ke me apart and put me back to-get-her in so-me sort of hi-de-o-us pa-ro-dy of Cal Le-and-ros. "He-re."

The dark hand cur-led aro-und the grip, and I felt the brush of skin har-der than horn. “Ahhh, such a pretty toy. The mo-dern equ-iva-lent of the flint-lock.” He aban-do-ned the rat for a clo-ser exa-mi-na-ti-on. “I ha-ve se-en many ima-ges, but the-re are no examp-les of such re-cent fi-re-arms down he-re in my do-ma-in.” The te-eth gnas-hed in a grin. “Man’s ent-hu-si-asm for kil-ling his own kind still ple-ases me, even af-ter all this ti-me.”

As my eyes drif-ted back re-luc-tantly, be-hind him I tho-ught I saw the rat twitch. No, I was su-re of it...with belly still ga-ping half open and eyes blankly empty, it twitc-hed. I lo-ok-ed away aga-in and de-ci-ded bre-ak-fast wasn’t the way to go to-day. “Gre-at. I’m glad you’re happy. Sorry the-re’s no bow and rib-bon. Now can we talk abo-ut Ro-bin?”

“Ba-bo-ons we-re ne-ver one for pa-ti-en-ce.” He pul-led out the clip as if he’d do-ne it a tho-usand ti-mes. “Inte-res-ting.”

The rat squ-e-aked. It was fa-int and raspy and now-he-re ne-ar be-ing on my list of la-test frig-ging gre-atest hits. “Go-od-fel-low,” I emp-ha-si-zed sharply. He-ar-ing my own vo-ice was bet-ter than he-ar-ing the al-ter-na-ti-ve. “So-me-one’s trying to kill him. You know anyt-hing abo-ut that? You know who might be gun-ning for him?”

The clip was slam-med back ho-me and a ton-gue as we-at-he-red as be-ef jerky clic-ked aga-inst the te-eth. “You ask much of me. I hold the sec-rets of Osi-ris, the know-led-ge of Thoth, the de-ath rolls of Anu-bis, but a list so long? You re-qu-est the im-pos-sib-le.”

That was the stan-dard li-ne. Yo-ur po-or, yo-ur hungry, yo-ur hud-dled mas-ses ye-ar-ning to kill me, that was Ro-bin’s mot-to. “How abo-ut you nar-row it down to the top twenty or so? Think you co-uld do that?” The-re was the scrab-bling of paws and the mo-ist thump of what I ho-ped was a ta-il aga-inst wo-od. “Co-me on, Hank. I ga-ve. Now you gi-ve, and you can get back to yo-ur Fran-ken-rat, okay?” Po-or dam-ned trash munc-her. I was no ro-dent fan, but Jesus.

“Twenty?” The we-apon was pla-ced ca-re-ful-ly, al-most lo-vingly, on top of a glass ca-se con-ta-ining a stuf-fed ba-bo-on, which, by the way, did not lo-ok li-ke me. “As I ha-ve sa-id, im-pos-sib-le. You ask me to se-pa-ra-te twenty gra-ins of sand from the de-sert’s mighty stretch. Such a task can-not be do-ne.” The-re was a ho-le in his chest. I hadn’t no-ti-ced that be-fo-re. A sun-ken ho-le and the shi-ne of gold and tur-qu-o-ise de-ep wit-hin. “Per-haps I co-uld thin the whe-at from the chaff and gi-ve you a hund-red cre-atu-res who wish de-ath upon the puck.” Arms of bo-nes and ro-py flesh wrap-ped with brown wrap-pings cros-sed. “Go. Re-turn in se-ven days and I will ha-ve the in-for-ma-ti-on you se-ek.”

“Se-ven days...” I star-ted to pro-test as the-re was a lo-uder thump, wet and hor-rib-le, and then the skit-ter of ra-cing paws. I lo-ok-ed down; I co-uldn’t help it. Hur-ri-edly, I lo-ok-ed back up, tas-ted bi-le, and ho-ped I ne-ver saw a rat, de-ad or un-de-ad, aga-in as long as I li-ved.

“Go.” The glow was re-tur-ning to Wa-han-ket’s hol-lows of bo-ne.

I went.

A we-ek...I only ho-ped Ro-bin li-ved that long.

I went back in-to the ma-ze, wan-de-red far eno-ugh away from Wa-han-ket that I felt a lit-tle mo-re com-for-tab-le, and then I did it aga-in...once mo-re do-ing what I’d told Nik I wo-uldn’t. I sat on the dusty flo-or, cross-leg-ged, and held out my hand. I fo-cu-sed, twis-ted that fo-cus, and it ca-me. I kept it smal-ler than a full-si-zed ga-te as I had be-fo-re, but went for just a lit-tle big-ger this ti-me. From the si-ze of an oran-ge to that of a bas-ket-ball. And I then fo-cu-sed har-der. The ga-te, not-hing but the ga-te. No tho-ughts of Tu-mu-lus or the Aup-he. No tho-ughts of fe-eding so-me-one to them. No tho-ughts that we-ren’t mi-ne. It wasn’t go-ing to hap-pen. I wo-uldn’t let it. May-be I wo-uldn’t even ad-mit to ha-ving them in the first pla-ce.

The gray light swir-led and ed-di-ed li-ke a par-ti-cu-larly dan-ge-ro-us rip-ti-de and it glo-wed li-ke flesh-mel-ting ra-di-o-ac-ti-vity. It was still ugly as hell and clam-ped down on the ba-se of my bra-in li-ke a vi-se. It hurt, it felt cold and wrong, and he-re I was do-ing it any-way.

Why? Be-ca-use li-ke I’d tho-ught be-fo-re, it co-uld sa-ve my li-fe so-me-day. It co-uld sa-ve Ni-ko’s li-fe. That ma-de it worth do-ing. It ma-de the pa-in, the blo-od, and the sen-se of te-ete-ring on a chasm hungry for just one mis-step worthw-hi-le. The Aup-he had ne-ver gi-ven me a damn thing I

wan-*ted* to ha-*ve* or know, but if so-*me* ge-*ne*-*tic* trick of the-*irs* co-*uld* ever sa-*ve* my brot-*her* or an-*yo*-*ne* el-*se* I ca-*red* abo-*ut*, then so-*me* go-*od* wo-*uld* co-*me* out of the hor-*ror* show they had tri-*ed* to ma-*ke* of me and the world.

I re-*al*-*ly* wan-*ted* that bit of go-*od*. I'd sa-*ved* Ro-*bin* and myself be-*fo*-*re*. I wan-*ted* to be ab-*le* to do that aga-*in* if push ca-*me* to sho-*ve*. Ni-*ko* li-*ved* a li-*fe* of mons-*ters* and mad-*ness* be-*ca*-*use* of who I'd be-*en* born. And he held his own-*we* both did, but if I co-*uld* ha-*ve* that emer-*gency* exit ava-*ilab*-*le*, I'd fe-*el* bet-*ter*. I'd fe-*el* may-*be* a frac-*ti*-*on* less res-*pon*-*sib*-*le* for the mess the Aup-*he* had ma-*de* of both our li-*ves*.

If only I co-*uld* get a lit-*tle* god-*damn* bet-*ter* at it.

Des-*pi*-*te* my de-*ter*-*mi*-*na*-*ti*-*on*, the chasm whis-*pe*-*red* at me. It sa-*id* things...bad things. It wan-*ted* things too, things even wor-*se*. I co-*uld* al-*most* to-*uch* tho-*se* things, tas-*te* them, fe-*el* them...

Shit.

With a mas-*si*-*ve* ef-*fort*, I shut them out. They we-*re* go-*ne* and I felt a slight sen-*se* of sa-*tis*-*fac*-*ti*-*on*...a very wary sa-*tis*-*fac*-*ti*-*on*. I wasn't stu-*pid*.

The pa-*in* spi-*ked* and with a hiss at the sharp ac-*he*, I clo-*sed* the do-*or*-*way*. The light fa-*ded* away and I wi-*ped* my no-*se* with the dish to-*wel* I'd bro-*ught* for the oc-*ca*-*si*-*on*. It wor-*ked* bet-*ter* than the pa-*per* to-*wels* had. As I did, I tho-*ught* it was not-*hing*. Just things I ima-*gi*-*ned* the Aup-*he* tho-*ught* and felt. I was in a cre-*epy* as hell ba-*se*-*ment* do-*ing* an even cre-*epi*-*er* thing and who wo-*uld*n't ima-*gi*-*ne* so-*me* crap in that si-*tu*-*ati*-*on*? It was a flu-*ke* the first ti-*me* and my ima-*gi*-*na*-*ti*-*on* this ti-*me*.

The blo-*od* kept co-*ming* and I wad-*ded* the cloth and held it aga-*inst* the flow for ne-*arly* ten mi-*nu*-*tes* be-*fo*-*re* it stop-*ped*. My ears we-*re* okay. Only that big ga-*te* I'd ma-*de* to es-*ca*-*pe* the sir-*rush* had set them off. Wi-*ping* my fa-*ce* tho-*ro*-*ughly*, I fis-*hed* the Tyle-*nol* out of my poc-*ket* and swal-*lo*-*wed* two. The he-*adac*-*he*, the blo-*od*, it was all still the-*re*. Prac-*ti*-*ce* didn't se-*em* to be ma-*king* per-*fect*. That su-*per* ga-*te* I'd ope-*ned* whi-*le* figh-*ting* the Hob months ago had de-*fi*-*ni*-*tely* got-*ten* down and dirty with wha-*te*-*ver* I used to open tho-*se* rips in re-*ality*. I co-*uld* al-*most* fe-*el* the bloc-*ka*-*ge* in my bra-*in*. Li-*ke* a da-*ma*-*ged* area, har-*de*-*ned*...thic-*ke*-*ned* li-*ke* scar tis-*sue*. I'd ha-*ve* to get aro-*und* it or push thro-*ugh* it.

Or, as Ni-*ko* had sa-*id*, my bra-*in* wo-*uld* co-*me* oozing out my ears. Eit-*her* or. If he fo-*und* out what I was do-*ing*, that might just be the le-*ast* of my con-*cerns*.

I ma-*de* my way back ups-*ta*-*irs*, get-*ting* lost abo-*ut* as many ti-*mes* as I ex-*pec*-*ted*. On-*ce* the-*re* I kept my he-*ad* duc-*ked* down and ma-*de* my way to the ne-*arest* bath-*ro*-*om* to check for any lef-*to*-*ver* blo-*od* on my fa-*ce*. Ever try to check yo-*ur* ref-*lec*-*ti*-*on* wit-*ho*-*ut* ac-*tu*-*al*-*ly* lo-*oking* in-*to* a mir-*ror*? Not so easy. I to-*ok* so-*me* pa-*per* to-*wels* and so-*ap* and scrub-*bed* first, then to-*ok* a lo-*ok* that las-*ted* abo-*ut* a frac-*ti*-*on* of a se-*cond* be-*fo*-*re* qu-*ickly* tur-*ning* my he-*ad* away.

It was ne-*arly* as hu-*ge* an ac-*comp*-*lish*-*ment* as shred-*ding* a ho-*le* in spa-*ce* it-*self*. Pho-*bi*-*as* are tricky things. I knew a de-*mon* wasn't go-*ing* to co-*me* out of a mir-*ror* and ta-*ke* me. I knew be-*ca*-*use* I'd kil-*led* that de-*mon*, but that was the first glimp-*se* I'd had of myself in a mir-*ror* sin-*ce* Dark-*ling* had craw-*led* out of one to gob-*ble* me up.

How did I lo-*ok*?

Gu-*ilty* as hell. Ni-*ko* was so go-*ing* to kick my ass.

When I sho-*wed* up at Pro-*mi*-*se*'s apart-*ment* twenty mi-*nu*-*tes* la-*ter*, I'd tuc-*ked* the gu-*ilt* far out of sight with the na-*tu*-*ral* ac-*ting* skills Sop-*hia* had shown her marks over the ye-*ars*. In ot-*her* words, I pas-*ted* a big fat lie on my fa-*ce*. If I was half as go-*od* as she'd be-*en*, I might just pass. At the apart-*ment* do-*or* I pul-*led* up half a step be-*hind* Ro-*bin*'s ho-*use*-*ke*-*eper*, Se-*rag*-*lio*. She to-*ok* one lo-*ok* up at me, sho-*ok* her he-*ad*, and fis-*hed* in the poc-*ket* of her co-*at* to hand me crac-*kers* and pe-*anut* but-*ter* in mac-*hi*-*ne*-wrap-*ped* cel-*lop*-*ha*-*ne*. "A stiff wind wo-*uld* blow you over, su-*gar*, and we're abo-*ut* to fa-*ce* a big gusty hot one now. Eat up." She had a small su-*it*-*ca*-*se* with her. So-*me* of Ro-*bin*'s things, I tho-*ught*, but...

I ope-*ned* the crac-*kers* eagerly, to-*ok* a bi-*te*, and sa-*id* aro-*und* it, "Whe-*re* are the rest?"

"The ta-*xi* dri-*ver* is brin-*ging* them up, all fi-*ve* of them," she sig-*hed* as she knoc-*ked* on the do-*or*.

“And for one mess of chan-ge, you’d bet-ter be-li-eve. God for-bid he sho-uld help a lady out of the go-od-ness of his tiny shri-ve-led he-art.” Sha-king her he-ad im-pa-ti-ently, she had lif-ted a small fist to knock aga-in when the do-or was flung open and out ca-me Is-hi-ah in one hell of a tem-per. That wasn’t the surp-ri-se. He was al-ways in a tem-per, a hot-blo-oded guy to lo-ok as if he sho-uld be spor-ting a ha-lo. The surp-ri-se was that he was the-re-that Ro-bin had ope-ned the do-or for him. Wings out of sight, he mo-ved bet-we-en Se-rag-lio and me, didn’t lo-ok at eit-her of us, and stro-de down the hall to-ward the ele-va-tor.

Shrug-ging, I to-ok the su-it-ca-se from Ro-bin’s ho-use-ke-eper and fol-lo-wed her in-to the apart-ment. Ro-bin was in a ro-be, pro-bably one that had be-lon-ged to one of Pro-mi-se’s past hus-bands, eating bre-ak-fast. “Yo-ur crap, sir.” I flop-ped the su-it-ca-se on the di-ning ro-om tab-le. “Tips are ap-pre-ci-ated, you che-ap bas-tard.”

Fork sus-pen-ded half-way bet-we-en mo-uth and pla-te, he lo-oked at the ca-se and de-man-ded ins-tantly, “That’s just the ha-ir ca-re pro-ducts. Whe-re’s the rest?”

Se-rag-lio was al-re-ady le-aving, pre-fer-ring to me-et the cabd-ri-ver half-way rat-her than to de-al with her emp-lo-yer. I didn’t much bla-me her. Chan-ging my mind abo-ut bre-ak-fast, I sat at the tab-le and snatc-hed a ho-ney-drib-bled cro-is-sant from his pla-te and ate it. “I saw Ish in the hall.” He’d be-en trying to talk sen-se in-to Ro-bin, ha-ve him tell us what was go-ing on, I knew. Is-hi-ah wo-uldn’t tell us him-self, but he co-uld use his ti-me to end-les-sly prod Ro-bin in-to tel-ling us him-self. “He se-emed pis-sed. Even mo-re pis-sed than usu-al.” Which me-ant Ro-bin hadn’t co-ope-ra-ted.

I lic-ked my fin-gers cle-an of the sticky swe-et-ness from the bun. “He al-so se-emed wor-ri-ed abo-ut you. Se-ri-o-usly, Ro-bin, who is he? He knows you, and I me-an re-al-ly knows you, the go-od and the bad. Not many pe-op-le can say that.” Ni-ko and I co-uldn’t, not en-ti-rely-not with Ro-bin hol-ding back on us.

He he-si-ta-ted, pus-hed the fo-od aro-und on his pla-te, then ex-ha-led. “What is he wo-uld be mo-re ap-prop-ri-ate. A rec-ru-iter for the go-od and nob-le li-fe, you co-uld say, one with a mo-ral co-de even mo-re strin-gent than that of yo-ur brot-her.” He ga-ve a mock shud-der at the tho-ught. “It’s un-can-ny. Un-hin-ging might be the bet-ter word. Far too many Boy Sco-uts in the world.” The mild an-no-yan-ce de-epe-ned to so-met-hing dar-ker. “We ha-ve a his-tory, Is-hi-ah and I do. One of him pus-hing and pus-hing and ut-terly pis-sing me off. He’d ha-ve me gi-ve up everyt-hing that ma-kes me the mag-ni-fi-cent spe-ci-men I am.”

“The lying, the che-ating, the scre-wing everyt-hing in sight?” I as-ked with a grin.

“Exactly.” He to-ok a bi-te of eggs, out-ra-ged at the tho-ught.

It was hard to ima-gi-ne the guy with the balls to try and rec-ru-it Ro-bin Go-od-fel-low to the stra-ight and nar-row. Even har-der to ima-gi-ne why. “He re-al-ly did se-em wor-ri-ed as hell abo-ut you,” I sa-id aga-in. He’d be-en angry, but cont-rol-led be-ca-use I hadn’t se-en his wings as he’d stal-ked off. The-re’d be-en only a pa-le gray le-at-her jac-ket, blue shirt, and fa-ded je-ans. His blond ha-ir had co-ve-red the scar, so it didn’t gi-ve anyt-hing away. Blond ha-ir...but pa-le, not the mo-re fa-mi-li-ar dar-ker sha-de I’d se-en every day of my li-fe. Over-cast blue-gray eyes in cont-rast to pu-re win-ter sky, fa-ir skin to Rom oli-ve, an inch or two tal-ler, but...

The re-ali-za-ti-on prick-led in the back of my bra-in, not qu-ite ma-de but wor-ming its way up. Ro-bin li-ked Ni-ko, a hel-lu-va lot. He had cha-sed him re-lent-les-sly in the past be-fo-re Pro-mi-se sho-wed up. Hell, cha-sed him a lit-tle bit af-ter that too. And Is-hi-ah...Ishi-ah lo-oked li-ke Ni-ko.

No. No, that wasn’t it at all. Ni-ko lo-oked li-ke *Is-hi-ah*.

Ro-bin, al-re-ady gat-he-ring in the cre-aky wor-kings of my bra-in, lo-oked me up and down and to-ok in my rump-led clot-hing for a qu-ick chan-ge of su-bj-ect be-fo-re I co-uld open my mo-uth. “Aga-in...in one ye-ar? How can you be-ar the exer-ti-on?” he draw-led. “Just re-mem-ber, on-ce you go furry, you ne-ver ha-ve to worry. Well, tech-ni-cal-ly that’s not true. She co-uld trans-form half-way thro-ugh and eat you...ha-ve a co-okie with her no-okie. Or wor-se yet, ha-ve you se-en tho-se na-tu-re chan-nels? Ro-mu-lus’s ha-iry sac. You co-uld be stuck for ho-urs. Next ti-me be su-re to ta-ke the cros-sword, just in ca-se. Or a crow-bar and so-me WD-40.”

That ef-fec-ti-vely ru-ined my ap-pe-ti-te. “I ho-pe yo-ur ribs hurt li-ke hell,” I grumb-led as Ni-ko and

Pro-mi-se ap-pe-ared in the ro-om. The Is-hi-ah mat-ter wasn't for-got-ten, but I sho-ved it on the back bur-ner as Ni-ko had so-met-hing on his mind. I fi-gu-red that out when he sho-ved me in the bath-ro-om, slap-ped a bar of so-ap in my hand, a to-wel over the mir-ror, and bo-ught that big lie I was still we-aring. Af-ter the qu-ick sho-wer, he was pus-hing me out the do-or past a swe-ating and swe-aring cab-bie to-ting what had to be a one-hund-red-and-fifty-po-und ste-amer trunk. Po-or bas-tard. Bet-ter him than me.

By the ti-me we hit the stre-et, Ni-ko fi-nal-ly spo-ke. "We ne-ed to check on Bog-gle."

I was ac-tu-al-ly rat-her re-li-eved to he-ar it. I felt...hell, I wasn't su-re what I felt. Bog-gle was a kil-ler and a pre-da-tor, but we'd got-ten her in-to that mess. If she di-ed be-ca-use of it...it wasn't a go-od tho-ught. "Okay. Wan-na bring so-me lol-li-pops for the kid-di-es?"

"And," he ad-ded, ig-no-ring the wi-se-ass re-mark,

"Pro-mi-se and I ha-ve ve-ri-fi-ed Saw-ney's new 'ca-ve.'"

"Ye-ah?" I sa-id with grim in-te-rest. "Is it in that bu-il-ding?"

"Mo-re or less. Un-der it wo-uld be mo-re pre-ci-se. It was what I'd for-got-ten re-ading af-ter all. That bu-il-ding is Bu-ell Hall, the last re-ma-ining struc-tu-re of a for-mer in-sa-ne asy-lum as they cal-led it back then."

Oh, Jesus. It ma-de sen-se. It ma-de per-fect sen-se. The sla-ugh-ter at the men-tal ins-ti-tu-te, his fond-ness for the mo-re psycho-lo-gi-cal-ly da-ma-ged ho-me-less, his fas-ci-na-ti-on with the tas-te of Aup-he cra-zi-ness that he was so su-re was in me. Saw-ney was all abo-ut in-sa-nity...twenty-fo-ur-se-ven. It ma-de ab-so-lu-te god-damn sen-se he'd ho-le up in the ru-ins of an old asy-lum-as much as I didn't want it to.

But that ne-at, qu-a-int brick bu-il-ding? It lo-oked li-ke the ho-use of so-me-one's grand-mot-her. Co-oki-es and milk, not elect-ros-hock and stra-ijt-ac-kets. "You're kid-ding. Tell me you're kid-ding," I de-man-ded.

He wasn't kid-ding. Whe-re Co-lum-bia now sto-od had on-ce be-en the New York Lu-na-tic Asy-lum, re-na-med the Blo-oming-da-le In-sa-ne Asy-lum ye-ars la-ter. From 1808 to 1894, it had sto-od be-fo-re mo-ving to the New York Hos-pi-tal in Whi-te Pla-ins.

Frig-ging fas-ci-na-ting.

It wasn't cre-epy eno-ugh that the re-ve-nants we-re ra-va-ging the cam-pus; they and Saw-ney we-re al-so ro-aming the un-der-rem-nants of an in-sa-ne asy-lum from the eigh-te-en hund-reds. In ad-di-ti-on to Bu-ell Hall, the-re was the asy-lum tun-nel system, on-ce used for ste-am or co-al trans-port, that ran be-ne-ath the cam-pus. Tun-nel upon tun-nel. It wo-uld be per-fect for get-ting aro-und the pla-ce and pop-ping up li-ke a hel-lish jack-in-the-box wit-ho-ut be-ing se-en in tran-sit.

It was the per-fect ca-ve.

"It was sa-id to ha-ve be-en qu-ite a be-a-uti-ful sight in its day. Lo-vely gro-unds," Ni-ko sa-id as we wal-ked. I wasn't su-re if he was yan-king my cha-in or not, but eit-her way, I didn't bot-her to hi-de a shud-der.

"Ye-ah, be-a-uti-ful. Jesus." Not-hing li-ke a brisk walk aro-und the asy-lum with the lo-oni-es to get yo-ur day go-ing.

Gray eyes gle-amed at my dis-com-fort. "Too many hor-ror mo-vi-es when you we-re yo-ung ha-ve war-ped yo-ur vi-ew of the men-tal he-alth system."

Right. Scary mo-vi-es when I was a kid, that was the prob-lem. Not that the Aup-he as a ra-ce we-re ra-ving ho-mi-ci-dal ma-ni-acs or that Saw-ney kept on li-ke I was a lu-na-tic-fla-vo-red lol-li-pop. That had not-hing to do with it. "So we can get in-to the tun-nels the-re-at Bu-ell Hall."

"Pre-su-mably."

It was get-ting col-der and I stuf-fed my hands in the poc-kets of my le-at-her jac-ket. Zip-ping it up wasn't an op-ti-on, not if I wan-ted easy ac-cess to my hols-ter. "And if we go down the-re and find his night-ma-re ass, what then? We ha-ven't had too much luck so far. Guns don't work. Swords don't work. Hell, bog-gles don't work. Whe-re do-es that le-ave us?"

"I've be-en thin-king abo-ut that. Ex-ten-si-vely." The last of the le-aves we-re be-gin-ning to fall in the park and Nik ca-ught one that waf-ted down in front of him. He tur-ned it over with long, si-newy

fingers, then held it up. "What color is it?"

"Red, I guess," I said, having no idea where he was going with this. "With some orange."

"No." He held it up and admired it before letting it drift away. "It's the color of fire."

I got it then. "And Sawney's no fan of fire."

"No. Being burned at the stake will tend to do that." Ni-ko didn't seem too sympathetic. "All we need to do is recreate that."

"Without the army they had the first time," I reminded him.

"Weary the path that does not challenge," he quoted. "Ho-sea Bal-lou."

"I like things easy," I countered. "Me. Want to write it down? I can repeat it."

"That won't be necessary. After twenty years, I do believe I have it." He tugged at my ponytail. "I have an idea. One I'm surprised you haven't thought of, but we'll discuss it later."

I looked at him warily. "What are we going to discuss now?"

"I want to talk to you about Delilah and the nymph and the others who'll come after them," he answered, giving one last tug on my hair as the teasing humor faded from his eyes.

All right, I knew we'd had this particular talk with added stick-Aup-he figure illustrations when I was ten. He-re's Cal. He-re's a girl. He-re's the-ir flesh-gnawing baby eating the neighbor's dog. I didn't believe Ni-ko was setting up for a repeat performance. I was right.

"You have to be careful." The wind blew at his hair, but it was tightly secured and it barely ruffled.

"You know I am." If anyone knew that, it was Nik. If anyone knew what I'd given up to be careful, it was him...and George.

"That's not what I mean. I know how cautious you are in that respect. I know how much you've given up." There was a strong grip on my shoulder. "I'm talking about the Aup-he. They are out there. We haven't seen them in months, but they will be back. There is no escaping that. You need to watch yourself...if I can't be there to do it for you."

There it was, his concern, and it was a valid one. I was on my own more now than I'd been just a year ago. In the past, I was either with my brother or with Robin. Now on occasion I was with those who didn't have the same loyalty to me as my brother, Promise, and Good-fellow did. Would they have my back like those three if the Aup-he came for me?

"I'm growing up, Mom." I curled my lips and gave him a light punch. "It was bound to happen."

He stopped walking, but the leaves kept falling. "You're my brother, Cal. You're my family. You are my *only* true family. Do not leave me out of stupidity or carelessness." Then, as I turned to face him, he said something I only very rarely heard from him. "Please."

The last time he'd made that request he'd shaken me nearly senseless. He'd been furious, and behind that fury had been concern. This time the situation was less urgent, but the concern was the same.

He had raised me. My brother. I wouldn't insult him by calling him mother or father, not after the ones I'd had, but he'd filled the roles. Brought up my ass and kicked it when it needed it. Truthfully, he hadn't kicked it quite as often as it needed it. He was tough, but he knew what my life was. And what it wasn't what it could never be. Normal. He'd cut me slack, more than I deserved. I was alive because of him. More importantly, I was sane because of him—no Bloomingdale Insane Asylum for me. Without Ni-ko, I couldn't have said that with such absolute faith.

"I'll be careful. I promise." I said it with that same faith and I meant it. For Nik, there wasn't much I wouldn't do. Shit, there wasn't *anything* I wouldn't do.

"Good." He walked on, the leaves seeming to drift with him. "I'm glad banging your head against a trailer wasn't necessary this time."

"You're all about the love, Cyrano. Don't let anyone tell you different." I grinned.

Boggle, it turned out, disagreed with that.

Strongly disagreed.

It to-ok a whi-le to cross the park and thro-ugh the par-ti-cu-lar gro-uping of tre-es to ar-ri-ve at the cle-ar-ing that held Bog-gle's ho-me. The bog-lets we-re in the tre-es all aro-und us. The-ir oran-ge eyes blen-ded in with the last of the le-aves. The-ir muddy hi-des we-re al-so go-od ca-mo-uf-la-ge aga-inst the bark of limbs and trunks. They we-re comp-le-tely qu-i-et, the only so-und the oc-ca-si-onal fla-ke of mud tumb-ling down to the gro-und, and only Ni-ko was ni-nja eno-ugh to he-ar so-met-hing li-ke that.

But at le-ast I spot-ted the eyes and smel-led them. That sa-ved me a pu-nis-hing swat and fif-te-en blocks ex-ten-ded on-to our da-ily run. "What are they do-ing?" I as-ked qu-i-etly.

"Gu-ar-ding the-ir mot-her," he ans-we-red as softly, not bot-he-ring to lo-ok up at them or draw his ka-ta-na. I had the odd fe-eling he didn't want to in-sult them by "spot-ting" them. "They're ho-no-rab-le child-ren."

He was right, in both res-pects. When we re-ac-hed the mud at the ed-ge of the wa-ter, they flo-wed, af-ter le-aping from tree to tree, down the tre-es to sur-ro-und us. Still in si-len-ce, they stal-ked back and forth, ke-eping bet-we-en us and the pit. "We apo-lo-gi-ze," Ni-ko sa-id, ra-ising his vo-ice this ti-me, "for the harm do-ne to yo-ur mot-her."

The si-len-ce en-ded and the grow-ling star-ted. A pack of ga-tors with lon-ger legs and arms, mo-re agi-le, smar-ter, and far mo-re pis-sed off than yo-ur ave-ra-ge swamp dwel-ler. "I don't think they ac-cept." I pul-led the Eag-le. "And you so-un-ded re-al-ly sin-ce-re to me."

I didn't bla-me them for be-ing less than for-gi-ving. I didn't think bog-gles lo-ved or li-ked or had any emo-ti-ons be-si-des "hungry now" and "bright-shiny." But even wit-ho-ut what we might con-si-der af-fec-ti-on, Bog-gle had ra-ised her child-ren, fed them, kept them ali-ve. As bog-gles went, I tho-ught she pro-bably qu-ali-fi-ed as a go-od mom. And we'd sent her back to them skin-ned ali-ve. If so-me-one had do-ne that to my fa-mily, do-ne that to Ni-ko, inad-ver-tently or not, I wo-uldn't ha-ve be-en too god-damn happy myself.

"Bog-gle." Ni-ko swung his bla-de la-zily in the air, sketc-hing a sil-ver li-ne in the me-tap-ho-ri-cal sand. Do not cross. "We don't want to en-ga-ge in vi-olen-ce. We only wish to see that you're re-co-ve-ring and find out if you le-ar-ned anyt-hing abo-ut Saw-ney whi-le do-ing bat-tle with him." Ever the prac-ti-cal one, Ni-ko, mi-xing com-pas-si-on with cu-ri-osity.

The-re was a mo-ment when I tho-ught his words we-ren't go-ing to me-an a damn thing-to the smal-ler bog-gles or the lar-ger one. The bog-lets we-re slit-he-ring clo-ser and the thick crust of mud re-ma-ined un-mo-ving. It lo-ok-ed li-ke so-me-one was go-ing to ha-ve to go down, and, half-grown kid-di-es or not, it wasn't go-ing to be Nik or me. I aimed the Eag-le and put pres-su-re on the trig-ger.

"Leg?" Ni-ko mur-mu-red.

"Do my best," I mut-te-red back. Mary Pop-pins with a gun, that was me. If a spo-on-ful of su-gar didn't do the trick, a leg-ful of le-ad just might.

That's when Bog-gle fi-nal-ly ca-me up for air. One cla-wed hand thrust up thro-ugh the mud and wa-ter, then the ot-her. Using the ed-ge of the so-lid gro-und, she pul-led her-self up thro-ugh the thic-ke-ned sur-fa-ce. Mud co-ated her pe-eled chest, but it se-emed lo-oser the-re than on the rest of her...as if the-re was mo-re li-qu-id. As if her skin-ned raw flesh was we-eping. Jesus.

Saw-ney-he had do-ne that. It was go-od to ke-ep that in mind. If an-yo-ne was to bla-me, it was him. Bog-gle had be-en pa-id, she'd ag-re-ed to the task and the pri-ce. She had un-ders-to-od the dan-gers. I lo-we-red the gun. "Lo-ok, kid-di-es. Mom's up. Let's every-body calm down."

The oran-ge eyes we-re dul-led, but the-re was still a spark be-hind the film-a mur-de-ro-us gle-am that ma-de her of-fsp-ring se-em li-ke a lit-ter of play-ful pups. "You. You co-me he-re. You da-re."

"We we-re con-cer-ned." Ni-ko's grip had fir-med on his sword. "Re-mem-ber that Saw-ney is the one that did this to you, not us."

He was ec-ho-ing my tho-ughts, but Bog-gle didn't se-em to buy it. She ca-me on to so-lid gro-und; slowly, but she ca-me. The bog-lets gat-he-red mo-men-ta-rily, grow-ling and his-sing, then scat-te-red. "I am hurt. I will not he-al for many days. Many that I can-not hunt, be-ca-use of the Red-cap." The gums we-re mot-tled an un-he-althy gray with the black, but the te-eth we-re the sa-me as they'd be-en be-fo-re. Imp-res-si-ve. "Be-ca-use of you."

All our best in-ten-ti-ons we-re fast he-ading down the tu-bes. We co-uld ret-re-at, but she co-uld fol-low, as co-uld the bro-od. We wo-uld ha-ve to hurt so-me-one, most li-kely kill so-me-one. It wasn't what we wan-ted, but it lo-oked li-ke that's what we we-re go-ing to get. "Bog-gle," I sa-id, "don't do this, okay? Just fuc-king don't." I'd al-most sa-id Boggy. I'd al-most for-got-ten for a se-cond this wasn't our old bog-gle.

She lo-we-red her he-ad, chuf-fing a hu-mid bre-ath and rip-ping the earth to de-ep fur-rows with ran-dom stro-kes of her claws. "Can't hunt. Can't *hunt*."

Fo-od wasn't the prob-lem. The kids we-re ca-pab-le of brin-ging in all the mug-gers ne-eded. They we-re old eno-ugh and big eno-ugh, but, as I'd tho-ught be-fo-re, this bog-gle wasn't li-ke the last. She wan-ted to hunt, *ne-eded* to hunt, and in her eyes we'd scre-wed that up for her. Tem-po-ra-rily cer-ta-inly. And right now, she was temp-ted to deny that fa-te with us.

The hand fle-xed aga-in and mo-re dirt flew. "Can't hunt." It was sa-id mo-urn-ful-ly this ti-me, and she def-la-ted as the eyes shif-ted from my gun to Nik's sword. The puf-fing of muddy sca-les set-tled and she dec-re-ased in si-ze by a third, not that she wasn't still hu-ge. "Can-not hunt. Can-not ro-am. Can-not be."

Now I re-al-ly did fe-el li-ke shit.

"You will he-al," Ni-ko sa-id. "You will hunt aga-in."

Her ho-mi-ci-dal mo-od shif-ting, Bog-gle set-tled on-to the gro-und. "He can-not suf-fer eno-ugh. Ne-ver eno-ugh."

"I think you'd be surp-ri-sed how much we can ma-ke him suf-fer." Ni-ko lo-we-red his bla-de in slow, wary inc-re-ments. "He was bur-ned at the sta-ke on-ce. We'll ma-ke him wish for that day aga-in."

The oran-ge eyes bur-ned with sud-den cla-rity thro-ugh the clo-uded lens. "He can-not be kil-led. Can-not."

"We will kill Saw-ney," Ni-ko co-un-te-red with cer-ta-inty. "That, I pro-mi-se you."

Then he told her how.

20

Ni-ko's pro-mi-se and the in-for-ma-ti-on tur-ned out to be eno-ugh for Bog-gle. We en-ded up wal-king away. I had my sus-pi-ci-ons the-re was mo-re to it than ac-tu-al for-gi-ve-ness, fa-ith, and go-od-will. I tho-ught that Bog-gle didn't want to lo-se one or mo-re of her child-ren. Wha-te-ver the re-a-son, it didn't mat-ter. We wal-ked away and no bog-lets had to die, and that was a go-od day.

We hadn't le-ar-ned anyt-hing new abo-ut Saw-ney, but that had be-en a long shot any-way. Bog-gle had ro-amed the tun-nels se-pa-ra-te from us, lo-oking for him, but not-hing had ca-ught her at-ten-ti-on ot-her than a few bo-di-es flo-ating in the wa-ter. I didn't ask what she'd do-ne with them, if anyt-hing. They we-re de-ad al-re-ady. No one ex-cept Bog-gle who co-uld use what was left of them. It suc-ked for them and the-ir fa-mi-li-es, but the-re you go.

On the way back, we dis-cus-sed Ro-bin and ca-me to the conc-lu-si-on that if we didn't catch who-ever was af-ter him in the act, we we-re up the cre-ek. I'd tho-ught it was pos-sib-le the guy hit by the tra-in might've be-en the only one be-hind it all, but from the way Is-hi-ah was pus-hing the puck, it now se-emed less li-kely. With the Saw-ney si-tu-ati-on, Ro-bin's prob-lem co-uldn't ha-ve co-me at a wor-se ti-me. He al-so co-uldn't ha-ve pic-ked a wor-se ti-me to be a stub-born as-sho-le abo-ut it, but that was Go-od-fel-low for you.

Ishi-ah had sa-id Ro-bin had do-ne so-met-hing not qu-ite et-hi-cal in the past. No surp-ri-se, right? But from the way he had sa-id that, from the way Ro-bin re-fu-sed to talk abo-ut it, not et-hi-cal, in re-al-ity, pro-bably didn't be-gin to co-ver it. Not for the ret-ri-bu-ti-on it had put in-to mo-ti-on. We didn't even know how long ago wha-te-ver had hap-pe-ned had ta-ken pla-ce.

I did know it was a mess, and if we hadn't ne-eded him figh-ting with us so badly, I'd ha-ve be-en temp-ted to le-ave him at Pro-mi-se's with Is-hi-ah to ke-ep an eye on him. But we ne-eded ever-yo-ne we co-uld get. Hell, I plan-ned on as-king Is-hi-ah if he'd clo-se the bar for a night and ta-ke on

Saw-ney with us. And if he co-uld bring anot-her pe-ri or two with him, that wo-uld be fan-frig-ging-tas-tic.

It didn't turn out that way.

"No," he sa-id in flat re-fu-sal. "I'm sorry."

He didn't so-und sorry as he sto-od be-hind the bar, arms fol-ded and lo-oking a lit-tle too much li-ke Ni-ko for my pe-ace of mind. Now that I'd had the tho-ught, it was a do-ne de-al. I co-uldn't unt-hink it, and I had no de-si-re to be ro-aming aro-und Go-od-fel-low's sub-cons-ci-o-us cra-vings, se-xu-al or ot-her-wi-se. No-ne at all.

"I tho-ught you wan-ted to help Ro-bin," I de-man-ded. I'd stop-ped by the bar as Ni-ko went on to check out that idea he'd had re-gar-ding Saw-ney. It was a go-od idea, damn go-od. He-re was ho-ping it wor-ked.

"I do want to help Go-od-fel-low with his prob-lem from the past, but Saw-ney Be-ane is not that prob-lem. I ha-ve to pri-ori-ti-ze."

He ac-tu-al-ly sa-id it. Pri-ori-ti-ze. An in-sa-ne mass mur-de-rer, unk-nown as-sas-sins, cre-atu-res with wings, a man with ge-nes far mo-re de-mon than an-gel, tal-king birds, tal-king *mum-mi-es*, de-ad wol-ves, re-ve-nant af-ter re-ve-nant, skin-ned bog-gles, and he ac-tu-al-ly had the sto-nes to say pri-ori-ti-ze.

I was...well, hell, not to be re-pe-ti-ti-ve...bog-gled.

"But you can ha-ve the night off," he ad-ded po-li-tely. "I'll con-si-der it a per-so-nal day. Yo-ur check will, of co-ur-se, be doc-ked."

For-get bog-gled, now I was just pis-sed.

"Saw-ney co-uld kill Ro-bin as easily as who-ever's af-ter him. So you're sa-ying you'll be okay with that?" I le-aned ac-ross the bar to emp-ha-si-ze the ac-cu-sa-ti-on.

"Pri-ori-ti-es," he sa-id, un-mo-ved, "and I al-so ha-ve a pri-or com-mit-ment. Not that that's any bu-si-ness of yo-urs." Thick dark brows lo-we-red. "I wo-uld think that you wo-uld be mo-re con-cer-ned abo-ut pre-pa-ring for the bat-tle than be-ra-ting yo-ur emp-lo-yer. And if you ke-ep mu-ti-la-ting the cus-to-mers, you won't ha-ve one of tho-se for much lon-ger."

I ma-na-ged to le-ave wit-ho-ut ta-king a swing at him, but it was a ne-ar thing. As Is-hi-ah had a tem-per every bit as bad as mi-ne, he wo-uld've swung back. He might lo-ok li-ke a Nor-dic ver-si-on of Ni-ko, but the-re the re-semb-lan-ce en-ded. No mat-ter how long-li-ved Ish might be, he was hell on whe-els. He might be the most mo-ral son of a bitch in the city, ac-cor-ding to Ro-bin, but right now, he wasn't any damn help.

That wo-uld turn out to be a the-me of the day.

De-li-lah tur-ned out to be una-va-ilab-le, per Pro-mi-se. In ot-her words, she co-uldn't find her with a blo-od-ho-und-her or any ot-her wol-ves wil-ling to go up aga-inst Saw-ney aga-in. Bog-gle was down for the co-unt and Nus-hi was, as he'd sa-id, a he-aler, not a figh-ter. On-ce aga-in it was down to the fo-ur of us. Fo-ur aga-inst co-unt-less pse-udo corp-ses and one ge-nu-ine corp-se re-tur-ned to li-fe, bring-ing his scythe and a hun-ger that co-uldn't be sa-ted.

Two...no, three stu-dents now, and one ma-in-te-nan-ce man. I knew bet-ter than to think that wo-uld fe-ed all of Saw-ney's new clan. They hun-ted so-me on cam-pus, but I knew they we-re brin-ging ho-me mo-re ba-con than that. Using Co-lum-bia as a cent-ral lo-ca-ti-on and the asy-lum tun-nels as ho-me, they we-re brin-ging them in mo-re than gro-ups of two and three. Re-ve-nants had a hun-ger to al-most match that of Saw-ney. Hun-ger to hun-ger, obe-di-en-ce and mad-ness, a lar-ge clan of she-er star-va-ti-on and ra-ving in-sa-nity...

Fo-ur of us aga-inst that. Why the hell not?

"Don't for-get the he-ad shot," Ni-ko sa-id at my sho-ul-der.

We sto-od just in-si-de the front do-ors of Bu-ell Hall-an empty Bu-ell Hall thanks to Dr. Nus-hi. He'd co-oked up a fu-mi-ga-ti-on for a rat in-fes-ta-ti-on sche-me that had kept the pla-ce loc-ked up for the day and now the night. He'd cla-imed he'd se-en a few of Mic-key's way-ward co-usins at a re-cent spe-ech to the pre-med club and they co-uldn't clo-se down the pla-ce fast eno-ugh.

"The-re's not-hing li-ke a he-ad shot to dist-ract a guy, I'll gi-ve you that," I sa-id. "Just don't for-get

how fast he is. I'll do my best, but..." I gave a shrug and a cold grin. "At least I can promise to hit part of him. He might be able to walk around with a fist-sized hole in him, but I'd like to see him do it with sixteen or so of them."

"Always the optimist." He slapped me lightly on the back. "You restore my faith in the human condition."

I didn't bother to open my mouth on that one. One comment on how I was only half of the human condition would get me a painful nerve pinch. I let it go. "I try," I snorted, hefting the Eagle. I had a handful of extra clips on me, this time all expensive rounds. Revenants, Sawney, I didn't care which I blew apart tonight.

"You do realize I'm still in utter agony, a virtual cripple that you've dragged to near certain death." Robin was immaculate in copper shirt and brown slacks. His sword's hilt was chased with matching copper and small emeralds. It was a beautiful and graceful creation, but that didn't make the edge of the blade any less deadly. I wondered what excuse he'd given Seraglio to pack that up and bring it to Promise's apartment. Showing off his weapons collection maybe. That would work. Living as a human car salesman didn't stop "Rob Fellows" from being one helluva show-off.

"Yes, when you attempted to sexually assault my cleaning lady, your pain and suffering was abundantly clear." Promise's heat-her eyes narrowed and focused on a small gold hoop decorated with one tiny emerald drop that hung from Robin's ear. "Is that my earring you are wearing?"

"It matched the sword," he dismissed. "And it gives me a practical look. I both pilage and plunder. In fact, I all but invented the concepts," he said as he raised one wicked eyebrow. "Besides," he added carelessly, "you'll get it back."

"If you survive that near-certain death you spoke of?" she reminded with sweet poison.

"I'm sure you'll pluck it from my cold, clammy earlobe, Mrs.

Nottinger-Granville-Schoens-te-in-Parsons-Depry. You seem to be quite adept at that."

A few days at Promise's place had disintegrated the truce the two had once had. Roaming with a friend never worked out when it came right down to it. Mild affection could turn to homicidal fury from one to well left on the floor or, in Robin's case, one orgy in the living room. Credit where credit was due, the majority of them did seem to be nurses. Or at least they were dressed like nurses. I didn't notice any of them treating his cracked rib before Promise began throwing them through the front door, but the medical field is an arcane business. I might have missed it.

"After I'm done with you, you won't have enough molecules joined together to form an earlobe," she snapped back. The Egyptian dagger Niko had given her was in her hand and ready to taste blood.

"We never should've had two kids," I said to Niko. "One would've been plenty."

He had doffed his duster and was hefting a backpack over his long-sleeved gray shirt, the steel bands around his wrists barely showing. There was no room on his back for the sheath of his katana and he was carrying it in one hand. "Do not put this on me. I've raised one already."

Idential looks of contempt hit us both. "Okay," I said hurriedly. "I'm ready. Nik, you ready?" How much worse could Sawney be than a pissed-off vampire and puck joining forces against us? Then, all joking aside, I asked, "Robin, seriously, you up for this?" He'd insisted that he was. The poison had passed from his system days ago, the rib was cracked and ached, but it wouldn't hold him back in a fight.

"Up for it? Kid, I was on the beach at Troy. By the way, Achilles? Everything they say he was." He lifted his chin, gaze unwavering. "Believe me, I can handle this."

Poisoned, shot, nearly an extra in Hitchcock's *The Birds*, why would he want to handle it after all that? I didn't want to admit it, had been struggling with it for a long time, but I knew the reason. He was our friend. My friend. Jesus, I was such a girl. When the hell had I gotten so damn soft?

"Just don't get your ass killed, okay?" I ordered gruffly. I didn't wait for an answer. We'd

sco-uted out the up-per bu-il-ding and it was cle-ar. Now it was ti-me to he-ad down-ward, and I did. I mo-ved down the hall to the ba-se-ment-access do-or and hit the sta-irs.

The-re was not-hing the-re. Not if you didn't co-unt the stench of Saw-ney and the re-ve-nants. It was eno-ugh to ha-ve me bre-at-hing thro-ugh my mo-uth. "Whe-re's the tun-nel ent-ran-ce?"

Ni-ko had ob-ta-ined a map of the tun-nel system from Nus-hi, me-mo-ri-zed it, go-ne over it with me se-ve-ral ti-mes, and then drawn it in per-ma-nent ink on the back of my hands and on my fo-re-arms. Fol-lo-wing that, he'd stuf-fed the map in my poc-ket, sa-ying, "In ca-se we're se-pa-ra-ted. It's not eno-ugh, I fe-ar, but it's the best I can do." Brot-hers be-li-eve in you, but they al-so know you. I know east from west, but that was the most I co-uld ho-pe for.

"In the so-ut-he-ast cor-ner, be-si-de the fur-na-ce."

Which wo-uld be one re-ason the smell was so strong. It was li-te-ral-ly co-oking aga-inst the sur-fa-ce of the fur-na-ce. I fol-lo-wed Ni-ko and then hel-ped him pry up the me-tal trap-do-or in the flo-or. It wasn't loc-ked, but it had be-en. The rem-nants of a pad-lock lay off to one si-de. The me-tal was he-avy as hell in our hands and we eased it down so-und-les-sly to sta-re in-to the depths. Mo-re sta-irs, but the-se we-re much ol-der. Splin-te-red wo-od fra-med with iron, they di-sap-pe-ared in-to the dark-ness. One whiff was all I ne-eded and I nod-ded. "Ho-me swe-et ho-me."

Ro-bin sta-red over my sho-ul-der and sig-hed pla-in-ti-vely, "At le-ast the be-ach at Troy was warm. The-re was sun and sand."

"Blo-ods-ta-ined sand," Ni-ko po-in-ted out as he star-ted down.

"It was still sand." Ro-bin fol-lo-wed him. "In my li-fe I've le-ar-ned you ta-ke the small ple-asu-res whe-re you find them."

We we-ren't go-ing to find any of tho-se be-low, I knew. No small ple-asu-res-only the very lar-ge sa-tis-fac-ti-on of put-ting Saw-ney down, this ti-me for go-od. I wa-ved Pro-mi-se on. Ha-ving her at Ro-bin's back might ke-ep him mo-re on his to-es. Dan-ger from all si-des, that wo-uld ke-ep the ad-re-na-li-ne pum-ping and the sen-ses sharp and re-ady. And if I enj-oyed the hun-ted lo-ok he threw over his sho-ul-der be-fo-re he mel-ted in-to the murk, hey, that was just gravy.

When Pro-mi-se va-nis-hed be-low, I tur-ned on the flash-light I car-ri-ed in my left hand and went down af-ter them. Gun in one hand, torch in the ot-her, I wal-ked down the steps with ca-re. As cre-aky as they lo-oked, they we-re sturdy be-ne-ath my fe-et.

"All cle-ar." Ni-ko's low mur-mur ca-me drif-ting up past sto-ne and plas-ter walls. They on-ce wo-uld've be-en comp-le-tely co-ve-red with plas-ter and pa-in-ted. Over the ye-ars that plas-ter had be-en so-aked ti-me and ti-me aga-in and had rot-ted. Hand-fuls we-re go-ne in so-me spots and in ot-her are-as not-hing but sto-ne re-ma-ined.

The-re we-re splat-ters on the steps, the sto-ne and the filthy plas-ter. Brown and dri-ed. Blo-od. One hel-lu-va lot of blo-od. Saw-ney had pic-ked his ca-ve all right and it was a go-od one, up un-til a few re-ve-nants had got-ten sloppy and po-ac-hed from the cam-pus. Then they'd ac-tu-al-ly kil-led and fed abo-veg-ro-und right at the-ir front do-or. Saw-ney was in-sa-ne, but he was smart. He wo-uldn't ha-ve or-de-red that or al-lo-wed it if he knew. You don't shit in yo-ur own back-yard; every go-od two-leg-ged pre-da-tor knows that. That me-ant the dis-cip-li-ne wasn't as all-encom-pas-sing as it se-emed, at le-ast not with all of them. It was a go-od sign. If we co-uld ta-ke Saw-ney, the re-ve-nants might scat-ter. They wo-uld de-fi-ni-tely be less of a thre-at if they re-ver-ted to typi-cal re-ve-nant figh-ting skills. Every gho-ul for him-self.

At the bot-tom of the sta-irs the brown sta-ins co-ve-red the en-ti-re flo-or, from wall to wall. I co-uld pic-tu-re it. The body, may-be only half de-ad, of the vic-tim be-ing tos-sed down the sta-irs li-ke gar-ba-ge. If they we-ren't de-ad at the top, I ho-ped li-ke hell they we-re when they hit the bot-tom. What kind of world was it when that co-uld be cre-di-ted as an ac-tu-al ho-pe?

Saw-ney's world.

The tun-nel wasn't as cram-ped as I tho-ught it might be, but it ma-de me cla-ust-rop-ho-bic no-net-he-less. The-re we-re no ro-oms, no al-co-ves, not-hing-just one long ran-ge of tun-nel. You co-uld go for-ward or back, but that was it. The-re was no spre-ading out if so-me-one ca-ught you from the front and be-hind. It wasn't a go-od tac-ti-cal po-si-ti-on to be in. We we-re mo-ving at a

pa-ce slow eno-ugh that I co-uld walk back-ward with gun re-ady for any re-ve-nant that might be brin-ging ho-me a doggy bag. It was a very re-al pos-si-bi-lity. We'd cho-sen night for the as-sault as we ho-ped most of the re-ve-nants wo-uld be out hun-ting. Saw-ney might be as well, but if he was, on-ce he ca-ught din-ner he'd co-me ho-me with it. That's all we ca-red abo-ut-na-iling him when he did.

If we'd co-me du-ring the day, they all wo-uld've be-en down he-re. Not a go-od pros-pect for suc-cess. Re-ve-nants co-uld and did pass du-ring the day-light if they co-ve-red up with ho-oded jac-kets to hi-de slick flesh and wo-re sung-las-ses to con-ce-al a milky flash of eye. If they kept the-ir he-ad down, they co-uld sli-de thro-ugh the crowds, but mi-xing with the po-pu-la-ce was dif-fe-rent than kil-ling and drag-ging a body ac-ross cam-pus. Night-ti-me was best for that sort of work.

This way we'd do-ub-le our chan-ces of co-ming ac-ross Saw-ney with con-si-de-rably fe-wer re-ve-nants at his si-de. That didn't ma-ke the odds in our fa-vor, but it did ma-ke them bet-ter. I'd ta-ke it.

"We're at the first split."

I stop-ped and tur-ned to see the tun-nel bre-ak off to the left and right. Both tun-nels re-eked, but the one to the left did just a lit-tle mo-re. I jer-ked my he-ad in that di-rec-ti-on. "That way."

We mo-ved and this ti-me fas-ter as I set-tled for snatc-hing a glan-ce over my sho-ul-der every few se-conds at the tun-nel be-hind us. We had mo-re spa-ce bet-we-en us and the ent-ran-ce now, as well as two tun-nels for the re-ve-nants to cho-ose from. They did use both from the smell of it, even if this was the-ir ma-in path of tra-vel.

"He'll know we're co-ming," Ro-bin sa-id as his fi-ne le-at-her sho-es trod si-lently on the brown, crus-ted path.

"How do you know that?"

He lo-oked back at me, the sto-len ear-ring glit-te-ring in the be-am of my flash-light, but it was Pro-mi-se who be-at him to the punch with the mil-dest of sar-casm.

"Only be-ca-use he has every ti-me so far?"

"Go-od po-int," I ad-mit-ted.

"He'll know, but he won't run," Ni-ko sa-id. "This is his true ca-ve. He will not gi-ve it up, and in his mind it is not as if he has anyt-hing to fe-ar from us."

That was the sad truth. De-ad wol-ves, a skin-ned bog-gle, and the fact that he'd eaten a chunk of my chest we-re all pro-of of that. He had no re-ason to run. We we-re bet-ter than cab-le, the most en-ter-ta-in-ment he'd had in a long, long ti-me. Se-ve-ral hund-red ye-ars to be exact. The son of a bitch wo-uld pro-bably be glad to see us-cack-le in-sa-nely in glee. And why not? Whe-re bet-ter to do anyt-hing in-sa-nely than in the sub-ter-ra-ne-an lef-to-vers of an asy-lum?

So-met-hing spar-ked brightly at the bot-tom of the wall to the right and I stop-ped to pick it up. It was an en-ga-ge-ment ring. The di-amond was small and sur-ro-un-ded by even smal-ler ru-bi-es. Pretty, but for the co-up-le on a bud-get. I knew the ot-hers had se-en it; the-ir eyes we-re as sharp as mi-ne, but they'd pas-sed it by. What co-uld you do? She was go-ne, who-ever she'd be-en. Go-ne far from this pla-ce and may-be she was no pla-ce at all, I didn't know. I did know she wo-uldn't want pro-of of her lo...of her exis-ten-ce...hid-den down he-re in the fe-tid dark-ness. I put the ring in my poc-ket. At the very le-ast I co-uld le-ave it so-mew-he-re up top...so-mep-la-ce in the sun. Pro-mi-se's ga-ze was the one that tur-ned back this ti-me, her eyes soft. I scow-led and lo-oked away. It was corny and stu-pid, pic-king up that ring-two things I wasn't. I re-al-ly wasn't. And I ha-ted that I'd be-en ca-ught in it.

We wal-ked on and the tun-nel se-emed to get mo-re and mo-re nar-row, but I tho-ught that was mo-re me than ac-tu-al re-ality. We'd be-en un-derg-ro-und a lot la-tely and it re-min-ded me...of what, I wasn't re-al-ly su-re. Ab-ba-gor's ca-ve? Alt-ho-ugh we'd al-most di-ed the-re mo-re than on-ce, I didn't think that was it. It was de-eper than that, an abs-cess ac-hing from a long ti-me ago. No, not Ab-ba-gor, but may-be so-met-hing mo-re ter-rif-ying than even he had be-en.

The Aup-he had had me for two ye-ars. I co-uldn't re-call a sing-le mo-ment of tho-se ye-ars spent in a world se-pa-ra-te from this one. But the-re we-re ti-mes I wo-ke up to the fe-eling of rock be-ne-ath my fin-gers and the sen-se of tons of the sa-me han-ging over-he-ad. Ca-ves, the mons-ters lo-ved the

god-damn ca-ves.

“Cal.”

I drew in a breath of tainted air, trying to clean away what barely qualified as the shadow of a memory, and moved past Promise and Robin to stand beside Niko. “Ye-ah?”

“We have a room.” He indicated the door almost fifty feet down the hall. I couldn’t make out any details. It was at the edge of the flashlight beam.

“Okay. I’m ready.” With the Desert Eagle and the explosive rounds, I was designated distraction of the day. I needed to keep Sawney’s attention on me while Niko put his plan into play. As the Red-cap had already acquired a taste for me, it shouldn’t be that hard. I went on ahead with Niko close at my back. When I reached the door, I noticed the faded printing on it. HYDROT-HERAPY TREATMENT ROOM. I wanted to ask Nik what water had to do with the treatment of mental health, but kept silent as I moved a hand toward the handle. He could be there. Sawney could be right there, and I wasn’t going to tip him off. I was ready for this to be over.

The element of surprise was lost with the screech of hinges almost rusted into a solid whole. That didn’t mean it hadn’t been opened recently. The metal was so old; it would never open easily again. Gripping, I shoved at the door hard and with Niko’s help got it open enough to let a person slip through, and through I went. The room was small and empty except for a water-filled square in the filthy tiled floor. Five feet by five feet, it was too small to be a pool and a little too early in plumbing history to be a whirlpool tub.

“Why is there water in it?” I muttered aloud. It was murky and impenetrable and it shouldn’t have been there. Whatever it had been used for in asy-lum days, I would think it would’ve long dried up over the past hundred years or so. “And what the hell was it for?”

“In less educated days, mental health workers used to plunge people over and over underwater. It was some time before they came to admit that near drowning didn’t seem to improve anyone’s mood disorder.” Niko regarded the flat surface of the water with disdainful repugnance. “I doubt Sawney is using it for a reason any more enlightening.”

He was right.

A hint of white swelled under the water, breached, then sank again. An arm, it had been an arm. Christ. You’d think I’d be getting used to finding body parts littering the landscape in Sawney’s wake. I wasn’t. As we continued to watch, a leg appeared and disappeared, followed by a hand. All were disembodied, all white and drained of blood. The hand was a woman’s, delicate with nail polish the exact color of a rose I’d once seen at a flower stand. Pink with the faintest touch of peach the color of spring. It was beautiful and it was awful and I wondered if the ring belonged to her.

“Go-plash,” Robin said beside us. “Lovely. I’ll never eat again.”

“I have seen worse. So have you.” Promise nudged him into motion.

“So I have,” he exhaled. “Although I could’ve done without the reminder.”

We all turned to exit the room. I’d taken one step when the cold hand fastened around my ankle and I was suddenly breathing water-black water that served as the broth for body parts. I choked and held my breath as I kicked at the iron grip that pulled me down. I felt the random bump of decaying flotsam and jetsam and kicked all the harder. It didn’t help. There was the sharp scrape of a tiled opening at my waist just as I felt fingers on my wrist from above. Warm fingers. Niko. But as suddenly as his grip had appeared, I was yanked from it. I passed through the opening that I could only feel, not see. After that there was more water, the burning of my lungs, and that implacable grasp on my ankle.

Finally just as my breath threatened to give out, I was dragged out into the air feet-first. Not unlike my birth, I came out kicking and screaming. Or kicking and spitting water-logged curses. A revenant had his teeth buried in my thigh. I kicked him off with my other foot and he looked up, grinning at me with a mouthful of motled yellow and green teeth. I aimed the Desert Eagle there and blew his head off. There was more splashing of water and I twisted to see another

re-ve-nant ri-sing from the wa-ter. I fi-red aga-in and the pi-eces of him sank be-ne-ath the sur-fa-ce.

Now alo-ne on the ti-le flo-or-except for one de-ad re-ve-nant-I co-ug-hed up wa-ter and did my best not to think abo-ut what had be-en in that wa-ter. Aro-und me was a ro-om that was iden-ti-cal to the one I'd be-en yan-ked from. Gre-at. Mo-re cut-ting-edge men-tal he-alth ca-re. I lo-ok-ed at the wa-ter one mo-re ti-me and then sho-ok my he-ad dog-fas-hi-on, sen-ding the wa-ter flying. Nik wasn't co-ming. If he we-re, he'd ha-ve be-en he-re al-re-ady. The ot-her re-ve-nant must ha-ve clo-sed so-me sort of hatch in the pas-sa-ge that con-nec-ted the two tanks of wa-ter. Clo-sed and loc-ked it.

I set the flash-light on the flo-or to prop aga-inst my leg, which wasn't ble-eding too badly, wi-ped at my fa-ce, and rol-led up my sle-eve. On my arm the map of the tun-nels sprang in-to vi-ew. Ni-ko's anal-re-ten-ti-ve ways pa-id off yet aga-in. I men-tal-ly tra-ced a path that wo-uld con-nect the tun-nel this ro-om was off back to the tun-nel whe-re the ot-hers we-re. I knew Nik wo-uld be do-ing the sa-me. Ho-pe-ful-ly, I'd me-et them in the mid-dle. I grab-bed the light and scamb-led to my fe-et. The do-or to the ro-om was half open and I slip-ped thro-ugh in-to the hall, tur-ning left.

And the-re was the bad news.

It was a conc-re-te wall, one that wasn't on the map. It wasn't ne-arly as old as the walls of the tun-nel. A re-cent ad-di-ti-on, per-haps to ke-ep tres-pas-sers and the mo-re ad-ven-tu-ro-us stu-dents out of a less stab-le part of the tun-nels. Wha-te-ver it was, right now it was a hu-ge pa-in in the ass. I hols-te-red my gun, switc-hed the light to the ot-her hand, and chec-ked the map aga-in. The-re was anot-her con-nect, but it was in the ot-her di-rec-ti-on and fart-her. I ga-ve in to the ine-vi-tab-le and star-ted a ste-ady lo-pe.

The air was co-ol and damp, re-min-ding me too much of the wa-ter I'd just co-me out of. I clo-sed my mo-uth aga-inst it and kept mo-ving. The re-ve-nants we-re wa-iting. I didn't ex-pect anyt-hing dif-fe-rent. It was the ones that we-ren't out hun-ting... who we-re do-ne with hun-ting for the night. They we-re well fed and a lit-tle slug-gish for it, but slug-gish for a re-ve-nant is still fast-just not fast eno-ugh. They ca-me in twos and thre-es in-to the light. I went thro-ugh half a clip, but it wasn't the re-ve-nants that wor-ri-ed me. It was Saw-ney. If he sho-wed up, that was it. He'd hand-led all of us with a bog-gle and wolf cha-ser. If he ca-ught me alo-ne, ego and a smart mo-uth wo-uldn't help me one damn bit. I tho-ught of ma-king a ga-te over to the next tun-nel, but if I did that, the-re was no gu-aran-tee I'd be ab-le to do my part when the ti-me ca-me. The-re was no gu-aran-tee I'd be cons-ci-o-us to even walk thro-ugh that ga-te-not af-ter the last ti-me. I co-uld'n't ta-ke that chan-ce.

I kept run-ning, but I lis-te-ned for a fa-mi-li-ar in-sa-ne cack-le. I lis-te-ned hard. And when I ca-me to anot-her wall, I did so-met-hing el-se as hard.

“Son of a *bitch*.”

This wall was the sa-me as the ot-her, and it ef-fec-ti-vely pen-ned me in the sa-me as a mo-uset-rap. It was a lit-tle less than a hu-ma-ne one with the re-ve-nants run-ning aro-und, but a damn ef-fec-ti-ve one. Co-uld'n't the-se pe-op-le up-da-te the-ir maps? I had the exp-lo-si-ve ro-unds, true, and if it had be-en a plas-ter wall, I co-uld've used a clip to put a ni-ce ho-le in it. But this wasn't plas-ter; this was conc-re-te. If I used every ro-und I had on me...may-be, and then what wo-uld I use to dist-ract Saw-ney? Ot-her than ser-ving up myself as a buf-fet sup-per, not a damn thing.

I didn't want to go back in the wa-ter, but I didn't see any way aro-und it. I didn't know if I co-uld get past wha-te-ver obst-ruc-ti-on was down the-re, but I knew I co-uld'n't get past this one. We we-re lo-sing ti-me. The la-ter it got, the mo-re re-ve-nants wo-uld co-me ho-me from the hunt, and that wo-uld only ma-ke things har-der. They we-re hard eno-ugh al-re-ady. God-damn it. I tur-ned and this ti-me, as-su-ming I'd na-iled all the re-ve-nants, I ran fas-ter.

Assu-ming, it wasn't what I'd be-en ta-ught. Ni-ko has a qu-ote...hell, Ni-ko has a qu-ote abo-ut anyt-hing and everyt-hing. This one had be-en abo-ut over-con-fi-den-ce or comp-la-cency, so-met-hing to that ef-fect. And then Ni-ko had sum-med it up in terms I wo-uld ac-tu-al-ly re-mem-ber. As-su-me, he had sa-id, and *you* will get yo-ur *ass* kic-ked by *me*. It was slightly dif-fe-rent than that old sa-ying I'd le-ar-ned in the sixth gra-de, but it got the po-int ac-ross. And I did re-mem-ber Ni-ko's ver-si-on most of the ti-me, but on-ce in a whi-le I blew it. On-ce in a whi-le I had to say hel-lo to Mr. Fuc-kup.

I tho-ught I was alo-ne. I was wrong.

“Tra-ve-ler.”

It stop-ped me in my tracks, that one sing-le vo-ice. I tho-ught it was his at first, Saw-ney’s, but the se-cond ti-me it ca-me, I knew bet-ter. It was as glo-ating and pre-da-tory, but it wasn’t co-ated with the oil slick of in-sa-nity. Ins-te-ad it was co-ated with the dryness of dust and the grit of de-sert sand. I co-uld smell the he-at of a mer-ci-less sun ri-sing from li-mes-to-ne tombs. Co-uld all but he-ar the chan-ting of pri-ests and the mo-ve-ment of a sto-ne slab that wo-uld se-al you in for hu-man li-fe-ti-mes.

My flash-light be-am shot back and forth for se-ve-ral se-conds be-fo-re I spot-ted what I knew I wo-uld see. The-re was no cow-boy hat this ti-me, but the-re was the sa-me re-sin-har-de-ned flesh, blac-ke-ned and wit-he-red lips, brown stubs of te-eth...ban-da-ges, dry ones. He had be-en he-re aw-hi-le, then...wa-iting.

Wa-han-ket.

The dusty glow fla-red in his eye hol-lows and the le-at-hery jaw crac-ked in a cro-oked, jag-ged grin. “Surp-ri-sed, tra-ve-ler? You sho-uld not be. On oc-ca-si-on every scho-lar sho-uld en-ga-ge in fi-eld re-se-arch.”

“What are you do-ing he-re? How the hell did you even know we’d be he-re?” I as-ked wa-rily as I pul-led my gun.

“Kno-wing yo-ur mo-ve-ments, the most simp-le of things. I set my lit-tle pet to fol-low you.” Pet? Oh, Jesus, that damn squ-e-aking zom-bie rat he’d be-en put-ting back to-get-her at the mu-se-um. It’d run off in the sha-dows and I ne-ver tho-ught abo-ut it aga-in. “It was my eyes. I saw you co-me to this pla-ce be-fo-re...abo-ve. I knew you wo-uld re-turn he-re, be-low. As for what I want?” The corp-se grin twis-ted. “Obser-ving. Re-cor-ding. That has be-en my li-fe in that wretc-hed ba-se-ment for ye-ars upon ye-ars. I want to *par-ti-ci-pa-te*.” Li-ke a kid who wan-ted to be in the scho-ol play. Ye-ah, wha-te-ver.

“I want it to be as it on-ce was when I cre-ated kings. As I ha-ve cre-ated one now. Awa-ke-ned one, rat-her.” It was sa-id with glo-ating sa-tis-fac-ti-on. Dynasty af-ter dynasty, Ro-bin had sa-id. Tho-usands and tho-usands of ye-ars, even a king ma-ker and scho-lar co-uld get bo-red-co-uld want to get back in the ga-me. Ha-ve a lit-tle fun. But it didn’t mat-ter what he wan-ted, be-ca-use he wasn’t go-ing to get it.

The gle-am of me-tal in my hand wasn’t the only one. I saw anot-her as the wit-he-red hand flas-hed up-ward. I’d for-got-ten the brit-tle ba-se-ment-dwel-ling sa-ge lo-ved all things high-tech. And guns we-re de-fi-ni-tely ad-van-ced tech-no-logy, li-ke the 9mm I had so mo-ro-ni-cal-ly gi-ven him. I threw myself aga-inst the wall, drop-ping the flash-light and fi-ring as I went. The plas-ter exp-lo-ded be-si-de me, but se-ve-ral fe-et down. Lo-ving tech-no-logy didn’t ne-ces-sa-rily trans-la-te in-to be-ing go-od at using it. Tar-get prac-ti-ce had be-en li-mi-ted in the mu-se-um.

Altho-ugh he wasn’t a crack shot, he was qu-ick for a bag of bo-nes and scraps of flesh. He di-sap-pe-ared in the dark. “What is Saw-ney gi-ving you, you bas-tard?” I snap-ped. He’d wo-ken him up just as he had the rat. Wa-han-ket had so-me-how trig-ge-red Saw-ney’s re-in-teg-ra-ti-on. Gi-ven him wha-te-ver bo-ost he ne-eded to exp-lo-de back to li-fe. That tra-ve-ling ex-hi-bi-ti-on had shown up in the mu-se-um and the mummy had se-en his chan-ce to be what he’d on-ce be-en, a king ma-ker. But Saw-ney wasn’t his pup-pet. Saw-ney wasn’t ru-led by anyt-hing ex-cept his own mad-ness.

“Saw-ney Be-ane of-fers me not-hing in the way of ma-te-ri-al go-ods. He of-fers me not-hing at all. But he cre-ates a newly in-te-res-ting world,” drif-ted the vo-ice of the Sphinx. “I ti-re of this mo-no-to-no-us exis-ten-ce. Day af-ter day, ye-ar af-ter ye-ar. I ti-re of the blo-od-less qu-est for know-led-ge.” The-re was a sly sa-tis-fac-ti-on.

“Even if that qu-est ga-ve the Red-cap this pla-ce. His true ho-me. I ti-re of it all. I am re-ady for chan-ge and this one brings it in splen-did, bold stro-kes.”

The gun fi-red aga-in. The bul-let ca-me clo-ser. I’d tos-sed the flash-light when I’d first fi-red the Eag-le, not that Wa-han-ket se-emed to ne-ed the help. Co-uld mum-mi-es see in the dark? Pro-bably. Co-uld they re-pel bul-lets?

We'd see abo-ut that.

I met-ho-di-cal-ly spra-yed the en-ti-re clip back and forth ac-ross the tun-nel, si-de to si-de and top to bot-tom. Re-ading abo-ut gun bat-tles on the In-ter-net was dif-fe-rent than be-ing in one, alt-ho-ugh he was pro-bably hell on whe-els when it ca-me to a bow and ar-row or sword. A gun, tho-ugh...over-con-fi-den-ce...over-con-fi-den-ce was-damn, if only I co-uld re-mem-ber Ni-ko's qu-ote.

The smell of smo-ke fil-led my fa-ce, and my ears rang from the con-cus-si-ve blasts. I sta-yed clo-se to the wall, felt aro-und on the flo-or for the flash-light and switc-hed it on, and held it at arm's length from my body to dec-re-ase my chan-ces of be-ing hit. I flic-ked it back and forth. Not-hing. Okay, tech-ni-cal-ly not true. The-re was so-met-hing, just not the who-le pac-ka-ge. I mo-ved for-ward and bent down to pick up Wa-han-ket's gun, along with his hand still wrap-ped aro-und it. As I ma-de my way fart-her, I saw ot-her bits and pi-eces of him. Not much, the oc-ca-si-onal scrap of brown li-nen or blac-ke-ned pi-ec-e of dri-ed flesh, but not-hing subs-tan-ti-al. It was a tra-il of bre-ad crumbs, and they led back to the ro-om, back to the po-ol.

The king ma-ker had left the bu-il-ding.

Wa-han-ket had chan-ged his mind abo-ut be-ing a par-ti-ci-pant af-ter all. The ro-le of re-se-arc-her co-uld be bo-ring and mo-no-to-no-us, but the mu-se-um ba-se-ment was sa-fer than the re-al world. Wa-han-ket had lost his ed-ge a long ti-me ago in tho-se de-sert sands.

I lo-oked down at the black wa-ter. "Once mo-re in-to the bre-ach," I mur-mu-red to myself. Or as Go-od-fel-low wo-uld've sa-id, on-ce mo-re in-to the bre-ec-hes. I gri-ma-ced. It was as bad he-ar-ing it in my he-ad as he-ar-ing it in per-son. Ex-ha-ling, I hols-te-red the Eag-le, pri-ed Wa-han-ket's gun out of his se-ve-red hand, and sho-ved it in my wa-ist-band be-fo-re di-ving in-to the wa-ter. I was lucky; Hank had left the hatch open for me in his hurry to es-ca-pe. It ma-de the body parts bum-ping aga-inst me as I swam not so bad. Ye-ah, right. It was god-damn hor-rib-le, and when I re-ac-hed the ot-her si-de, I scamb-led out as fast as I pos-sibly co-uld.

Wet fo-otp-rints led away ac-ross the ti-le. Wa-han-ket was run-ning back to his ba-se-ment. He'd think twi-ce abo-ut le-aving it aga-in.

"Whe-re the hell ha-ve you be-en?"

I lo-oked up from the fo-otp-rints to see Ni-ko in the do-or-way. He was still wet from his at-tempt to pull me out of the wa-ter. "Cor-rec-ti-on," he sa-id with nar-ro-wed ga-ze, "what to-ok you so damn long to get back?"

"You worry too much, Grand-ma." I grin-ned in re-li-ef at the sight of be-et-led brows and ir-ri-tab-le gray eyes. Ni-ko's worry was al-ways cle-arly exp-res-sed-as an-no-yan-ce. "Did you see Wa-han-ket?"

He ig-no-red the qu-es-ti-on as he lo-oked me up and down, but Ro-bin, be-hind him, ans-we-red. "We saw a few wet fo-otp-rints and a pi-ec-e of li-nen. Wa-han-ket, eh? Crafty corp-se. But I sup-po-se that exp-la-ins how Saw-ney fo-und a pla-ce so per-fec-tly su-ited for him."

"And for that, per-haps we will de-al with him la-ter." Ni-ko in-di-ca-ted whe-re the ma-te-ri-al of my je-ans was rip-ped over my thigh. "Re-ve-nant?"

As much as I ha-ted to ad-mit it, I had to. "Ye-ah."

"One?"

"Two," I sa-id de-fen-si-vely, "and I was trying not to drown at the ti-me. It's not my fa-ult."

"It's ama-zing. The per-son who shows up at our spar-ring ses-si-on lo-oks so very much li-ke you too." He sa-id it as if he hadn't felt my hand sli-de thro-ugh his in the wa-ter as I di-sap-pe-ared to God knows whe-re. As if he hadn't run from one hall to anot-her only to be bloc-ked by conc-re-te walls. We all had ways of de-al-ing. When the si-tu-ati-on had be-en re-ver-sed, I de-alt the sa-me, with sharp-edged sar-casm-once I'd kil-led everyt-hing that had got-ten in my way.

"I'd say bi-te me, but I've be-en bit-ten al-re-ady. Be-si-des, Go-od-fel-low might jump over you and ta-ke ad-van-ta-ge of it," I grumb-led, but cur-ved my lips aga-in. "And the-re was not-hing over the-re but re-ve-nants and Wa-han-ket. No Saw-ney."

"Then let's go find him," Nik sa-id, wa-iting un-til I pre-ce-ded him. Watc-hing my back.

“By the way, you ha-ve ab-so-lu-tely not-hing I want to bi-te,” Ro-bin snor-ted as he mo-ved thro-ugh the do-or. “Ego-ma-ni-ac.”

Pro-mi-se swal-lo-wed that one in si-len-ce, but it wo-uld ma-ke a re-ap-pe-aran-ce la-ter. I had fa-ith. We exi-ted the de-ad end of the ro-om and star-ted back down the tun-nel. We wal-ked a hund-red fe-et be-fo-re we saw it. At first, I saw only a glimp-se. Pa-le, it flas-hed, di-sap-pe-ared, re-ap-pe-ared, and then va-nis-hed aga-in.

“Tra-ve-lers.” The-re was the low hiss of se-ve-ral vo-ices in uni-son. “*Tres-pas-sers.*”

Gre-at, a new ref-ra-in.

“They’ve le-ar-ned a new word,” I draw-led. “How god-damn cle-ver is that?”

“Se-ve-ral rungs be-low a bra-in-less par-rot,” Nik res-pon-ded with arc-tic bi-te, “and an ut-ter was-te of our ti-me.” Mo-re damn re-ve-nants and no Saw-ney. We we-re all di-sap-po-in-ted. I knew I was ti-red of hac-king at the-ir stub-born, dis-gus-ting flesh. The-re was no ho-nor in bat-tle, no ho-nor in kil-ling. The-re was only ne-ces-sity. Ni-ko had ta-ught me that. But if the-re had be-en ho-nor, re-ve-nants wo-uldn’t ha-ve en-te-red that pic-tu-re anyw-he-re.

“*Tres-pas-sers.*” What had be-en glimps-es be-ca-me a long lo-ok and then a clo-se-up of one of the most fre-akish things I’d ever se-en. “*Tres-pas-ser-s-t-res-pas-sers-tres-pas-sers.*” They bo-iled in-to the light, arms fla-iling.

They we-re we-aring stra-itj-ac-kets, every last one of them-left over from the go-od old mad-ho-use days. No lon-ger whi-te, the grubby cloth was rot-ting and rip-ped. The overly long sle-eves we-ren’t fas-te-ned be-hind. Ins-te-ad they flap-ped li-ke the wings of mad-de-ned birds or wo-ve thro-ugh the air li-ke a stri-king sna-ke as the re-ve-nants ran. It was oddly hypno-tic and not-so-oddly hor-ri-fic. It wasn’t eno-ugh that re-ve-nants lo-oked li-ke zom-bi-es; now they lo-oked li-ke zom-bi-es of the in-sa-ne. Saw-ney wasn’t happy just be-ing mad him-self or se-eking it out; he had to dress up his god-damn pets that way as well. Talk abo-ut yo-ur hob-bi-es we all co-uld’ve do-ne wit-ho-ut.

“I’ve li-ved a long, long ti-me and I’ve se-en many, many things,” Ro-bin sa-id, awed, at my back, “and I can con-fi-dently say that I ha-ve *ne-ver* se-en anyt-hing qu-ite li-ke that.” I didn’t ha-ve ti-me to res-pond. They we-re al-most on us and I ra-ised the Eag-le and fi-red se-ve-ral shots.

Explo-si-ve ro-unds, they might not ha-ve much ef-fect on Saw-ney, but they wor-ked li-ke a fuc-king charm on his boys. We didn’t end up figh-ting them, but we did end up we-aring them. I wi-ped a hand ac-ross my fa-ce, cle-ar-ing it of pul-ve-ri-zed flesh and thin, wa-tery blo-od. I didn’t wa-it for Ro-bin’s out-ra-ged com-ment abo-ut his ward-ro-be that had to be fast on its way. “Ye-ah, sorry abo-ut that,” I sa-id auto-ma-ti-cal-ly as I he-ard his dis-be-li-ving gurg-le be-hind me.

We mo-ved on wit-ho-ut furt-her dis-cus-si-on. All in all, the best thing for me. We step-ped over the bo-di-es of stra-itj-ac-ke-ted re-ve-nants and dod-ged the two slow-mo-ving ones that had cra-ters in the-ir he-ads. The spo-on-ful of bra-ins they had left kept them mo-ving aro-und, but not too awa-re.

Which is exactly how I felt when the gro-und di-sap-pe-ared be-ne-ath me.

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This just wasn’t my day.

I used to ha-te the sen-sa-ti-on of fal-ling, sa-me as an-yo-ne el-se. But sin-ce I’d ma-de a few ga-tes and tra-ve-led thro-ugh them...a tra-ve-ler just as Saw-ney sa-id...that had chan-ged. I still didn’t li-ke it, don’t get me wrong, but I sort of re-cog-ni-zed the fe-eling. Wal-king thro-ugh tho-se ga-tes was li-ke fal-ling, only not just down. It felt li-ke fal-ling down, up, and si-de-ways-all at on-ce. Hard to ima-gi-ne, but that’s how it felt.

So when the flo-or ca-ved in un-der me and I fell, for a se-cond I was con-fu-sed. Had I ope-ned a ga-te and not even re-ali-zed it? One mo-ment of con-fu-si-on, but it was long eno-ugh to hit and hit hard.

I lost the flash-light. I didn’t lo-se my gun. If the fall had kil-led me, I still wo-uldn’t ha-ve lost the gun.

I’d lan-ded on my si-de. I blin-ked da-zed-ly in-to the black-ness and re-ali-zed...ye-ah, that wasn’t an Aup-he ga-te. You fell, as-sho-le. Now get the hell up. It was easi-er sa-id than do-ne. I whe-ezed as I

pul-led air in-to shoc-ked lungs and tri-ed to mo-ve. That's when I felt the fin-gers on my leg. They crept up un-der my je-ans and to-uc-hed my calf, circ-les of ice on my ba-re skin. They mo-ved so-ot-hingly, stro-king my leg as they suc-ked the warmth from it. Saw-ney. Only Saw-ney dra-ined the he-at from you li-ke that. I grow-led, low and in-co-he-rent, in the back of my thro-at and tri-ed har-der to mo-ve my arm, mo-re spe-ci-fi-cal-ly my hand hol-ding the gun. Oxy-gen-star-ved, I didn't ha-ve much luck.

“Cal?”

It was from abo-ve. Ni-ko. He'd ma-na-ged to avo-id fal-ling with me. Go-od for him. I wasn't surp-ri-sed, but I was a lit-tle re-li-eved.

“Cal?” This ti-me it ca-me from be-si-de me, along with the crunch of bo-ots lan-ding on the deb-ri-s of shat-te-red ti-le. The-re was light, a hand on my fa-ce, and then the sil-ver swe-ep of a sword. The fro-zen to-uch on my calf di-sap-pe-ared just as the claws had be-gun to punc-tu-re the skin. That tra-de-mark crazy la-ugh went with them.

I let my arm re-lax. A fu-ti-le tre-mor was all I'd got-ten out of it any-way. In the flash-light's glow I co-uld see the Eag-le res-ting in the dirt, my whi-te fin-ger lax on the trig-ger. I al-so saw Ni-ko's bo-ots mo-ve clo-ser, and then, as I lo-ok-ed up-ward and he si-mul-ta-ne-o-usly knelt, I saw his fa-ce. He was pis-sed as hell. “Saw-ney.” He ran a qu-ick hand over my arms, legs, and spi-ne. “I am go-ing to enj-oy kil-ling him far mo-re than I sho-uld.”

I'd got-ten a few bre-aths in and co-ug-hed out, “You...and...me...both.”

With his help I ma-na-ged a sit-ting po-si-ti-on. I lo-ok-ed up in ti-me to see Pro-mi-se and Ro-bin jum-ping down. It was abo-ut ten fe-et down from the tun-nel flo-or, and they ma-na-ged it with ease. Cer-ta-in-ly mo-re ease than I had. Pro-mi-se se-emed to flo-at down whi-le Ro-bin ca-me down qu-ickly and light-ly, a hand bra-cing his ribs. I knew how he felt. I hung my he-ad and con-cent-ra-ted on bre-at-hing. Drow-ning, fal-ling-I was get-ting ti-red of not bre-at-hing. “Mo-re tun-nels?” I as-ked, shif-ting my sho-ul-ders aga-inst a blo-oming all-over ac-he.

“New tun-nels with the ti-le rep-la-ced and fi-xed in-to pla-ce over them. Saw-ney must ha-ve had the re-ve-nants dig them,” Ni-ko sa-id. Hands slid un-der my arms and hef-ted me to my fe-et. “An ef-fec-ti-ve trap.”

I wob-bled, then ste-adi-ed. “Sne-aky fuck.”

“Pithy, but ac-cu-ra-te.” Ro-bin used his flash-light to scan the cir-cum-fe-ren-ce of the pit. “Whe-re did he...ah. The-re.” The-re was an exit, one small eno-ugh you'd ha-ve to crawl thro-ugh it whi-le drag-ging yo-ur din-ner be-hind you. “Won-der-ful. Craw-ling thro-ugh dirt. Co-lor me filthy and ex-ci-ted.”

“Filthy and ex-ci-ted, and exactly how wo-uld this be dif-fe-rent from yo-ur norm?” Pro-mi-se as-ked with the per-fect ap-pe-a-ran-ce of ge-nu-ine in-te-rest.

“Well, co-lor me an-no-yed as shit,” I grit-ted be-fo-re Go-od-fel-low had a chan-ce to fi-re a shot back. I twis-ted the crick out of my neck and star-ted to-ward the ho-le.

Ni-ko fis-ted a hand-ful of my jac-ket, hol-ding me back as he mo-ved ahe-ad. “My turn to go first,” he sa-id mild-ly.

He did it with mo-re gra-ce than I had. So-on we we-re all stan-ding in a new tun-nel. Ni-ne by ni-ne, it was car-ved out in the earth be-ne-ath the asy-lum tun-nels. “Our lit-tle fri-ends ha-ve be-en busy.” Ro-bin lo-ok-ed aro-und, bent down to to-uch the dirt do-or, and ca-me up with a fin-ger wet with red mud.

“Very busy in-de-ed,” Pro-mi-se ad-ded. “That is fresh. To-night's kill.”

“Go-od. That me-ans we're clo-se.” Ni-ko mo-ved-fast, smo-oth, and still as co-ol-ly pis-sed as he'd be-en when he'd drop-ped down in-to the pit.

I hadn't tho-ught of this who-le mess from Nik's po-int of vi-ew. Saw-ney had de-fe-ated him easily at every turn, had kil-led al-li-es he'd en-lis-ted, had at-tac-ked his brot-her with im-pu-nity and ac-tu-al-ly con-su-med part of him. Ni-ko was not hap-py-in no way, sha-pe, or form-and was de-ter-mi-ned to ma-ke this en-co-un-ter with Saw-ney our last. My brot-her-he'd ne-ver le-ar-ned to spre-ad the bla-me aro-und. It was our fa-ilu-re, not his, but he wo-uldn't see it that way. Co-uldn't see it that way. He'd li-ved the ma-j-ority of his li-fe un-der the we-ight of so-le res-pon-si-bi-li-ty. The-re was no

chan-ging that ha-bit now.

One damn go-od brot-her, but as I'd tho-ught many ti-mes be-fo-re, too go-od for his own go-od.

As we mo-ved, we fo-und mo-re signs of Saw-ney's vic-tims. The-re was no mo-re jewelry, but the-re we-re clot-hes. Rag-ged and dirty. Knit caps and an-ci-ent co-ats. Sho-es with pe-eling so-les. So many clot-hes was bo-und to equ-al a who-le damn lot of vic-tims-the ho-me-less we'd known he was con-cent-ra-ting on now.

He'd fi-gu-red out pretty qu-ickly that the-se we-ren't the days when tra-ve-lers di-sap-pe-ared and it was con-si-de-red a ha-zard of the day. He knew pe-op-le wo-uld lo-ok for him if he stuck to yo-ur ave-ra-ge New Yor-ker who had a job, wi-fe, hus-band, child-ren, pa-rents...the ones that wo-uld be mis-sed. But as we'd se-en, the ho-me-less we-re per-fect and he wasn't the first mons-ter to think so. They even tra-ve-led, pus-hing carts from he-re to the-re. I do-ub-ted that was a pre-re-qu-isi-te for Saw-ney any-mo-re, the tra-ve-ling. When you li-ved in a city this big, you didn't ne-ed to wa-it for the way-ward tra-ve-ler mo-ving ac-ross the co-untry-si-de. And then the-re was his tas-te for the men-tal-ly ill, and that de-fi-ni-tely tip-ped the sca-le. The-re was sa-fe and the-re was mad-ness-fla-vo-red fun...a win-win for our boy Saw-ney. We'd known that, but se-e-ing it on such a lar-ge sca-le...

Jesus.

The clot-hes didn't lit-ter the dirt flo-or. They we-re hung whim-si-cal-ly from the ce-iling, li-ke the ga-uzy cur-ta-ins you'd see in a ha-rem in an old mo-vie. So-me shirts we-re pin-ned to the walls with one arm po-in-ting the way ahe-ad and the ot-her han-ging limp. Sho-es we-re li-ned up at the ba-se of the wall to march in the sa-me di-rec-ti-on. When the shirts and sho-es ran out, then ca-me the hands and fe-et. The palms of the hands we-re punc-tu-red by na-ils pin-ning them to the pac-ked dirt wall, and the in-dex fin-gers po-in-ted the way. In the sa-me fro-zen march as the sho-es we-re the fe-et with dirt plum-ping up bet-we-en gray to-es. I lo-ok-ed away. Even if I'd be-en comp-le-tely hu-man, I wasn't su-re I co-uld've sta-yed that way af-ter what we'd se-en in the past we-ek.

This who-le god-awful show ma-de me won-der if he'd an-ti-ci-pa-ted we'd co-me all along or if it was just mo-re of his sick sen-se of hu-mor pla-yed out for his own en-ter-tain-ment. Right be-fo-re we kil-led him may-be I wo-uld ask him. At le-ast the blo-od was less easy to see, so-aked up by the earth be-ne-ath our fe-et. It was still the-re, tho-ugh; the re-ve-nant pro-ved that.

He was cut in half and left on the flo-or long past whe-re the body parts fi-nal-ly en-ded. A cha-in was wrap-ped aro-und him se-ve-ral ti-mes over and tra-iled off in-to the dark-ness. Saw-ney had ta-ken away the bot-tom por-ti-on of the re-ve-nant with him and left a tor-so with a he-ad, arms, and hands. The sa-me hands that we-re fe-ve-rishly sho-ving dirt in-to the ga-ping mo-uth. Red mud was oozing from the cor-ners and I re-ali-zed he was trying to suck the blo-od, no-urish-ment, from the dirt. Whi-te eyes fi-xed on us hung-rily and the hands sprang to a new task-drag-ging the re-ve-nant to-ward us with a gre-edy scab-bling of fin-gers. But the cha-in sprang ta-ut and he mo-aned in des-pa-ir.

"I be-li-eve we ha-ve anot-her cam-pus po-ac-her," Ni-ko sa-id as he watc-hed the form writ-he. Li-ke I'd tho-ught ear-li-er: Any go-od pre-da-tor li-ke Saw-ney knew you didn't kill in yo-ur own back-yard. You didn't le-ave a ne-on-bright tra-il of bo-di-es to yo-ur la-ir. Ap-pa-rently the re-ve-nants just didn't grasp the con-cept.

"I gu-ess Saw-ney did find out abo-ut the-ir ext-ra-cur-ri-cu-lar ac-ti-vi-ti-es." And from the lo-oks of it, you didn't want to piss off Saw-ney be-ca-use pu-nish-ment was as in-ven-ti-ve and harsh as what we'd do-ne in the se-wers. "Want me to..." I tap-ped the bar-rel of the gun aga-inst my leg. Put him out of his mi-sery wasn't qu-ite right. I didn't gi-ve a shit how mi-se-rab-le he was. He de-ser-ved to be. Put him out of *my* mi-sery wo-uld be mo-re ac-cu-ra-te. This was every gory hor-ror mo-vie co-me to li-fe and I co-uld pretty much do wit-ho-ut it.

"No ne-ed." Ni-ko's sword swung and a he-ad rol-led. The te-eth snap-ped and wo-uld for a whi-le, but the light wo-uld fa-de from be-hind clo-uded-glass eyes and all wo-uld still. Even-tu-al-ly. If he'd be-en who-le and fed, we co-uld've qu-es-ti-oned him. I do-ub-ted he wo-uld've tal-ked, but we co-uld've tri-ed. But half of a star-ved re-ve-nant is in fe-ed mo-de and not-hing el-se. They ne-ed the no-urish-ment to reg-row the mis-sing parts; thin-king shuts down and ins-tinct ta-kes over.

Un-for-tu-na-tely ins-tinct didn't know that even a re-ve-nant co-uldn't reg-row half of a body. He co-uld've go-ne on exis-ting that way for months and months, tho-ugh, and I was su-re Saw-ney wo-uld've gi-ven him every mo-ment of that ti-me to suf-fer.

"Not one wolf wo-uld co-me, eh? Hmm, I won-der why," Ro-bin sa-id, skir-ting the body and kic-king the he-ad out of the way whi-le deftly avo-iding the te-eth.

"The leg hum-pers ha-ve be-co-me mo-re in-tel-li-gent than I; if that's not a bad sign, I don't know what is."

"I'm be-gin-ning to won-der how even an army was ab-le to ta-ke him." Pro-mi-se had long put away her dag-ger and now had her own sword out. She ten-ded to be fon-der of cros-sbows, but this si-tu-a-tion cal-led for mo-re she-er dest-ruc-ti-ve po-wer. Bet-ter to slash at a re-ve-nant than worry abo-ut aim-ing for an eye soc-ket.

"Not a go-od tho-ught." Va-lid, but not go-od. I step-ped over the body and fol-lo-wed the cha-in in-to the black-ness. Ali-ce down the rab-bit ho-le. She fo-und mad-ness; so did we. But we fo-und the bo-di-es first.

They hung from the ce-iling, a fo-rest of them. In re-ality, it wasn't mo-re than twenty, but it se-emed li-ke a hund-red when I ca-ught the first glimp-se of them. They hung from ho-oks fi-xed in wo-oden be-ams that must've sup-por-ted the flo-or of the tun-nels abo-ve us. Li-ke the car-cas-ses of cat-tle they hung. The-re was so much dri-ed blo-od that the dirt flo-or had co-agu-la-ted to a hard sur-fa-ce be-ne-ath my fe-et. The hall had en-ded in a ca-vern dug by re-ve-nant hands. It wasn't the sa-me as a rock ca-ve, but it was as clo-se as you co-uld get. Saw-ney had co-me ho-me.

I lo-oked up at all the na-ked limbs, slack fa-ces, empty eyes and mut-te-red, "Holy shit." So-me we-re de-com-po-sing, so-me we-re stiff in ri-gor mor-tis, and so-me lo-oked as if they'd be-en pluc-ked off the stre-et only ho-urs ago. The smell of rot was so thick that it se-emed you co-uld've sco-oped a hand-ful out of the air if you tri-ed. I didn't put it to the test.

"Are you re-ady?"

I tur-ned my he-ad to-ward Nik and ans-we-red darkly, "Mo-re than."

"Be ca-re-ful," he or-de-red in a ba-rely audib-le vo-ice-no gi-ving Saw-ney any hints of what was go-ing to hap-pen. "Be-ing a dist-rac-ti-on do-esn't me-an be-ing a de-ad one. Watch yo-ur-self. If he gets too clo-se, mo-ve back and we'll try so-met-hing el-se."

"Don't get kil-led. Got it." I ga-ve him a grin, be-ca-use what el-se co-uld you do in the fa-ce of all this de-ath? Grin de-fi-antly or lo-se it al-to-get-her.

"Go-od. Now don't for-get it." With that he mo-ved off to-ward the left-hand wall. Ro-bin he-aded for the right, Pro-mi-se sta-yed at the ent-ran-ce, and I went right down the mid-dle.

I wo-ve bet-we-en the bo-di-es, do-ing my best to not to-uch a sing-le one. They didn't mo-ve; I know they didn't, but from the cor-ner of my eye it lo-oked li-ke they did. "Saw-ney," I cal-led. "You worth-less child-kil-ling scum, whe-re are you?" The light of my flash-light bo-un-ced from dull eyes to whi-te fe-et to shiny ste-el ho-oks. "You're not hi-ding, are you? Not from the li-kes of me, full of crazy."

"Saw-ney!" This ti-me I sho-uted it. In this pla-ce whe-re the si-len-ce was as thick as the smell, I da-red to ra-ise my vo-ice to a sho-ut and the body han-ging be-si-de me shud-de-red to he-ar it. It was a night-ma-rish thing, but it didn't shock me. Ter-rib-le or not, it se-emed a re-ac-ti-on that be-lon-ged he-re, along with the de-ath and des-pa-ir. And be-ca-use of that, it slo-wed me-only for a frac-ti-on of a se-cond, but that was mo-re than eno-ugh.

Saw-ney clim-bed over the top of the body with the smo-oth scut-tle of a scor-pi-on to grin at me with bla-zing che-er. "A tra-ve-ler co-me to vi-sit." A hand flas-hed so qu-ickly that I ba-rely saw it mo-ve. I jer-ked back in re-ac-ti-on, but it was too la-te. I felt the sco-re of a claw along my che-ek. The ebon hand was ra-ised for a tas-te. The red eyes brigh-te-ened thro-ugh the whi-te and brown ro-pes of ha-ir that swung over the black ab-sen-ce of a fa-ce. "I re-mem-ber you, tra-ve-ler. I re-mem-ber yo-ur tas-te. Ah, so go-od. We co-uld be brot-hers, you and I."

Of co-ur-se he re-mem-be-red me. The son of a bitch had be-en wa-iting, and he dam-ned su-re was no brot-her of mi-ne. "Then you re-mem-ber this," I snar-led and fi-red the Eag-le.

I mis-sed.

Li-ke I'd sa-id, the bas-tard was qu-ick. Qu-ic-ker than me...may-be even qu-ic-ker than Ni-ko. As qu-ick even as the Aup-he, which was as qu-ick as I'd ever se-en. I hit the de-ad body, tho-ugh, and blew it in half. I sin-ce-rely ho-ped the ot-hers we-re stic-king to gro-und le-vel as inst-ruc-ted and fi-red aga-in as Saw-ney jum-ped to the next body. This ti-me I hit him in the chest. In the do-ub-le-fist-si-zed pit I'd cre-ated I saw a glit-ter as bright as glass. The ho-le I'd cre-ated in his si-de in the tun-nel at the SAS was go-ne, as if it had ne-ver be-en. I fi-red aga-in, but on-ce aga-in he was go-ne. But he wasn't get-ting away, not this ti-me. One way or anot-her this was the last ti-me we to-ok on this ho-mi-ci-dal pi-eece of shit. The ab-so-lu-te last god-damn ti-me.

I went af-ter him, pus-hing bo-di-es asi-de with my arm, trying to hold the flash-light on his fle-e-ing form. I fi-red aga-in, hit-ting him in the back, and that's when he le-aped from a body to the dirt and wo-od ce-iling, flip-ped back-ward over my he-ad, and cut me from be-hind. From the fi-ery pa-in, I co-uld tell it wasn't a scratch, but ne-it-her was it me-ant to kill me. No, that'd be too easy. Saw-ney wan-ted to play. I'd fi-gu-red on that. He was a play-ful kind of mons-ter. He was al-re-ady clo-ser than Nik had wan-ted, but I wasn't re-ady to back off. This was it. This had to be it. No mo-re de-ad lit-tle girls, no mo-re de-ad wo-men in lo-ve. No mo-re.

Whir-ling, I fi-red, se-pa-ra-ting his leg at whe-re I gu-es-sed the knee wo-uld be un-der the flo-wing imi-ta-ti-on of co-at. His enor-mo-us grin ne-ver fa-ded. He snatc-hed up the leg and di-sap-pe-ared. At le-ast it se-emed that way. I ba-rely got an imp-res-si-on of the di-rec-ti-on he'd go-ne-back the way I'd co-me.

“Pro-mi-se,” I war-ned as I ran.

She was re-ady for him, bloc-king the ent-ran-ce with her sword. He ga-ve an an-no-yed hiss, the first non-gle-eful so-und I'd he-ard from him, and sprang back to the ce-iling and ra-ced along it out of sight of my flash-light. I swo-re, spun on my he-el, and he-aded af-ter him. That's when I dis-co-ve-red it wasn't only hu-man bo-di-es han-ging from the ho-oks. Lep-ro-us hands snatc-hed at me as I ran. Mo-re ru-le-bre-aking re-ve-nants hung twis-ting on the me-tal. They cla-wed and snap-ped, mad-de-ned by the-ir imp-ri-son-ment...tor-tu-red by pa-in. Ye-ah, too damn bad for them. I didn't ha-ve any mo-re pity than I had had for the one cha-ined in the tun-nel.

I pus-hed thro-ugh them, ig-no-ring the blo-ody stri-pes left ac-ross my fa-ce and neck. Saw-ney was the only thing on my mind now. “You're run-ning, Saw-ney? You af-ra-id yo-ur me-al's go-ing to kick yo-ur ass?”

I co-uldn't see Ni-ko or Ro-bin, but I knew they we-re hid-den in the dark-ness wa-iting to ma-ke the-ir mo-ve. Ro-bin's job was the sa-me as Pro-mi-se's-ke-ep Saw-ney in the ca-vern. Ni-ko's was to ta-ke ad-van-ta-ge the mi-nu-te I got Saw-ney suf-fi-ci-ently dist-rac-ted to hold still for a few se-conds. All I had to do was ma-ke that hap-pen. A co-up-le of se-conds...it had se-emed a lot mo-re do-ab-le when we we-re dis-cus-sing it abo-veg-ro-und.

“Saw-ney,” I star-ted to yell aga-in just as he ca-me out of the dark-ness be-si-de me and to-ok me down. I twis-ted un-der him and fi-red aga-in in his chest. The-re was a crac-king, the so-und of rot-ten pond ice split-ting un-der a spring sun. Cle-ar, cold glass pep-pe-red my shirt, frag-ments of wha-te-ver ma-de up the co-re of the in-ner Saw-ney. They bur-ned even thro-ugh the cloth, li-ke dry ice. I fi-red aga-in, sho-ved him hard, and rol-led be-ne-ath the swi-pe of the scythe. Not fast eno-ugh to sa-ve me a sli-ce along my sto-mach, but qu-ick eno-ugh to ke-ep my guts in-si-de whe-re they be-lon-ged. I had to get dis-tan-ce bet-we-en us or Nik wo-uld scrap the plan and mo-ve in, in-tent on sa-ving my ass. I rol-led aga-in and pul-led the trig-ger two mo-re ti-mes, na-iling him in the thro-at. Blo-od, with the cle-ar pu-rity of ra-in and the che-mi-cal bi-te of an-tif-re-eze, po-pured out li-ke a wi-de-open fa-ucet. I skit-te-red back-ward from be-ne-ath it and mo-ved up to a cro-uch. As for Saw-ney, chest and thro-at in ru-ins-Saw-ney se-emed to be ha-ving the ti-me of his li-fe. I no-ti-ced his leg was back in pla-ce, which se-emed to add to his go-od che-er.

“Tra-ve-ler.”

He was drif-ting clo-ser, his fe-et not to-uc-hing the gro-und. I'd se-en it be-fo-re with him, but I'd al-re-ady had my vi-ew of the mons-ter world so-undly sha-ken with this bas-tard-and this wo-uld've

be-en ni-ce to do wit-ho-ut. I ra-ised my eyes in the joy of de-ni-al and tri-ed for that he-ad shot Ni-ko had as-ked me for ear-li-er.

Too la-te. Saw-ney was go-ne. Not so fast this ti-me, but I wasn't su-re if his wo-unds we-re slo-wing him down or he wan-ted me to ke-ep up to play a lit-tle lon-ger. If I had to pick, I'd pick the one that scre-wed me but go-od. I fol-lo-wed any-way as this ca-vern pas-sed in-to anot-her. The ent-ran-ce was hid-den by a cur-ta-in of ho-oks and corp-ses. I pus-hed thro-ugh them with dis-tas-te to find an iden-ti-cal spa-ce. Mo-re blo-od, mo-re bo-di-es, and mo-re Saw-ney. And this ti-me he kic-ked up the play to high ge-ar. He slas-hed the mo-ment I pas-sed thro-ugh the cold flesh. My blo-od was on the scythe along with the blo-od of to-night's vic-tim or vic-tims. Not exactly sa-ni-tary and the very le-ast of my con-cerns.

I threw myself to one si-de and emp-ti-ed the clip in his di-rec-ti-on. It was a lot of bul-lets and I wasn't su-re a sing-le one hit him. His scythe hit me, tho-ugh, car-ving a thin sli-ce in my sho-ul-der. Flit-ting away, he di-sap-pe-ared, re-ap-pe-ared, and sli-ced the out-si-de of my thigh. I bac-ked away, ej-ec-ting the clip and sli-ding a new one ho-me. The slas-hes we-re pa-in-ful and blo-ody, but su-per-fi-ci-al...just for fun. So far. But they wo-uld get de-eper. Nik wo-uldn't hold back any lon-ger. As a dist-rac-ti-on, I was gre-at. As for get-ting Saw-ney to hold still, I might not sur-vi-ve that long. He was too god-damn fast.

But then...I co-uld be fast too.

Ti-me to see if prac-ti-ce ma-de per-fect.

Bre-aking pro-mi-ses. I'd do-ne it a few ti-mes now. But so-me-ti-mes you bre-ak them lit-tle, and so-me-ti-mes you bre-ak them big. This was go-ing to be fuc-king hu-ge.

"Tra-ve-ler."

The-re. Slash. Go-ne aga-in, but I he-ard the fa-in-test rust-le of bo-di-es be-hind. Ni-ko was co-ming, and I hadn't do-ne my job. Not yet. But I wo-uld. I sa-id I wo-uld, and I was ke-eping my word the-re even if I was bre-aking it so-mew-he-re el-se.

"Ye-ah, I'm a tra-ve-ler." I co-uld fe-el the swe-at so-aking my shirt and je-ans. "One li-ke you ha-ven't se-en be-fo-re, as-sho-le."

I saw him thro-ugh the han-ging bo-di-es, the scythe dup-li-ca-ting his grin. "Tra-ve-lers, they are all the sa-me to Saw-ney Be-ane. Go he-re, go the-re. Hor-se, no hor-se." The smi-le, al-ways with the damn cra-zed smi-le. "All the sa-me."

"Not me." I ga-ve a grin of my own-wild and sa-va-ge. "Not this tra-ve-ler."

So I tra-ve-led.

As be-fo-re, I didn't bu-ild the ga-te be-fo-re me; I bu-ilt it *aro-und* me, and I was go-ne. I re-ap-pe-ared be-hind him and na-iled him in the back. Then he va-nis-hed and I va-nis-hed with him. I fi-red, mis-sed, tra-ve-led, fi-red aga-in. So-me-ti-mes I hit him, so-me-ti-mes I didn't. But he co-uldn't sha-ke me, no mat-ter how he tri-ed, be-ca-use I was a night-ma-re. I was this mons-ter's night-ma-re just as he'd be-en one to so many ot-hers.

I saw Nik from the cor-ner of my eye now and aga-in, and al-so oc-ca-si-onal-ly saw Pro-mi-se and Ro-bin figh-ting off re-ve-nants. I won-de-red what I lo-oked li-ke to them, as I glo-wed with a sickly gray light and di-sap-pe-ared, re-ap-pe-ared, di-sap-pe-ared, re-ap-pe-ared...May-be li-ke a ra-pidly sped-up mo-vie-a fast-for-ward of blo-od and me-tal.

I was ble-eding aga-in from the no-se; I tas-ted the salt. The ears too, li-ke in the mu-se-um, but I was al-so ble-eding from my mo-uth. I swal-lo-wed the cop-per of it and went on, be-ca-use that was fi-ne; bet-ter than fi-ne. It was just god-damn gre-at. And I was la-ug-hing-be-ca-use on-ce I pus-hed thro-ugh the pa-in, on-ce I emb-ra-ced the he-ad-crus-hing agony-tra-ve-ling was fun as hell. And I li-ked it far mo-re than was go-od for me, be-ca-use it tas-ted just li-ke Saw-ney sa-id I did.

The next ti-me I fa-ced Saw-ney I put one in his fo-re-he-ad and when I flas-hed be-hind him I emp-ti-ed the clip in the back of his he-ad. Whi-le grin-ning thro-ugh blo-od-co-ated te-eth, I fi-red bul-let af-ter bul-let, blo-wing away the cur-ve of skull to show the glassy mass wit-hin, ta-king that he-ad shot Ni-ko had on-ce as-ked of me in the sub-way.

That's when Saw-ney tur-ned his he-ad comp-le-tely back-ward to grin at me. In his mind, it was all

fun and ga-mes, even if we both di-ed. With the so-und of bo-nes crac-king, his body tur-ned at a slo-wer pa-ce to ke-ep up with his he-ad. The scythe ro-se high.

And this ti-me I didn't flash out. This ti-me my bra-in ti-ed it-self in an ex-ha-us-ted knot and the tra-ve-ling flo-wed out of me, ri-ding on the blo-od. But that was all right, be-ca-use, for on-ce, Saw-ney was stan-ding still.

Which was when Ni-ko set him on fi-re.

The fla-meth-ro-wer had be-en con-ce-aled in the over-si-zed back-pack Nik had be-en ha-uling. Alt-ho-ugh whet-her Saw-ney wo-uld've known what it was was de-ba-tab-le. Alt-ho-ugh Saw-ney knew a lot of things he sho-uld'n't, thanks to Wa-han-ket pro-bably. Even wit-ho-ut that help, he wo-uld've le-ar-ned fast in this ti-me and pla-ce. Ye-ah, one smart son of a bitch. Too bad for him that wasn't go-ing to help him now. Too damn bad.

As I stag-ge-red back from him, the stre-am of fla-me en-ve-lo-ped him and he went up li-ke a bon-fi-re. Co-ve-ring him from he-ad to toe, Ni-ko ma-ni-pu-la-ted the fi-ery stre-am li-ke a fi-re ho-se, and from the lo-ok on his fa-ce, he was enj-oying it as much as he sa-id he wo-uld. Saw-ney, ho-we-ver, was not. The in-sa-ne la-ugh-ter had tur-ned to in-sa-ne scre-ams. The ho-ok-ed re-ve-nants and the ones on the gro-und scre-amed with him. Saw-ney whir-led in the air, bright as the sun, sin-ge-ing and bur-ning the bo-di-es a-ro-und him. The scre-ams...they didn't stop. They went on and on as Saw-ney spun fas-ter and fas-ter. Ni-ko kept the fla-me on him.

"Now, you bas-tard," he sa-id qu-i-etly, "now co-mes yo-ur jus-ti-ce."

And whi-le Jus-ti-ce was blind, she co-uld gi-ve you one hel-lu-va sun-burn. He bur-ned for what se-emed li-ke fo-re-ver. I watc-hed si-lently as I used my hand and then my sle-eve to mop the blo-od from my fa-ce and spat out the red stuff as well. The he-adac-he was fi-er-ce, but not as ago-ni-zing as it had be-en. I'd eit-her bro-ken thro-ugh the wall or just flat-out bro-ken pe-ri-od. Eit-her way, I co-uld'n't ha-ve ca-red less as I watc-hed that mons-ter be-gin to fall in on him-self. The ha-ir was go-ne, bur-ned away. The crystal-li-ne spi-ne and skull we-re na-ked to the eye and mel-ting li-ke glass in a fur-na-ce. In ot-her pla-ces, the flesh, al-re-ady black, was har-de-ning, then crumb-ling to ash be-ne-ath him. And still the scre-aming went on. I was glad my ears we-re al-re-ady ble-eding. It sa-ved so-me ti-me.

"Pro-met-he-us, lo-ok what you ha-ve wro-ught," Ro-bin mar-ve-led at my el-bow.

The re-ve-nants that re-ma-ined had tur-ned to run, and I didn't ha-ve the energy to lift my gun to stop them. Wit-ho-ut Saw-ney, they we-re lit-tle thre-at. Pro-mi-se to-ok the he-ad of one in pas-sing, but as for the rest...screw it. We let them go. They wo-uld'n't be han-ging a-ro-und Co-lum-bia any-mo-re, and li-ke cock-ro-ac-hes the-re wo-uld al-ways be mo-re in the city. No mat-ter how many you step-ped on, they wo-uld al-ways be the-re.

Saw-ney bur-ned on. He cla-wed the air as his in-si-des tur-ned in-to a ri-ver of mel-ting ice or eva-po-ra-ted with an ugly, che-mi-cal-ta-in-ted hiss. We didn't ha-ve a sta-ke to ro-ast him on as they had had in the fif-te-enth cen-tury, but twenty-first-cen-tury tech-no-logy ma-de up the dif-fe-ren-ce.

"No, tra-ve-lers. No."

The-re was only a black, twis-ted thing left now...small as a child and shot thro-ugh with a glit-ter of smo-ked di-amonds. When the plea didn't work, the la-ugh-ter ca-me back, a harsh caw thro-ugh di-sin-teg-ra-ting vo-cal cords, but crazy as ever. "I will be back. From as-hes and bo-ne to flesh and mur-der. You can-not stop me. No-ne can."

"Pro-mi-se?"

She mo-ved at Ni-ko's rap-ping of her na-me and lif-ted a bot-tle from her bag. Smal-ler than Nik's back-pack, it held one thing only...a glass bot-tle of sul-fu-ric acid. "If you can co-me back from a few scat-te-red mo-le-cu-les"-Ni-ko's smi-le was cold and su-re-"we'll cer-ta-inly be re-ady and wa-iting to see it."

Eit-her he smel-led it or so-me-how sen-sed what it was, and for the first ti-me the la-ugh-ter and scre-aming com-bi-ned in-to one sic-ke-ning who-le. In-sa-nity wasn't so fun for Saw-ney any-mo-re; true in-sa-nity was be-ing pul-led from the sho-res of mor-ta-lity by a rip-ti-de of acid and fla-me. I ho-ped it hurt. God, I ho-ped it hurt, and I ho-ped he was as ter-ri-fi-ed as every one of his vic-tims had

be-en.

Espe-ci-al-ly one tom-boy lit-tle girl who'd lost her suns-hi-ne bar-ret-te.

Then it was over. The small dark form fell in on it-self and the fla-mes bur-ned wildly on the gro-und. Ni-ko kept the fla-meth-ro-wer go-ing for anot-her fi-ve mi-nu-tes be-fo-re fi-nal-ly switc-hing it off. The em-bers fla-red, then dul-led, le-aving only as-hes and blac-ke-ned bo-ne. It had ta-ken him over fi-ve hund-red ye-ars last ti-me to co-me back from that.

It wasn't long eno-ugh.

Pro-mi-se po-ured the acid in a ste-ady stre-am over the rem-nants. They smo-ked and mel-ted in-to the gro-und. It hadn't ta-ken an army af-ter all.

He was go-ne.

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The trip back thro-ugh the bo-di-es wasn't any less ter-rib-le kno-wing the re-ason for all that de-ath had be-en eli-mi-na-ted. The pe-op-le we-re just as de-ad as they had be-en be-fo-re. We kil-led the ho-ok-ed re-ve-nants, but left them han-ging. Cle-anup on this sca-les wasn't so-met-hing we we-re set up to do even if we we-re inc-li-ned. Ken Nus-hi wo-uld ha-ve to de-al with that or, with the way bo-di-es we-re di-sap-pe-ar-ing la-tely, he might not. Ins-te-ad of cob-bler el-ves, co-uld be the-re we-re lit-tle mor-tu-ary el-ves that cle-aned up the sce-ne of the mas-sac-re with tiny mops. It ma-de as much sen-se as anyt-hing el-se. So-met-hing had de-fi-ni-tely be-en at work cle-aning up Saw-ney's first vic-tims-the bo-di-es in the park.

Right then I co-uldn't ha-ve ca-red less. Go-od for who-ever. Way to ta-ke ini-ti-ati-ve.

Ni-ko had gi-ven and wo-uld con-ti-nue to gi-ve me hell for bre-aking my word abo-ut the tra-ve-ling. I had we-eks of hu-mi-li-ating ass-kic-kings in our spar-ring fu-tu-re. I grin-ned to my-self and spat a last mo-uth-ful of old blo-od. Not-hing sa-id fa-mily li-ke ha-ving the Kung Fu King wi-pe the flo-or with yo-ur butt. It was bet-ter than a card any day.

"Ze-us, kid, you lo-ok li-ke a no-nu-ni-on-sanc-ti-oned hu-man sac-ri-fi-ce." On-ce we ma-de it thro-ugh Saw-ney's tun-nel and up to the man-ma-de one, Ro-bin got a go-od lo-ok at the blo-od drying on my fa-ce and gri-ma-ced.

"Be-en to a lot of tho-se?" The ble-eding had stop-ped, and, alt-ho-ugh my he-ad still hurt, the pa-in was be-arab-le...mo-re so than it had be-en in the mu-se-um. Much mo-re so. That me-ant so-met-hing. I tho-ught I'd wa-it aw-hi-le to find out what.

"Hu-man, no." He still had his sword out to de-al with stray re-ve-nants and used it to sa-lu-te me with a happy le-er. "But I had a vir-gin or two tos-sed my way."

"That's right, be-ca-use you we-re a god," I snor-ted, re-mem-be-ring his drun-ken ramb-ling from the bar.

"Yes, be-ca-use I was a god. Did you ex-pect anyt-hing less?" The nor-mal-ly sly grin had ab-ruptly tur-ned in-to so-met-hing ti-red and old.

I felt the sa-me way. It had be-en one long night. My he-ad ac-hed, the mul-tip-le scythe slas-hes bur-ned, and I wan-ted a sho-wer. I wan-ted to slu-ice away the blo-od and the ta-int of the black wa-ter. I wan-ted to be cle-an aga-in. Then I wan-ted to sle-ep, a ni-ce ut-terly sa-tis-fi-ed sle-ep.

But pe-op-le in hell want a re-al-ly go-od an-ti-pers-pi-rant too, don't they?

The sta-irs up to the ba-se-ment roc-ked un-der my fe-et, from one si-de to the ot-her. It to-ok me a se-cond to fi-gu-re out it was ex-ha-us-ti-on and not an earth-qu-ake. We didn't get many of tho-se in New York, but you ne-ver knew. I res-ted a hand aga-inst the wall and used it to bra-ce my-self every third step or so. Half-way up, I felt a small hand at the ba-se of my back sup-por-ting me. I lo-oked back to see Pro-mi-se lo-oking up at me with a fin-ger held to her lips. As long as she had li-ved, she knew all abo-ut the ma-le ego. I tri-ed to pre-tend that I didn't ne-ed the help, but I did get up the sta-irs qu-ic-ker than I wo-uld ha-ve wit-ho-ut it.

Ahe-ad of us, Ni-ko and Ro-bin we-re al-re-ady on the sta-irs to the first flo-or. Pro-mi-se and I clo-sed and pad-loc-ked the trap-do-or. It wo-uld gi-ve Nus-hi the ext-ra ti-me he ne-eded to get

so-me sort of su-per-na-tu-ral cle-anup crew. It al-so ga-ve me a chan-ce to catch my se-cond wind and ma-ke it up tho-se sta-irs wit-ho-ut Pro-mi-se's as-sis-tan-ce. The lights we-re low in Bu-ell Hall and it was si-lent, pe-ace-ful. I co-uld've do-zed as I wal-ked, but I kept the lids up and tri-ed to stay alert. The-re co-uld still be re-ve-nants. The-re co-uld be se-cu-rity do-ing a swe-ep. Nus-hi wo-uld spe-ak up for us, but that wo-uld put him in a po-si-ti-on he'd pro-bably so-oner avo-id. So, as we hit the small lobby, a glo-om-shro-uded two-story af-fa-ir, I was as sharp as I co-uld ma-na-ge un-der the cir-cums-tan-ces.

It wasn't eno-ugh.

I don't know what it was. It co-uld've be-en I co-uldn't smell thro-ugh the blo-od in my no-se or that the smell was one that I ex-pec-ted he-re-just backg-ro-und. Cin-na-mon and spi-ce and everyt-hing that was so ni-ce abo-ut col-le-ge girls. But it wasn't only cin-na-mon. It was cin-na-mon and ho-ney, a scent I'd ca-ught se-ve-ral ti-mes be-fo-re. When she wal-ked out of the sha-dows I ma-de the con-nec-ti-on...way too god-damn la-te.

Se-rag-lio.

She wasn't alo-ne. She was flan-ked on one si-de by three men and on the ot-her by two mo-re men and a wo-man. They all had the sa-me glossy black ha-ir and dusky skin. They we-re of ave-ra-ge si-ze com-pa-red to her small sta-tu-re, but ot-her than that, they all had the sa-me lo-ok to them. It was mo-re than an eth-ni-city; they lo-oked re-la-ted. Fa-mily. They all had guns as well. Tho-se we-ren't matc-hing, but what the hell?

"Se-rag-lio." It was Ro-bin. He sa-id her na-me with re-sig-na-ti-on, and as I lo-ok-ed over at him, I co-uld see that he was ex-pec-ting this. Not her, no, but this. On-ce a hu-man had ma-de one of the as-sas-si-na-ti-on at-tempts, he'd known who was be-hind it. All of our pres-sing hadn't mo-ved him to tell us, but he'd known. I didn't think he'd known that it wo-uld co-me so so-on, tho-ugh, and with us in the cros-sha-irs with him.

She inc-li-ned her he-ad. "The Herds-man." She bo-wed it aga-in. "Tam-muz." Then aga-in. "Pan." Lif-ting her he-ad, she smi-led. "Our God. Our ne-ver for-got-ten, fle-e-ing God. How we ha-ve mis-sed you."

The Ge-or-gia ac-cent was long go-ne, as was the bold snap of her eyes. Now the-re was only cold. Cold vo-ice, cold eyes, cold sa-tis-fac-ti-on.

"Tam-muz? The Baby-lo-ni-an god?" Ni-ko's sword was up as was my gun, but we we-re tho-ro-ughly out-num-be-red in the we-a-pons de-part-ment.

Ro-bin shrug-ged lightly. "Li-ke you've ne-ver gi-ven an-yo-ne a fa-ke na-me?" He set-tled back on his he-els, drop-ping the po-int of his sword to-ward the flo-or. "What am I thin-king? Of co-ur-se you ha-ven't." Co-ol and bre-ezy. It was the Ro-bin we'd first met, one who was so ac-cus-to-med to hi-ding who he was and be-ing exactly as his ra-ce was pa-in-ted: shal-low, tho-ught-less, full of un-ca-ring con-ce-it. It was easi-er to see yo-ur sins catch up to you if you didn't ca-re, right? But he did. If he hadn't, he wo-uld've told us the truth. Wha-te-ver was go-ing on...wha-te-ver this was, he felt go-ilty over it. He felt reg-ret, and he ca-red a gre-at de-al.

"You re-al-ly we-re a god?" I as-ked in dis-be-li-ef. In the bar he'd told me so whi-le drunk as a skunk, but who'd be-li-ieve that he was tel-ling the truth mo-re or less?

"*In vi-no ve-ri-tas*. If you drank mo-re, you'd know that." Then the fa-ca-de fell and he rub-bed his eyes we-arily. "I'd ask what you want, Se-rag-lio, but I think we al-re-ady know that, don't we?"

"The Ba-nu Za-deh tri-be do-es not for-get slights, no mat-ter how old. No mat-ter how many tho-usands of ye-ars pass. And the slight of a god is a sha-me to a pe-op-le that can-not be for-gi-ven or for-got-ten." Her fin-ger tigh-te-ned on the trig-ger un-til the knuck-le pa-led to light gold aga-inst her dar-ker skin. "Baby-lon is no mo-re. Our tri-be has dwind-led to what you see be-fo-re you, but we ha-ve you to thank for that. When you left us"-her vo-ice be-ca-me a hiss-"*de-ser-ted* us, the sick-ness ca-me and the fury of the migh-ti-est storm the de-sert had se-en ca-me. Wit-hin months, half the tri-be was de-ad. You to-ok yo-ur pre-sen-ce and you to-ok yo-ur pro-tec-ti-on and now we are all but go-ne from the world. Be-ca-use of you. All be-ca-use of you. But"-her smi-le re-tur-ned-"tho-se an-ces-tors that we-re spa-red ha-ve al-lo-wed the-ir des-cen-dants to cla-im ven-ge-an-ce. We are all

that is left of the Ba-nu Za-deh, but we will be eno-ugh.”

Ro-bin co-uld ha-ve sa-id it was co-in-ci-den-ce, the di-se-ase and storm, that he'd ne-ver be-en a god, only an im-pos-ter, but I won-de-red if his “aban-do-ning” them was all the-re was to it. Par-ti-cu-larly when the rem-nants of the tri-be had cha-sed him for tho-usands of ye-ars bent on ven-ge-an-ce. I co-uld see how easily wha-te-ver it was had hap-pe-ned. When we'd first met him, Go-od-fel-low was the lo-ne-li-est son of a bitch I'd se-en. Pucks didn't se-em to stick aro-und each ot-her much. The ego se-emed to be part of the-ir ge-ne-tic ma-ke-up from what I co-uld tell from the two I'd met. No won-der they went the-ir se-pa-ra-te ways. The clash of nar-cis-sism wo-uld be exp-lo-si-ve. And the ma-j-ority of ot-her non-hu-man ra-ces ha-ted and scor-ned pucks. Thi-eves, con-men, ego-ma-ni-acs, it was the ac-cep-ted ima-ge. And, hell, it was true, but Ro-bin had pro-ven he was mo-re than that. He sto-od with us and had sin-ce the be-gin-ning. He'd fa-ced de-ath with us mo-re than on-ce. It hadn't be-en she-er lo-ne-li-ness that had dri-ven him to that, but that had be-en part of it...at le-ast in the be-gin-ning.

I didn't think it wo-uld've be-en any dif-fe-rent in the days of Baby-lon. I co-uld see him co-ming ac-ross a de-sert tri-be and be-ing dif-fe-rent eno-ugh that they we-re sus-pi-ci-o-us of him. But if he we-re a god, and I was su-re he had a few Ho-udi-ni-style tricks to daz-zle an-ci-ent hu-mans, then they'd wel-co-me him. Emb-ra-ce him. No con-tempt. No hat-red. Just ac-cep-tan-ce, fri-ends-hip, wors-hip. Who co-uld turn down a lit-tle wors-hip? Not yo-ur ave-ra-ge per-son, and de-fi-ni-tely no puck. Even-tu-al-ly Ro-bin wo-uld bo-re and mo-ve on. It was his bad luck on the ti-ming was all. Of co-ur-se, if he'd still be-en the-re when di-se-ase and na-tu-ral di-sas-ter re-ared the-ir he-ads, it might not ha-ve go-ne any bet-ter for him than it was go-ing now.

“You cur-sed us with yo-ur aban-don-ment,” she con-ti-nu-ed. “As our tri-be has di-ed, so will you.”

“And you think you can kill a god?” Pro-mi-se in-qu-ired with the per-fect to-uch of dis-mis-sal. I didn't think it wo-uld cast eno-ugh do-ubt in them to work, but it was worth a try.

“Even gods can die.” The dark eyes we-re un-re-len-ting in the-ir de-ter-mi-na-ti-on. “We've se-en many things in our long se-arch, my pe-op-le. Ge-ne-ra-ti-on af-ter ge-ne-ra-ti-on has se-en won-ders and hor-rors, and we've se-en the de-aths of gods. We ha-ve kil-led many our-sel-ves. Yo-ur kind,” she sa-id to Go-od-fel-low with a righ-te-o-us vin-di-ca-ti-on cur-ving her lips. “They we-re ne-ver the right god, ne-ver you, but we kil-led them no-net-he-less. They we-re not you, but they we-re li-ke you. Un-ca-ring and un-de-ser-ving of exis-ten-ce.”

“Why didn't you simply sho-ot me in my bed?” he as-ked. “It wo-uld've be-en easy eno-ugh for you.” Alt-ho-ugh it wo-uldn't ha-ve be-en. Ro-bin wo-uld've he-ard the sligh-test out-of-pla-ce no-ise. He hadn't li-ved this long wit-ho-ut pic-king up a tho-usand and one tricks of sur-vi-val.

“First, we had to be su-re you we-re the right one.” With her ot-her hand she held up a gold arm-band with what lo-oked li-ke li-on he-ads car-ved on the ends.

“One of the first things we le-arn as child-ren. The one of-fe-ring that you to-ok with you. I se-arc-hed yo-ur apart-ment and fi-nal-ly fo-und it. You kept it all this ti-me. The sen-ti-ment mo-ves us.” Ye-ah, why was I not be-li-ving that?

She tos-sed it at his fe-et. “I co-uld've tri-ed at the apart-ment, en-ded you the-re, but no. You co-me and you go. The days you spend at work, or so you say. Six nights out of se-ven you are go-ne who-ring, fo-oling ot-hers in-to be-li-ving you'll ne-ver le-ave them as you left us. I ne-ver knew when you wo-uld *gra-ce* me with yo-ur pre-sen-ce so that I and my brot-hers co-uld be wa-iting. Be-si-des, fa-cing a god on his ho-me ter-ri-tory whe-re he is his stron-gest, we are mo-re cle-ver than that. And we've co-me to know thro-ugh se-ve-ral ot-her of yo-ur kind that you are all but im-pos-si-b-le to po-ison. The sir-rush pro-ved that.” I tho-ught of all the fo-od she'd gi-ven me and felt my sto-mach ro-il. “So we tri-ed se-ve-ral ti-mes to kill you with the sir-rush, the Ha-meh, our brot-her.” Pa-in flic-ke-red be-hind her eyes. “I do not be-li-eve you de-ser-ve to see yo-ur de-ath fa-ce-to-fa-ce, a war-ri-or's de-ath, not one of tre-ac-hery for you are a tre-ac-he-ro-us cre-atu-re. But now I see we ac-ted as you did, co-wardly and wit-ho-ut ho-nor. The sa-me de-ath you cho-se to inf-lict on my pe-op-le. You dest-ro-yed us as a pe-op-le and now as the last of our pe-op-le we must fa-ce you to do the sa-me. And we will be mo-re ho-no-rab-le than you.”

“The-re aren’t many who aren’t,” he rep-li-ed mat-ter-of-factly be-fo-re drop-ping his sword. It hit the arm-band with the mu-si-cal so-und of a bell rin-ging. “So, you will let them go, then the ot-hers...as you are ho-no-rab-le, and they’ve do-ne not-hing to you.”

A self-sac-ri-fi-cing puck. The world wo-uld stop if it knew, but the world didn’t know Ro-bin li-ke we did. He had it in him. Un-til this mo-ment may-be even he didn’t know, but it was the-re. What a hel-la-ci-o-us way to find out.

“I sin-ce-re-ly do-ubt they wo-uld go, Al-mighty One. Even now they stand with you ins-te-ad of shun-ning you as they sho-uld. They know what you ha-ve do-ne now. Whe-re is the shock and hor-ror at yo-ur sha-me?” She sho-ok her he-ad. “No. They are not yo-ur kind, but they are li-ke you. Ta-ke them as yo-ur ser-vants in-to wha-te-ver af-ter-li-fe a god cla-ims.” The smi-le was ref-lec-ted by tho-se who sto-od be-si-de her, her tri-be. Not one of the smi-les was a ple-asant one.

“How’d you find us?” Ni-ko as-ked ab-ruptly. “And how did you find Ro-bin at the sub-way? We we-ren’t fol-lo-wed.” And we hadn’t be-en. Any one of us wo-uld’ve pic-ked up on that.

“A GPS trac-ker in his cell pho-ne. The mo-dern age is a mar-vel of tech-no-logy. The fol-lo-wing of a god be-co-mes simp-li-city. A hu-man out-wits the di-vi-ne. The world has co-me full circ-le.”

“But fin-ding Ro-bin to be-gin with had to be a bitch.” Kind of li-ke her. “Over two tho-usand ye-ars. Way to hold a grud-ge.”

“It’s ret-ri-bu-ti-on. Only blo-od will ans-wer the debt.” It was hard to be-li-eve this wo-man had on-ce ma-de me bre-ak-fast. She and the ot-hers we-re all the sa-me un-yi-el-ding sto-ne. I gu-es-sed if you we-re go-ing to be a hard-ass, se-e-ing yo-ur li-ving, bre-at-hing ru-na-way god be-fo-re you wo-uld be the ti-me for it.

“If you gi-ve a damn, I am sorry,” Ro-bin sa-id qu-i-etly to them. “Whet-her you be-li-eve it or not, I truly am. Not for what you think, but I am sorry.” Sorry for what he’d do-ne and sorry for what was co-ming.

The-re was no gi-ve, in the-ir eyes or the-ir fa-ces, and I re-a-li-zed: We we-re go-ing to ha-ve to kill them. All of them. Hu-mans. It didn’t sit right. I didn’t think it ever wo-uld, but it was get-ting easi-er. Af-ter all, I’d be-en mo-re than happy to kill that bas-tard in the sub-way. Of co-ur-se, he-re we might not get the chan-ce to. We we-re go-od, but we we-re fa-cing se-ven guns. Pro-mi-se co-uld ta-ke a num-ber of hits and stay on her fe-et. The sa-me wasn’t true of the rest of us. At le-ast one of us was go-ing down; it was a fact, one that sat hard and un-di-ges-ted in my sto-mach. We we-re tho-ro-ughly fuc-ked.

Unless...

Unless I co-uld get be-hind them. Get the drop on them. It might ma-ke the dif-fe-ren-ce.

And that’s when I dis-co-ve-red anot-her dif-fe-ren-ce, the one Saw-ney had ma-de, what he’d pus-hed me to. I gu-es-sed I owed that mur-de-ring bas-tard a fa-vor, be-ca-use the knot ti-ed in my bra-in was go-ne as my mind got the se-cond wind my body had. The ef-fort to he-ad him off, the mind-ren-ding stra-in to be fas-ter, the ne-ces-sity of rip-ping re-ality ti-me and ti-me aga-in had fi-nal-ly punc-hed thro-ugh the scar tis-sue that had held me back the-se past we-eks. It was wi-de open. *I* was wi-de open.

And it was easy this ti-me. It was so damn easy. The-re was no blo-od, no pa-in, and it was so right that I won-de-red how I’d sur-vi-ved this long wit-ho-ut it. As Se-rag-lio ex-ten-ded her gun with a “No, my god, we do not gi-ve a damn. Not for you or yo-ur apo-lo-gi-es,” I was sud-denly be-hind them, and I felt go-od, re-al-ly go-od, and...pre-da-tory. Con-tent and hungry for vi-olen-ce, with a blo-od that felt as if it scorched my ve-ins. As if it we-re a he-at that only kil-ling co-uld co-ol. Then the fe-eling was go-ne, be-ca-use I had mo-re im-por-tant things to think abo-ut, or may-be it wasn’t go-ne. May-be it just let me do what I had to.

Was it me? Was it not?

Who ga-ve a rat’s ass?

It *was* de-fi-ni-tely me, tho-ugh, who shot the first two in the back be-fo-re two ot-hers tur-ned. No ho-nor. The only thing ho-nor got you was kil-led. I saw Nik roll and co-me up from the flo-or to im-pa-le the man on the far si-de of Se-rag-lio. Pro-mi-se, alt-ho-ugh she to-ok two bul-lets first, to-ok

out the wo-man be-si-de him with a qu-ick snap of her neck. Go-od-fel-low pro-du-ced two dag-gers and two mo-re fell with me-tal in the-ir thro-at. I saw blo-od blo-om on Ro-bin's neck, red drip-ping down Ni-ko's hand, I saw Se-rag-lio be-gin to pull the trig-ger of the gun aimed at Ro-bin's he-ad, and then I saw wings.

Wings, pa-le blond ha-ir, and a bla-de mo-ving as fast as he fell. Is-hi-ah.

Se-rag-lio's gun flew to one si-de im-me-di-ately fol-lo-wed by her he-ad. As her small body crump-led, I co-uld've stag-ge-red with re-li-ef that I hadn't had to be the one to do it. She'd ma-de me pan-ca-kes. She was a hun-ter and a psycho-tic kil-ler, but she smel-led li-ke cin-na-mon and ho-ney, and she'd ma-de me pan-ca-kes.

Then I for-got abo-ut the pan-ca-kes and re-mem-be-red the blo-od on Ni-ko and Ro-bin. I knelt be-si-de my brot-her. Pro-mi-se was the-re as well, rip-ping at his sle-eve and get-ting blo-od on her hands in the pro-cess. "La-ter," Nik or-de-red, vo-ice cont-rol-led. No pa-in. No pa-nic. "Se-cu-rity. Po-li-ce. We ha-ve to go now. Ta-ke Ro-bin." He was right, I knew that, but se-e-ing the blo-od still co-ur-sing down his hand, I ope-ned my mo-uth to say we co-uld ta-ke one se-cond. "Cal, *now*."

Damn it. I shut my mo-uth and tur-ned to Ro-bin as Nik got to his fe-et and he and Pro-mi-se mo-ved qu-ickly to-ward the do-or. Go-od-fel-low was up-right, hand pres-sed to his thro-at. He pul-led it away to lo-ok at a palm wet and red. "Gods ble-ed." He ga-ve a li-qu-id co-ugh. "Se-rag-lio wo-uld be ple-ased." Then he drop-ped or he wo-uld ha-ve if I hadn't ca-ught him on one si-de and Is-hi-ah on the ot-her.

"Jesus." He had blo-od on his lips and his eyes had go-ne un-fo-cu-sed and hazy. I slap-ped my hand over the torn flesh of his neck. "I tho-ught you had a pri-or com-mit-ment," I snap-ped at Is-hi-ah. It was easi-er to snarl at him than con-cent-ra-te on the warm wet-ness po-uring thro-ugh my fin-gers or the drow-ned gurg-le to Ro-bin's rag-ged bre-at-hing. So much for the damn bul-let-ro-of vest.

"This was it." If the-re was any reg-ret over kil-ling Se-rag-lio, I didn't he-ar it. I didn't ex-pect to. He'd do-ne it to sa-ve Ro-bin. If he hadn't do-ne it, I wo-uld've do-ne it myself, and you wo-uldn't ha-ve he-ard any reg-ret in my vo-ice eit-her. It was po-int-less to show what you co-uldn't chan-ge.

We drag-ged Go-od-fel-low ra-pidly to-ward the do-or and out in-to the co-ol night air. "Nus-hi. We ne-ed to get him to Nus-hi to be he-aled. Pro-mi-se?" I sa-id with des-pe-ra-te de-mand.

"Hund-red and ni-ne-ti-eth Stre-et and Fort Was-hing-ton, apart-ment num-ber twel-ve-C," she sa-id swiftly as both she and Ni-ko lo-oked back at the limp puck with grim worry. They didn't ha-ve long to lo-ok. Wit-hin a se-cond he was go-ne, pul-led up-ward and out of my hands. Is-hi-ah to-ok him. Po-wer-ful wings bunc-hing with musc-le, he lif-ted a now-uncons-ci-o-us Ro-bin in-to the air and so-ared away. Go-ing to Nus-hi. Right now he was the only one fast eno-ugh. And he wo-uld be.

He had to be.

23

"Did he let you in this ti-me?"

"No. Stub-born bas-tard." Two days la-ter I was spre-ading out the sup-pli-es on the kitc-hen tab-le and ges-tu-ring for Nik to strip off his long-sle-eve gray T-shirt. The six-month-old cir-cu-lar scar on his chest was still a bright cont-rast aga-inst his oli-ve skin. It wasn't the best of me-mo-ri-es and I lo-oked away to the ugly fur-row on the outer as-pect of his bi-ceps. It wasn't bad, not ne-arly as bad as I'd tho-ught when I'd se-en the blo-od co-at-ing his arm and hand. Still, one mo-re not-so-gre-at me-mory. "He wo-uldn't even ans-wer this ti-me."

My own wo-unds, Saw-ney's go-ing-away pre-sent, ac-hed as I mo-ved, but they we-re much less de-ep than Ni-ko's bul-let wo-und. Thin sli-ces, they'd he-al so-on eno-ugh. "Damn pucks," I mut-te-red as I cle-aned the wo-und.

"I think this si-tu-ati-on ap-pli-es to only one puck...ours," Ni-ko cor-rec-ted as I ap-pli-ed the an-ti-bi-otic cre-am. "I don't think many ot-hers wo-uld be too as-ha-med to show the-ir fa-ces."

"They do lo-ve sho-wing them off," I snor-ted. I put the ga-ze and ta-pe in-to pla-ce and sat as he pul-led his shirt back on. I pus-hed my half-empty glass of ho-urs-old mor-ning oran-ge ju-ice back and

forth. “You’d think the son of a bitch would at least let us in long enough to see that he’s okay.”

“Ishi-ah and Nus-hi both said he was healed.” He added with a sliver of humor, “And I would think the sheer volume of his cursing us to Hades through the door would reassure you. It’s not the voice of a dying man.”

No, it wasn’t. Neither was the mocking of our fighting skills, lack of drinking capabilities, and pretty much everything about our personal appearance. It was razor-sharp, sliced as fine as Sawney’s scythe, and was definitely not the voice of a sick puck. But I’d felt his unconscious weight against my arm and the blood pouring through my fingers. I’d sensed the cool slit-her of death sliding through him. That was hard to forget, almost as hard as the fact you’d inspired an entire tribe of people to hunt you through the centuries with the burning desire to kill you. As many times as we’d ponded on his door in the past days, he’d refused to open it, refused to face us.

A hand looped around my wrist. “He’ll come around, Cal. He simply needs time to come to terms with what he did.”

“And that we know what he did,” I exhorted, with understanding.

Ishi-ah, with Robin’s permission, had finally told us the whole story. I doubted Robin would ever tell us face-to-face himself, and as I’d suspected, there was more to it than just playing god. Had that been all there was, I was sure Robin wouldn’t have been that ashamed. He was a puck, born to lie, steal, and fool. The storm and disease weren’t his fault. He hadn’t been responsible, no matter what the tribe and their descendants had thought, not for those deaths.

But there were two others...

It wasn’t boredom after all that had him leaving. It had never occurred to God-fellow that the more attractive members of the tribe might not want to “serve” their god. Who wouldn’t possibly want some of that, right? He still had that attitude today, but now maybe it was tinged with a weirdness I just hadn’t noticed.

There had been one woman, particularly beautiful and with an even more particularly possessive husband. She had gone to the god as requested. She hadn’t fought. She hadn’t said a word. He was charming and handsome and he was her god. She’d done what her new faith said was her duty and she did it willingly...if a god wanted you, who were you to say no? To even think no? And when it was done and she had gone back to her husband’s tent, he hacked her to death with his sword. Possessive, obsessive, maybe even insane, because he had tried to kill the god as well.

When Robin had left what he really had come to think of as his people, there had been two bloody bodies in his wake. Two deaths because of a puck ego. Two deaths that might still have happened had he not been there; abuse is abuse and insane is insane, but there was no doubt they had happened at that moment because of him. The tribe hadn’t blamed him for those deaths, but he damn sure blamed himself. After thousands of years, he still blamed himself enough to not want to face us.

I understood that, but that wasn’t going to stop me from kicking down his door tomorrow. Enough was enough. He was our friend. That pretty much said it all. No matter what he had done, he was a friend. Yeah, tomorrow, absolutely...foot through his door. I told Nik so.

“Which is probably exactly what he needs.” He squeezed my arm and let go to frown at the table.

“Leftover eggs and anti-biotic cream. I could do without the mix. You’re a hopeless slob, you know that, little brother?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He’d spent the night at Pro-mise’s and this was his first look at my morning mess. I took a drink of the warm juice. “How’s Pro-mise?”

“Healing well.” It was a myth that vampires healed immediately, but they did heal much faster than humans did.

As we’d stood and watched Ishi-ah and Robin disappear into the night, we’d heard the wail of an approaching siren. I’d built a gate instantly and taken us all back to the apartment. I couldn’t take God-fellow to Nus-hi. I’d never been in his place before...didn’t know the way,

and the-re was a way to every ga-te-twis-ting and true as an ar-row to the he-art. On the ot-her si-de of our do-or-way, Pro-mi-se's wo-unds, one high to the sho-ul-der abo-ve her cla-vic-le and one at her hip, had al-re-ady stop-ped ble-eding. The one to the hip was a thro-ugh and thro-ugh and best to just le-ave the ot-her bul-let in, she'd sa-id.

Vam-pi-res, balls of ste-el or one hel-lu-va to-le-ran-ce for pa-in-it was one of the two. With vil-la-gers cha-sing yo-ur ass with pitch-forks and torc-hes, you wo-uld've ne-eded at le-ast one of them.

As for the ga-te...that sen-sa-ti-on, the Aup-he-ness I'd felt with the first one or two, it hadn't re-tur-ned with the very last one-our es-ca-pe exit. May-be be-ca-use I was watc-hing for it. But I was af-ra-id it'd be back. So-oner or la-ter. At le-ast I wasn't Fro-do, fo-aming at the mo-uth every ti-me I put on the ring. I had to be ca-re-ful, tho-ugh, ca-re-ful as hell. Even tho-ugh I didn't want me to be-*it* didn't want me to be. "Nik," I sa-id dif-fi-dently, "I think you might be right. No mo-re ga-te-ways for a whi-le might be a go-od thing." I pus-hed the glass away. As much as I'd de-ni-ed it, I was my fat-her's son. Be-ca-use of that I co-uldn't let my gu-ard down. Not as long as I li-ved. "No mo-re tra-ve-ling, Saw-ney wo-uld say. I think I might li-ke it a lit-tle too much."

No one in the world co-uld re-ad me li-ke my brot-her co-uld. No one ever wo-uld. We'd grown up with the Aup-he at our win-dow and aro-und every cor-ner. We'd grown up with the mons-ters out-si-de and the mons-ter in-si-de me. If I sa-id I li-iked it too much, he knew what I me-ant.

"No mo-re ga-tes." Then he flic-ked my ear and of-fe-red easily, "Ha-ven't I sa-id that all along? Alt-ho-ugh don't think I didn't know you cho-se to ig-no-re me."

"Know-it-all prick." I rub-bed my ear. "If only I lis-te-ned to yo-ur wi-se and sa-ge ad-vi-ce, we'd be...oh ye-ah...de-ad now."

"That do-esn't chan-ge the fact it was wi-se and sa-ge." His eyes gle-amed. "And you'll only wish you we-re de-ad when I'm fi-nis-hed with you. Get yo-ur ge-ar. We're go-ing to the park."

Ti-me for a class in Butt Kic-king 101. I was ne-ver go-ing to gra-du-ate from that damn class. "Gi-ve me two ho-urs. I ha-ve so-met-hing I ne-ed to do."

Ge-or-ge li-ved a short sub-way ri-de away. I wal-ked it. It to-ok forty mi-nu-tes. I still had the en-ga-ge-ment ring in my poc-ket, the di-amond and ru-bi-es of a de-ad wo-man. I had told myself I'd bring it up in the sun for her, but it might be bet-ter to le-ave it whe-re her fi-ancé co-uld find it, if I co-uld find him.

It had go-ne from co-ol to cold, an early win-ter. The-re we-re scud-ding clo-uds and the icy bi-te of an ap-pro-ac-hing snow. I used to li-ke win-ter when I was a kid. We'd tra-ve-led aro-und so much I'd se-en it all. Pla-ces whe-re it was warm in Janu-ary and ne-ver sno-wed and then pla-ces with three fe-et of it. I'd li-iked the snow best. No scho-ol. Not that Sop-hia ca-red if we went, but my brot-her did. Snow-ball fights with him...got my ass kic-ked the-re too. I'd al-so li-iked the stil-ness and qu-i-et of the snow, not to men-ti-on the fact you co-uld see the fo-otp-rints of an-yo-ne who'd ho-ve-red aro-und yo-ur win-dow with red eyes and me-tal-lic grins. You co-uld be pre-pa-red...re-ady.

But then the Aup-he to-ok me at fo-ur-te-en, and I'd co-me back with a pro-fo-und dis-li-ke of the cold. Tu-mu-lus, Aup-he hell, the pla-ce they'd kept me from what we tho-ught, was a di-men-si-on of rock, char-nel stench, and se-ar-ing cold. I might not re-mem-ber my ti-me the-re, but I re-mem-be-red Dark-ling's few ho-urs of co-oling his he-els the-re. So-mew-hat. Bits and pi-eces thro-ugh a blur-red and hazy lens. That was my mind trying to pro-TECT me. It knew. If I re-mem-be-red what hap-pe-ned in tho-se two icy was-te-land ye-ars I'd spent the-re from fo-ur-te-en ye-ars old to six-te-en, they'd ha-ve to po-ur me in-to one of tho-se stra-ijtj-ac-kets we'd se-en in the asy-lum ru-ins. I didn't li-ke win-ter any-mo-re, and I didn't li-ke the cold.

But, hell, it's New York. What are you gon-na do?

Suck it up and tuck yo-ur fa-ce aga-inst the wind. The sub-way wo-uld've be-en easi-er, war-mer too, but I ne-eded the ti-me. Not to think...the thin-king had be-en do-ne on this for a whi-le. I just ne-eded it. You might ha-ve to jump from the third story of a bur-ning bu-il-ding, but you ne-eded to ta-ke a bre-ath first. Be-ca-use this le-ap wasn't one of fa-ith. This was one of en-dings and a bad cho-ice over a wor-se one. I ne-eded that bre-ath.

Sooner than I wanted to be, I was in front of her building. The steps were empty this time. I stood at the bottom one in hesitation. Five inches of concrete and it seemed like a mountain, one I suddenly didn't want to climb. She would know. The instant she saw me, she would know. It wasn't what I wanted, but it was what I'd planned. Until George was no longer a part of my life, she wouldn't be safe. She wasn't a warrior like Nik or near imperVIOUS to bullets like Prometheus. She wasn't Robin, sly and better with a sword than all the goddamned Musketeers and Zorro combined. She wasn't us. She was George...stubborn, determined, but gentle and vulnerable as hell. She'd fight if she had to and do it with courage and an unbreakable will. The rest of her, though, was all too breakable. To something even far less deadly than an Auphe.

And then there was me. Tailored right down to my DNA. I couldn't be with her. I couldn't be with any human woman. She wouldn't believe that, but she would believe something else. She'd believe in Delilah. Charm had been a one-night stand. A one-time thing for one particular thing. But Delilah was different. With her there was the potential for something else...something that could snare my emotions, the more primal ones, for a while. Something real probably not especially healthy, but something genuine. That was the betrayal. And George would know it the moment she set eyes on me. Wasn't that why I was here?

Then I saw the white flutter of an envelope resting on the stone balustrade. It was weighed down by a small piece of polished glass, dusky to pale like her skin. I picked it up and saw one word written on it: *ring*. I opened the unsealed flap and pulled out a small slip of paper. It too had just one word written on it.

Goodybye.

She already knew.

Mission accomplished. Goody for me. That had to be relief that burned in my stomach and if I walked stiffly up the steps to the lobby, well, it was cold, right?

I fished out the ring with fingers just as stiff and cold and slipped it in the envelope. Sealing it, I dropped it in George's mail slot and it was gone. Just like George was. Just as I'd planned.

I didn't remember much of the walk back. My hand held tight to the bit of pale glass in my pocket, but my mind was as frozen as the weather as I flowed with the sidewalk crowd. And that was for the best. I didn't want to think, not about my choices, not about George. Not thinking, that would get me through this day. Committing Niko's cardinal sin not noticing the unforgiving and dangerous world around me.

But then it noticed me.

I felt the gates open. One after the other. One, two, three...ten...fifteen. I looked up, and there they were on top of my building. Marble skin, white hair, gunmetal teeth, they blended into the winter itself. You wouldn't have seen them if you didn't know to look. But I knew. I saw them. Lining the ledge like gargoyles, Auphe after Auphe after Auphe.

All looking down at me.

Oh, *shit*.

About the Author

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