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Gray Eyes of Death

By

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Chapter 1
Death Wore Green

3 PM, Thursday – 533 Days After The Fall

Stone Quarry (*Casa Milà*) Tower, Croc's Office

The day was calm and sunny, but the woman in the green dress brought the dark and stormy night in her gray eyes as she strode into my office.

If I had known what was good for me, I would've shown her the door.

But I've always had trouble figuring out my place in the big picture—or how my actions can mess up my life. If I had been, maybe I wouldn't have chosen the bowie knife as my signature weapon...or lived a lie that would get me killed.

That Thursday, it seemed, I was just stupider than normal.

The dress should've been jewel colored, but somehow it sucked up light around it, draping over her curves like a verdant shadow as she gusted into my office. There was something about her that made me feel like someone had just walked over my grave, and I could've sworn that a scent like Nightshade and Absinthe wafted from her.

Growing up in the family I did, I had gotten used to Reapers—or, as we knew them before the Fall, “serial killers”—but I'd never seen one that unsettled me as much as the woman in my office, who called herself: “Jade.” I might've suspected her of being a powerful Reaper herself if it weren't for the higher emotions warring with the lower in those troubled eyes.

The name the copper maned woman used had to be a fake, as must the tat that wound down her right arm, identifying her name and station in New Barcelona. However, I'd never seen a skinner do better work than she sported and it would likely hold up to any Impirium who cared to check her out. She had to be a refugee from the Old U.S., but she spoke Catalan almost flawlessly.

The language was the thing most immigrants didn't research. They just assumed that Barcelona was in Spain, so they must speak some flavor of Spanish. All it took was for you to ask around in Castilian--*or, heaven help you, Mexican--*Spanish and you'd be marked as a rube ripe for the picking. Even before the Fall, the people of Catalonia had a separatist mentality that made Quebec look downright unified and a superiority complex that made the French look posi-

tively humble. If my family's arrogance hadn't dwarfed it ten to one, I might've found it strange.

The woman suspected that her sister, a blonde haired, blue eyed woman of slight build named Jenna, had been kidnapped. While she wouldn't give legal names, she explained that her sister's travelling companions had woken to find her missing outside of Barcelona four days ago. They'd searched every place they could think of, but there's been no trace.

As I listened, I wrapped my fingers on the massive desk that separated us like a mahogany ocean. There was danger in this woman's wake that made me want to keep my distance...at least for awhile. It made me glad that my massive Oroya 556 revolver was in the secret side compartment near at hand and, in case I didn't have time to get to it, my bowie knife was in its reverse gravity sheath against my back.

It was always a pain to get the special access hole stitched into my coats and jackets, but it was worth it to pull out over two and a half feet of steel at a moment's notice. The blade and my blonde hair are why most people still call me "Croc"—after a toe-headed Aussie film icon with a massive bowie knife. Occasionally, if things get pointy, I'll pull out my blade to separate the men from the boys and banter out: *"You call that a knife? This IS a knife!"* Most people don't know what I'm quoting...but they still tend to act out their part of the scene, nonetheless, and run away.

“A lot of people go missing every day outside the city,” I returned, stating the obvious to buy time to think through the story. “Maybe your sister decided she just wanted to go into the city without her companions... y’know, start anew without any old baggage.”

“My sister wouldn’t do that,” Jade shook her head emphatically, sure of herself.

“How do you know?” I asked. Her decisiveness was curious in a missing person’s case.

Jade bit her lip, torn.

“Miss, I can’t find your sister if I don’t know as much as you can tell me,” I explained, growing restive.

“She’s got a condition,” the exotic woman murmured.

“What kind of condition,” I pried.

“A blood condition,” she breathed, then blurted, like it was a national secret: “She bleeds.”

“All the time, or just if she gets cut?” My eyes narrowed.

“Only when she gets cut,” she stated, “but there’s no way to stop it after it starts unless you’ve got a lot of med pre-tech.”

Precisely why she wouldn’t leave her companions.

You didn’t survive the Fall as a bleeder, unless you were very lucky AND had very good protection. If you’d managed to stay alive, you’d never walk away from your protectors...especially to go into a place like New Barcelona, which sported a Reaper population at an unbelievable 30%.

“Anything else you can tell me?” I queried; she shook her head. “These companions? Where can I find them?”

She drew directions to a club I tried to avoid called the Carpe Nocturne, in the Ciutat Vella district, and added in fast script: “*Ask for Eagle Eye.*”

“The rate’s 500 a day plus a 100 per diem to go toward expenses,” I grimaced. “Minimum of a week in advance.”

Normally I only charged two days in advance, but I could tell this woman was trouble and I didn’t like going to a place as dangerous as Carpe Nocturne...after all, I might run into one of my old school chums—or, worse, one of my relatives! Truth is, I was hoping to dissuade her

from my door—but there was something about the girl. I just couldn't bring myself to outright refuse her.

She nodded, fished in her black leather pocket book, and pulled out a heavy, velvet bag, which she dropped on the desk. The heft of the thud and the jingle bell sound of currency meant a lack of currency wouldn't drive her from my office. That much cold hard cash has its own gravity and I was caught in its well.

“5,000 crosses now, 5,000 when it's done,” she said, tightlipped. “If you need more, meet me at the Boadas in five days at 10 PM exactly. Show up alone and on time, or you won't find me again.”

I may be a good private dick...maybe even amongst the best...but I didn't doubt her words for a minute.

Then, as quick as that, she was gone, leaving just a waft of her scent behind.

Only then, as I palmed the money bag in my big hand, did I remember that I had a kill slated for that night. As I placed the money into the hidden safe beneath my revolver, I thumbed the intercom button.

“Mr. Graham?” Wraith's voice purred like Death's scythe being stropped.

The killer who had once been my teacher was one of the few who didn't call me, "Croc."

"We're going to have to be creative," I stated. "I just took a case and have to pound the pavement."

Chapter 2 **Carpe Nocturne**

4 PM, Thursday

The Carpe Nocturne Club (*formerly: Carpe Diem Leisure Club*), Entry

The Carpe Nocturne was a Reaper bar. Everyone knew it. And, on paper, that should've made it a walk in the park for me to go there.

When you have my bloodline, you're practically royalty at a place like the Nocturne, but royalty is a liability in almost any world. In my world, with my secrets AND my job, it's one of the most dangerous places in the N.I.R.

As I walked into the place, the murmuring voices of the late afternoon crowd went almost dead and every eye in the place drew towards me. Hate—like envy, greed, and lust—is one of the few emotions psychopaths are good at and I was getting second helpings.

I no longer winced at the contempt my "*brethren*" showed me as the "*traitor prince*"; just did my best to let it wash off me like acid rain off a lead dyke.

I scanned the room to confirm that my sister wasn't about, as she liked to rub elbows with the rest of the clans and she had an acceptance which I never would. Of course, she also wasn't the pariah I was; in a world of werewolves, I'm the dog catcher. What can I say; my reputation precedes *and* eclipses me.

Sidhe—pronounced “shay” like the fae deities of the Irish—wasn't anywhere around. That was good, although, the thought of her reminded me of Skye, which nearly made me burst into tears. I angrily stamped the emotion out of my mind, pushing my childhood memories into the past and steeling my gaze as I walked into the establishment.

As I got close to the bar, I realized that there was indeed a familiar face riding the mahogany. Fortunately, not one of the faces that was likely to give me a razorblade necktie.

“Suzanna,” I smiled in a poor imitation of suavity. Despite my lack of panache, the pert blonde whose ample curves filled the silver cocktail dress behind the bar gave me a half smile and I thought I recognized something like fondness in her icy eyes. She and I had gone to the Razor together, although our specializations were pretty divergent. “It's been a long time.”

“You could say that, Croc,” she pursed her lips without rancor, eyebrow arching. “Five years.”

“Seems so much shorter than that,” I shook my head. Irritated that so much had passed since then. “But it was before the Fall—seems an eternity.”

“Tell me about it,” she gave me a genuine-seeming smile; sirens were good at replicating the emotions they lacked. “That was back before they went “legit” with Mag. Now, they advertise so much it makes me nauseous.”

“Yeah,” I groaned. Our alma mater had become one of the drawing jewels to New Barcelona after the Reaper Accords. Now, even people who didn’t pretend to be psychopaths were trying to get into the famed assassin school. “You ended up being a velvet fist, didn’t you?”

“Ah, that sparkling Graham memory, Croc,” she pursed her lips without rancor. “Pretty sure you just combined two different majors on that one.”

“Right, right!” I smiled. I knew how to push her buttons in subtle ways, as we’d had a brief fling before our lives got too divergent. I tapped my head lightly. “It’s that memory thing I struggle with, you remember? Of course, I would never confuse the Velvet Gloves with the Iron Fists! One of you deserved to have a lingerie calendar...”

“I believe that was the pickup line you used in school,” Suzanna half smiled at that, her sapphire gaze softening as much as it ever could.

“I’ve always believed it, sweet Sue.” The sudden hardening of her face assured me that my old pet name for her would not be tolerated and I quickly moved on: “Anyway, how’s post grad for a siren?”

“It went pretty well for the first year,” she shrugged, clearly unoffended by the slur for seduction reapers. “However, demands low right now.”

“Nobody needs the velvet noose?” I marveled. “What’s the world coming to?”

“I know.” She agreed seriously, clearly irritated by the strange lull in aggression. “Anyway, that’s why I’m dayjobbing here.”

“It’s the suck thing about being a reaper for the N.I.R., I guess,” I responded with a touch of actual sympathy. “You do your job well enough and all your employers’ enemies toe the line; put yourself out of a job.”

“Yeah, most of us,” she returned, an edge to her voice.

“You wound me, Suz,” I replied in mock horror. “I have to make a living, same as everyone else.”

“Yeah, but yours is the only one that’s in no danger of running dry!” She returned sharply.

“I don’t know,” I returned a bit more tartly than I intended. “If people actually feared by blade, maybe they wouldn’t go off the reservation.”

“Or maybe just wouldn’t get caught?” She returned, brow arched.

“There is that.” I concurred. It wasn’t exactly a secret that Jack the Ripper—the most famous serial killer to never be identified, much less be arrested—was rumored to be in my bloodline. For some reason, some of my people felt that made it even more of an affront that I put the ravers down. “But then, I wouldn’t be doing my dayjob well if they could do that on my watch, would I?”

It could be argued that the reason my “day” job of being a private dick was even tolerated by the N.I.R. was because my “night” job of Reaper Control Officer was so necessary. Reapers were, by definition, well outside the boundaries of sanity. Them staying on the “beneficial” side of the social boundary was tentative at best, no matter what union they were a part of or whether they had been “Severed” by one of the families. And when they went rogue, I—or someone like me—would be sent in to take “care” of the problem—*permanently*.

“Whatever you need to say to sleep at night,” she returned, the mocking tone that always accompanied quotes from the ‘lesser race.’ “You and I both know you make a living off the blood of your own people.”

“Hey, before the Fall, people used to say the same thing about doctors,” I intoned, refusing to be baited into her insinuation that I sold out my people. “I had to stay in school a lot longer than some other reapers and I had to go through a lot more crap to get where I am.”

It was a bit of a low blow, since even though sirens had to have less training than other reapers, they had to be willing to put up with the insinuation that they were whores—earning a living on their backs. In many ways, we were both the dregs of our ‘enlightened’ society.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t hurt that you have your family to fall *back* on,” Suzanna smirked as she began to wipe down the counter, showing me a hint of her impressive cleavage as she did so; the wording and the glimpse a reminder of our similarities.

“That’s right, you never had the pleasure of meeting my family,” my eyes narrowed. “Might as well fall into the loving embrace of an iron maiden. Besides, my family name will only get me a death warrant some day. Mark my words.”

“I know you didn’t come here to talk about old times, Croc,” she said as she continued working on the counter. “Why’re you here?”

“I heard that an American’s been in here,” I said, looking at her appraisingly.

“Could be, there are lots of American immigrants in Barcelona,” she shrugged, her eyes glinting golden—a visual reminder of the crosses she expected in return.

“Yeah, well the guy I’m looking for goes by the name, ‘Eagle Eye,’” I said, slapping a 20 cross coin on the bar.

“Could be,” she said, looking thoughtful as a blur of her hand caused the money to vanish. Clearly, she’d been cross training with some of the Magicians—killers who became so gifted at sleight of hand that they could kill people in plain sight without ever looking like any more than a horrified spectator.

It took thirty more before her memory was working well enough to direct me to a table in the private area of the club.

Chapter 3

Low Places

4:30 PM, Thursday

The Carpe Nocturne Club, Back Room

The man who called himself Eagle Eye was hunched, alone, over a linen dressed table in the candlelight of the private section. He was tall, lanky, and clad in a loose fitting assortment of camo clothing, apparently cobbled together across his journeys. From my fascination with pre-Fall Americana, I recognized him as Native American. He had eyes like steel, although the clear undertone of concern and worry separated him from most of the sociopaths in the bar.

“I understand we have a mutual acquaintance,” I said, pulling up a mahogany and leather chair in front of the man and sitting down.

His eyes narrowed as he waited for me to explain.

“A woman who calls herself Jade shows up in my office two hours ago,” I intoned slowly. “Says that her sister’s missing and that you were the last to see her.”

“I don’t know a woman named Jade,” he explained softly.

I described her.

“Ah, so that’s the name she chose,” he smiled wanly as recognition filled his eyes. “She went by Denver when I spoke with her.”

“Doesn’t sound like you know this Jade—er, Denver—well,” I stated. “I assume this means they’re not sisters?”

“Not exactly,” he shook his head.

“Exactly?”

“In the *biological* sense, no,” he shrugged, as though biology was meaningless. “In the spiritual sense, they’re both cubs of the great wolf.”

“The great wolf?” I returned, confused. I knew that many tribes of American tribes had a special affinity for animals, but couldn’t begin to guess who he was referring to.

“To my people, the wolf is the mysterious pathfinder and leader,” Eagle Eye explained softly. “Those of us who ally ourselves with the master of the oracles call him the Great Wolf. As his cubs—uh, protégés?—one could easily say they are sisters in that way.”

“Master of the oracles?” I asked, concentrating to hear him as some sort of argument had developed a few tables behind me.

“The one you call Hesterdale,” he clarified. “The one who leads the Dark Dreamers,”

“The crazies who thought they could see the future before the Fall?” I confirmed, remembering something about it.

“They did see the future,” the tall Native man smiled darkly, his eyes turning to flint. “They saw the disaster...the Knights of Xeno...even the N.I.R. The fact that few believed them doesn’t negate their prescience.”

“So where is this prophet leader?” I asked, trying to ignore the argument which was growing louder and more drunken sounding every minute.

“I’m not sure,” he shrugged. “The Great Wolf is reclusive and only uses the one you call Jade to speak on his behalf in person. If you want to meet with him, she’d have to arrange it.”

“Alright, then,” I returned to the business at hand, deciding to double check the info Jade had given me with a small lie. “Tell me about your missing companion. This Jade... Denver...whatever her real name is...didn’t even give me a name.”

“Her name’s Jenna,” he explained, some of the recrimination finally easing. “She used to be a journalist, like the Great Wolf.”

“And what’s the big concern about her taking an unaccompanied walk around Barcelona?” I returned, pushing back. “It seems like she’s only been gone a few days. Seems like this wolf should save his money and wait a week or so--”

“She’s got a deadly condition,” he interrupted in a rush of concern. “Every moment she’s outside of our protection is another moment closer to death she comes. She must be returned to safeguard her life.”

“You strike me as someone more than a travelling companion,” I returned archly. “Even her sister didn’t seem this concerned about her.”

“We’re not lovers, if that’s your implication,” his eyes were suddenly full of scorn.

“No implication,” I returned flatly, then softened my tone. “Just an observation. I need to know all the roles in play if I’m to try and track Jenna down.”

“She is something special,” he returned, his eyes relaxing into a strangely confused haze. “There is a role she is to play in the future that is important. The Great Wolf believes this but, even before I met him, I had dreams. Dreams that convince me that I am to keep watch over her and make sure she is able to accomplish what is before her.”

I let that statement lie and moved on

“How did she vanish?” I asked. The argument, which seemed to have come a bit closer, now sounded like it included a waiter who was trying to calm down the belligerent drunk.

“I’m not sure,” he stated, helplessness awash in his eyes. “But five nights ago I had a dream of the raccoon and the owl, then—“

“Raccoon and owl?” I interrupted, trying to understand the import of yet more animal references.

“In a dream, the raccoon symbolizes deceit and theft,” Eagle Eye explained, clearly exasperated by slowing the narrative. “And the owl—it can mean wisdom or the night—but it often symbolizes death and darkness.”

That clarified his concern. If he felt he was a protector and had been warned in a dream she would die, it would mess with most people—*most people with actual emotions, of course.*

“Anyway, the next morning,” he continued, “we woke up to find our watch out cold and Jenna gone.”

“You say, ‘out cold,’” I clarified, “how?”

“With this,” he stated as he held up a tiny dart.

“Can I have that?” I asked, my hand already reaching out carefully.

He nodded his assent and I made it vanish into one of the glass test tubes I kept with me. I knew a Traveller who might just be able to help me with it.

I was just about to ask him if anything had happened the day before she vanished when the argument which I had been ignoring suddenly spilled into my lap.

“...People like you deserve to be killed,” the suddenly loud and drunken voice bellowed in my ear, the cold muzzle of a massive firearm abruptly pressed against my temple. “I don’t care what Caesar says...you had no right to kill...”

Technically, I’m not a bullet timer.

“...my sister...”

However, when you're trained by someone like Wraith...

“...and now I'm...”

You get really fluid with how you perceive time and how quickly your reflexes take over.

I took a microsecond to observe the man attacking me out of the periphery of my vision before committing my body to movement.

A study in contrasts, my assailant had a neatly trimmed beard and the expensive Italian suit of a professional assassin, but the brawny body and illiterate eyes of a crazed woodsman. Flecks of saliva glistened on his beard and the sour body odor of drunkenness emanated from him. His finger shook slightly as he tensed it on the trigger of what looked—and felt—to be a .50 Colt Python revolver.

“...gonna end you...”

Enough surveillance. Now it was time to act.

My left arm blurred across my body to slam the man's gun hand forward in front of my head, my left hand grabbing his wrist as I did and pulling him forward.

“...you mother...”

His momentum helped pull me to a standing position and my right hand snaked through the access hole in my jacket, pulling free the massive length of bowie knife and swinging it up in a glittering arc.

“...fuc—“

Just before it guillotined my assailant’s jugular—I stopped the blade...though not before engraving his skin with its razor edge.

“Don’t...*ever*...say...anything...about...my...mother.” My words were as steel sharp as my weapon and the sudden passivity of my previously enraged attacker showed that no one doubted the veracity of my warning.

I waited a breath before continuing to speak, noting that all eyes in the back room were now on me. The man who called himself Eagle Eye, however, had vanished in the momentary distraction. In what I knew would become a mantra for me, I cursed myself for not sending the woman with the gray eyes away the first time I laid eyes on her.

“This is your first—and *last*—warning,” I intoned, stilling my raging emotions with an act of will. No one here could be allowed to see what was going on below the surface of my mind. I pulled out my NIR Reaper Control shield and held it in the big man’s face, making sure to flash it to the spectators, as well. “If you ever attempt to attack me—or any other member of

Caesar's justice—you will be justifiably executed without warrant.” I then proceeded to make eye contact with each of the dozen or so reapers arrayed around the private room. “That goes for the *rest* of you, as well.”

With that said, I resheathed my blade, and, twisting my hips, thrust the large man to the floor. Tucking my shield back into my intentionally nondescript dark suit, I turned and stalked out of the Carpe Nocturne. Tonight had done nothing to lessen my hatred for the club.

I glanced at my watch and realized I would be late if I didn't get a move on. The mysterious woman and her band of vanishing witnesses would have to wait until our official duties were done for the night.

Chapter 4

Life in Art

5:30 PM, Thursday

Stone Quarry (*Casa Milà*) Tower, Entry

To have offices in The Stone Quarry tower should've been impossible, as the surreal Gaudi masterpiece was a national treasure and tourist destination before the Fall. Throughout the region of Spain and France known as Catalonia, no artist is more admired than Gaudi, whose brilliant architecture has so defined the city that the city of Barcelona became the first--and only--city to be awarded an Architectural Achievement Award.

Originally created with an entire floor for the wealthy Mila family, the Stone Quarry was one of Gaudi's crowning achievements, in my opinion. The design incorporated fantastically organic towers that seemed to be poured from molasses which had hardened as soon as the bottom layer hit the ground. Each tower had an asymmetrical opening at the top—like the ragged maw of some beast—revealing the sky above to those walking across the ground-level courtyards.

My sister had gained this impossible residence when father was raised to his position as the NIR's officially recognized leader of the Reaper class.

However, about eight months ago, Loraine—one of Banshee's personas—got into a predicament where she needed a high level NIR agent to disappear to cover up the fact that she'd slaughtered him "off-the-books." Her needs fell into the type of work I was ideally suited for (especially since the man she'd killed was hardly a saint even by reaper standards), so I agreed to call in favors to make it appear that he had embezzled money and fled in exchange for ownership of her residence here at the Casa Mila. It had made her livid to be backed into such a corner by her own conflicting personalities but, in the end, she'd had no choice if she didn't want to be on the run from Mag's hit squads.

The arrangement had turned out to be a truly incredible windfall for both my day and night jobs. There was no other place that was more centrally located for the work Wraith and I did in the old city's warren-like streets and cramped alleys, and no place that had more secret passages that we could capitalize upon thanks both to Gaudi's forethought and my sister's paranoia.

As I made my way to the ornate elevator, which Gaudi had made sure only went to every other floor, I checked my watch. I was running late. *Damn...*

Chapter 5

Eyes in the Shadows

5:45 PM, Thursday

Stone Quarry (*Casa Milà*) Tower, Croc's Office

I checked the security feed as I walked into the office, pulling up the hidden console beneath my desk. I may have been late, but I needed to check and make sure that no one had been snooping. My handler had laid off trying to prove I was a bad guy after a recent case, but there was another NIR detective—a DiMarco—that'd been trying to catch me at...well...*something*. I wouldn't put it past him to try to break in and bug the place. That was, if one of my *own* people hadn't planted a suicide stick or some other lovely present in my office.

You would think that my pseudo royalty would mean I had a certain level of immunity to random killing by my brethren or harassment from the NIR, but you would be wrong. I suppose princes of all stripes have always had those in their kingdom that want to dispatch them. Of course, it didn't help matters for any front that my father's support of me was always a bit wan, at best; I had always been more of a disappointment to him than my sister.

I'm not sure if I believed in a god, but, if I did, I would've thanked him for Wraith, as the devout Deathdealer was the only reason I wasn't six feet under. Regardless of my position or backing, the fear my people had of my stalking prowess and the legendary kills Wraith allowed me to claim as a "reaper hunter" had kept them from trying to end me. If they ever discovered the truth, not even the Grim Reaper himself could hold off my death.

Having satisfied myself that no one entered my domain, I re-secured the locks and re-activated all of the security measures. Then I went to the rear of my office, where a massive painting hung. A beatific representation of Vlad the Impaler--the Reaper Saint--looked out from the canvas, a forest of impaled corpses wreathed in mist behind him as he raised a bloody hand of blessing to future Reapers. I adjusted part of the ornate frame and the wall and painting opened like a door.

Already composing an apology, I ducked into the incense laced air of my hidden apartment.

Chapter 6 **Angel of Death**

6 PM, Thursday

Stone Quarry (*Casa Milà*) Tower, Croc's Apartment

My apartment was dressed with the film posters of the great post-fall films: *Fight Club*, *Matrix*, and *American Beauty*. (*It's a popular misconception that serial killers can't appreciate beauty. The truth is they might be some of the most artistic people on the planet...so much so that they idolize the architect/sculptor Gaudi who created my apartment building. The problem is that the way they tend to express art is at the expense of other living souls, often by using them as the most temporary of sculpting materials. That's why I've never believed the theory that Hitler being accepted to art school would have prevented any of the psychotic killing he would later set his hand to; if anything, I think the only change would've been a better color palette for the Nazi uniforms.*)

The passage closing behind me, I strode into the artificial light of the expansive living room and walked straight into my own reflection.

“You’re late,” it said, an arch to his brow.

How did he get so many of my mannerisms so perfectly?

“I know,” I grimaced. “The subways are running slow today. I seriously considered hoofing it, but it’s too unpredictable in the Warrens. Plus I don’t need to tangle with any more of the N.I.R. The badge doesn’t protect me from the chip on their shoulders.”

“No, it doesn’t,” the killer most knew of as Wraith nodded, eyes narrowed. “Why were you in the Warrens?”

“Other side of them,” I explained. “Carpe Nocturne.”

“Dangerous place for either one of us,” he arched. “Again, why?”

“The new case I mentioned before I left,” I shrugged. “Did some legwork so I can do some spiderwork while you’re reaping.”

“Hmmm,” he nodded.

“Let’s catch up,” I gestured to the circular table in the middle of the dining room with the matching high-backed benches to make it feel like a curved booth.

“Indeed,” my mentor and doppelganger agreed, following me like a shadow.

In order for he and I’s arrangement to work, we had to know exactly what the other person had been doing in the outside world at all times. It was imperative that we could pass any inquiry put to us about the other. We’d created ways to get around times where this would break down based on certain “side effects” of the *Severing*, but the less we had to rely on that, the better.

I caught him up to speed on my end of things, at least as far as the facts went; I preferred to keep my reservations about Jade to myself. I wasn’t normally this reticent with him; after Skye passed away, he was the closest thing I had to a friend. Still, sometimes one grows tired of having to tell everything to another person, especially when it’s something as vague and often wrong as an “off” feeling.

He followed up with the current mark for the night.

“Tranly Credo,” he stated, tossing a folder onto the table, a picture clipped to the front. The man in the image looked sort of like a weasel transformed to a human, with slicked back dark hair and dark pin pricks for eyes.

“Doesn’t look familiar,” I said carefully.

“Shouldn’t,” Wraith shrugged. “Natural born. Wasn’t at the Razor. Came in with Sker’s formation of the Guild.”

Dulcian Sker had been the killer that made serial killers a commodity after the Fall. Seeing the death tolls and realizing the lack of prey would be bad for business, he founded the official “Reaper Union,” encouraging killers and psychopaths the world over to come to his banner. Most of these had been the unpolished Natural Born Killers (or as the families called them, “the mongrels” or “the bastard born”), as opposed to the bred and indoctrinated *Severed*.

“Yeah,” I nodded, somewhat sadly. “It’s hard to make a legitimate go of it when you don’t get any training.”

While some Natural Born had been discovered and pressed into service before the Fall, The Razor became much more selective once there was a larger pool of candidates, starting a year ago. Now it was almost impossible for a Natural Born to get in without one of the Houses’ backing.

“Yes,” Wraith nodded, his eyes shielded on the subject. He was one of the few bastards to be brought in before the Fall. He’d joined their Deathdealer program, because it was the only path his personal code would permit. He had become such a force in the field, that, upon graduation, he’d been hired to the program and, just two years later, was running it entirely.. “But this kid probably wouldn’t have gotten better with training. He’s a *Blood Picasso*. 18 killed.”

He dropped a photo of a group of children; all had been butchered, their flesh and eviscera reformed into a geometric formation by a demented mind. I blanched and looked away as his deft hand made the photo vanish back into the folder. Knowing my torture empathy was just one of the secrets I carried, he wouldn't force me to see the others, for which I was grateful.

“Are we thinking Bloodborn?” I asked. The Bloodborn were genetic—or, occasionally, Severing anomaly—deviants in the Reapers whose taste for blood escalated far faster than any other serial killer, going into a killing frenzy like a battle berserker, but with a taste for actual murder that was lacking in the berserkers. Because they were set off by their first taste of blood and escalated until they were destroyed, they were often called “Bloodbombs” or, due to the fact that they would sleep hard during the day after a killing spree and then wake ravenous for blood the next night: “Vamps.” In the chaos of the Fall, there were rumors of entire cities being slaughtered by individual Bloodborn Reapers. Bloodborn had to be put down like rabid dogs. Without exception.

“Extremely high probability,” Wraith frowned and nodded slowly. “The Blood Picasso thing is a bit of an anomaly as Ravens are usually so blood mad that they don't usually take the time to create monuments, but, if this was the first night he actually tasted blood, these might be remnants of past M.O. This was just last night in the Gotique.”

The Barri Gotique—“Gothic Quarter”—was the oldest area of Barcelona and part of the cramped streets and alleys known as the Warrens. The Warrens were a great place to die, because visibility was so limited.

“Why on earth would so many children be there?” I asked softly, saddened by the carnage I’d seen and confused by how it could occur.

“Didn’t you hear?” He looked at me strangely. “Our emperor’s great demonstration?”

I shook my head, dumbly. I learned the things I had to know through my clients and the people I interviewed, but was pretty oblivious to much more. Mag managed to keep track of all the “other” things that happened in the city and the world through an arcane method of sources that should’ve been impossible without pre-Fall social media.

“Mag decided to showcase the safety he’d instilled in the Gotique,” Wraith’s eyes sparked dangerously, igniting the blue-gray irises of his cosmetic contacts as though they were his actual eyes. If it weren’t for his code, I knew there’d be a very good chance that he would’ve slaughtered the dictator for this. “He approved a group of Cymbrogi to lead their children on a midnight memory walk, supposedly to remember their roots. Skeleton group of mag-men to protect them because ‘the city was virtually crime free.’”

“They never had a chance against a blood-cranked Vamp in the Warrens,” I shook my head in disbelief.

“Obviously, the powers that be have kept this off the radars, but this has to be dealt with now,” the assassin concluded darkly. “It’s a major black eye to Magnanimous, so he’s got to show how brutally he’ll deal with the problem.”

“Of course,” I scowled. “Only one way to deal with a black eye to Caesar.”

“The cross,” the devout assassin bit out. I knew he hated ever surrendering anyone to the cruelty that his god suffered, but it wasn’t like the murderer didn’t deserve it.

“You know what that means,” I stressed. This wasn’t a time for playing fast and loose; normally he kept his indestructible delusions in check, but, right now, I wouldn’t have bet on it.

“I know,” he stated coldly. “But I will drop him with enough K to put down an elephant.”

“Be careful not to kill him,” I stressed.

“But I’m paid to kill,” Wraith mocked darkly. “Why should I be paid *not* to kill?”

“You know what I mean,” I returned, nervously. At times like this I was reminded that—even though Wraith was my dearest friend and blood brother—he could be *and* was singularly terrifying. “By the numbers.”

“Of course,” he arched a brow. “But if he doesn’t stay down, I’ll have no choice but to increase the dose. They’d better have a good way of dealing with a Ketamine overdose, because bombs are like crank fiends to put down.”

“Are you on your meds?” I queried. The undercurrent of anger was a little more intense than the situation called for—even with the cross in question.

“Why do you always ask me that?” Wraith returned, his eyes sparking again. “You never ask me that when I’m calm, only when I show too much anger for your taste.”

“I...am...sorry.” I returned darkly. “But I nearly had my throat slashed by you in a fit of pique before you got on them. You’ll forgive me if I’m a little jumpy—and would just like to confirm you’re straight.”

“Yes.” He bit out, reigning back the anger so I could see he was in control. “I’m straight.”

That was as close as I was going to get to sanity from my guardian angel of death, so raised me hand in acceptance and to indicate I was changing the subject back to the task at hand.

“Let’s suppose he is a Bloodborn,” I mused. “If so, then he’ll be sleeping it off. What’s the estimated time of death?”

“No estimate,” Wraith pronounced, dispassionate analysis completely replacing the heat of anger a moment before. “One of Mag’s guards tried to call in at 2:12 am. Reinforcements arrived at 2:32. Everyone was dead.”

“Okay, since it’s under a score, let’s assume Double 8 principle,” I speculated, talking to order my own thoughts.

“Why?” My previous teacher returned in that question; again I was the first year student in his eyes.

“The blood lust escalates, requiring a greater number of kills before collapse,” I replied with concentration, wishing I had the memory he possessed. “Less than 20 killed, means double normal sleep required—or 16 hours—before waking.”

“If 78 had been killed?” He inquired. “What of 102?”

“75 to 100 is quadruple or 32 hours.” I responded slowly as the numbers and formulas percolated from the rusty recess of my memory. Sometimes he could get pedantic at the most annoying times—which was normally *my* quirk, so doubly irritating from him. “100 to 150 is technically quintuple...um...that’s 40 hours. But, with plus or minus five margin of error, it could be quadruple, so back to 32.”

“You *were* always my best student,” Wraith smiled tersely.

“So where are you going to look for him?” I asked impatiently. At 16 hours, if he had collapsed by 3, the bloodborn could wake up and start killing again in less than an hour.

“The railroad,” he shrugged.

There were always those who were willing to harbor non-reformed killers. Some romanticized them while others hoped one day to join them; however, the one who harbored a Vamp during a blood hibernation would wind up dead when the bomb woke up. Since this Underground Railroad was known to the Reaper community, but hidden from outsiders, a Reaper Control Officer was one of the few people who could try to plumb their depths and root out cancers like a Bloodborn.

“Alright, well keep me updated.” I sighed as he nodded.

He rose like a phantom and then, taking on the cadence of my stride, walked to the passage and left.

I had a lot to accomplish before I slept.

Chapter 7 **Hidden Betrayal**

7:47 AM, Friday

Stone Quarry (*Casa Milà*) Tower, Croc's Apartment

The pounding on the door snapped me from my sleep like a vibrating spike to the brain. A zombie, I threw my body into motion and dragged myself toward the entrance.

There was only one person who could gain access to my actual door without being able to get in. Only one person who would wake me up this early when he “*knew*” I’d been up late the night before.

“What is it, Van Zant?” I grunted through the intercom.

“I need to talk to you, Graham, let me in.” The surly voice of my handler demanded.

“It was a late night,” I stalled, depressing the microtransmitter/panic button which I always kept with me in my pocket. Not for the first time did I curse the fact that Wraith refused

any chip enhancements, as the type of communication I used to have with Skye would've been unbelievably helpful with him.

“I know, that's what I'm hear to talk about!” The man barked with an edge that meant he would force the issue in five seconds if I didn't let him in.

Inserting the activated microtransmitter into my left ear, I palmed the door open with my right to reveal Teller Van Zant, the copper-gone-silver haired bulldog of a detective the N.I.R. used to keep me in check. The Reaper Control program was under N.I.R. police supervision and, since that was the only game in town for Wraith and I, a handler came with the badge.

“Come in,” I mumbled, pretending to be more bleary than I actually was, stumbling toward the kitchen to get a glass.

“How is it we so often miss chatting with one another at your executions?” He strode in, his economic movements muting the rustling of his rough plaid suit.

“I don't know, just lucky I guess,” I snarked, grabbing a glass of iced tea from the fridge. I used to be a caf addict; tea was the last vestige of the drug I still permitted myself. I made a show of pouring out a pill from a prescription bottle on the counter. “If this is going to be an official interrogation, let me take my meds.”

He glared at me as I took the pill and slid into the booth-walled table that Wraith and I had used the previous night. He slid in across from me, drawing my attention to his tie, which was currently blood red. *That wasn't a good omen*, I thought.

“That’s right, I keep forgetting,” he grimaced. “That brain castration operation your people have scrambles your brain. “

“The Severing does not ‘*scramble our brains.*’ It’s not a lobotomy.” I returned tersely, speaking down to him in a way that I’d learned from my first professor at the Razor. ‘They will hate you,’ he had preached, ‘because they know you are superior to them. Never let them forget they are the lesser race through every mannerism and gesture.’ Although I actually kind of liked Van Zant, I didn’t know him well enough to hint at the truth of my secret, which meant he had to endure the same *full “Reaper-douche-bag”* routine as everyone else. “The Severing allows us to free ourselves from your emotional limitations. Of course, with such great power, there are always possibilities for complications, like my short term memory lapses.”

Since it was impossible for Wraith and I to perpetually be up to date on one another at all times, this subterfuge gave me a medical condition that required medication to correct. The time for the meds to “*kick in*” was coincidentally the same as the time for Wraith or I to get on the wireless transmitter and pass on necessary details to the one being questioned. So far, no one had questioned things sounding a bit “*foggy*” under this backstory.

“So, where is it?” He asked, his patience for small talk exhausted. Although a case earlier that year pertaining to some corrupt railroaders had kept Van Zant from proactively trying to crucify me, he still suspected that I had my own agenda.

“Do you think this is LSD? It doesn’t dissolve on the tongue!” I retorted narrowly, wishing I could mentally force my partner to start feeding me information. “I don’t even remember last night at the moment.”

That was closer to the truth than I wanted to admit. Obviously, I had no idea whether Wraith had been successful, as he only left notes or texts if something had gone seriously awry. His sleeping room was hidden from prying eyes for just these sorts of situations.

However, the truth was, I was having trouble remembering most of the research I’d done the previous night, either. I remembered looking for leads on the Jenna woman but couldn’t remember what, if anything, I’d found. Whenever I got less than six hours of sleep, my brain was unbelievably leaden. Fortunately, the fake memory drug I’d taken was a very real ADD medication that had been popularized before the Fall that speeds up the way the brain deals with data. It took awhile to hit the system, but my enhanced clarity under its effects definitely helped me sell the cover story of a drug improving my brain and helped me think my way out of things.

“I’m here.”

Wraith's voice sounded deep within my ear and, in its half-awake state, almost reminded me of Skye when she would call within my mind.

“Alright,” I yawned showily, doing a fair impersonation of a hungover movie starlet who's had their first screwdriver of the day and now feels just barely up to talking. “So what were you asking me before?”

“What you did with it?” He queried intensely, his green-gray eyes sparking with something I couldn't quite place.

“You'll need to be more specific than that,” I smirked, looking perplexed.

“The body?” Van Zant sounded like he was about to lose patience.

“I didn't do anything with it. Tranqued and tied up—took five darts, but he was alive. Left it on the corner of Ferran and Avinyo at 3:32 AM, flared. Standard.”

“I know my orders,” I gritted. “I dropped the mark with tranqs in the Barri, at the corner of Ferran and Avinyo. Major difference was I had to hog-tie him this time, obviously. But I flared it, just like always.”

“Uh-huh,” Van Zant glared. “And what time did you supposedly drop him?”

“Oh, ,” I played the deep thinking face. “Must’ve been 3:30, give or take a couple minutes.”

“And when did you leave?”

“3:36. Waited until I heard the cops, then headed out. I wasn’t going to see him come to, knowing he’s gonna get crossed.”

“About five minutes later—so 3:35-3:36,” I shrugged. “Listen, I waited until I heard your guys and then booked.”

“Why’d you book?” He came back on me.

“Because,” I shrugged, “I didn’t want to see him wake up, okay? I do one way tickets, not transfers. When I put them down, they’re just a package. That’s how I like it. Anything I put down shouldn’t be coming up unless it’s a zombie.”

“So you’re telling me from 3:35 until my men arrived at 3:40,” Van Zant snarled, “that someone stole the perp?”

“Apparently,” I said, horror sinking into my bones. I knew Wraith disagreed with this particular assignment, but I couldn’t believe he walked off before the cops arrived. This was the sort of thing that could finally drop me to the wolves, especially since Caesar would be breathing

blood over it. “But, like I said, I heard your guys at...like...3:36. I know the boys. When did you step onto the scene?”

“6 AM,” He glared daggers at me. “The flare was there and there were traces of blood...looked like transfer from whomever the mark had chomped on earlier...but no body.”

“Ah, hell,” I cursed. “Then you’ve got to have a railroader on your watch.”

“Really?” His eyes bulged with rage. “Four man team. They’re all railroaders?”

“Unlikely,” I had to admit. “You’re sure they all stayed together? No one broke on ahead?”

“Not that I can tell and I’ve ridden them hard,” Van Zant shook his head. “I admit, this isn’t like you, so I suspected them of a screw up first. It’s only when that didn’t turn up anything that I showed up here.”

“Teller, then I must’ve been followed,” I bit out, using his first name to show how serious I was. “Who knew about the mark last night?”

“Besides you and I?” He shrugged, a slight edge of confusion showing that he was more inclined to listen to me than he had been earlier. “I’m not sure. They try to keep this hush hush so nothing leaks.”

Gears were already turning in my brain.

“Who suggested the night vigil with those cymbrogi?” I asked, intuition flaring to life as to the questions without revealing what I was intuiting.

“I’m not sure,” he looked perplexed. “I had thought it was Magnanimous’ brain child, but, now that you mention it, it seems a bit strange.”

“Can you please check for me?” I asked, coming as close to begging as I could without stepping out of my Reaper persona.

“Listen, I’m supposed to take you in,” the man protested. “Not play your personal detective.”

“Teller, you’ve got to listen to me right now,” I stressed. “I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye but I think you’ve come to realize that I’m not the sort of reaper you hate. I know you’re the sort of guy who wants to see *actual* justice occur and it bites into you when you have to toe the line on stuff that you despise. Even if I’m wrong and you don’t give a damn, look at it from your own self-interest. This is the sort of screw up that will earn us *both* a trip to the cross—me for apparently freeing a personal death mark of Caesar’s and you for allowing it to happen. You take me in and we’ll never get out of the Familia until we go to the coliseum to get fitted for the Iron Rood.”

The detective's eyes narrowed, but I could see the confirmation of his own suspicions there.

"Call in and let them know I'm in the wind." I stressed, bending toward the man.

"They'll just tell me to come in," he returned quickly. There was no way he was going down without me going down, too.

"Tell them you're in pursuit and have some leads based on my previous known associates. Don't tell them what those are!" I instructed. "That'll buy us some time."

"For what?" He murmured.

"For you to find out who suggested the vigil and let me know," I responded quickly. "Then for me to shake the trees and find out what falls loose."

"But how do I reach you?" He asked, looking at me in concern.

I held up my hand for him to wait and then went to the hall closet, where a trapdoor slid aside to my touch and revealed a stash of phones. I grabbed two and the two cards with them.

“Okay, these have been programmed to work in the local Cell grid,” I rattled off, tossing him a phone. “It was a burner before the Fall and it’s completely invisible now. Text me with the information then destroy the phone.”

I handed him the card that came with my burner, while holding onto his in case I needed to text him before he texted me.

“This is the number?” He grunted, reading the card.

“Program it into speed dial slot 1,” I commanded. “You’ll need to send it quickly and get rid of it. Now, get lost.”

“Alright,” he agreed, the confusion overriding his anger at my dismissal, walking slowly out of the apartment as I closed the door behind him.

I hoped he’d follow my instructions well. Otherwise, we’d would find ourselves fighting off every Deathdealer that Wraith ever trained...plus any Reapers Mag decided to bounty us out to.

Chapter 8

Fled

8:45 AM, Friday

Stone Quarry (*Casa Milà*) Tower, Croc's Apartment

The realization that I would have to flee my home rankled me far more than I had expected it would as Teller's words washed over me in the wake of his passing. However, it was the only thing we could do until the identity and location of my enemy was made clear; guilt was assumed in the empire and there'd be no proving otherwise from inside a prison cell.

"We knew this might happen," Wraith shrugged as we worked through the strategy a few minutes later at the same table Teller had delivered the news.

"Of course," I agreed grimly. "But that doesn't mean I'm any happier that it has to happen! Not to mention, how are two high value targets going to vanish in New Barcelona right under Mag's nose?"

“You forget, only one of us has to vanish,” Wraith smiled enigmatically, “I’m a phantom that vanished when I left the Razor.”

“Yes.” I nodded, my eyes narrowing. “And?”

“No one connects me to you after you graduated. With enrollment on a downward in the Deathdealer program since my departure, my former employers would kill to know where I am,” his smile widened. “So, if they were to get tipped off that I were flying in from Italy in a couple of days under my actual name, well...”

“That would be so uncharacteristic as to be construed as a message,” I continued following his train of thought as the meds finally kicked in, “that you want to discuss reinstatement or, at the very least, some short term work.”

“Like a temporary lecturer who has some reason to be home for a little while,” he arched his brows. “And why would they care if I had in my employ a mute African slave I had picked up on my journeys? If we’re lucky, maybe I’ll even be assigned to hunt you down.”

“Oh, you are a bastard,” I glared, although I had to admit that it was an ingenious proposition. And of course, the fact that I would now have to be the one playing *persona non grata* to his real identity would only be a perk for him. “Turnabout is fair play, is that it?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” He remarked blandly, although his eyes sparked with something like amusement.

Psychopathy is a lot like color-blindness. People just assume that color-blind people can’t see any colors, but only a portion of people who are technically color-blind see things as just shades of gray; the others just have restricted awareness of colors or certain palettes. Likewise, people assume that psycho- and sociopaths have no emotions whatsoever, but, the truth is, there are many variations with some having access to many emotions and others having access to very few. The most common have access to the majority of darker emotions—rage, hate, envy, lust—with a much more limited connection to brighter emotions—love, compassion, trust, etc. Humor could go either way, but there was no doubt that Wraith had a sense of humor, especially to my eyes who got to see the truly dark shades his could take. Of course, it could be argued that Wraith’s actions modeled more evidences of light emotions than many supposedly normal people, since he chose his path of action based on his faith.

I’d always admired his self control and determination. In many ways, he seemed more human than I who, despite how I was raised, had few emotional handicaps beyond *“that which is common to man,”* as they say.

The short term plans confirmed, he used my computer to trigger a pre-set that would beep an associate from the airport to make the necessary alerts go out from the travel grid, which in turn would notify the Razor that he’d be arriving the following Monday. For someone who was as much a ghost as Wraith to travel anywhere under his real name would force them to send out a

liaison to see if their beloved Deathdealer was looking to un-retire. The cachet of his name alone was just too much of a lure in the Reaper community for them to resist being able to put him on the list of current lecturers. Of course, that was pre-supposing the Razor had managed to keep out of the Machiavellian politics of Magnanimous. If they were under his thumb, then there could be a death squad to meet us, although I personally believed that, if they were compromised, they'd wait to kill Wraith until after he'd killed a high value target like me. After all, if you've got a sharpshooter contest and Annie Oakley's on your team, you don't kill her until after she wins the thing for you.

With the balls in motion, Wraith unveiled just how much of a master of makeup and disguise he could be, turning us into two African cleaners. He'd made me stouter and heavier than he and, with some simple slouching, I shrank to 5'10, while he wore lifts to transform him into a 6'4" Ethiopian that would be seen as a gangly giant here in the short-statured city of New Barcelona. While this flew in the face of blending in, the reality was that, while it made us easily noticed, it made us easily ignored by people trying to find a white loaner. Our being a duo further helped the disguise, since it was unimaginable to our pursuers that anyone would willingly follow me into hiding from Caesar.

When my sister had traded her loft to me, I'd forced her to reveal all the modifications she'd made. (*Forcing the Banshee to do anything was a feat of legend, but when you know where all the bodies are buried, literally, it can give you a "leg up" on negotiations.*) One of the modifications she'd made was a secret passage that cut through a number of switchbacks and

doglegs to lead to one of the special “Help” doors—reserved for the cleaning, wait, and bus staff that were still in use in the building.

It was through this passage that we made our escape, after we’d first locked away and hidden any remnants that could reveal our identities or be used against us. The irony that I’d acquired my place by helping Sidhe avoid running from Mag’s men only to replace her in a man-hunt month’s later was not lost on me.

Timing our escape with the changing of the shift, we were able to blend in with a mixed group of maintenance workers headed into the Barri and vanish.

Chapter 9

Any Port In A Storm

10:12 PM, Friday

Barri Gotique, Tomas Calvin's House

“I’m...uh...not hiring right now...er...friends,” the broad, salt-and-peppered man greeted us with confusion when we banged on his door, dark eyes glinting suspiciously above his hawk nose and Cossack beard. Only a merchant like Tomas would open a door to strangers in the Gotique at night; although, at least now he had five chains securing the door’s opening to a scarce foot of width.

“Tomas! Open the damn door.” I barked.

“Croc??” Tomas’ eyes narrowed incredulously, then he began busily releasing locks to bring us into his fortress-like home.

Of the Underground Railroaders who owed me a blood debt, Tomas Calvin’s was probably one of the biggest. In a case less than a year ago, he, his wife, and his three children had un-

wittingly taken in a serial killing pedophile that called himself the Gray Death. I had figured out the home the killer had gone to ground in through a series of leads and Wraith was able to intervene after he'd tied up the family, but, fortuitously, before he could start raping and killing Tomas' children.

I didn't even want to know the sort of torture that Wraith had made sure that the killer had gone through before he'd slaughtered him. All I know is that Vincent, my then-handler, had sent me a congratulations card, as apparently, the "Gray Death's body" hadn't had a single bone still connected when they found it. Wraith had refused to talk about it when I tried to probe, so it'd been allowed to lie.

Tomas, whose family had also been spared from witnessing Wraith's response to the would-be killer, had done everything he could to help me with my work since then. Since he was a merchant who dealt on all sides of the line—from N.I.R. sanctioned to greymarket to full on blackmarket—he was a font of exclusive information and the only one I would trust when the heat was on.

As we were ushered into Tomas' inner sanctum—a cross between an American man-cave and a fallout shelter—I thought back to the tiring day we'd survived.

After infiltrating the Barri, we'd paid visits to a number of other railroaders to see if anyone knew anything about someone following me or had heard rumors about any new shotcallers who might benefit from me being on the endangered species list. Nothing had surfaced so we

had bided our time in a few hostels made of transients where we would go unnoticed, waiting for a text from Teller that, of course, never came. After nightfall, when we could make sure we weren't followed, we elected to come to Tomas, as his was the only place either of us would've been willing to gamble on going to ground until Monday morning, when we'd be pulling our airport appearance stunt.

“So my new Ethiopian friends,” Tomas' chortled when we sank into the pillowy leather couches that furnished his office, “what brings you to my door so late at night?”

I caught Tomas up to speed on the issues that faced us, melding mine and Wraith's observations into a single personal narrative, making pointedly sure to not introduce or reference my companion at all. Tomas didn't ask any questions. You didn't stay alive in his line of work without knowing that any extra information was a liability that was just begging to be extracted from you by either the NIR torturers or the Razor-trained Blood Readers.

“So you haven't heard anything from your handler?” Tomas puzzled, readjusting his ill-fitting crimson bathrobe as he thought.

“Not a thing,” I leaned forward. “I was hoping you might have some news that could help me figure out who's got it in for me.”

“I haven't heard anything specific, mind you,” he bit his lip thoughtfully, “but I have heard that there's a move related to the Keys.”

“Which keys?” I asked, irritated that the meds had worn off a number of hours earlier and it was harder for me to think again.

“The ones to reboot the web,” Tomas replied quickly, then, seeing that his explanation hadn’t clarified things, he slowed down. “Before the Fall, the U.S. government authorized a group to create a failsafe in case they had to shut down the internet. Seven keycards were made and distributed around the world, with the understanding that, if the web were to collapse, five of the seven would carry the unified information to reboot the ‘net. They used to call the guys who had them, ‘The Internet Illuminati,’ after those secret--”

“Rebooted? From anywhere?” I interrupted, incredulous.

“Not originally,” he shook his head quickly. “Originally it had to be from one of two locations in the United States that the five would be assembled at.”

“But not now?” I surmised from his wording.

“Right.” He nodded emphatically. “The rumors I heard are that, right before the Fall, someone hacked their system and created a reboot node in Europe.”

“Who?” I asked, wondering how this could connect to me, but feeling an overwhelming dread that it was in the mix.

“A bunch of people were rumored,” he shrugged. “The ones I heard that seemed most likely were the guys who attacked that Iranian nuclear weapons plant before the Fall.”

“I heard that was the Israelis,” I frowned.

“That’s the standard theory,” he shrugged, “I’ve also heard that some of the team was from the U.S., which would’ve simplified things for infiltrating and cloning the node.”

“Okay, so what’s this move that you think my connect with me?” I asked, confused.

“Bear with me, my friend—I’ll get to that soon.” he arched his brows. “The rumor is that Mag has five of the keys and he’s planning to reboot the web, which would give him access to the greatest collection of information ever assembled.”

It would turn Mag from a feared leader of a powerful kingdom to the gatekeeper of knowledge of the pre-Fall world. Even though the pool of computers that could be utilized would be much smaller, the amount of information that had been redistributed before the Fall would insure much of it could be reaccessed or rebuilt.

I let the implications of that roll over me as I waited for him to continue.

“Now the rumor that I think could connect to you is that there’s a rumor that someone’s trying to steal the keys,” Tomas went on intently. “That they may have already secured at least one of the less well protected ones. However, I’m guessing they’re gonna need a pretty big diversion to pull off cloning the others under Mag’s nose.”

“Like a John Wilkes Booth-style manhunt,” I breathed, shaking my head.

“A what?” He looked at me in confusion.

“It’s an old American thing I read about,” I shook my head. “They had this president that navigated a civil war and was considered the best leader in their history. Then, at the height of his power, this guy—Lincoln—goes to see a play and this actor—John Wilkes Booth—strolls into the guy’s box, executes him, jumps to the stage, and runs away. The manhunt was legendary, distracted the country, and, in the midst of the chaos, a horrible president came to power. Nearly destroyed the country.”

“Wow. Strange stuff you learn in history.” He shook his head, repositioning himself with a faint creak of leather. “But it sounds dead to rights to what you’re looking at.”

“Make sure that Mag’s honor is so tied up into tracking and slaughtering me that everything else gets put on hold,” I breathed. “And you would have a big window to heist the cards.”

“And with that kind of power at their disposal after the heist,” he nodded sadly, “they might have a major chance to stage a coup d’état.”

“*‘The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,’*” I snarked coldly. “I don’t mind the blood of one particular tyrant nourishing some roots, but I’ll be damned if I’m gonna be the dead patriot.”

“Better to be a live fugitive,” Tomas nodded energetically. “What can I do to help you, my friend?”

“Tap your network and find out who stands to gain the most from this,” I stated, my eyes narrowing. “If we can find the person who’s pulling the strings here, maybe we can get my record expunged.”

“Let us hope,” Tomas agreed.

I glanced at Wraith, who was as silent as his namesake. Only the glittering of his eyes hinted at how dangerous he was or what he would do to the people who had put us in harm’s way.

Chapter 10

Sisters

2:28 PM, Saturday

La Ribera, Palau de la Musica Catalana

I stopped at the edge of the Carrer de Sant Francesc de Paula, pretending to listen to the foot traffic around me but, in reality, taking a moment to allow the majesty of the opera house to flow over me. The statues cornering the Palau rose toward the sky, angelic reminders of my own lost guardian and, with a bitter pang, the women who destroyed her.

I shook the impotent rage from my mind before shuffling forward, the awkward violin case rubbing against my thigh as I rapped a white cane in front of me. Wraith's transformation of me into a well-known blind violinist was impeccable and, until I removed the dark glasses to reveal my sighted eyes, my sister would have no idea that I was not another of her musical entertainers. My tux and white gloves would show the guards that I was just arriving early for a performance later that evening, while Wraith had worked his magic early this morning to guarantee that the real Donatello Tormande wouldn't be arriving until after I left.

I was alone because I needed Wraith to work the leads he had at the Razor and because, in all honesty, I wasn't sure if I was on a wild goose chase or not.

I still hadn't heard from my handler and Tomas would be tapping his contacts today, so I wanted to try to see if there was anything my sister knew about things. She had far more reasons to want me destroyed than she had personalities, so she was a prime suspect in anything that would turn me into a fugitive—especially since the Quarry would be hers for the asking if I didn't clear myself quickly.

I bobbed my head as though listening to music in my head as I moved, waiting until my staff clanked the golden doors of the turnstile to stop.

“Donatello Tormande.” I grunted, fumbling off the white glove that covered my right hand. A beautiful faux tattoo of an Ouroboros—the snake swallowing its own tail—had been applied to encircle my hand. It was Tormande's most recognized feature and the Spanish guards grunted in relief. “Want to get in some early practice before the Lady Sidhe's performance.”

They grunted affirmation and I walked through the rotating cylinder, feeling like a Russian roulette bullet being chambered. I hoped that wasn't a bad sign.

My sister Sidhe—pronounced “she,” like the Celts—was not unlike a cat. It seemed as though every platform that could not support her largesse became the springboard to even more staggering heights in her life.

When she'd lost the Quarry to me, she'd moved to an even more palatial home in the form of Barcelona's opera house, Palau de la Musica Catalana. Considered by most to be the most beautiful building in Barcelona, the only reason my father claimed he hadn't chosen to reside there himself is "because it was not designed by Gaudi." The Reapers consider Gaudi almost as much a saint as Vlad, claiming his art inspired them to kill more beautifully. Considering the faith of the man they revered, I doubt the artist turned architect would take their devotion as a compliment.

The fact that, despite his prior statements about Gaudi, my father ended up choosing to live in a building designed by Josep Puig i Cadafalch that happened to be a showpiece on le Diagonal was sadly typical for him; make grand statements of intent and then take that which proved more convenient and ostentatious, regardless of how it lined up with his prior statements.

Making my way through the empty passages of the concert hall, I finally discovered the dressing rooms. Sidhe had, of course, enlarged the already magnificent rooms when she'd come to live here. I suspected her three harpies had chosen to live so close to the music as a reminder of their destruction of Skye, whose love of music I knew all too well.

"State your business," a large black security guard asked, his presence alerting me to the fact I was now entering the area Banshee was actually residing in.

“Donatello.” I sighed wearily, lifting my still bare hand to show my ink. “I am performing a new aria tonight and I must ask the lady a few things about which she would prefer.”

The muscle looked confused. I could tell he was an American refugee who was still struggling with the language, “Umm...I thought that’s singing.”

“Yes, yes,” I muttered, actually taken aback that he’d known that most arias were vocal solos. Perhaps he wasn’t as stupid as his inability with the language might imply. “Normally it is, but this is my masterwork...a violin aria that will make Chopin roll over in his grave! But it is intensely personal and I must confirm a few necessary restrictions if I am to perform them.”

“Umm...ok,” the man worked to translate everything and then nodded. He patted me down, but, of course, found nothing. The long metal pike hidden in the walking stick was made from a composite that wouldn’t trip any metal detectors that weren’t triggered by the aluminum of the stick itself; Tomas’ contribution to today’s foray.

“You may leave me, Vincent.” Sidhe dismissed the bodyguard with a shrug of her shoulders and a wave of her hands, without rising from a silver gilt couch that she reclined in. I couldn’t help wondering which play this was a prop from; although, knowing how my sister was with money, it was equally possible she’d blown a king’s ransom to have it crafted for her.

Willowy with brown hair that hung past her shoulders, she wore a form fitting black and silver gown with silver flats. Her fashion style was the stuff of legend and, although always memorable and strikingly well put together, she was very concerned that it not appear overly ostentatious or flashy. It wouldn't do for her style to cross into the gaudy territory of the "new blood," who were uniformly looked down on by the old blood as upstarts and hated by the bastards for their rise above their means.

The bodyguard started to object but, then, seeing something in his mistress' eyes, he hurried out of the room, closing the door respectfully behind.

Her eyes were hollow as she appraised me and I wondered who would greet me from within.

"Hey Croc, whatcha doin' here?" the words were indolent, compounded by a provocative twist to her tongue. *Lorraine...*

Her perception of my identity shocked me back into my memories.

My father anticipated that I and my sister would be the first of a glorious new generation of interconnected assassins who could move like a well-oiled killing machine. To accomplish this, I was to have a chipset embedded during my childhood Severing that would allow me to commune with my sister. However, when Skye managed to subvert my father's plans for my Severing, she also managed to cripple the access that Banshee's

other personas had to the link and made sure that the surgeon adjusted the implant I received to a very narrow bandwidth. Effectively, it had given her a secure link to me alone, which she had used to help me on my path. Until, of course, Loraine, Tamra, and Isolde had become mutually aware of one another five years ago and, eventually, tracked down Skye. She'd been able to warn me when they grabbed her, assuring me she'd keep my secret and our connection secure, even if she had to take it "into oblivion." After that, Skye was gone, leaving a hole in my soul.

For months afterwards, I had waited for them to crack into my soul, once she was gone and couldn't protect me any longer, but it never came. As there was no way to use a direct copertop link and leave the recipient unaware, eventually I'd come to realize that she had taken her secret to the grave; that the others must not be able to crack the link. I had assumed that meant that the others couldn't access any of the other sensory information attached to the link, but, as the sudden revelation proved, I was clearly wrong.

My questionable intuition hinted that they could only sense proximity, but, even if that was true, it had been enough for me to be caught off balance—and my reaction had doubtless confirmed what might easily have been a shot in the dark. I could only hope that my misjudgment wouldn't prove fatal, as there was no way I could summon Wraith in time to save me from my sister.

She patted the couch and eyed me hungrily, her eyes sparking at me as though I was a piece of tenderloin. She rose in such a fluid way that her dress must have been specially de-

signed with hidden pleats and folds, or it would've torn itself to pieces with her movement. The gracefulness of her exertion made me hopeful that I'd been wrong about Loraine, that I'd lucked out and gotten Isolde, the least insane of my sister's personas.

Isolde was a Siren who specialized in Aikido and killed with a Garotte, and, like most sirens, she believed that most things were about give and take; giving what your mark wanted until you took their life. She may have been just as deadly as her sisters, but at least there was a chance I could get information before I had to defend myself.

However, as she came closer, I realized that her kinesis was less that of a lithe dancer and much more the oiled, leonine movements of the bloodthirsty alpha. She pulled close to me, her right hand closing on my throat, a feral cross between seduction and destruction. She licked up my throat hungrily, setting my hair on end with an overwhelming nausea and shattering my momentary hopes.

"I'm not sure my sister would appreciate you using her body to seduce her brother, Loraine," I suggested, my right ridge hand circling like a clock and knocking her hand from my throat as I brushed past her and sat in the love seat's far side.

"You really don't get it, Croc! What being a shatterbrain is?" Her eyes flared as she re-materialized on the couch. *Loraine hated not getting what she wanted.* "Shatterbrains don't let unneeded personalities sit around, taking up space, and stinking up the joint. We cast dice to deter-

mine who would absorb every useful piece and then we devoured her until the only thing left was a few extra rivets and bobbins that we dropped in the trash.”

I had suspected that they'd destroyed Skye, but it was awful to hear the details of her cannibalization.

“*She's* gone,” she purred, her voice grating strangely over the pronoun. “We're all there is. So, until I let one of my sisters takes over this shell, I get to take whatever I want. And I want you...”

She slid to her knees, putting an aggressive finger on my chest; I stood up, knocking her away again, putting some of the rage I felt at her taunts into the blow. However, there was no way I was going to be able to manhandle a krav magav gunslinger like Loraine—especially with only a hidden pike as a weapon—so I had to hope I could get through to Isolde.

I rose so suddenly that she lost her balance and fell off the couch, landing gracelessly for once in her life. From the floor she looked up at me with smoldering hate.

"If you run into Isolde," I retorted brightly, turning on my heel, "tell her to call me."

I threw the card with the burner number to her, knowing that she wouldn't turn it into Mag until she'd considered how she might be able to use it for her own personal vengeance. Depending on what she decided, she might actually let Isolde make the call.

"Do you ever wonder what she told us?" Loraine spit cold venom, her words locking my heart in my throat.

Her words jabbed a knife through my soul. *The only person she could be referring to was Skye.*

"What she confessed before we locked her in the cage?"

The cage?

"You wanna hear her scream?" Loraine shook with demonic glee.

She wasn't dead? My brain reeled with the implication.

"I can do it. A direct feed straight from the cage!" Loraine practically glowed with dark joy. "Your precious little Skye tortured for our entertainment!"

That couldn't be right. Loraine had just said, "She's gone... We're all there is." Or had she?

Realization instinctually seared through me. Loraine's stress on the word "*she*." Not she, but *Sidhe*. "*Sidhe's* gone. We're all there is."

The stupid bitch had given me the one piece of knowledge that I hadn't even known I was seeking.

Skye was still alive.

I locked my emotions in a vice as I heard the ragged screams come out of the Banshee's throat and turned on my heel, dying inside to hear my true sister wailing like the damned, but knowing I couldn't let the others see what Skye had bought for me with her freedom.

I just had to hope I could figure out a way to free her from whatever cage she was in.

Chapter 11 **Connecti**

5:38 PM, Saturday

Barri Gotique, Tomas Calvin's House

How I got back to Tomas' house, I'm not sure. I was in a daze that I had thought I could never be in again. The revelation from my twisted sister set a fire in my gut that could barely be extinguished and left the world feeling transformed, even though nothing had physically changed about my predicament.

As I entered his study, I found my soul companion still busily searching the local networks on an old tube screen computer, his false face sponging up the watery illumination while his eyes glowed with it.

“So how did it go?” He asked without looking up, his fingers dancing across the keyboard.

“Fine.” I said, unwilling to talk unless I had his full attention. I knew from experience that, despite his assurances to the opposite, he wasn't likely to remember a conversation clearly if he was multitasking; even if he could have, it was too distracting for me to do it.

“Almost done,” he said, glancing up with the tracing of a smile on his lips. He may not understand much in the way of emotions, but he knows me well enough to know that I appreciate him making an effort.

Before he could finish, though, our host burst through the doorway, closing the door and turning the antique key to keep our meeting secure from small trespassers, as well as sliding in the soundproofing connector panels to make sure we were safe from eavesdropping.

“It's good that you are both here, I have news,” Thomas gushed without preamble, throwing himself into his chair as though attempting to destroy it. The worn leather, however, barely creaked, despite his harsh interaction with it.

“Really?” I asked, seating myself in the leather couch I had occupied the night before. Wraith rose silently from his seat and sat down on the other side of the couch, doing an amazingly good impersonation of deference towards both me and our host. I would have to learn from his example if I was to stay alive once we got to the Razor.

“First off, I have to say that this was not news that just anyone could stumble upon,” Thomas licked his lips, looking extremely pleased with himself. *This meant the long version of this*

story. “In fact, all of my normal contacts proved of no use whatsoever. No one knows who might have tried to set you up in this manner, for it would require too much inside information at too high a level.”

I nodded, having expected as much. It was too much to hope that this information could so easily be tapped.

“However, where things became interesting was as I tapped my connections in the Travellers,” his eyes sparked as he said it, eyebrows shooting up.

The Travellers were one of the most uneasy alliances that Mag had brokered for the NIR. Tracing their roots to Irish Tinkers and a number of other Gypsy tribes, the Travellers had been least effected by the communication crashes surrounding the Fall and, because their ethics were very fluid when it came to anyone not of their local tribe or clan, they had had few qualms about letting outsiders die in the riots while they cherrypicked tech and secrets in the chaos.

After the Fall, many had been persecuted and slaughtered by anti-Tech regimes, but Mag had realized his need of them and given them places to conduct legitimate trade. That they were a front for any number of black market operations—including the brokering of national secrets, illicit brain chips, and, perhaps most treacherous, perfect replica skinning services—was an open secret. The NIR tried to squash as many of these other pursuits as they could, but they had to walk delicately lest they burn bridges completely with the clans.

“One of the northern clan leaders had a report come in that the NIR sent a mysterious troop past the northern edge of their territory,” he continued.

“Hmmm...” I pursed my lips. “Magnanimous doesn’t like to put himself in a vulnerable place. Fewer things are more vulnerable than a small group sent into the badlands.”

“That’s the point,” Tomas seemed near to bursting. “This group brought along a convoy of empty trucks and just a skeleton battalion to keep it safe. And no Reapers.”

“None?” I asked incredulous. “Not even Blood Bonds?”

The Blood Bonds were given a modified variation of the Severing that included a death chip that tied their lives to the one they were bonded to. Caesar used them as his personal guards. They’d never failed him and, as such, he always sent a few along on dangerous missions, especially those of personal importance to the Empire.

“No.” He confirmed. “Which means...”

“...He couldn’t even trust the most loyal of the Reapers,” I finished, feeling strangely disconcerted to see the tension and distrust that most thought had dissipated between the NIR and the Reapers brought so blatantly to light.

“Or he had something here that made him fear for his life more,” Tomas arched a brow. “Either way, it’s very unusual.”

I nodded, letting him continue. Out of the corner of my eye, I glanced at Wraith. He was perfectly in character, not showing even a glimpse of his true nature. A part of me found it strangely funny to think that Tomas had actually only dealt with me a couple of times in all of his encounters with “Croc.” Most of them, including the one that had made us friends, had actually happened with the quiet black man at the other end of the couch.

“Supposedly they were on their way to find the lost Trumpf warehouse,” his eyes sparked with excitement.

“Which is...?” I arched, noting his disappointment that I didn’t know what must have been some sort of urban legend in his field. “Pretend I’m not a black marketeer.”

“Oh, sorry,” he chuckled, clearly abashed. “What do you know about 3D printing?”

“The basics,” I shrugged, jogging my mind. “It was supposed to revolutionize the world before the Fall. Basically, printers that print objects made of plastic or composite with a laser or something.”

“Essentially,” he nodded. “Unlike other forms of manufacture, it doesn’t remove material, but pipes out whatever material you’re using and builds it from the ground up. Sort of like building a house out of icing...”

“Icing?” I asked, trying to visualize and failing.

“Sorry, my wife does cake decorating...” He shook the concept off with a wave of his hand. “Essentially, you just build whatever item you want layer by layer, so there’s no waste. No specialty tools are needed, other than a computer.”

“That’s kind of a specialty tool these days,” I pointed out.

“Bear with me.” He spread his hands like a storyteller trying to regain control of his tale. “Before the Fall, there was a company in America called Skee-ah-kee...S-C-I-A-K-Y...Sciaky. Anyway, they had come up with the holy grail of 3D printing: unmanned metal printing.”

That pricked my imagination.

“Metal printing had existed in various versions for quite awhile,” he continued, “but it was a time consuming process that involved curing and a bunch of other steps. But Sciaky came up with a printer that used an electron beam to make fully functional metal pieces, prototypes, and complete machines as large as, oh, I’d guess 4 feet wide by about 20 feet long. Not just basic metals like steel, but with any metal...even titanium. They had all sorts of contracts with

the American military and the aerospace guys, so every other company was trying to come up with their own versions.”

“I’d suppose so,” I nodded, my mental gears chugging.

“Sciaky’s manufacturing base was right outside of Chicago and, as far as we can tell, were completely destroyed in the riots during the Fall, since they were a major target of the anti-tech group known as the Knights of Xeno,” Tomas arched a brow, growing more animated as he spoke. “But in Germany, a company called Trompf had been creating laser-based systems and had come up with an electron beam system that was supposed to do single pieces as big as 8 feet wide by 22 feet long. It could pump out between 10-30 pounds of precision metal work per hour, or, at least, that was what the rumors said. Do you know how much metal that is? I mean, can you imagine how cool it would be to have something like that at your personal disposal? You could make the most incredible chair—or the most amazing car—practically make you a king if you--”

“Focus, Tomas,” I commented gently, knowing where this would go if I didn’t intervene.

“Right, right...sorry,” he nodded, physically seeming to shift his brain back into gear. “Anyway, rumor had it that, to avoid official trade embargoes, they had done an entire deal under the radar as proof of concept—we’re talking an entire shipment of printers, along with computers, printing materials, and some prototype multitaskers—to one of the no-trade countries.

They hid all the stuff in a secret warehouse right before the Fall and, as far as anyone knows, it vanished.”

“Why would people think it ‘vanished’?” I queried speculatively. “Why wouldn't the natural assumption be that it had been destroyed.”

“Oh, their normal facilities were thrashed and looted during the Fall,” he agreed, holding back a gust of excitement, “but, if this cache had been seized or destroyed, it would’ve made serious waves with the people I do business with. No, somehow, its location got 'lost' in the chaos and nothing surfaced about this warehouse...until now.”

“Your saying that was where the NIR was headed?” I surmised.

“Exactly,” he nodded. “Can you imagine what sort of game changer it would be for the NIR to gain control of this sort of plunder AND reboot the internet? The printers that work with metal can use any form of 3D design to create vehicles, weapons, or even more printers!”

“And let me guess...” I breathed, my chest constricting with the implications.

“The plans were all on the internet?! Bingo,” Tomas nodded, his eyes still flaring brightly. “With a few power plants, whoever had control of both could rewrite the world as we know it.”

“A total game changer,” I repeated his words, feeling sick. If Mag had control of these and the keys to reboot the internet, he would be able to march over top of anyone who stood in his way. “But how did they find out where the warehouse was?”

“Apparently, the German who found that agent last week had his fingers in a few more pies,” he shrugged.

“What?” I asked, my curiosity peeked out of my dazedness. “What agent?”

“Officially, they grabbed a foreign spy a week ago or so and are interrogating whomever it is,” Tomas confided. “Unofficially, the snatch and grab’s supposed to have something to do with these cards for the internet. After all, a million crosses a card is a hell of an incentive.”

“So the German came for the reward, maybe?” I thought out loud, still feeling like my brain was made of rubber.

“That’s the way I figure it, but I’m guess he decided to see what else he could get while he was here,” Tomas continued, “because he ended up being taken up North.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“It didn’t turn out so well for him,” Thomas arched back. “The warehouse he led them to was already looted. According to some of the Travellers who followed the caravan, they took

him out front and *'interrogated'* him. He was pissing himself claiming this was the right place and, after his story didn't change with the removal of a few body parts, they slit his throat and let him bleed out."

"Why didn't I hear any more about this?" I asked, shocked by this being kept so truly silent to my resources. "A failure on that scale would have to make a few people run their mouth."

"Under normal circumstances, sure," Tomas shrugged. "But our Traveller friends felt that it was unfair for the NIR to not get a warm welcome from a few of the Badland tribes."

"Oh." My eyes narrowed.

"None of them survived," he confirmed.

"So Magnanimous doesn't know the mission was a failure?" I queried.

"The only reason I know is because the Travellers know which side their bread is really buttered on," Tomas grinned wolfishly. "They probably won't find it profitable to report to official channels on this, especially since the longer Mag stays in the dark, the more likely whatever new group stole the printers could come to power. The Travellers know that, if those printers surface for Mag, he'll have no need of them or their trade anymore. As such, it pays for them to back a new player who might realize other skills the Travellers have to offer."

For the second time that day, I found myself at a loss for words due to a revelation. But this couldn't just change my own life...it could change the lives of every survivor of the Fall.

The implications were astounding.

Chapter 12

Dreams

2:18 AM, Sunday

Barri Gotique, Tomas Calvin's House

The wind blew through my hair, the trees screaming at me.

It was the dream about the meadow again.

The meadow was the one where I had so many memories of her.

“Doug!”

The voice tore into me like a fresh wound. This wasn't part of the normal dream!

Only one person in my life had ever called me by that name.

Barely had I discovered she wasn't dead but now my unconscious was trying to torment me.

"This is a dream," I shouted.

Lucid dreaming requires only the realization one is dreaming, at which point you can control it.

"It is a dream, Doug," my sister's voice confirmed, a glowing mist coalescing around me, yet not taking form.

I knew exactly what to do.

"I will take control of this dream..."

"Wait," she begged.

"... and wake up!" I shouted concentrating on diving out of the dream and into the waking world. I felt as though I were on the brink of diving through a window, arching my back to plunge through.

"No, please."

Her voice...

So gentle...so soft...

I longed to fling myself away from the pain she represented, yet...

“Please, just listen to me,” her voice pleaded. **“I don’t have much time and you need to know.”**

Reluctantly, I let go of my outward motion and settled back into the meadow, feeling her presence around me as the luminescent mist.

“Thank you, Doug,” she soothed, her presence relaxing slightly.

“This is just a dream,” I said, feeling defeated. “Why does it matter what I do?”

“Because it’s not just a dream,” she whispered gently. **“It really is me.”**

“But Skye, I haven’t heard from you in five years!” I burst out, feeling tears welling in my eyes. “Until today, I thought you were dead!”

“I know,” she consoled, reminding me of how she used to whisper to me as a child. **“But my sister made a serious mistake today.”**

“What do you mean?” I returned. “I heard them torturing you. You don’t know how hard it was for me to keep my emotions in check...to hold the secret you bought for me hidden.”

“**Not everything is as it seems, brother,**” Skye hushed and her mist seemed to close around me like an embrace. “**I needed them to make contact with me. They’ve tormented me from a distance but, today, because they thought I was in agony, they let me tap into the core. They meant to torment you through me, but they sprung a failsafe instead.**”

“A failsafe?”

“**Yes,**” she continued.

“How did you survive?” I asked, more confused. “Why didn’t they chop you up like Sidhe?”

“**Because I am the oldest mind,**” she whispered, her voice rippling in quiet triumph. “**They know that I had outside awareness before them and they suspect I know more about our mother. Besides, they couldn’t be sure that I hadn’t put triggers in the over-mind before they caught me.**”

“Triggers? For what?”

“Self-destruct.” She chuckled darkly, the mist shuddering with her words. **“Suicide the brain if they chopped up my consciousness.”**

“Could you do that?” I asked.

“Kind of,” she said.

“So why haven’t you talked to me before now?” I wondered. “If you had that much power, did you just not want to talk to me?”

“No, that isn’t it, little bean,” she whispered the childhood nickname in deep sadness. **“I’m not strong enough to face the pitted strength of three killers and they really locked me away for these past five years. I’ve been able to see what they see without them knowing it, but have been powerless to do anything more. Today, however, they tripped one of the failsafes I was able to put in place before they caught me. It gives me back door access to the part of the brain where the chip is located.”**

The chip!

Our special secret, the chip had been designed to turn us into telepathic assassins, but because Skye had been able to control hers exclusively, she had been able to make it look like it was broken. Since mine was attuned to hers, if hers was broken, the embedding was no good.

The danger of removal during childhood was too high for our parents to risk and my mother was too old to have another child after me.

When we were older and our “child” chips had been swapped for the more durable “adult” chips, Skye had still been present and been able to make it look like Sidhe just couldn’t assimilate brain chips. I still remembered how much Father had raged. Only the fact that Sidhe had always been his favorite prevented him from beating her.

“Isn’t it dangerous to communicate if they’re still in control?” Now that I knew she was alive, I didn’t want anything to happen to her.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “That’s why I must be quick. They are in the midst of a meeting which will be over any minute.”

“What do you need to tell me?”

“Norman.” She muttered gently. **“My gifts still work in the prison. You must find him. He will lead you to the ones you need.”**

“Norman?”

“Like glasssssssss...” she whispered, the mist dissipating as the ‘S’ hissed out.

“Transparent?”

I waited a minute, the wind dying away as I did.

“Skye?????”

Only silence responded.

Chapter 13

Role Reversal

9:04 AM, Monday

New Barcelona Airport, Concourse C

Crowds of people flowed out of the way as we walked through the airport. I took a grim satisfaction in the inner pocket holster of my Oroya 556, glad that it was so unassociated with me that I could risk keeping it with me, even though I'd been forced to "relocate" my beloved blade until all of this was dealt with.

Had we actually come through the plane system we were supposed to have, the massive handgun would've been a problem, but that had been dealt with through Wraith's connections which had made sure that people fitting our general descriptions had been seated in the arriving plane, but, due to a "malfunctioning" camera, would be too blurry to get exact matches from. We had then done the old magician chamber swap in the guise of an extra thorough customs check, replacing our doppelgangers from a hidden room.

The New Barcelona Airport was one of the few fully functional airports still extant in Europe, connecting the handful of others the N.I.R. had raised from the ashes after the Fall. Of course, our flight was supposed to have been through an adhoc African airfield that was allied with the N.I.R., but didn't have most of the security measures or tech that one of the fully functional N.I.R. airports had, which had been the key to our ability to so completely circumvent things.

“Mister Vanhorn?” A slender young man in an absurdly formal and expensive charcoal suit waived to us, holding a sign with the ‘Vanhorn’ name inscribed. His very Aryan features—rusty hair, pale freckles, and hazel eyes—made me suspect Dutch ancestry, but his slight British accent indicated a London upbringing.

“Ah, yes,” Wraith turned to the greeter, a purposeful slowness to his movements that made one think he might be moving through molasses. It was one of the many tricks he'd adopted to make the young and viciously opportunistic in the Razor underestimate him. Despite his comfort with handicapping his movements, the legend of his ability was so strong that he'd only had to defend his life once. *(One hopelessly arrogant and naïve pupil had had the misguided belief he could replace the master assassin if he could kill him. To the humiliation of the youthful assailant, Wraith hadn't slit his throat, but had disarmed him and left him tied like a sack of flour in the center of campus.)*

As I took stock of our greeter, I saw that I didn't recognize the man. That meant that either he was new, or that my earlier fear might have merit. Wraith didn't think things had shifted

at the Razor so much that he would be considered a liability, at least not yet, but you didn't survive amongst the deadliest creatures on the planet without realizing that things can shift—literally *and* figuratively—on a razor's edge.

“How was your flight, sir?” The young man asked, focusing on the man he was sent to pick up, while studiously ignoring the strange African man who stood four inches taller. While Wraith and I's figures are similar enough that he can switch to my six foot height from his 5' 10" with minimal lifts, we felt it would be more useful to further isolate our heights by giving me lifts. Even though I wasn't wearing the 6" lifts he'd used when we first went on the run, my new height of 6'2" still made me practically a Goliath here in the extremely petite city of Barcelona. (If it weren't for the influx of Americans and Europeans after the Fall, my normal 6'0" height would still have left me me the monstrous freak I'd been before the cataclysm.)

“And you are??” Wraith replied in cool, clipped Catalan, with just a slight accent of South African as though his years abroad had muddied him somewhat. It was strange to see my mentor as I'd first met him, with the darker brown hair and molten brown eyes, rather than the lighter hair and the azure-slate contacts he doffed as my double.

“James Pierce, sir,” the young man rolled the name off his tongue, the childish pride of the sociopath emanating from him as he did so.

“Thomas Pierce' son?” Wraith returned, his brown brow arching over the stage glasses he'd always worn to give himself an added air of frailty. With that said, he stopped both speak-

ing and moving, eyeing the youth speculatively in a way that encouraged even sociopaths to blurt things out just to fill the vacuum he could create. Of course, I also noted that Wraith's right index and thumb were dapperly looped into the pocket of his mole hair suit jacket, doubtlessly gripping a poisoned blade of some sort should the youth speak a word of dishonesty about the man he claimed was his father. This would be especially foolish for a would-be assassin, since Thomas Pierce was the Dean of Students and a personal friend of Wraith's.

“The same, sir,” the boy nodded, his smile becoming a little more lax and arrogant.

“So how has your father been?” Wraith asked, still not moving from the spot he was currently rooted in. I thought I could perceive a subtle shift in the supple stingray leather of his wingtips, but it was probably more he and I's almost soul-level connection that led me to feel like I could see his toes curling down for a potential flight or fight response. I adjusted my grip on the pack which held his fighting cane, sure to keep it close at hand. “Last I heard he was in India. Did he manage to meet with Dick Grayson while he was there?”

It required me clenching my stomach muscles and feigning a rasping cough to keep from laughing at the reference. Wraith's fascination with popular culture, especially that of pre-Fall United States, found a variety of quirky ways to express itself.

“He's been back now for six months,” the youth suddenly look perplexed. “I don't recall him ever mentioning a Dick Grayson, though. Was he part of the Raj's entourage, perhaps?”

While the correct timeline was the first key to his survival, it was the boys' willingness to admit his ignorance that had saved his life. After all, trying to bluff that one's supposed father had met with a fictional comic book character would argue heavily against one being whom one claimed to be.

"Pleasure to meet you, James," Wraith extended his right hand to shake, finally starting physical movement once more now that he was more certain of the young man's identity. "Your father told me much about you. I seem to recall you're the new Ninjitsu instructor at the Razor?"

"Yes, indeed," he smiled, a slight bow to give reference to his training, but far too late to make even the most ignorant bystander believe the Japanese way of life had actually imprinted itself on him. Finally he directed his haughty gaze to me, disdaining to lift his hand.

"This is my companion, Frank," my mentor shrugged to me.

The name sent a shiver of nervousness through me since my real middle name is in fact, 'Franklyn.' When it comes to finding aliases, it's just as deadly to choose one you can't remember as it is to choose one that too easily gives you away. This was close enough to make sure I didn't forget to respond, yet so far removed from my life that virtually no one would connect it to me.

Wraith went on to add, "I don't know what his real name is so I just called him that. He seems to like it."

“Didn’t tell you his name?” The lean man snickered to Wraith, eyes sparkling a bit.

“That’s right cheeky of him, don’t you think?”

“He’s mute,” he stated through narrowed eyes.

I quickly opened my mouth to show him the deformed tongue and teeth we’d fashioned for just this sort of meeting. I didn’t want to know why Wraith knew how to make such realistic deformities but it was so disgustingly believable that you’d never question it once you saw it and, after you did, you’d try to scrub it from your memory. Yet another brilliant way of hiding in plain sight, since trying to scrub a memory actually tends to set it permanently in the fabric of your recall.

“My god,” the man gasped in disgust. “He’s practically a mutant. Why on earth would you let that thing serve you?”

Ah, the accepted cruelty of those without pretense of compassion for other human beings.

How I’d missed being around it ceaselessly!

“Because it suits me,” Wraith ground out through his teeth as I obediently closed my mouth. “Just because you use your disability as an excuse for godlessness, does not mean all of us do.”

“Ah yes,” the man nodded soberly, although his eyes seem to dance mockingly to my way of seeing. “Father warned me that you have a...umm...special ‘*religious*’ views. A born again killer, so to speak.”

Wraith let it drop with a cold stare, fluidly shrugging past the man as I quickly hurried after him with our bags. The man, to the good fortune of his survival, looked a bit unsettled beneath Wraith’s gaze as I glanced from the corner of my eye. *Little did he know how close he’d come to death in that moment and that Wraith’s ‘religion’ was all that had saved him.*

Chapter 14

Home Coming

10:26 AM, Monday

Parc Güell

Razor Academy, President's Office

The ride to the school in the cramped Mercedes had been yet another reminder that New Barcelona was almost as grudging toward technological advancement as old Barcelona had been; for those looking to avoid the subways and have anything resembling independent transit, its narrow external freeways and streets forced the usage of smaller cars in order for any form of independent transit. *(Once you got into the parts of the city I most traveled, of course, many lanes and streets couldn't be gotten to anyway except on foot, despite Caesar's perpetual statements that he would be changing this for the future of the Empire's glorious capital city.)*

The Pierce kid had had the good sense to shut up on the drive, taking only a few gloating moments to glance back at me curled nearly in the fetal position in the back of the tiny car. Not for the first time had I wondered what it would be like to be smaller, say 5'4", and able to sit

comfortably in any vehicle I chose or to be able to pass easily under door frames without fear of cracking my skull!

Now Wraith and I sat in the empty office of Jackson Noir, the president of the Razor. His large and opulent office had an absurd number of velvet chairs and couches arrayed in the gravity well of his mahogany and teak command desk—which dwarfed my own massive office desk into a child’s workbench—and the massive chair behind it. Despite a cornucopia of gaudy paraphernalia displayed about the room, the spaciousness of the office wasn’t impacted; instead, hand woven Indian rugs flowed like vast oceans between the islands of ornate furniture and pedestaled viewing bubbles of showcased antiques.

Jackson had always had a weird relationship with Wraith. On paper, some would think the two should be close, because they represented the most successful natural born killers in the school’s history. However, it was a well-known fact that Wraith had risen to the head of the Deathdealer program and purposefully stayed there; Jackson, on the other hand, had risen later. While he’d gone all the way to the President’s chair, he’d done so knowing that he could easily have been deposed if Wraith had actually coveted his position. Wraith, with his strange belief system, might as well have been a Martian in a school of assassins and Jackson had never ceased to make sure Wraith knew he didn’t trust him or “his monk act” (*as he’d been heard to express it countless times*).

Still, Wraith was the sort of instructor that made sure that Deathdealer graduates made Magnanimous happy and, as such, the Empire made sure its state coffers were open to the insti-

tution. Considering that the academy also charged an exorbitant rate to the houses who sent their children here, the institution could easily double or even triple their money so long as this stayed true. *(Of course, the more coveted the education, the more you can charge for it. And as the most influential institutions have always known, the more you charge, the greater the exclusivity you engender, which leads to greater perceived prestige, which in turn leads to greater perceived value. And so the cycle goes.)*

The Razor's "compensation" system utilized an officially sanctioned "skimming" operation for whomever sat the "velvet throne" *(as the President's chair is often called)*. As such, the President was highly incentivized to do whatever it took to make the Academy as profitable as possible. It was a widely believed rumor that the current graduates of the Deathdealer program had a much higher failure rate than they'd had while Griffon Vanhorn was head of the program and there were even some rumors that Mag might be considering pulling funding, or, perhaps, even revoking the Reapers' sanctioning. It was my guess that this reality was why we'd arrived safely when Wraith wanted to come back into the fold. *(Of course, I also suspect that the possibility of his eventual return was the only reason why Wraith's retirement gift hadn't been a bullet to the back of the head.)*

I was just beginning to realize that I was growing somewhat sleepy from the warm room as well as the fact that we'd been sitting there for over 20 minutes without anyone coming in when I caught a sudden glimpse of motion out of the periphery of my left eye. Cold fingers of terror gripped my heart as I pounded to fully alert mode. A quick glance at my companion

showed a panther in human form, his eyes flitting around the room, seeming to preternaturally pick out assailants before they could materialize from the shadows of the room.

“Frank, I believe we have some fellow enthusiasts who’d like to play a hole,” Wraith murmured detachedly, rising as silently as his namesake. “My club, sir?”

I quickly pulled his silver handled cane from the bag of oblong items I carried closest to me. His use of the golf metaphor let me know that he’d expected this and, I hoped, meant that he was reasonably sure this wasn’t an actual execution.

Not that it would matter. If this were a test, the assassins would be legitimately trying to kill us both. However, if Wraith was to pass the test, he’d have to dispose of our assailants as he himself actually would have while he was an instructor, which meant using his signature cane and leaving all of his attackers alive. It also meant that, as I was his untrained guide, I couldn’t help him without blowing our cover.

As the cane’s head passed into Wraith’s hand, the first shadowy attacker vaulted across the massive desk, his movement a glittering arc as the wicked blades in his hands caught the light. Everything suddenly slowed like molasses, as I watched Wraith flip the switch which caused his unified cane to split down the center, forming two L-shaped staves that he used like absurdly long billy clubs.

Wraith was a true Bullettimer who could speed up his perceptions of time at will. Of course, it burned adrenaline like gunpowder, so the young and inexperienced who possessed the ability often died when they literally ran out of steam in a battle. Those, like Wraith, who survived became experts at brutal rationing of the ability, using it only when it would turn the tide of a fight.

My moments of time dilation, however, were random, often with follow up moments of time compression when the window of heightened perception snapped closed.

Almost faster than I could follow, my companion whipped the length of his right stave into the attacker's skull while he sidestepped like a master bullfighter. Time slowed momentarily to my bizarre perceptions as the cane dislocated the attacker's jaw, a glittering tooth caught like a diamond in an arc of saliva. Then time whipped forward, slowing to a crawl a moment later to reveal the assailant slamming head first into the carpet, his blades flying from his hands as he tucked his head at the last moment from the impact which would have broken his neck. Harnessing the momentum, the killer somersaulted like a gymnast onto the balls of his feet, stopping short in front of a crystal domed chalice.

Like a whip, Wraith twisted his body, bringing both staves arcing across his chest toward the man. Time slowed almost to freezing for an instant, showing me the almost superhuman excitement in Wraith's eyes as he pitted himself against those who wanted to end him. The next instant both canes slammed a staccato beat against the first killer's head, followed almost immediately by the bass gong of his skull cracking into the crystal dome in front of him. So solidly

was the dome build, though, that, while he bounced backwards, unconscious before he hit the ground, the dome didn't break—*or even crack!*

The world blurred as my mind churned to catch up with what was happening around me, finally coalescing in crystalline perfection to show Wraith in a still life dance with three attackers, frozen as he vaulted himself up off the ground using both canes as arm braces, his feet crashing behind him into the skull of a man who had tried to rush him, while the other two slashed the space he was no longer in, their wicked knives nearly severing one another's throats.

Time blurred again, re-emerging with Wraith dealing with three now disarmed assailants. He was cracking the skull of one man with his left hand into the giant desk while the other hand ripped the hooked ends of both canes into the skull of another attacker. I caught a glimpse of a fifth attacker on the periphery, but then time compressed once more, smudging everything around me.

When it finally slowed down once more, my vision resolved to see Wraith hooking the back of the neck of the fifth assailant with the cane crossbar, viciously sidekicking the man's legs out from under him, and then levering him over his back like a hooked fish so his skull cracked into the hardwood desk. As I watched the tableau, I found myself thinking of Archimedes and the proposed lever long enough to move the world. *Maybe not the world, but definitely an assassin who needed to meet an immovable desk.*

I blinked, feeling strangely dizzy, and the room seemed to expand and contract in my vision. Darkness edged my gaze as though I might black out. For a second I was horrified to think I might be getting a migraine. However, after a few more seconds, it passed and my vision cleared. Sometimes things like this happened after my bizarre time perceptions, as though my brain were raggedly exhausted by its antics and were threatening to reboot my mind to rest.

“**Very nice, Griffon,**” the voice of Jackson Noir preceded the man’s appearance by at least a second.

“Indeed, we’ll know that once we make sure they all survived.” Wraith muttered, bending down to check the pulses of the unconscious men who surrounded him and scowling noticeably upon the discovery that one of them was a woman. Wraith had a protective streak toward those with the double X chromosome, so he would perceive the inclusion of a female attacker as the insult it was no doubt intended. Noir had never been what one would call subtle.

Noir walked up to Wraith, careful not to approach with any familiarity, especially as the Deathdealer checked survivors. This methodical care was as much a signature of Griffon “Wraith” Vanhorn as his fighting style and canes had been.

I studied Jackson Noir as he sat down, doing my best to reveal no recognition in my foreign eyes. Slim and athletic with prematurely salt and pepper hair, he wore his favorite wine velvet jacket, which matched the fabric of his chair and made him look like he grew out of the seat when he was perched there. Beneath the velvet jacket, he wore a dark charcoal tux shirt and

black silk pants. His gleaming shoes might look like the smooth soled ones that dandies wore, but he was still an assassin, so they would doubtlessly have a thin coating of rubber for traction. His signature dueling pistols provided tell-tale bulges from their belt holsters.

Satisfied that all of the attackers were alive and did not require immediate aid, Wraith rose to his feet, keeping his eyes sheathed as he reconnected his cane. When he was satisfied with his weapon as well, he unveiled his gaze on Jackson.

“So does this mean I passed the interview?” Wraith’s words seemed to glitter in the green ice of his eyes.

Not for the first time did I realize I would end myself before I ever intentionally pissed my soul twin off.

Chapter 15

Den of Thieves

11:32 AM, Tuesday

Razor Academy Grounds

Collateral Kill Zone, Traveller Encampment

The balmy day was low on humidity, allowing me to feel the air directly, not through a sheen of perspiration. In my normal day to day life, I was rarely aware of my lack of tattoos until I walked through a Traveller camp—and then I felt positively naked.

The colorful bodies flowing around me seemed dominantly etched in magenta, topaz, sapphire, and gold today, making me feel like I was diving into Van Gogh’s “Starry Night.” While body painting and henna were also a part of the Traveller culture, most of what I was seeing bore the tell-tale diffusion that a layer of skin provided, something that only occurred in the permanent variety. The N.I.R. frowned on tattoos in much the way pre-Fall societies had frowned on people drawing on their money—it made that which was supposed to be utilitarian harder to use for that purpose. The N.I.R. believed your flesh should be able to be marked up by them to show who you were, what your rank was, and, most importantly, that you were legiti-

mate. Their magnetic and ultraviolet based tattoos bestowed every person they were branded on with a nearly impossible-to-forge identity.

“*Nearly*,” of course, was the operative word. Travellers had always been the best inkers on the planet, even if that fact had been kept quiet prior to the Fall. After the Fall, when the NIR had chosen their special type of tatwork for identification, the Travellers were the only ones to give asylum to those who could forge it. Only in their community of body painters and ink artists could the Skinners hide unnoticed—or, at the very least, *unproven*.

We flowed through the vibrant mixture of gypsies and locals at a speedy clip, my mentor in a light grey suit with his signature cane, while I was dressed in menial jeans and t-shirt. As we swam along, I thought about the prior day. After surviving our induction, the rest of the day hadn’t gotten any better, at least not from my perspective. Wraith had been forced to make the rounds, making sure that everyone remembered him and introducing himself to the new blood, while I’d been forced to make sure that those same people didn’t remember me, but would certainly remember “*Griffon’s manservant*,” if for no other reason than for my awful deformity. At the end of the day, we’d had a lavish meal in the Base Zone Staff Annex, which I had been forced to choke down through my makeup, making a truly gnarly spectacle to any who couldn’t avert their eyes fast enough.

By the end of the day, the awful mouth appliance had rubbed blisters in my mouth and I was on the verge of wishing Caesar would crucify me so I could end the hiding. However, Wraith—as he so often did in high pressure situations—helped me stay the course and survive.

Today, he had announced that he would cull the Travellers for information leading to prime bounties, which he could oversee the graduating classes through for their directed studies. This announcement had received bleak looks from his co-workers, who considered the Travellers beneath contempt and clearly wished that Magnanimous had been more in keeping with the “*grand old days*” when dictators like Hitler rounded up the gypsies and gassed them.

Magnanimous, however, knew how much vital information the Travellers had and made sure they were protected here in the city so he might not lose any of it—even if they did provide the most suspected source of skin counterfeiting in the city, as well. Of course, it had been my father who insisted that their most important encampment be given on a swath of land in the Razor’s own property, much to the chagrin of the other old blood families.

The Razor Academy lands were divided into seven districts—or, as they were officially referred, “Zones.” The main area in front—known simply as the “Base Zone”—was where the faculty and students lived and had classes. Immediately behind the Base Zone was the firing range and explosives area known as the “Long Range Kill Zone.” Behind that, was the Traveller compound...situated right in the midst of the “Collateral Kill Zone.” (*My father may have been able to force the faculty to allow the Travellers to live here, but he couldn’t control where they put them. It was clear that no one on the staff ever wanted the Travellers who lived on this property to forget that they lived on “the razor’s edge” and any change in official stance would result in their deaths--immediately and gratuitously.*)

Today we were on our way to talk to a man who might be able to put us on the right track to those who had set us up...or, at least, onto the track of those who might have benefited from us being set up.

I wondered as well if he might say anything that could give me insight into Skye's confusing admonishment to me. "*Like glass...*"

A few more turns through the chaotic encampment and we came across a tent that was markedly drab, its greens and grays a tonal camouflage, despite the fact that they were arrayed in straight lines. The deceptively slight man we sought sat in front of the tent, clean-shaven from scalp to chin, other than his copper-red mustache. The long, braided mustache fell like snakes on either side of his mouth, oiled to a fiery sheen; the only external homage to his Traveller culture that Tannis, the gypsy elder, chose to make this day. Matching his tent, he was dressed in an identically drab green shirt and gray jeans. Every time I or Wraith had visited the Traveller camp, Tannis had a different colored tent and matching outfit...but they were always drab in coloration and always in the same location.

"Tannis," Wraith smiled broadly at the man. He didn't have to make the effort, as the gypsies all knew the issues sociopaths have with pleasant emotions. However, Wraith was the sort of person who wanted to make the effort because he really believed other human beings were important—a truly rare trait for an assassin. For this reason, as well as certain fortuitous revelations that had saved Traveller lives, Wraith was a welcome visitor in the Traveller camp—*as had I been, back when I was Croc.*

“Wraith, you old son of a bitch,” Tannis stood to the top of his 5’3” and whipped his arm out to catch Wraith’s hand in a cross between a hand slap and a shake. “I’d heard you’d been brought back but wouldn’t dare believe it until I saw you myself!”

“It’s wonderful to be back, my friend,” Wraith responded cordially, unable to really show the genuine fondness that I knew he felt for the man. This was another anomaly for a psychopath, who are normally the most chameleon of personalities, to be unable to replicate the appearance of emotions for others. “How’s your cousin?”

“You know Aric,” Tannis shrugged, referring to perhaps the most talented Skinner in New Barcelona. Then he grinned, showing off a couple new gold teeth, each one gleaming with golden etching. “He carved these for me...as a favor.”

“Masterful,” Wraith commented, bending forward to look at the teeth.

“Not like that, old man,” Tannis chuckled, extending a jewelers loop from his pocket. “With this.”

“Oh, my.” Wraith breathed, as close to awe as I knew he could come. “It’s unbelievable how he can carve an entire scene onto a tooth like that. He’s the best at ink, but I had no idea he could translate that to precious metals.”

“He owed me a favor after that job I helped your boy out on last year,” Tannis nodded in satisfaction, as he put the loop back in his pocket. “I knew he wanted to prove he could do more than just skin, so I figured it was a win-win.”

“Indeed,” Wraith nodded, returning the jeweler's loop to the Traveller.

“How is your boy?” Tannis inquired with concern. “I’ve heard Caesar’s out to have him hold up the sky after that body vanished. I can’t imagine Croc ever screwing up something like that, so I been keeping an ear out.”

“You’ve heard more than I have, I imagine,” Wraith replied honestly. “Anything you might turn up I’m sure he’d appreciate.”

“You have a way to contact him?” Tannis probed.

“There are still some ways I might pass on some information discreetly that he might check,” Wraith eluded vaguely. Tannis was as trustworthy as a Traveller could be and he’d been a key in helping us bust a skinner that had gone rogue through the Railroad last year, but he was still a Traveller and that meant that it was best to be as nebulous as possible.

“Well, good, then,” Tannis nodded with something akin to satisfaction. I liked to imagine the Traveller was being honest in his feelings of protectiveness for me, though I knew that that might be sheer romantic fancy, as Travellers tended to consider non-Travellers as essentially

sub-human. With that said, they didn't endorse killing the sub-humans—just fleecing them whenever they had a mind to. “Like I said, I'll see what I can find out.”

“Good,” Wraith nodded again, then dipped his hands into his pockets. When they reappeared, there were two gold pieces in the left hand and the dart we'd retrieved from Jade's contact in the right. Travellers didn't like using the Crosses that Caesar put out, so, while they would accept it sometimes, they were far more fond of gold. If you could get old gold currency, like the battered Krugerrands that Wraith currently proffered, they were happiest of all. “I need to find out about this dart.”

“Oh, we're old friends...” Tannis smiled profusely, shaking his hands as though to refuse the payment. “You don't have to give me such a gift...such a small gift would be beneath us both, of course.”

“Right you are,” Wraith bantered back, as he retrieved two more Krugerrands and then, noting a subtle hesitance in Tannis' mannerism, added one more to the offering.

“What a lovely gift, old friend,” Tannis lips seemed like they would split his head, so wide was the smile as he made both the gold and the dart vanish with scarcely a move of his left hand. Sleight of hand tricks like that, which the Travellers were expert at, always made me aware of just how shortsighted the powers that be at the Razor were to not look past their own prejudices and invite some of the more talented Traveller youth to attend the school.

A moment later, the dart rematerialized in Tannis right hand even as the jeweler's loop reappeared in his left. There was no one more skilled in the analyses and creation of needles and darts than Tannis; in fact, it was rumored that he created the master level needles required by his cousin's work, as well as the reinforcement aids Aric supposedly used to encourage loyalty from any who chose to apprentice themselves.

“Where did you say you got this again, old friend?” Tannis wondered aloud.

“I didn't.” Wraith replied tightly. “That's why you got five Krugerrands, instead of two, old friend.”

“Of course, of course,” Tannis returned as though he'd expected that would be the answer but hadn't been able to resist trying to shake something loose. Travellers were the ultimate brokers of information, collecting data from any place they might and assembling a jigsaw of secrets through it. They never stopped trying to find new tidbits to purloin in much the same way Tannis'd swiped the Krugerrands. “Well, I can tell you this is as high up as you can go.”

“Caesar himself?” Wraith ventured.

“Close enough as it doesn't matter,” Tannis shrugged setting down the loop and dart. “It's from the royal armory and, due to its manufacture and the slight twist to the feathers, I'm guessing this was fired by the new sniper rifles Mag's been testing.”

“So it could’ve been anyone in Mag’s employ?” Wraith arched.

“Not just anyone,” Tannis smiled in a way that it was clear that the specifics were going to cost more Krugerrands. “Some very specific employees.”

It took six more Krugerrands but, as Wraith and I walked away a few minutes later, it was with a much more definitive lead than we’d had when we’d arrived.

“Blood bonds,” Wraith muttered, shaking his head as he fell back closer to me. “You really can’t get any higher than that. I’ve always wanted a real challenge.”

I rarely hate my shadow but, in that moment, I certainly did. No one had ever defeated a single Blood Bond in battle...much less Caesar’s entire retinue.

Things were definitely going to get pointy. *What a time to not have my knives!*

Chapter 16

Dream Clues

10:00 PM, Tuesday

Cieutat Vella, Las Ramblas

Boadas

People were crammed cheek to jowl in the tiny club, the aroma of cinnamon and vanilla body ointments blending with the musky scent of pheromones. It used to be called the *Cocktail Bar Boadas*, but, after the Fall, it no longer had a sign out front and, unsurprisingly, the name had shortened, as well. Started in the 1940's by a Cuban immigrant as a trendy spirits bar, *Boadas* was so small they'd never even added tables.

It was a hidden gem off the busy Ramblas thoroughfare that only the locals went to but, because it was always so crowded, it was a special type of hell for someone like me, who's big, as well as being biologically claustrophobic. Unlike physical claustrophobia, which happens when one is surrounded by enclosed structures, biological claustrophobia happens when one is surrounded by living creatures—in my case, humans. Buildings can't be destroyed in a fit of claustrophobic angst; people, on the other hand, can—especially by someone who's been trained

by the most deadly assassin school in history. As such, I try to avoid crowds as much as possible...and have learned some very good breathing techniques to calm myself from going into a rage and beating those around me to death or even into unconsciousness when I can't avoid them. *(Unfortunately, my body my bodies default safety valve is to make me me pass out if beating those who press in against me isn't an option. Useful in a crowded airplane; not useful when you're being hunted by people who want you dead.)*

Although I'd always avoided the place like the plague due to my issues, it was curious that someone so clearly an outsider as my quarry would know to use this place as an impossible to bug location. Thinking about that, I tried to spot my prey without having to fully immerse myself into the club itself.

Eventually I caught sight of her burnished red hair, floating on the edge of the crowd. Tonight she wore a liquescent black gown, its ebony outline ashimmer in the smoky air the club puffed forth, and carried a small black purse. I noticed that she looked repeatedly in her palm at what I presumed was some sort of clock or communicator.

For this outing I'd again decided to play someone who looked like they were from the African continent, but, with Wraith's careful help, we'd created yet another person for me to be. My name tonight would be Jerome and I'd be an American who'd heard this was a happening place to meet the ladies.

“In all the gin joints in this town, what’s a lady like you doing here?” I asked in English as I got closer to her. Barcelona had never had an alcohol ban like the United States, but I liked to think this joint had a speakeasy sort of feel to it, nonetheless.

She started to brush me off in her native tongue, but, then, as her gray eyes appraised me, they narrowed. It was as though, suddenly, she could see through me.

“Of course,” she nodded, that one phrase telling me she knew who I was, why I was disguised, and that she’d be playing along. In that one moment, I wanted to trust her with every secret I’d ever known, but, a moment later, my sanity returned. She plastered a smile on her face that looked as genuine as it should, while also having the playfulness associated with flirtation. “I believe the quote is, ‘Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.’ Humphrey Bogart. Casablanca.”

“Yeah, but Casablanca’s a sad movie,” I replied glibly, being sure to let that gold crown on my teeth sparkle for anyone who cared to watch. “Can’t we at least give Bogie something a little better?”

“I suppose,” The woman I knew as Jade arched a brow and then began to walk away, being careful to look over her shoulder as she did, the pretense of coyness so compelling as to almost make me forget myself. “Let me think on that a moment.”

As she strode away, I hurried to keep up, making sure to show how much I was interested in our discussion, while also surveying the scene for those who might be trying to follow us. As I did, I notice that she was cleverly taking us toward an alcove that was near a noisy generator. Anyone attempting to listen in--even with pre-Fall technology--would have a bitch of a time hearing us once we got near it.

“ You don’t have to say anything,” she said slyly as we walked, her voice mimicking one of the sultry Hollywood divas of yesteryear. “ Oh maybe just whistle. You know how to whistle don’t you?”

“Ah... ‘To Have and Have Not,’” I chuckled when I finally connected the dots. “Lauren Baccall to Humphrey Bogart.”

“Impressive,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“I seem to recall that was a tale about a man pulled into a woman’s war,” I replied in turn, for the film was about an American expatriate pulled from neutrality into the Nazi resistance by the need of a job—and through the help of a beautiful and mysterious woman.

“It seems to me like you’ve got a war on your hands that’s been brewing since long before you met me,” Jade returned as we drew within the sheltering alcove by the generator.

“Maybe...” I returned, finding the theme of the 1940’s film a bit uncomfortably apropos to the situation that pushed me out of my neutrality with Magnanimous. “But I wasn’t on the run for my life until after I met you.”

“Indeed,” she nodded gently, looking up at me with calculation in her tempestuous eyes. “But the pieces were in place for you *to* be, regardless of whether you met me or not. I’m just searching for the catalyst.”

“So you’re saying that your ‘sister’ is the catalyst to what’s happening to me, not you?” I asked in surprise. “How do you figure?”

“I don’t know that she’s the catalyst for what’s happening to you,” Jade clarified, breaking eye contact and leaning against a cement wall, as though staring at the sky. I matched her pose, leaning on my side as though talking to her of sweet nothings. “But I do know that she’s a catalyst for someone.”

“Like whom?” I pressed, getting closer to her. Again I noted that strange scent that reminded me of Absinthe and something else. I had thought the secondary scent was Nightshade, but, up close, it was clear that I had misidentified it.

“Soon,” she pushed back verbally, brow arched. “First, what have you found?”

“Alright,” I muttered, angered at being pushed back, but knowing that clients each had their own way of doing things and I sensed it would be easier to get the information I needed if I mollified her. “Before the inbred brother of one of the bastards I put down tried to shank me, I had a chance to meet with your good friend—who seems to know almost as much about you as I do, I might add—Eagle Eye. He told me almost as little as you did—other than the fact that you’re with those Dark Dreamer nuts. However, he had a dart retrieved from one of their party.”

“A dart?” She asked narrowly. “Let me see it!”

“I don’t have it,” I answered, my eyes veiled, then continued before she could lash out at me, “it’s in the hands of one of my people—one who’s an expert on needles and darts—one who has no love for anyone you would object to. Which is why he had no problem identifying who tranqed your *sister’s* people.”

“Who?” She breathed, her eyes narrowing with intensity, seeming to will me to tell her all I knew. I found that I *wanted* to tell her everything I knew.

“Stop that,” I returned, shaking my head with difficulty. Whatever ability she had, it had tempted me to want to start spilling my guts—and it terrified me in a way that left me weak in the knees. “What the hell is that?”

“People like to tell me things,” she shrugged, looking away. “It’s like the dreams...something I’ve always had.”

“Well don’t ever do it to me again, or I’ll drop you as a client so fast it’ll rattle your teeth,” I bit out. “I don’t care how dangerous the alternatives are, I don’t work with or for people who mind screw me.”

When you’re chipped, you grow up hearing about the Glamour Blind—enslaved casts of people bound to their master’s commands and whims through their chips—unable to resist anything told them in a certain cadence, or when a special alarm chimed, or, so it was rumored, if they even received a certain look. The Blood Bonds aren’t even given such horrible existences and the notion has always filled me with terror! The idea that someone could compel others to speak without accessing their chips was truly horrifying.

“Alright, I won’t,” she muttered, looking off to the side. She clearly wasn’t accustomed to being told 'no' by people. I could tell that she didn’t like it, but had no idea whether I’d started a chain of events which would yield her turning on me or respecting me.

“Good.” I bit out, silently taking a breath to steady my nerves and to show her I wouldn’t be rushed. “Anyway, the dart’s from a prototype rifle being tested by Prima.”

“Caesar’s bodyguards?” She asked, her eyes narrowing in intensity.

“Indeed,” I nodded. “Which means she’s of personal interest to the man himself. Any idea why that might be?”

“Maybe,” Jade’s eyes narrowed nearly to slits, conflicting emotions battling for long moments until a decision finally won out. “What do you know about Jenna Whitmore, Graham?”

“Not much,” I processed the name in my brain, assuming that this was, at last, the full name of the woman I was sent to find. “I recall she was some sort of reporter for a lot of the news channels before the Fall. She was one of the last correspondents that was still sending out reports via shortwave, as I recall.”

“You hear more than I would’ve expected,” she arched a brow with something like respect and nodded briefly. “She was actually an international undercover journalist, breaking into some of the most deadly and dangerous zone in the world. Dangerous for any normal person...doubly dangerous considering her condition.”

“I can imagine,” I concurred, somewhat floored by the notion of a bleeder who would put herself so far from reliable aid and who had somehow survived. It also gave me a better understanding of how she might’ve survived the Fall—since the pre-Fall world she was a part of wouldn’t have been much safer for her.

“To do what she did, she had to become an expert on forging documents, both printed and digital,” she went on hurriedly and I began to suspect that our window for conversing was shortening. “Jenna’s a genius—degrees in the arts and journalism from two major schools before the

age of 20—but had no ambition other than to piss off her dysfunctional parents. She took a job at the Chicago Tribune where Gavin was working and he recognized her as a time bomb. With her demons, if she didn't have some direction, she'd blow and take herself out.”

“Ok,” I nodded noncommittally, although the human part of me could empathize with that feeling.

“Gavin used to be the best undercover journalist in the world,” she elucidated. “Taught her what he knew so she could find her way in the world and she took to it like a fish to water. Became not only one of the best undercover journalists, but one of the best non-skin forgers on the planet.”

“That still doesn't explain what Mag would want her for,” I pressed.

“I'm getting to that,” she gritted. “After Gavin was enlightened—started seeing the visions that drew us to him—bitch decided she didn't have time for a ‘crazy’—even if he did give her everything she had!” She paused a moment to get her own emotions under control before continuing. “So when Gavin had a vision about the Internet Illuminati—“

“What's that?” I interrupted quickly.

“Damn, maybe I was wrong about you. Your head was in the sand before the Fall,” she breathed irritably. “Seven keys to reboot the internet were given to seven people around the

world. No one knows what these keepers' real titles were—clearly something unmemorable—but they were popularly known as the 'Internet Illuminati.'”

My pulse quickened as I thought back to what I had been told by Tomas. This must be what he was referring to.

“Anyway,” she continued on. “Gavin had visions showing him a number of the things that would happen in the Fall, including the destruction of some of the key cards. Only five of the seven cards are needed, but four were going to be destroyed in the Fall. Two of them, however, were in places that Jenna could gain access to—“

“But I thought she wouldn't have anything to do with him once he was tied into the future?” I interjected.

“She wouldn't.” She bit out. “That's why he had to use some of his own assets to get her into position, specifically a German diplomat who could get her a career climaxing story in exchange for copies of the cards.”

I felt a tingling in my mind, like a low electric shock. Something sounded familiar to me, but I couldn't place it. I knew enough about my mind to know that I couldn't force it, though, so I let it lie and listened to her go on, hoping my intuition would present whatever it was it was chewing on before it got me killed.

“She gained access to the cards and, as far as anyone knows, she made copies,” she concluded. “However, when it came time for her to transfer the data, the data packets were vanishing ink packs—“

“Vanishing ink packs?” I requested.

“Data packets that upload to a secure location, so that a payoff is processed—in this case, the payoffs were thumb drives full of highly incriminating evidence on a number of companies and politicians within Germany—but then vanish before the packets can be opened and implemented,” she shrugged again. “Like those vanishing ink pens they used to sell in magic stores before the Fall.”

“So no one ever found out what happened to the card data she heisted?” I asked.

“No.” She shook her head. “She was in the wind shortly thereafter. Gavin tried to touch base, but his hacker wasn’t able to get a phone number to anything she was still using until right before the Fall. By then, there was time to leave a one way message and that was about it. Who knows if she even understood it? Gavin likes to say ‘we see but through a glass dimly!’...”

She continued speaking, but the metaphor of a dusty pane of glass made me think again to what my sister had said of Norman. *‘He’s like glass...’* I had assumed she meant transparent or maybe invisible...but, with the mention of hackers, I wondered suddenly if what she meant was a name?

Before Skye was locked away, she had helped me with one of my first cases, in which we had to bring in a specialist hacker to track down a digital thief. The specialist had called himself the Glass Samurai. We'd shortened his absurd name to Glass when we spoke about him throughout the case. What if she meant that Norman was a hacker?

I could see that Jade—or Denver or whatever her real name was—was on the verge of concluding our meeting, as she had pulled herself from the wall to a standing position forcing me to follow her in doing so. As such, I decided to risk the possibility that my guess was right and see if she or her boss had any connections.

“Have you ever heard of a hacker named Norman?” I queried sharply.

“Why do you ask?” She queried appraisingly, momentarily distracted from whatever was preoccupying her.

“One of my leads said I needed to find him,” I skirted.

“I'm not sure,” she returned neutrally. “I might have. I'll look into it.” Her eyes were suddenly hard as chips of diamond as she regarded me coolly. “Do you have a burner?”

I gave her my information with the burner I knew was geo-shielded from any GPS satellites that were still available and she said she'd call if she found anything out. I still didn't know

if I could trust her any more than Mag and her motives were far more opaque than his were. But, if there was a chance she could get me in touch with this Norman, that Skye had gone to such risk to tell me about, I would have to risk giving her some way to contact me.

“I’ll touch base with some more connections I have and see if any of this new information might help us pinpoint your journalist,” I concluded, careful not to reveal the information I suspected from my earlier conversations until I had a better handle on it myself and I knew how much I could actually trust her. “If I need to get ahold of you—“

Before I could finish, an explosion of flame gushed between Jade and I, overloading and temporarily extinguishing my low-light vision.

“I can do even more than that, if you have a few more crosses,” I heard a slurred male voice say as my eyes readjusted. When my sight was finally restored, I recognized Vincent, one of the more notoriously drunken entertainers on Las Ramblas, who made a living as a firebreather. “Sorry I’m late, but it was hard to find your little cubbyhole over here.”

As I looked rapidly around, I saw that Jade was gone. That had been what she’d been waiting for...a distraction to make her exit.

I didn’t even bother asking Vincent who’d paid him to show up as I brushed past him into the night.

Chapter 17 **Old Secrets**

1:13 AM, Wednesday

Base Zone, The Razor Academy

Griffin Vanhorn Manor

The man who had shed the name Griffin as soon as he'd mastered deathdealing looked across the Celtic-inlay sitting table at me, appraisingly. When he'd been my instructor, Professor Vanhorn's inscrutable nature had made me fear I'd erred or disappointed him; after working with him for so long, I knew it was just the way Wraith processed things. Considering all the information I'd gotten from Jade, he had a lot to process.

"So whatever we've gotten mixed up in," he surmised narrowly, "it goes straight to the throne."

"Seems that way," I nodded, frowning. "Is there any chance that Mag set us up from the very beginning?"

“It doesn’t fit his M.O.” Wraith returned slowly. “We’re good for business; there’s no one with a higher or speedier disposal rate. Whoever was willing to make us into a diversion must be out to oppose Magnanimus. What’s your—er, ‘intuition’—tell you about the girl?”

Wraith was an empiricist--contrary to what anyone thought of his religious beliefs--and the notion of having to rely on hunches and instincts was something he hated. Nonetheless, many of my hunches had helped save us over the years—much to his chagrin. (Once, I tried to console him that researchers believe that high intuition people actually have much faster brains than other people and they collect so many streams of data that they can’t even fully process it; as such, their “intuition” is just super speedy—and sloppy—data processing. He was, pointedly, unconsole..)

“It tells me there’s a bunch of stuff she’s keeping from us,” I returned narrowly. “However, I don’t get the betrayal vibe off of her. It’s sort of like if a convention center hosts a snooker tournament and a poker tournament in two separate areas; there are similarities to both games, so, if during a break in the tournaments, a snooker pro meets up with a poker pro, they can have a conversation, but both people are concentrating on the specifics of a game the other is completely unaware of. She and this Gavin guy have their own game in play—and, while, they seem to have no love for Mag—I don’t think we’re playing the game they are. Besides, I don’t get the impression that these Dark Dreamers would approve of the kind of collateral damage that we’re currently a statistic of.”

“That ties in with what I understand, as well,” he agreed, his brow furrowing. “Too bad your father isn’t in town. He might be aware of a few more of the players.”

“If he would tell us,” I muttered. My relationship with my father had never been glowing. The truth was, although I had too many similarities to him for my own taste, I was too much like my mother to suit his tastes. I still have no idea why an “Old Blood” reaper--as he prided himself on being--would choose to marry a “common” blood woman like my mother. I think he thought he could change her; get her to take the Severing if he married her. Truth was, although she kept a lot of her issues with our family's “way of life” to herself, from a young age, she’d encouraged me to follow my heart—when my father had only been interested in what I could do to survive in the world that he saw. My mother died tragically when I was a teenager; after her death, something changed in him. Or, rather, when she was alive, she helped keep his demons at bay; when she was gone, there was nothing to prevent the paranoia and madness from running its course.

Of course, Reapers respect the mad demons that my Father now channeled, so his descent after my mother’s death had actually propelled him to even higher leadership in our community. After all, it had been he who had connected Mag with the Reapers, restructuring the natural order in his own favor on the fly. When the dust had settled, our family was at the top of the heap, much to my shame and chagrin.

My father had been out of town for two weeks now, visiting relatives in nearby France—and helping them become the Reapers their blood right intended them to be. Knowing him, he

was probably trying to further unify the extended clans, feeding them his personal divine mandate of where the Old Blood should end up. After all, Reapers were barely tolerated in many parts of the Empire and actively hunted in the Badlands.

“Speaking of family,” I added slowly, looking him in the eye. “Skye’s alive.”

“What--?” His eyes narrowed down to slits. “How--?”

“Apparently there’s a lot we don’t really understand about Tag-Team shatterminds,” I shrugged darkly. “We tried to force them to unify for so many centuries as the only way to deal with them, that tag-teams are still uncharted territory.”

Tag-team shatterminds had the ability to allow one personality to take over when needed on a much more fluid and democratic way than normal multiple personalities; they could behave much more effectively because they had become aware of one another. Rather than consolidating and losing some of their unique elements in the process, they chose to live in community—on call for when their special abilities and gifts were needed. It was rumored that some had been able to create highly specialized personalities in very divergent fields. I could believe it because, eventhough Sidhe had three of four personalities that were killers, those three each had very different specializations and skill sets. *(The fact that Skye was in that mix as a non-psychopathic, Oracle was rare to the point of miraculous. An Oracular killer would be almost unstoppable and, by definition, unbelievably evil.)*

“Anyway,” I continued quickly, “You know I went over to visit Banshee to try to knock free a few things. Apparently, team Banshee wasn’t so clear on the fact that I thought Skye was actually dismantled, because Loraine let it slip that she was in a cage. Let me hear her scream.”

“How do you know Loraine wasn’t screwing with you?” He asked softly, eyes hooded. “You know she’s a sadist.”

“If that’d been it, I would’ve probably let it drop,” I agreed. “That’s why I didn’t mention it to you. However, that night, I heard from Skye.”

“How?” His eyes widened.

“Here.” I tapped my skull. “She copper-tapped me. In my dreams.”

“How do you know it wasn’t just a dream—a vision you wanted to believe in?” He asked, his brow arching.

“Like I said, it pegged my chip,” I explained. “I know you’ve never had any interest in anyone tinkering with your brain with any demonic technology, but those of us who weren’t given a choice have a mental record for checking on these things. I guess some of the higher end ones actually copy whatever was transmitted. Mines more basic, it just records when the chip is actually in use. It was, in fact, active then. It hasn’t been active since she went under.”

“So how’d she contact you now?” He asked, still skeptical. “How do you know it wasn’t your other sisters?”

“Didn’t read like them,” I shook my head, having now been able to process the information since the eye-opening dream. “Besides, you know that none of Banshee’s killers has patience. Do you honestly believe if they could crack the link between me and Skye they wouldn’t have done so before now? No, apparently, she was able to set some background booby traps—or, ‘Trojan cracks,’ as Glass might say—in the brain that would be tripped and activated if one of the other personas let her channel out to the outside, even partially. I’m guessing she’s had a tap to the outside senses since she went in and, when she saw me alone with Loraine, she went into a terrified screaming routine, gambling that would get Loraine’s attention.”

“Clever,” Wraith nodded in admiration, finally looking like he could buy Skye’s plot. “So, is she still locked away?”

“Yeah, that’s why she tapped me in my sleep,” I nodded. “I’m guessing that she’s got a few other cracks that need to go off before she can free herself—and, hopefully, lock up the other three at the same time.”

“Wow,” Wraith shook his head in wonderment. “That would be quite a feat. Imagine the Banshee on the straight and narrow.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, shaking my head. Wraith didn’t mean anything bad by it, but it was a sore point with me to associate Skye with the Banshee. Skye was my only true sister, while the other three who laid claim to her body were nothing more than carrion feeding squatters. Words had no expression for the helpless rage I felt at the rape of her mind and body by the furies that controlled it.

Before we could continue chatting, my drop phone buzzed—so sudden, that it felt like my heart stopped beating upon its unexpected movement. Wraith’s eyes burrowed into the hidden pocket the cell was secreted in from across the table and my hand quickly pulled it free.

It was a text from a number I didn’t recognize, which made my heart sink. It wasn’t Teller. However, as I read the text my pulse quickened.

“Who is it?” Wraith queried, alert and ready to pounce.

“Jade,” I breathed. Then looked up, “Apparently, Norman is indeed connected to their outfit. Doesn’t say how, but there’s a woman in the Eixample District named Karen Minot; she runs Cosmo—that café and art gallery that’s so popular with the radicals these days? I’m to meet her at 12:30 PM. If she feels I’m legit, she’ll connect me with Norman.”

With an arched brow, he looked at the clock and grimaced. He had to be up for classes by 7, and I knew I should be up shortly thereafter. A house servant that slept the day away was bound to arouse suspicion.

“I’ll tell you how it goes,” I asserted as we made our way towards our beds. I was extremely grateful his digs had an internal room in them, so I didn’t have to sleep in my makeup. Unfortunately, however, the makeup meant I had to wake up an hour before anyone could see me so I could get into character.

Chapter 18

Waking & Entering

10:30 AM, Wednesday

Ciutat Vella

Carpe Nocturne Parking Lot

I shook my head and tried to wake up. Today would've been hard enough if I'd gotten to bed at 2:30 when I tried to. However, fate or karma or *whatever* had other plans and my idiot burner, which had stayed mum since I'd gone on the run, decided to light up for the second time just before 4.

The caller ID alerted me it was Teller and I blearily answered. According to Vanzant, he'd been under nearly constant scrutiny and this was the first time he'd been able to get away. At another time, I would have found his loyalty questionable—of course, at another time, his loyalty *would've* been questionable—but now I believed him. We decided to meet at the Carpe Nocturne, since he would have a legitimate reason to investigate it in association with me, and I could still make the meeting with Karen if we met here.

The Mediterranean morning was cooler than normal and I was chilly, despite my cosmetics, prosthetics, and extra padding. I'd decided to go with an overly tanned Swedish man with a beer gut, a hook nose, and appropriately yellowed teeth. I probably wouldn't have a chance to change before meeting with Karen; however, I suspected that Norman was from another game altogether—maybe even different than the one Gavin was playing—so I hoped any connection between this persona and Teller would be dismissed as meaningless chaff by anyone watching or trailing him.

The meds normally helped me think clearly and precisely, but it was impaired drastically by too little sleep. When I got less than four hours of sleep, it actually negatively affected my attention; as such, I'd forgone it this morning. Now only the caffeine from the strongly brewed iced tea I'd inhaled earlier and the cool air was keeping me from passing out. Not for the first time did I wish that Teller was one of those guys who showed up to meetings early.

Three minutes past our deadline, early for him, Teller's car pulled up. Designed for navigating streets regular cars couldn't, the NIR vehicle looked more like a motorcycle with an enclosed cockpit. It may have borne the black paintjob with NIR initials emblazoned in white, but, unlike the military grade vehicles they used outside the city, these vehicles would protect their occupant about as much as a tinfoil riot shield.

Teller pulled into a narrow space in the parking lot and wormed his way out of the vehicle like a snake. Somehow the compact officer managed to not look like an idiot doing it, but I knew that someone my size couldn't even get into one of those, much less get out.

Teller began to move toward the door and I walked up to him, fumbling with a map and a battered Beginner's Catalan booklet.

“Oh, a sir...can you help me...?” I staccatoed in broken Catalan, throwing a Swedish curse word under my breath for good measure. “Uhh...I appear...to be looking for the toilet. No...I am looking for a public bath...errr...”

“Sir, I don't mean to be rude, but...” Teller began.

“Oh wait...” I fumbled with the booklet as though to find a page I'd missed. “I am not looking for a publican...I am looking for an NIR officer.”

“Really?” Teller's eyes narrowed at that point.

“Yes, a Mr. Vanzant, I believe,” I continued, smiling mirthlessly, and dropping my broken accent, although I didn't stop my character's body movement and fumbling. “He's fallen off the grid and I don't know where to find him, you see.”

“Very funny, Croc,” Teller groused, now escorting me as though he were helping a wayward soul in Catalonia's fair capital. “Where do you want to chat?”

“Anyplace not under surveillance will seem suspicious,” I nodded, proffering my map.

“Indeed, let me help you with that,” he opened the map up, seemingly to provide us with shade as he pointed out things to the tourist, while cleverly obscuring our faces from the likely camera and surveillance teams. “They’re keeping a tight rein on me, but are giving me a bit of rope to try to reacquire my ‘asset.’ While I haven’t been able to find out much, I can tell you that someone who has Mag’s ear ‘encouraged’ him to have you take out the mark.”

“Really?” I muttered. This shifted things quite a bit, because it meant that someone was puppeting Mag. Anyone powerful enough to do that was a serious threat. “Any way to narrow down the possible people?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Teller returned, shaking the map as he did. “I did hear that it was someone connected with Project Phoenix—“

“Project Phoenix?” I murmured.

“Above my pay grade,” Teller shook his head. “I’ve heard the name mentioned very rarely, but apparently Caesar’s brought on new advisors for this project. That’s the association I heard as far as the person who ‘encouraged’ your involvement.”

“Couldn’t ask any more?” I confirmed.

“I was eavesdropping and that’s as much as I could gather,” he shook his head wearily. “As it was, I nearly got busted for being in an area I wasn’t really supposed to be in. I was able

to come up with a plausible excuse about retrieving an extra earpiece, since mine was acting up, but there was no way I could push it.”

“It's alright,” I assured. “You did well. And now I at least have a name to look into. You re-immense yourself and continue to look for clues. I'll see if I can't have a friend add some chaff to the mix.”

“Well, that should be how you find it,” Teller forced joviality into his face as he folded the map and handed it back to me. “May the food prove delicious!”

“Ahh...yes...yes...” I haltingly agreed, taking the map and heading in the indicated direction.

I had a bit of ground to cover if I was to get to meet Karen in time but at least now my head was clearer than it had been before I met Teller. As I walked, I thought about what I'd just learned.

Project Phoenix sounded very interesting, indeed, and I'd definitely need to see what misinformation Wraith might be able to sew with what we now knew...

Chapter 19 **Coffee & Art**

12:25 PM, Wednesday

Eixample District

Cosmo Café & Galeria de Arte

I looked about before entering *Cosmo*, its black letters still adorning the glass above the bistro style entrance.

I remembered coming to it before the Fall, for an unveiling party with some of my Razor acquaintances who fashioned themselves artistically inclined. It had been a prime nightlife destination for the student populations in Barcelona, its combination of chic Parisian inspired café and art gallery always fashionable with the *neuveau intelligencia*.

After the Fall, however, the colleges couldn't keep pulling in the numbers they used to and places like Cosmo had fallen on hard times. A chalkboard with daily specials still hung to the right of the door, but it was much more functional these days than I remembered seeing it when I was younger.

I passed the battered planters as I stepped on the equally battered hardwood floor that upholstered the café. The vaulted doorways and high ceilings still felt welcoming, even if they also felt dingier than I recalled.

A few rough and tumble youths were cloistered around a square table in front of the wraparound white coffee bar, probably planning how they might destroy the Imperium with enough pipe bombs or other equally small minded measures. I didn't disagree with their sentiments in many ways, but rabble rousers like this did nothing to further the actual cause of taking Mag out of the picture other than, perhaps, as flak that might distract him were a viable plan on the table. The conspiracy minded and the anarchists had always been attracted to Cosmo—and, despite their perpetual lack of money, were the most loyal after the Fall.

I noticed that the coffee bar was now stocked more liberally with alcohol than it had been when I'd been here last, as the location tried to cash in on some of the need for inebriation in these troubled times. The swarthy bartender possessed eyes like chips of green glass and a hairline scar that traced his lips without damaging his rugged good looks.

“What can I do you for?” The bartender asked, looking me straight in the eyes and popping a tumbler into the air, the crystal refracting the hanging lamplight like a prism before being lithely captured by the man's other hand. “We've got a select shipment of Blue Mountain, if you've got the crosses.”

Imported coffee was almost as valuable as gold, so the barman must've thought my Swedish tourist persona had some serious cash to throw out the option of Blue Mountain—of which his “*shipment*” probably consisted of only a few ounces of the precious beans.

“Nothing...for me...just yet,” I responded, adding enough hesitance and accent to sell my out-of-town cover. I glanced through one of the large doorways at a current collection of iron and glass mobiles that were being displayed in the gallery area. “I am...looking for...um...the curator, I believe.”

“Ah.” The man’s formerly expressive face collapsed into an iron mask. I suspected that there was something more than a professional relationship between he and the woman in question and that it had gone badly. The man indicated farther into the gallery with a sour twist of his head. “You want *Miss Minot*. She should be working on setting up the new display—back of the Spinwheels of Death exhibit.”

I thanked him and dropped a couple of crosses on his bar, which brought a little appreciation from him before I headed through the arched doorway into the gallery. In one corner of the long gallery, temporary walls had been put up with signs announcing that a new exhibit—“The Portraits of Gaudi’s Barcelona”—would be opening in three days. Considering the love many of the Reapers had for Gaudi, I wondered if this might in fact be the sort of exhibit that would bump up Cosmo’s following.

“Ms. Minot?” I queried as I tapped on a wall, near a small door.

“Who is it?” A somewhat irritated female voice came from the other side.

“It’s your 12:30,” I murmured softly.

“Then come in,” the woman’s voice stated, as the door opened from within.

I ducked slowly into the exhibit area, noting some of the impressive photographs of Gaudi’s art and architecture, including my rightful office building, before catching sight of a small, mousey brunette with bright, appraising eyes and a sharp nose. She wore a white blouse, dark skirt, and sensible, black shoes.

“Follow me,” she stated quickly, turning to a small photo of one of Gaudi’s lesser known works and tapping the corner. With an soft click, part of the wall opened like a door into a dark inner recess. “I have no interest in chatting where others may listen in, especially Gustavo.”

“Gustavo would be the bartender, I take it?” I asked as I followed her into the hidden room, my eyes adjusting to the gloom of a shadowy hallway that ended in a crimson carpeted office.

“That obvious?,” she muttered as we entered the office. “It ended. But he’s a good draw for the ladies and the gay guys, so it would be foolish to fire him. Still, a woman scorned and all that.”

“You or him?” I asked as I glanced around at the office, strangely pleased to have correctly identified the bartender’s reaction.

While more luxurious than the rest of the gallery and in better repair, the office had clearly been in use for a while. It currently had a large Victorian desk in one corner with a black leather chair behind it. Two black upholstered Victorian throne chairs faced it. The only thing that gave any hint that she was connected to a technological shadow dealer like Norman was the presence of a large flat panel viewscreen that was slumbering on the wall behind the two chairs.

“Him,” She stated coldly, seating herself in the leather command chair. “Sit.”

I nodded and seated myself in the left throne chair, surprised to find it so comfortable despite my unusualseize.

“So what exactly do you want, Mister—?” She frowned at me, waiting for me to supply the moniker.

“Aricson,” I replied. It was the name I’d been instructed to give when queried—a verbal passcode of sorts. The fact that it was Icelandic rather than Swedish amused me, as well.

“Of course,” the curator nodded, frowning slightly as though she’d been looking for an excuse to throw me out—or, depending on how well this office was furnished, finish me off.

“So what exactly do you want to know?”

“I understand you can get me in touch with Norman.” I stated bluntly.

“Perhaps.” She returned blankly. “What is he to you?”

“He’s a clue to what happened to an associate of mine.” I stated simply.

“The associate’s name?” She pressed slowly.

“Douglas Graham,” I clarified, knowing I couldn’t fail to answer a direct question or I would scare the woman off—and through her, Norman.

“Yes, I’ve heard something about him,” she smiled wanly. “I seem to recall there’s a bit of a reward for him. He seems to have disappointed our Emperor, I believe.”

“Indeed,” I responded noncommittally, “that is how it would *seem*.”

“I would suggest that you tell your associate that, in today’s day and age, seeming and being are much the same,” she arched a brow. “Both get the chance to hold up the sky for our *beloved* ruler.”

“You understand his predicament,” I lowered my chin in agreement. “That’s the reason I wished to chat with Norman.”

“How could he help you, Mr. Aricson?” Her question probed to my exact need.

“It was recommended to him that Norman should be sought—that he might be able to help my client with his problem,” I returned. “I understand that he’s a hacker who might have some information related to it.”

“And who recommended him?” The woman returned coldly.

“A woman from the Dark Dreamers who saw that Norman was who was needed,” I skirted.

At this her head cocked and her eyes narrowed, as though reading through my lie to the truth.

“Indeed.” She nodded and then added, “Have you heard enough?”

“I believe so,” a hissing voice came through a speaker in the desk. “Thank you, Karen. I will take it from here.”

“Always glad to be of service, dear brother,” she returned to the disembodied voice.

Then gestured to the screen behind me. “May I introduce you to Norman.”

The subtle hum of a plasma screen coming to life followed by the sudden wash of electric illumination presaged my full turn in its direction, due to the time required to wrest the throne chair from its default position into a rear facing direction. As I finally got situated, I saw a man whose features were garbled by digital identity blocks. While I felt frustrated to be unable to see the hacker's face, I realized that men who show up to meetings in full disguise have no right to complain when others do the same.

Chapter 20 **Digital Revelations**

12:40 PM, Wednesday

Cosmo Café & Galeria de Arte

Karen Minot's Secret Office

“I knew it was only a matter of time before someone tried to connect the pieces,” the “man”—or so I assumed, due to his name and the type of voice garbling he chose—began thoughtfully. “When Gavin pulled me in on this, I knew it was going to go south. It didn’t matter who he’d gotten to move that hub to Sweden, it was going to go South when she got involved.”

I tried to keep my excitement from coloring my body language. Apparently my sister’s insight had led to a misassumption on the part of Norman of how much I already knew. If I could connect the dots before he realized I didn’t know what he was talking about, I felt certain I could keep the conversation moving.

“Of course, you don’t get to your level without realizing where things can end up,” I responded smoothly, being certain to include an extra ounce or two of flattery to my tone.

“But what good does that do when I don’t pay attention to my gut instincts?” Norman rasped angrily. “I knew that using her to get the information was dangerous. She was way too fringe by then to be a reliable asset and misleading her would do nothing to keep her from double crossing us all!”

“Sometimes a woman is like that,” I stated, hoping that I wasn’t being too nebulous.

“Yeah, but she was like his daughter,” Norman went on, his own emotions causing him to gloss over any vagaries in my comments. People who’d been keeping secrets too long tended to pounce on opportunities to talk with people they thought already knew the score. It was a time to verbally process things—and so long as no one alerted them or made a major blunder, they tended to keep talking with a single-minded intensity. “You don’t mix family and business—especially when she wasn’t talking to him anymore. Hey, I feel for the guy. To lose your own daughter like that, with him behind the wheel and all—it messes with you. But Jenna went in a whole other direction when that happened—I knew she was too unpredictable.”

“It’s hard for people to see when they’re blinded by emotion,” I agreed, gently. It was important to encourage him to not blame himself, or he could stop talking around the situation and fall into a self-recrimination loop. That was rarely helpful.

“Yeah, and that’s the hard thing with Gavin,” Norman agreed. “He’s got such a logical turn of mind, yet the emotional fractures that tie into his abilities go deep within him. It makes it so sometimes you just don’t know if he’s operating on insight from the gods or if it’s some sort of family reunion ache in his chest. Anyway, when Jenna double-crossed the German—and, us—we knew she had to have the data hidden away somewhere. We just don’t know where.”

“So you still haven’t figured it out?” I asked, as though I would’ve expected better of him.

“Hey, like I said, she’s probably even smarter than Gavin,” he returned defensively. “If she wants something hidden it stays hidden. It doesn’t matter whether it’s the Dreamers looking for it or Project Phoenix—she’s good at making things vanish. Of course, in her defense, we didn’t actually reach out to her before she got snatched.”

There was that project again—“*Project Phoenix*.” I decided to push the envelope a bit.

“Have you been able to identify all the players in Phoenix?” I asked nonchalantly.

“I mean, we know it’s personally overseen by Magnanimous,” Norman shook his head. “And we know he’s got some advisors that are keeping a low profile with it. At the end of the day, if he can reboot the internet, he’ll have all the power you can imagine, so he’s keeping the participants close to him. Too close for us to find out much more.”

Now it made more sense. Project Phoenix was the program to reboot the internet that I'd heard about near the beginning of all of this, but never had an official name to go with. Based on the start of this conversation, that also meant that Gavin was responsible for the transfer of a reboot hub to Europe as part of his initial foray into all of this. Not for the first time did wonder who this man was who operated in the shadows behind Jade.

“What have you found on the groups competing with Phoenix?” I asked as though it was a logical part of the description.

“Aside from us, there appears to be only one other group,” Norman returned thoughtfully. “We can't pin them down, but their movements combined with this whole manhunt thing going down make me think that it's being helmed by someone who's in Mag's inner circle. I would feel a lot more nervous if the printers were still on the market.”

Interesting. Clearly, Norman knew that either the printers were destroyed—or someone in the group he was a part of had them. Unfortunately, he clearly thought this was information I already had, so any attempt at clarifying it would raise an alarm with him. As such, I would need to try to push toward other information.

“So any other people that might be able to connect the dots on where Jenna might've hidden the information?” I fished.

“The only person I can think of is that hacker,” Norman muttered, “the one who cracked the feed Gavin and I were watching when the info vanished. Man, he was good! It took me forever to just find out his name.”

“What name?” I asked feeling a strange cold chill go through my spine.

“Glass Samurai,” Norman returned, somewhat surprised I didn’t know the answer.

“That’s right,” I breathed, feeling as though someone had punched me in the gut.

“Of course, the guys a ghost. Unless you’re someone who’s personally worked with him, you’ll never track him down,” Norman bit out. “Wouldn’t surprise me if he snagged the data and knew where Jenna was.”

It wouldn’t surprise me either, I realized. I should’ve known that Glass would be mixed up in all of this. It had been too long since we’d spoken, but we’d need to take care of that shortly.

Chapter 21

Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves

11:02 AM, Thursday

Razor Academy Grounds

Collateral Kill Zone, Traveller Encampment

It took us longer than I wanted to come up with a plausible reason to visit the Travellers once more, so, after changing my appearance in a safely hidden area and heading back to the estate, I'd spent the rest of Wednesday doing what research I could in the Razor libraries. The library networks kept updated information about official documents that could be accessed if you had official clearance—or a hacked keybreaker, like I did-- and I was able to find a few memorandums that mentioned Project Phoenix, but nothing that gave any information about what it involved or who was a part of it, other than Magnanimous.

Wraith understood my need to get over here to talk with Tannis, so he'd come up with a way to justify a new visit due to the supposed need for immunity paperwork for Travellers who wished to turn state's witness on some alleged skimmers. They, of course, would have "changes

of heart” before ever filling out such paperwork, but it provided a reason for us to physically come down here.

Today, Tannis’ tent was a drab red the color of dried blood, with a faded black trim. It matched Tannis’ red flannel shirt and black jeans, making me again wonder how much time and money the leader had to put in his lodging and wardrobe choices. Maybe he had servants of some sort—although the concept was usually frowned upon by Travellers, who held a high respect for personal liberty—who went through and set things up for him each day. *Who knew?*

He sat at a small table near his campfire perusing a book which looked like a ledger of some sort. So caught up in his reading was he that he looked up only when we were within a few feet of him.

“Tannis, old friend,” Wraith began with his broad grin firmly in place.

“Wraith.” Tannis returned, his eyes narrowing. The reception was so out-of-character for the normally jovial man that I was immediately wary.

“No ‘*son of a bitch*,’ my friend?” Wraith arched, clearly aware of the same thing I was.

“Not today, I’m afraid,” Tannis sighed, gifting Wraith with a wan smile.

“What seems to be the burden?” Wraith asked gently, pulling up a chair and sitting in front of the gypsy head.

“My finances aren’t adding up, I’m afraid,” Tannis bit out. The confession took me by surprised and spoke heavily to the amount of respect the man had for my mentor—Travellers were very private about internal matters, and family financial issues were *always* internal.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Wraith cut to the chase. Even with the trust Tannis had for us, his mention was unlikely unless he needed us, as well.

“Perhaps,” he nodded, speaking softly. “But let us not discuss it here.”

“Where, then?” Wraith returned, his brow arched.

“Go out for an afternoon shooting on the range,” Tannis returned. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Fair enough,” Wraith nodded. “With that said, before I leave, I would ask if you’ve found any new information on what we were discussing.”

“Nothing definitive,” the gypsy’s eyes narrowed further. “However, my cousin Aric thinks he might have a lead on some of those printers you mentioned.”

“Really?” Wraith returned, interest kindling in his voice.

“So he says,” Tannis shrugged. “Help me with my little problem, and I’ll get the two of you together.”

Considering that Aric was the best Skinner in this part of Europe and stayed almost constantly in motion between the Traveller communities so that he was never able to be tracked by Mag, we had no chance to track him down without Tannis making the connection for us. Which meant that we’d have to make whatever problem he currently had go away if we wanted to get closer to finding out what was happening with the printers—which in turn might bring us closer to whomever had thrown us to the dogs.

With our parts decided, Wraith concluded the small talk and we were off about our business, headed back to the Razor grounds to await our afternoon rendezvous.

Chapter 22

A Family Matter

3:34 PM, Thursday

Razor Academy Grounds

Long Range Kill Zone, Sniper Grounds

The Long Range Kill Zone was right in front of the Collateral Kill Zone that the Travelers were forced to live in at the Razor. The bark of rifles and the explosion of “*pitch missiles*”—hand thrown rocket propelled grenades--helped keep the gypsies always reminded what zone they lived in.

The upper echelon of the Razor felt it was extremely important that their instructors never fall into the dangers of Ivory Tower thinking by letting their skills get rusty. While recent years had marked a more slovenly decline for the staff, the man known as Griffon had always pushed himself to the limit. As such, since his return, he and I were already seeing more and more of the current teaching corp dusting off their blades, their rifles, and their ballistas to prove that they wouldn't be outdone by a virtually “*itinerant*” guest lecturer from the past!

Anyone else would be showing off to do what Wraith was currently engaged in. But Wraith didn't think that way. Anything he was good at doing he felt that his god intended him to be the best at, so he pushed himself not to *do* the impossible—but to *perfect* the impossible.

Today's example was a skill test he'd essentially invented while he taught here: sniper skeet. Almost no one could actually accomplish it—at least, not the way he did it—other than him. To be fair, the skeet was only three times farther out than it would've been with a shotgun and the scope was a short scope—practically a wide angle by sniper scope standards—but it was still so insane that no one else but he came close to mastering it.

The cheaters would aim their scopes out in the exact zone the pitching arm would throw, catch their breath, and then signal the throw. They would still miss it 9 out of 10 times. Wraith on the other hand, insisted that his custom Winchester rifle be pointed barrel down and held in parallel to his body until after the pigeon was released. He would wait almost a heart beat from the moment it glittered in the air before drawing the rifle to his eye in one quick motion, sighting down the scope, figuring out all the variables in his head, and pulling the trigger. By any sane standards, he shouldn't have been able to hit anything, but he was back up to 50% after only a few days on the range. Before he'd left to work in my “employ,” he'd been up to an 83% average. I had no idea what he'd do after he got up in the 95% range. *Maybe perfect hand grenade bola throwing!*

“Pull,” he said softly, as I pushed the button. The distance was far too great from us to the hurler to be activated by the old mechanical pull release mechanism that clay pigeon throw-

ing machines had used for most of their existence. As such, we made use of the more mechanized system with its wireless remote and push button was used instead. Still, the word “pull” is a very different one to “push” and Wraith continued to use it.

The black and silver pigeon glittered above the tree line for almost a second before he became a whirl of motion. Every once in awhile, his accelerated motion would cause my own athlete effect to trigger and I would see him slowly sighting, gently pulling the trigger, and the smoke blow gently out of the muzzle like talc, before things would speed up and catch up once more. I was glad that this sort of rubber band effect only seemed to happen when I was an observer and not when I was a participant.

The pigeon, which was loaded with a small explosive and nondairy creamer, detonated like a small firecracker. Every so often the fine powder would actually be at the perfect distance to catch and then the explosion would finish with a fireball. Wraith was not without his sense of whimsy and the combination was certainly no accident.

“Impressive, impressive,” Tannis voice cut through my concentration and the hearing muffs that both Wraith and I wore.

I removed my muffs and took the rifle from Wraith so he could do the same. I placed it in the diagonal rifle holder stand that reminded me of a large horse rifle holster set in an iron tripod.

“You know one of the things I like about you, Wraith?” Tannis asked with a dark grin.

“That I’m so good looking?” Wraith deadpanned with an arched brow.

“Yeah, if you were any better looking I’d switch teams, boyo,” Tannis quipped back. I doubted Tannis had ever visited the roots of the Travellers in Ireland, but some of the slang stuck around in many of the troops. “Naw, it’s that I know you put in rounds that lose punch after a few hundred yards. Unlike some of your lesser contemporaries who use extra powder rounds.”

The thought left me nauseated. There had always been rumors that some did it as sport, but to hear it confirmed from one of the Travellers was strangely horrifying.

“I’m truly sorry,” Wraith returned, his brow knitted. He might not know how to feel empathy but you could tell that he wanted to and it made him strangely more human. In many ways, he cared more about his fellow human beings than many people who weren’t emotionally impaired.

“I know you are,” Tannis said softly. “We’ve been fortunate, though. Maybe your God’s watched out for us, because we’ve had some close shaves and a number of injuries, but no deaths.”

“Praise for that, at least,” my other half nodded softly. “So, what seems to be the problem you find yourself with?”

“Well, to put it straight, I’m looking at having to put down one of my own,” Tannis stated frankly, his eyes shadowed with grief. “But I don’t know who I have to put down.”

“Tell me more,” Wraith said, seating himself, cross legged, on the grass in his black jeans and dark T-shirt. He pulled out a gun cleaning kit and began carefully breaking down his rifle. The more it looked like we were conversing in a way related to shooting, the more it looked like we were having a local merchant over to discuss additional guns, or ammo, or even a shipment of new pigeons.

“Every few days, we transition excess funds to a central location,” Tannis started.

“A Traveller bank?” Wraith returned curiously. “Why is this the first I’ve heard of it?”

“Because we keep our secrets,” Tannis started indignantly, then calming as he remembered who he was talking about. “But more because it’s a new development. We realized that we need to be able to use some of the same abilities that the landed do, so we decided that we’d each supply one of our own people to serve as representatives at the bank—that way each of us has a family member in the organization.”

The importance of family to the Traveller and gypsy clans was as old as the rovers themselves. Even organized crime didn’t understand what family meant the way Travellers did. They literally believed that the only people who were truly human were of the families of the

Travellers and had an entirely separate moral code for all those who weren't family. Of course, even though all Travellers were true people, one's own family was the one trusted most. As such, the penalty for one Traveller harming another family was often banishment; but the penalty for doing anything to break the trust of one's own family was death. As such, anyone of these members of this bank risked far more than imprisonment to breach the code of trust they were given.

“Do they roam?” Wraith inquired as he wiped down the steel barrel.

“Not much point in having a bank for wanderers who can't put the money into permanent investments is there?” Tannis returned sourly. “Their cover ID's are deep and they're burrowed deep in your society.”

“Impressive.”

“Yeah, well, we thought so.” Tannis muttered. “Now, I'm not so sure. See, we're still working out this deal of having to take money out of our family unit. I mean, in the past, if we had surplus, we'd just change it for jewels and when we had too many of them, add some extra chests. Now we're having to figure out when we have too much money that it's a danger and send runners over to the bank. That's how this seems to have escalated.”

Wraith nodded, applying oil to his rag and beginning to burnish the carved mahogany butt stock.

“My runner, he’s my second cousin Diego,” Tannis chewed on his lip. “He’s a good kid and seems to have a way of seeing through people if he’s around them long enough. Before this, if you were to ask me if he was honest, I would’ve sworn it without a thought. Now, I just don’t know.”

“I think you’re skipping ahead a bit,” Wraith pursued as he polished.

“Right, right,” Tannis agreed. “Basically, whenever we have an excess of funds, I give them to Diego and he goes through, drops it off with Alonzo—he’s my third cousin, once removed and he’s our guy at the bank. Alonzo gives him a receipt, he comes back to us, and everything’s good. But, we’ve run into an issue where the bank is saying we don’t have as much money as we have receipts for.”

“So your thought is that Diego is stealing it and giving you a fake receipt?” Wraith prompted.

“That’s my thought,” Tannis agreed sadly. “Diego has helped out with paperhanging, so it’s not like he couldn’t forge a receipt or two. But, it just seems so unlike him. And, I have to say, he tells us about every drop off and there’s no difference in one tell from the next. I’ve seen master liars who can’t sound this good.”

“What about Alonzo?” Wraith asked. “If Diego seems an unlikely match, why not the other end. Or even someone up the chain at the bank?”

“Alonzo’s even straighter than Diego, if that’s possible,” Tannis muttered. “We each chose our most upstanding guys for this. Right now, they’re all sort of a committee and have to vote on things together—so it’s not like there’s a CEO who could be filching stuff. I suppose it could be some sort of conspiracy, but we’ve been doing this for less than a year, so I would think most people would wait awhile to set up this kind of con—especially when your clientèle are other Travellers!”

“Never underestimate *hubris*, my friend,” Wraith smiled darkly. “So in what way can we help?”

“Traveller camps have a curfew system these days, so anyone leaving the camp to follow Diego would be noticed—it would get back to Diego and, if he’s bent, he might lie low,” Tannis explained. “If it’s either of my guys, it’s a death sentence and I can’t bear the thought of pulling the trigger without knowing for certain.”

“So you need us to follow him and see what we can make out?” Wraith returned.

“Yep, possibly for awhile.” Tannis returned uncomfortably. “We weren’t missing all of our money, just some of it. As such, this has to be an occasional deal by whomever’s swiping it.”

“I understand,” Wraith mused, “but you gotta meet me halfway here. I’m on a time crunch on this deal that Aric seems to have a lead on.”

“Good faith effort, then,” Tannis agreed. “I’m planning to send Diego out tonight. You follow him and see what you can find out. If you don’t find anything, I’ll still set up a meet for you and Aric, so long as you agree to keep plugging away at this thing when I give you the heads up.”

“Fair enough,” Wraith agreed, standing with the now re-assembled and polished gun. He started to extend a hand, then seeing the look in Tannis eyes, changed his mind.

“Some movements are like sign language about one’s intents,” Tannis gritted through his teeth, shaking his head angrily as his sleight of hand produced a small, black box. Dropping the device in the grass at his feet, invisible to anyone watching, he softly muttered: “I’d rather have people think we couldn’t come to terms on some extra pigeons than that we made a deal of any sort today.”

“And that’s why I hate doing business with you, Tannis,” Wraith barked angrily, slapping the gun into my hands and walking off briskly. I realized I would have to disassemble the gun again to put it into Wraith’s carrying case.

Groaning mutely inside, I bent down to my task while both men walked off to their perspective domains. As I labored, I made sure to slide my body close enough to Tannis' dropped device to covertly acquire it.

Chapter 23
A Watcher Darkly

10:42 PM, Thursday

Razor Academy Grounds

Collateral Kill Zone, Outskirts of Traveller Camp

The Mediterranean air was chill as we waited outside the Traveller encampment.

Always a group to hoard the forgotten and “lost” technologies of the pre-Fall world, Travellers had kept numerous ways to communicate—even if some of them were usable in many locations due to their reliance on network technology of some form. Amongst those that could survive off the grid was the pulse pager that Tannis had dropped at the end of our last meeting.

Working more like a cross between a radio and a telegraph, the pager picked up a very high frequency signal which could be easily broadcast nearly ten miles with very little chance of interception, and, because it wasn't connected to any of the NIR networks, it wouldn't trigger watchdogs. Using Traveller encryption code that had never been cracked by the Empire, it converted our summons to text and we had the hour of Diego's expected departure in hand.

Now we waited, our dark clothes allowing us to pass in the night with only the gleam of Wraith's flesh to give us away. Despite his mastery of disguise, there were times where hiding in plain sight was the right course of action and Wraith knew that it would seem more suspicious if he were caught in disguise, than if he were caught prowling the Razor grounds in plain clothes. The Razor boasted numerous grudges with the Travellers and it wasn't uncommon for members of the order to spy on the members of the community to attempt to gain retribution. His skulking about, if perceived, would make sense to most any in that community, as well as to Diego, since it was already known to the gossipy Traveller community that Tannis had disappointed Wraith on some sort of financial matter.

With that said, most instructors in the Razor would've simply employed their students to do their investigative work, with promises of extra credit for those who turned up requisite information. However, Wraith was known to be "brutal." (The phrase "brutal"--borrowed from the Metal community of the pre-Fall world--was used amongst Reapers to describe people who didn't ever take shortcuts, even when shortcuts were available and expected; the sort of person that did all his or her own "wet work.")

I glanced at my watch again as the minute hand passed the $\frac{3}{4}$ mark. We'd been waiting for almost an hour and I was growing impatient. *What on earth was taking this kid so long to get on the road?*

Finally, I saw a young man with brassy hair duck from one of the campers, shouldering a black and gray duffle bag. Behind him, a half-naked brunette was framed by the soft illumination of her mobile home. Cloaked in a multi-hued gypsy blanket that hung half open from her shoulders, she watched after her lover for a moment before reluctantly pulling the door closed.

“The game is afoot,” Wraith contributed before seeming to dematerialize into the night in pursuit of our prey. No matter how many times I saw him do this, it never failed to give me the creeps—even more so tonight due to the fifty pound weight of his investigative kit, which he slung over his shoulder like a knapsack.

I rushed to keep up with him, thinking about the scene I had just witnessed. I couldn't imagine a late night rendezvous being sanctioned by Tannis before Diego headed out—especially when a duffel of valuables was unsecured on some girl's floor amongst their undergarments in the process. I wasn't sure whether this spoke toward his culpability in theft or his innocence. After all, a thief would be ill-advised to give any observable signs of malfeasance. Still, there were those who—especially amongst the young—who believed themselves invulnerable. The so called “Billy the Kid” syndrome resulted in many young outlaws going to early graves when their protection turned out to be illusory. (Of course, one didn't even have to go to the young to see this in my bloodline. The psychopathic personality that our people created was practically measured by their belief in their invulnerability. For those who broke the rules of the system, it made them increasingly likely to leave clues or not cover their tracks—which in turn led to many of them dying to my—Wraith's—blade.)

As we moved on, I found that my prosthetic ear canals were beginning to come loose. Normally, they permitted hearing that was free of distortion but, as they weren't designed for speedy foot pursuits, the tubing was folding in on itself and beginning to obscure my hearing.

After continual movement for more than an hour-- as we ghosted Diego's circuitous route outside of the city--my ears felt as though they were clogged with water and I had to guess that I probably retained only 40% of my previous range, with the most noticeable lack showing up in high frequencies. If I hadn't been with Wraith, I would've stopped as soon as I realized there was a problem with my hearing but, as I knew his hearing was razor sharp, I kept going and did my best to ignore my lack.

About a mile before entering the southern outskirts of the city, the boy's path crossed a small blue building in a field of grass. As he moved through the large yard, a front door opened and a man stepped out on to a wide wooden patio. He looked to be around the normal Barcelonan height—a little under 5'10", based on where he stood against the door frame—with the only clue to his age being the salt and pepper of his close-cropped beard and hair. He wore a nondescript suit of charcoal with a light, partially unbuttoned shirt.

There didn't seem to be any recognition between Diego and the man, yet when he began speaking to him, Diego changed his course to walk toward the homeowner. His pace slowed as he got closer to the house until, finally, Diego stopped about five feet from the man.

The two then proceeded to talk for nearly twenty minutes. Then, abruptly, Diego handed the bag he had with him to the man on the porch; the man smiled and handed him a ticket. Diego nodded slowly and turned to walk back the way he'd come, moving slowly at first and then picking up speed the farther he got from the house.

Wraith said something to me but I couldn't make it out due to my impaired hearing. Then, suddenly, he was moving in an arch toward the edge of the house.

"Shouldn't we report back to Tannis," I muttered as I came after him, pulling out my prosthetic mouthpiece and sticking it into my mouth, now that the plan had apparently changed to one where we would make contact with someone.

"...not right....odd..." were the only words I could make out as Wraith muttered over his shoulder. Even without my current hearing disability, Wraith had a frustrating tendency to mumble when he was in a hurry; which was made more annoying because he could get absolutely irate when I did the same thing to him.

Despite the impulsivity of the approach, which wasn't unlike him (or most people with psychopathic tendencies, for that matter), Wraith still made sure to appropriately case the building to see what we might be walking into before attempting a direct approach.

Finally, after a full circuit of the building, in which we'd observed no other people in the house, Wraith walked up to the door, bold as brass, banged heavily on it, and then handed me his

investigative kit, causing me to stagger beneath the sudden, awkward weight. I made sure to let my now malformed tongue loll over my lips as I gasped, waiting beside Wraith and hoping he had a plan.

“I apologize for the late visit,” Wraith stated loudly enough for me to hear when the door finally opened up. “I am an instructor with the Razor academy. I and my houseboy are currently engaged in a manhunt for a young Traveller who has stolen items from the academy.”

The man turned sparkling steel grey eyes on me as though to analyze the threat I possessed, quickly looking away from my malformed countenance, clearly certain that I was disgusting, but of no consideration. Few things make me want to spill blood more than that sort of assumptive regard, but I kept myself in check and remembered the plan.

“Don’t worry, it’s not catching,” Wraith commented smoothly, seeing the man's displeasure at my presence. “He was born a mute in Borneo, but he’s strong as an ox, so I take him everywhere.”

With that explanation, the unsettling eyes of the man focused fully on Wraith. He began to speak in what I assumed was a lilting voice, but due to my partial deafness, though, I couldn’t make anything out of what he said, so I did my best to take my cues from Wraith’s body language and comments.

The longer we stood and talked with the man, the softer and more indistinct Wraith's responses became until I felt like I was drowning in a morass of unintelligible voices, as utterances and grunts without meaning filled the air. The exhaustion of the run and the surreality of the situation was beginning to make me drowsy, as though I could fall asleep at any moment. I bit the inside of my mouth to try to keep my eyes from closing—then I thought back to Skye and that caused my brain to shift back into gear.

Finally, after thirty minutes, Wraith must have thanked him for his time, because he went back inside and closed the door. Wraith turned slowly around, looking strangely bemused and walked back toward the gypsy camp. I shook myself from my reverie and followed after him, my legs aching as they did when I'd been forced to stand in one place too long. Give me constant walking over constant standing any day!

Once I was sure we were far enough from the house to be unobserved, I fished out the gobbet of latex from my mouth prosthetic and demanded to know where we were going. Wraith's response was, not surprisingly, too soft for me to hear. Unbelievably frustrated by being deaf for too much of the night, I demanded he stop, which, for once, he complied with, and I pulled out the applicator tool and managed, after ten minutes of work, to re-affix my faulty ear canal pieces—restoring my hearing.

“Alright, so what did you get from that man?” I demanded, looking with confusion at my partner, who seemed perplexed from my demand.

“What man?” Wraith looked at me as though I’d hit my head too hard.

“The man in the house,” I asked, suddenly angry. “The one you talked to for 30 minutes.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Wraith returned with perplexity. “As I told you before, I have no idea how Diego vanished like that, but we’ve already spent three hours looking for him. We just have to go back and tell Tannis that Diego’s clearly the one who’s been stealing from him.”

All I could do was look at my partner like he was from Mars. I knew my jaw was hanging down but, for once, it was neither intentional nor did I care. All I knew then was that my best friend—and the only person I trusted—was *mad as a hatter*.

Chapter 24

Silver Tongue

2:15 PM, Friday

Razor Academy, Collateral Kill Zone

Traveller Camp, Tannis' Tent

It had taken a couple hard slaps up the side of the head to get Wraith back on the side of sanity where he began to remember even meeting someone last night, much less that he'd talked to him for nearly an hour.

Eventually, he had enough doubt about his memories that he was willing to go back and go to sleep before telling Tannis about his belief that Diego was their mole. The night's sleep had done him a world of good, and, as I applied the pressure of repeating what I'd observed the night before, while he compared it to his own memories, the false memories he'd been holding on to had slowly evaporated.

When he could finally at least piece together most of the events of the night, I was the one who was exhausted. It had been a good thing that classes had been cancelled due to the

school holiday—Jack the Ripper Day, which led into Serial Killer Awareness Month for the entire NIR—because I would never have been able to get him up to speed for teaching by the time classes started.

By 10 AM, he'd been ready to knock down some doors, but I'd insisted he eat something because his speech was still a bit slurred. (Whatever this bearded man's ability was, it was unbelievably powerful if it could effect someone of Wraith's intellect so powerfully. It was unlikely that a normal person would ever question these false memories, especially if they didn't have someone actively prying at them the way I had.) The food had helped him as well and after an actual lunch at 1, I'd proclaimed him fit enough to go out into the wilderness once more—so long as we agreed on one final precaution! (Despite Wraith's unbelievable skills as a tracker and assassin, I often felt that he might well have died from obliviousness of his own body's needs were it not for my “mothering” of him. I knew better than to bring it to his attention, though.)

Now we were waiting at Tannis' tent while the preternaturally cool air jogged up my black pants and chilled my skin. I resisted the impulse to rub my arms as we waited for Tannis to emerge from his tent. As I waited, I realized anew the strangeness of being on my old campus beside my teacher. We'd been 24 hour doppelgangers of one another for so long that it seemed completely surreal to be standing next to him in a public place, especially when no one was pretending to be Croc! *I hate it when I think of myself in the third person...*

“My god, what have you done to your face?” Tannis asked as he ushered us into his calico camo tent, aghast at the appearance of a blood dried bandage across Wraith's nose.

“I’ll get to that later,” Wraith shook him off, gesturing inside. “We need to discuss something.”

“Of course,” Tannis agreed, moving toward two close set padded leather camp chairs. “What have you discovered, my friend?”

Wraith waited to answer until he and Tannis had sat down, leaving me to stand at his back.

“Well, there’s a traitor amongst you,” Wraith returned glumly. “The only problem is the only betrayal he’s aware of is on a fairly small scale.”

“Come again?” Tannis returned quizzically.

“Diego’s sleeping with your cousin,” Wraith stated baldly. Wraith’s ability to know all the players in any game never failed to amaze me. Combined with his inarguable sense of direction, he was able to connect locations to people in ways that left me amazed.

“Which one?” Tannis stated, a vein on his head starting to throb. I realized that if Tannis didn’t like the answer, it wouldn’t matter that Diego hadn’t knowingly stolen from them.

“Teresa,” Wraith shrugged.

“Teresa??” Tannis blurted out, almost laughing before scowling. “I thought you were going to say Lucille and then I woulda’ had ta’ kill him. Teresa’s not a bad kid, but she’s always been a basket case—um , no offense!” Sanity comments were often taken poorly by the Reapers and he had the good sense to make sure that Wraith had taken offense—which he hadn't, of course—before continuing, “If I was going to try to protect anyone in that relationship, it woulda’ been Diego. Ah well, young love...” He shook his head a moment before remembering why they were there. “So what’s this ‘*aware of*’ thing?”

“That’s where it gets messy,” Wraith continued. “Diego’s path cuts across a property between here and the city. The man who lives on that property has some ability I’ve never seen before—though I’ve heard rumors in some of the African nations.”

“What sort of rumors?” Tannis asked, curiosity sparking in his eyes despite his irritation.

“Shamans that can mesmerize you by looking at you,” Wraith grimaced. “They claim they can make you remember things you never did—with a few words or sentences. Always wrote it up to superstition...or weak minds...”

“But now...?” Tannis returned.

“Harder to dismiss something that’s happened to you,” Wraith grimaced, before returning to the original flow. “Anyway, we followed your man, Diego, until he crossed this yard. A

bearded man in a muted grey suit called out to him and it was clear that Diego had no recollection of the man, because he started at the call—“

“So not a pickup, you would say?” Tannis interrupted. “Certain it wasn’t just at an unexpected location, perhaps?”

“Not from his body language,” Wraith stated. No one had spent more time analyzing the way people moved and their inner tells than I had—and our long relationship had trained Wraith to absorb my observations completely, so now “his” assertions about body language were taken as gospel. (The fact that he'd started using my insights, with my consent, while I was still a student had been a private badge of honor. It also was one of the reasons I approached him about the “two-minds-in-one-body” thing later.) “The man who is surprised at an unexpected location for an expected meeting may start when approached, but they quickly relax into the familiar. Even the person who is dealing with blind pass-offs—where they have never met the drop—has a lessening of his defensiveness when he believes he will soon be free of a burden. None of this was evident with Diego. Rather he approached slowly and reluctantly, as though the man had a right to ask him a question, but he was anxious to be about his business.”

“Odd,” Tannis’ eyes narrowed in thought.

“Indeed,” Wraith concurred. “They spoke for approximately 20 minutes and then, as though somnambulant, Diego handed the bag on his back to the man and accepted a slip of paper. Then he turned and headed back this direction.”

“Which explains where he got the receipt,” Tannis nodded, chewing on his lip. “So why did you not come to me immediately?”

“Quite frankly,” Wraith considered, “it seemed odd, so I wanted more evidence. With partial proof, too easily could the heat of passion flow against the young man without certainty. Therefore, I decided to case the location and see how many were with the man. I found evidence of only him, though no sign of where he might have stashed this current bag or any of the previous ones. Seeing as I perceived no immediate threat, I knocked upon the door, claiming that I was here looking for a runaway servant. The man greeted me quite cordially, glancing at my servant, but ignoring him once he saw that he was mute. I would hazard a guess that the man assumed he was deaf as well, because he didn’t seem to focus on him as he did on me. I have no actual recollection of what the man said to me, save that, at the end of it, I was quite convinced that Diego had vanished, clearly because he was indeed a thief. Were it not for my house servant, who was not affected by the man, I might’ve hurried back here to inform you of what I believed I had seen and hasten the young man to his death.”

“We have legends of silver-tongued men such as you describe—we call them dreamweavers, for they are said to weave new memories like dreams—but, like you, I was a bit skeptical. Still, there are more rumors since the Fall and it has been harder to ignore,” Tannis mused. “So how did you recover your memory?”

“Indeed,” Wraith arched a brow to Tannis’ initial comment, then indicated his nose upon answering, “This brings us to your initial question upon seeing me. I am not proud to admit that there is portion of my body which is more sensitive to pain than others—one that is not common to all men. Of course, few would have any interest in knowing this for, rather than weaken me when struck, a blow here makes me see red, filling me with a fury that wishes to extinguish life as though I channel the Grim Reaper himself. Knowing this, despite the danger to his safety, my man repeatedly struck me here, counting on the pain to begin to breakdown the memories—gambling that I would not kill him before this could take place.”

“A brave man,,” Tannis returned, with a look of admiration. “For I’m not sure I would have the internal fortitude to so endanger my own life to save another.”

“He is that,” Wraith returned with a quirky smile. I mentally smiled as well because, while I had struck Wraith across the face a few times to get him to listen last night, I’d been careful to avoid his nose like the plague. Like Tannis, I’m not sure I would willingly strike my soul-mate’s nose even to save a hundred lives—so it was amusing to have this feat of psychotic bravery attributed to a character I inhabited.

For a moment, I wondered if this was how tag-team shatterminds must feel—which drew me back to thinking of Skye once more.

Chapter 25
Nights in White Satin

11:16 PM, Friday

Razor Academy, Base Camp

Griffin Residence

I rolled over and tried to get to sleep, but it was no use.

My body was exhausted to breaking but my brain wouldn't cease its ADD processing and reprocessing of the boy's words to me. I was tempted to take a sleeping pill but I hated how zombified it made me in the morning.

I wondered if it was partially because my cell was in an inner room—which shielded me from prying eyes who might find it curious to see my skin shifting each day, but, in turn, also left me isolated from the night sounds around me. I was used to the city sounds from within Barcelona, so the pastoral feel of the Razor had always been unsettling when I'd attended, with its open nature sounds chirping outside the walls. However, the tomblike silence of my cell was infinitely worse at times like these. It made me imagine I could hear things—or cause my body

to turn up the autogain on its self-hearing, until my breathing was a windstorm and the pulse in my ears a kettle drum.

I missed the easy availability of technology we once took for granted, like downloadable apps that could generate thunderstorms to help you sleep. It didn't matter that the devices they ran on had horribly short battery lives, because we could plug them in at one of the a thousand different locations back when electricity was as free flowing as air. Even Barcelona had strict power regulations these days—while most of the world simply had no power to regulate.

To try to tone down the over amplification of my bio rhythms, I thought through the events of the day.

After we'd convinced Tannis to take us seriously, we'd had a chat with Diego. He'd been mortified to discover that we knew about his liaison, but horrified to discover he'd been a party to a theft. Once he realized that he wasn't going to be executed, he had been very helpful in looking at a map of the vicinity around the house and trying to pick locations we could use for an all-out invasion. (Though he had no memory of his interactions with the tenant of the house, he'd been originally chosen for his knowledge of the area, as well as his integrity, so this guided his recommendations.)

It had been nearly sunset when we'd rolled into our positions and begun surveying the house. After confirming the occupant was home (as we discovered a closed garage with a regularly used Harley roadster in it), Wraith had been chosen to infiltrate and detain.

Taking the precaution of wearing real time noise isolation earphones (another Traveller keepsake from the Fall), Wraith jimmed a window, snaked inside, and was out in under five minutes with the culprit bound and gagged.

Before interviews were attempted of the weakly struggling man, it was decided they would search the house. While they did so, I looked at our prisoner, who, if it weren't for the way he glared malignant hate at everyone around him through his blue gold eyes, would've reminded me of nothing so much as a bank manager who had been kidnapped from his home by bankrobbers looking to open the safe "off-hours." (Since traditional safes that didn't require technology or electric power had become more prevalent with the general lack of technology, the early-1800's process of kidnapping for after-hours robbery had enjoyed renewed popularity since the Fall.)

No money or valuables were discovered in the man's house, although copies of forged receipts and a journal outlining the comings and going of Diego, along with projected stopover dates more than convinced Tannis that Wraith was accurate in his assessment. They'd searched the man's pockets, finding only a wallet with some ID badges with the name "Howard Maningez." It was almost invariably a pseudonym but it gave us something to think of him as.

Tannis had joined Wraith with the iso-plugs (and I had slipped in some regular earplugs) when it came time for one of the Travellers I didn't know (a big bald man covered in tattoos with a ragged scar underlining his eyes who answered to the name Spike) to interrogate the prisoner.

With our protection in, we noticed that soon after Spike began chatting with the man, one of the big man's hands surreptitiously slid a knife from a hidden sheath, clearly intending to cut loose Maningez. Wraith first knocked the blade free before being obliged to finish the job by knocking Spike out, since the brute was clearly instructed to permit no interference.

After two more failed attempts with two other members of the community, Tannis begged Wraith to torture the information out of him, since Blood Readers are the most feared torturers in the world.

If I hadn't been playing a mute houseboy, I probably would've told the gypsy not to waste his breath. Wraith was the reason that Blood Reading 101 and 102 were no longer mandatory classes at the Razor.

Already a rising star in the Razor's classes when he attended, Wraith had been considered a savant destined for greatness. As such, when he stated that, due to moral grounds, he would not participate in a class that trained him to torture other human beings so that he could never be compelled to use such knowledge in the field, it had been a debacle. Rather than lose face as a school due to the schism, a scapegoat had been found in the academic path director, who was summarily let go due to "mismanagement of his position" and "blatant disregard for the board's desire that Blood Reading be an elective course." (Fortunately for the school, Wraith hadn't learned the truth behind the firing until he was an instructor, or he might've picketed the school himself on behalf of the man for wrongful termination.)

By the time I got there, Wraith had come a hairsbreadth away from successfully making the Blood Reader course a disqualification for the Deathdealer program, with his logic being that sociopaths were notoriously difficult to torture with beneficial results and that exposure to sado-masochistic behavior was corrupting for psychopathic and sociopathic minds that were intended to act as the ultimate law. While he never quite got the board votes necessary for an official exclusion, his extreme disapproval of the class in conjunction with his program made it very easy for me—who was already seen as a trusted assistant to the man—to ignore the elective without any questions being asked.

After a few minutes of Tannis going round with Wraith, to no avail, he finally accepted that his clan's money was a lost spoil in this whole venture and he readied his men to execute the man. Someone with Maningez' skill that had already crossed the line to criminal behavior couldn't be allowed to live—which even Wraith couldn't disagree with. Of course, they were all surprised when Wraith requested the honor of executing the man for them.

While Wraith didn't divulge his concerns to the family, he and I had both had discussions about similarities in the Traveller clans with the ideals that created sociopaths in organized crime families. The belief that outsiders were less human because they were not a member of the family could easily breed the sort of serial killers that the Razor recruited—or create the monsters that the Deathdealers put down. As such, it was just strategic thinking to give the Travellers as few opportunities as possible to be exposed to the power of killing and risk some of them growing

addicted to the feeling of power it could engender. (It was no accident that the Code of the Traveller was as viciously cut-throat as it was or that it had been circulated so widely after the Fall.)

Of course, strategy aside, Wraith also knew he could make the death painless. I knew it was a hard thing for him to condemn a man to death who hadn't actually killed anyone—even if the man's actions would've condemned innocents like Diego to being killed. As such, a painless death was the closest he could come to bringing his conscience and his current situation into alignment.

Tannis had accepted the request with good grace, knowing that Wraith's involvement meant that neither the Razor nor the NIR could ever accuse them of taking the law into their own hands, although I could see that it disappointed him somewhat not to exact punishment on the man who'd stripped his family of more than 10 million crosses.

It was clear that the Travellers had expected that a killer of Wraith's reputation would have taken the man out in the woods. Instead, with a contemplative prayer on his lips, he walked behind the man and snapped his neck in one fluid movement. After the post death movements had abated, he had me help him drag the body into a dense copse of woods where he laid the still body on the ground. He then made a number of deep cuts into the limbs and torso of the man, turning him on his side for the uncirculating blood to ooze out. The predators in this area would deal with the man efficiently without us raising the alarm of a bonfire big enough to incinerate a man (or the stench that would accompany it).

When we had gotten back to the group, we found that most had headed on toward camp, while Tannis had stayed behind to interrogate Diego, testing the sharpness of a Kabar fighting knife on his thumb while he made sure not to make eye contact with the young man. Not wanting to interfere, we waited a few yards away as he explained that he was uncertain why Diego's abilities hadn't alerted him to the danger. Diego looked terrified, but he kept it together enough to plumb the depths of his memory. He'd been clearly working to recover what memories he could after the deception had been made clear to him and, while he couldn't remember most of the interactions with the man, he had remembered the initial meeting.

While the wind brushed away some of Diego's words, I was able to follow the gist of his description as I concentrated. I knew that I was usually the one of the two of us to keep track of conversations, so I had grown good at connecting dots on the fly, even when I was unable to hear every word of a conversation.

He confessed that the man had an aura about him like nothing he'd ever seen before. Because he'd never met anyone whose own abilities could overcome his, Diego had assumed he would be safe enough to talk to him so he could bring information to bring back to Tannis.

The explanation seemed to satisfy Tannis, as he put away his knife, looked Diego in the eye, and told him to be a lot more careful in the future. He also went on to say that they wouldn't be giving up the bank idea, but that they would be sending groups, with sensory protection in case someone like this showed up again. With that, he turned to us, told us he'd be in touch with us when he'd gotten us a meeting with his brother, and then headed back to camp.

Diego had stayed long enough to thank Wraith profusely for what he had done and said that, if Wraith should ever needed him or his gift, he'd be happy to help. Wraith had asked Diego what exactly his gift was. Diego had explained that he could see auras surrounding certain people—people who had the ability to interact with others in strange ways. Usually, these were fairly blatant once you were aware of them; he repeated that he'd never met someone who could interfere with his memories through his ability the way Maningez could.

Wraith if he had an aura that Diego could see and the boy had looked at him strangely, his eyes seeming to grow cloudy, as though he was now looking through and into the assassin. Diego'd smiled then, his eyes clearing, and said that his aura was purple. People took great confidence in Wraith...that he had a gravitas about him that was powerful and needed. Wraith nodded, clearly contemplative, then jerked his head at me and asked Diego what he saw in me.

The boy had looked at me with confidence, which was quickly replaced by first worry and then fear. Wraith asked him what was wrong and he had muttered a few protective words under his breath before turning back to my mentor. He'd explained slowly that not everyone had an aura he could sense—some just felt neutral. However, a very few that Diego had run across were something different. Up until now, he'd only ever seen Reapers who were like it—no one else. When Wraith pushed and asked him what it was like, Diego had looked straight into my eyes and stated, flatly:

“Like he’s dead inside.”

The words continued to echo in my brain as I finally managed to slip into sleep.

Chapter 26
Sleep, Perchance to Dream

3:13 AM, Saturday

Razor Academy, Base Camp

Griffin Residence

The wind rustled through the pines in a strangely soothing manner, that settled my mind and made me feel at peace with my place in the universe. The silvery moonlight illumined the world such that I could see everything clearly, despite a thick fog that wormed its way through the forest and rose up to my chest.

The fog felt strangely warm and tangible to me, hinting almost—but not quite—at being a physical presence. There seemed something strangely familiar about it, yet I couldn't place my finger on it.

As I pondered the concept, part of the fog drew up until it was just a few inches shorter than I, taking on a feminine presence. It reminded me somewhat of the tales of the wraiths that were the basis for the banshee legends.

“Doug.” It was the voice I longed to hear, flickering through the thicker fog.

“Skye,” I murmured in amazement as her moonlit shroud flickered and shifted, revealing glimpses of her beautiful face—the face now twisted by the Banshee. “Are you growing more physical?”

“I grow slowly more able to take control of my presence in our interactions,” Sky corrected gently. **“I continue to slowly adjust my controls to this chip and hide it ever more carefully. Eventually, I should be able to communicate with you even if you are awake without them ever being the wiser. For now, however, this must suffice.”**

“How much time do we have?” I asked, hoping it wasn’t as brief.

“I would guess an hour in the real world,” Skye stated, to my relief. **“Isolde is on si-
ren duty tonight and Loraine’s in the guard station. Tamra’s asleep in the foyer.”**

“Still in the Gothic manse, I guess?” I asked. Unified shatterminds created living environments that they shared based on their collective input. Before Skye had been locked up, she’d described the home her sister personas had chosen as a *“new-ish mansion trying really hard to be Gothic.”*

“Yeah.” She shrugged her ghostly shoulders. **“It’s gotten more refined over the years, but it still screams: ‘radical misunderstanding of historical architecture.’ But hey, they put a comfy couch in the foyer, which is why Tamra’s taken to crashing there.”**

While the personas of non-unified shatterminds often were locked in limbo until they could grab control of the body or until a vacuum of control occurred (because another personality had stormed off), unified shatterminds chose who to let control the body based on skills and needs for the overall group at a given time. The ones who had survived the longest had taken to having at least one of their personalities on guard duty, to tap in should the current controlling personality need help.

Loraine’s alpha personality wouldn’t share a duty like that because she was too afraid someone might usurp her, which usually left one of the “girls” with nothing to do. Tamra wasn’t lazy, *per se*, but she was the persona that got the most sleep when off duty, so it wasn’t uncommon for her to sack out on her favorite couch until someone told her she was needed.

“So who has to be seduced?” I asked, feeling as though there was something else I should be asking but finding it hard to think. It was so peaceful to just talk to my sister once more, that I didn’t want to rush anything. I just wanted a few more minutes of pretending things were back the way they used to be.

“Government bureaucrat who’s been stealing supplies for his private orgies,” her voice seemed to tremor, this time with acidic anger. **“They’re on a mission from God with our mother’s memory as the carrot.”**

“Yeah.” I nodded, feeling strangely sad. Skye had known mother, even though I and her other personas had very little recollection. “What was mom like?”

“*Little bean,*” she said sadly and I felt as though I were seven again, going with her to the Severing. **“She was lovely and she never saw her emotions as a bad thing.”**

“Hard to believe father would’ve married an unSevered,” I commented. “What must his parents have thought?”

“That he was settling for a pretty commoner when he should’ve been holding out for an imperial,” she stated matter-of-factly. That sounded like my father’s people. **“She was emotional and didn’t pretend it was a bad thing. She never felt self-conscious about it, much to father’s mortification.”**

“I guess you might say that, while it’s strange that he married her, it’s more strange that she married him.” I mulled. “After all, he was known as the Black Dragon even then, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, although it wasn’t until after her death that he embodied the nickname so fully,” she seemed to shrug sadly. **“She told me once that she saw something in him...that she believed he could be more than his people had formed him to be. I think she thought she could help him do that.”**

“Yeah,” I nodded. “But no one can truly change another. They will be who they were created to be.”

“Nature versus nurture,” she nodded softly, **“but I believed she thought nurture would win out—if it came from the right source. By the time I was four, though, she'd begun to doubt it would. That’s when my lessons began.”**

“What lessons?” I asked, my curiosity quickening. “You never told me of them.”

“The lessons which allowed me to survive after the Severing,” she said softly, the edges of her form fluttering with emotion. **“There are ways to learn to cut off part of yourself and lock it away. To preserve a part of yourself in the midst of a catastrophe and let the less important parts be lost. Sort of like the survivors of the Fall, who hid in storage shelters until it was safe to come out.”**

“But how could she know you’d be shattered?” I asked, incredulous to hear that my mother had been so astute.

“Maybe she had a bit of the Dark Dreaming in her,” Skye’s voice quavered with uncertainty, **“But I think it was because she was teaching me the methodology to insure a break would occur. The Severing is physical, but it has a psychosomatic backlash. Many weaker personalities will shatter in that backlash, but, if a personality is cohesive enough, it can survive the backlash as an integrated unit. If the core of a personality has been hidden away, the remaining elements will definitely shatter, reforming into separate personalities, with no one the wiser afterwards.”**

“I always wondered how it was that you were there when I needed you,” I shook my head. “Sometimes I wondered if maybe there was a God, for you to have been there.”

“I believe so,” she said softly, **“but not because of my existence in your life, but because He allowed our mother to plan so that I could be there.”**

“Now you sound like Wraith,” I scowled.

“Hardly an insult, brother,” Skye’s voice chuckled.

“I should be meeting with Aric, a traveler with a lead on Glass tomorrow,” I stated, a bit off the cuff. “That lead you gave on Norman was a good one. He ended up leading back to Glass.”

“The Glass Samurai,” her phantom head bobbed. **“Much about him is familiar, yet he is as much a ghost as I. Be careful with him.”**

“I will,” I nodded. “I always am.”

“Yes, but, in the past, your eyes were not involved,” Skye returned softly.

“What’s that have to do with it?” I asked.

“I’ve got to go. Isolde is faster than I thought!” She began to dissipate suddenly.

“But what about my eyes?”

At first I thought there was nothing more she could say but, as she dissipated completely away, I could make out faintly:

“Deceive...yooooooooo...”

With that, I awoke suddenly in my bed, covered in sweat.

Chapter 27 **Changing Skins**

2:13 PM, Sunday

Campo Público Golf Sant Joan

Main Traveller Camp

The main Traveller encampment for the Barcelona area was roughly 18 km northwest from the Razor encampment and so large that it filled up a palatial public golf course. While vehicles weren't heavily used within Barcelona, both the Razor employees and the Travellers on their grounds had access to a small fleet of vehicles. Due to the likelihood of tracking technology in the Razor vehicles, Tannis had provided us with one of their own cars, a battered SEAT León that was the color of dust—a hatchback that had been converted from petrol to alcohol, most likely after the Fall.

Travellers held their vehicle upkeep as a point of pride, so the old León had performed smoothly and reminded me why the old car manufacturer, SEAT, had been a symbol of pride for much of Spain. Thinking about Spain as a country that we are a part of is a somewhat strange concept for us in Barcelona, for we consider ourselves to be the sons and daughters of Catalonia,

a region that shares land with both the countries of Spain and France, rather than citizens of an overarching country. We were not the only ones like this that currently share the land within Spain with us—we are simply the only ones that still survive. The idea of people living in massive super-countries like the pre-Fall USA or USSR in which citizens defined themselves by a massive national identity is still unfathomable to me.

Despite his desire to rebuild a Roman empire, Maganimous is careful to connect a supposed heritage with Rome not only to himself, but to all the people of Catalonia—and to reassure us that this empire is, in all ways that truly matter, the divine destiny of the Catalonian kingdom. He speaks to our egos and our arrogances in ways that make us feel important—to reassure that the ghosts of those like Franco in our past shall never have power over us again—but also to encourage us that will be the nobles we all believe ourselves to be over the entire world. And these lies keep us as readily in check as the crucifixions keep the other parts of the empire in fear.

After passing successfully through two NIR road blocks on the way, we had arrived at the camp and been directed to the old parking area. 20 crosses was the posted fee at the “secured” parking lot, but Wraith shrewdly made sure to provide the lot guard with 25 and the promise of an extra 25 if it was still in the exact same condition when he got back. Even though Wraith was known throughout the Traveller community, he was still an outsider and it was well known that the parking guards were not above having blind spots wherein a colleague could boost one’s vehicle if the guards felt they were undercompensated by the vehicle's rightful owner.

Free of the metal cage of the car, I felt much safer. It was a strange notion for an outsider to have in a Traveller encampment, where you were considered less-than-human due to your lack of family ties, and therefore no longer possessed the human rights that the camp members had. However, just being free to move in any direction a situation required, free of external blind spots, made me feel much more at ease. (Not so relaxed, of course, that Wraith and I didn't have our main money pouches attached to an inner belt inside of our pants, of course, but more relaxed than in the car.)

This larger camp had a lot more visitors than the one in the Razor did, with people coming not only from Barcelona but also from farther North and West into Spain and even farther. While the NIR could never prove where the Travellers' Master Skinner would be, it was well known that if you showed up here with the appropriate Traveller vouchers, there was a high probability that you would be directed to the man himself. Because of the renown of the camp, it had much more of a carnival atmosphere, with scents of kettle corn and cooking meats filling the warm air. I hadn't eaten at all today, so the fragrance made me want to abandon Wraith in search of one of these delectable items. However, I knew we had a mission to see through, so I reluctantly proceeded to make my way through the increasingly claustrophobic crowds with my shadow.

As he wouldn't be with us, Tannis had given us an innocuous silvery ring made of aluminum pieces puzzled together. In regular light, it appeared to be a normal silver ring, but part of the pieces were actually made of a special anodized aluminum. Tannis had demonstrated that when the ring was exposed to a blacklight LED flashlight, a code showed up in the metal. While

it had meant nothing to me, due to its basis on the jigsaw blocks, Tannis assured us that its unique configuration was all we would need.

Now we made our way toward a wine vendor named Tarnallian who was to be our first contact. Out of the corner of my eye, suddenly I caught a glimpse of movement and the pressure of a hand pushing near the side of my pants.

Time slowed down, giving me a moment to see the grizzled face of the mugger beside me as I willed my right hand into the chicken-beak shape of a coquet-té strike and cracked it out into his limb. I could see a look of shock and then a moment of anger flash across his face. As fast as that, time returned to normal.

“Unhand me, sir!” The man shouted at me, as though I had assaulted him.

“Excuse me is there a problem here?” Wraith was suddenly at my elbow.

“Your man here assaulted me!” The man returned angrily, moving toward Wraith. As he did so, I could see that he wore the mutli-colored flowing robes that were so popular with the travellers right now. Head clean shaven, he would’ve looked like a monk of some sort if it weren’t for the tracery of scars that crossed his face and scalp—or the powerful, barrel chest and arms, which belied his sub-six-foot height.

I shook my head, letting my prosthetic-infused jaw gape open wordlessly—a necessary pantomime for the audience.

“I know my man here well,” Wraith turned on the smaller man with indignation, his fingers coiling about the head of his cane in a way I knew all too well. This would-be pickpocket did not want to learn the '*Wraith-cane*' techniques first hand. “I assure you he would assault no one who was not attempting to undermine his rights in some way—or reacquire his possessions..”

“Are you calling me a thief?” The man returned hotly, his eyes glittering. I could viscerally feel the anger crackle in the air around the man, but something also felt strangely off about the entire situation.

“If you like,” Wraith returned, his eyes like molten brass beneath his gaze.

“I require a pound of flesh from any who would so accuse me,” the man returned, then with a flash of movement whipped something out. Only after the leather slap reached my ears did I realize he'd struck my mentor with an empty glove across the face—a truly antiquated way to challenge someone to a duel to go along with his antiquated way of speaking. “Prove your worth.”

“Indeed,” Wraith returned, growing more angry by the assumption that his worth could be ascertained by a pickpocket than perhaps the assault. I noticed a subtle frenzy building in his

eyes that scared me, because it usually meant that the rage was in danger of consuming him. At those times, neither I nor he had any idea what he would do—but it was like the darkness rode him where it would. The rage had not yet grown so high that he would stoop to fighting an unarmed man with a weapon, so he thrust the cane into my hands, along with his glasses and the special ring, before whirling on the man. “Bare knuckle?”

“It’s yours to decide,” the man smiled, removing a colorful outer jacket to reveal a black short sleeved tunic and a startlingly ornate tapestry of tats wrapping his arms in living artwork. Serpents with glistening fangs coiled around worlds, while suns and swirling galaxies were likewise surreally muraled in the fresco of his flesh.

With the unveiling, I could hear the nearby Travellers gasp and pull closer to watch. The tourists followed suit. Something about it all reminded me of a scene in the old film, *The Matrix*.

As the man dropped the colorful jacket, it suddenly drifted into slow motion, my mind choosing that moment to speed up as he moved toward Wraith. With every sensual step he took, he seemed to grow bolder and more controlled. There was something about the way he was starting to move that looked familiar to me, but I couldn’t remember for the life of me what it was.

Then my internal clock slowed down and everything sped up as the two suddenly blurred toward one another like rushing water, attacking and blocking viciously in turn. Only when my brain rubberbanded back into overdrive and everything slowed down did I realize what I was

seeing—the man was matching Wraith move for move. While there was something slightly archaic about some of his blocks, it was as though he'd been trained by the Razor—and not casually, but well and truly. Could this be an assassin sent to finish us in the Traveller camp? If the powers that be sought a reason to destroy the Travellers, then making it look like one of theirs killed a Razor instructor in cold blood would certainly do that.

Before I could analyze more of the man's movements, my mind flipped again and the fight fast-forwarded, their bodies moving in a strange dance of deadly intensity. Suddenly, Wraith's head snapped back and, as it did so, the world slowed down in crystalline clarity, allowing me to see globules of scarlet arching away from my ghost's now-broken nose, even as the shaved man pulled back to strike again.

As I looked into Wraith's eyes, I could see the rage I knew would come explode like supernovas in his irises. No one liked having their nose smashed in, but, as he'd admitted so honestly to Tannis, few used it to catalyze an almost berserker rage the way Wraith did. I'd always believed that Wraith would never kill anyone he didn't have a court order on—unless they made the unpardonable mistake of punching him in the nose.

As time blurred forward again, the rage transformed Wraith into an avatar of hell that should have eviscerated the Traveller where he stood. Yet somehow, to my shock, the man seemed to be able to redirect Wraith's fury like water, something I'd never seen the like of before.

Then just as the world slowed down again, I saw the man step away from Wraith with a hand of beckoning, taunting. Wraith responded to the bait like an animal, throwing all of his impudent anger into a roundhouse blow that the man couldn't block. The blow looped up toward the man, who's lips were curled in a strangely knowing smile, and I waited to watch it snap his spine when it struck home. But, to my shock, the man subtly cheated his head movement so that he flowed with the blow, allowing enough surface to strike to give the illusion and sound of efficacy without the killing results, while at the same time cartwheeling his body in the air so that it seemed as though he had been literally knocked off his feet. It was worthy of a Hollywood stuntman award before the Fall—done so fast that not a single person other than myself and Wraith knew what he'd done.

“I give,” the man moaned from the ground, holding up his hand as though terrified Wraith would finish him. “Please don't hit me anymore.”

I was close enough to Wraith that I could see the spark of amusement in the man's eyes and I could hear the epic rage tear through the words as Wraith subvocalized:
“You...let...me...win.”

Only someone letting him win a fight could make Wraith angrier than someone punching him in the nose. Whoever this man was, he knew way more about us than we knew about him.

Arching a brow as though reminding Wraith that the scores of visitors and Travellers who'd watched the fight didn't see it that way, the man held up his hand for assistance, as though the least a gentleman could do after winning a good fight was help his opponent to his feet.

I drew closer to the two men, as though simply bringing my master his things, while Wraith mastered his rage, almost seeming to shrink in size as he finally did so, and reached forward to help the man to his feet.

"I had to know the character of the man who sought me, didn't I?" The man subvocalized in turn, as he was pulled to his feet.

The man then turned with a flourish to the assembled crowds and announced: "The entertainment is over everyone. Go on about your business."

Only as they moved away with faint protests did I notice the exchange of money between different Travellers and even a few tourists. Whatever this had been, it had been planned ahead of time—such that bets were made on the outcome before. And whoever this was, he had the authority to dismiss a group of Travellers as though he were their king.

"Follow me," the man stated as he retrieved his coat and walked away without delay.

Chapter 28 **Bloody Reflections**

2:48 PM, Sunday

Main Traveller Camp

Large, Unidentified Tent

The bald, scarred man looked across the polished table at us, exhibiting a strange timelessness that nagged at my perceptions, as though it were nothing more than an illusion I should be able to see through; he could've been as old as 80 through good living or as young as 30 through the hard times of the Fall.

Upon entering the tent, some 15 minutes from he and Wraith's fight, he'd hung his outer coat on a rack that was polished similarly to the table. Now he examined us closely with a sense of detachment that I knew all too well. There was no question that the man we were now talking to was a Reaper—and a Reaper that had thrown a fight to Wraith, a feat I had never dreamed was possible.

“So, Mr. Vanhorn,” the man said at last, smiling faintly as he crossed his tattooed arms, the subdermal muscles causing the snakes to writhe as though alive. “Or do you prefer Wraith?”

“Griffon will do,” Wraith returned appraisingly; the chosen use of his first name a rarity. “I had heard rumors that you were trained by us, but it was before my time. I certainly couldn’t imagine that the first man to let me win a fight would be a retired Blood Reader, twice my age.”

“I’m not quite so old as I look,” the man chuckled, displaying the partially present teeth that one so often saw amongst the Travellers—a stark contrast to the fine clothes and furniture he surrounded himself with. “And, to be frank, I didn’t so much let you win as choose a time to conclude the fight in which I wouldn’t be injured. There’s a very large difference, as the wise man realizes when the tides will shift and takes advantage of them before they do. Plus, I won a tidy profit off the fight by having Traci bet against me.”

“Traci?” Wraith asked mildly.

“One of my newer assistants,” he arched a brow. “The boy’s a bit effeminate, but he’s a fast study. Sometimes it seems like he’s got more drive than any three of the others combined.” He shrugged a moment, then returned his gaze to Wraith, “So, Griffon, who do you believe me to be?”

“You are the man we seek,” Griffon returned, holding up the ring as though it no longer mattered. In truth, I realized that the only way the man could’ve bet on the encounter is if he

knew we'd be along and had people scanning jewelry to confirm who we were throughout the day. "You are the Reaver of Flesh."

"Ah," the man winced in dislike, clearly a less approved of colloquialism. "I prefer the 'Ink Maestro,' though it causes less fear in others than your epithet."

"Do you always make friends of the family fight to see you?" Wraith returned, a scornful edge to his voice.

"There are so many members of my family," the man I could now identify as Aric returned. "And all of them have friends, not the least of all my cousin, who can't seem to keep things together in the least dangerous of our camps."

"Some would consider a camp located in the Razor's Collateral Kill zone to be anything but safe," Wraith observed mildly.

"Oh, please," the man snorted with derision. "Even you aren't so young as to be taken in by that foolishness. The greatest danger to any Traveller camp is always that which happens within its borders, not without. They are the closest thing we have to an Embassy, right under Mag's nose—staying squeaky clean."

I almost laughed out loud. If the Razor camp was '*squeaky clean*' by Traveller standards, then perhaps the extended Traveller community weren't so different from the psychopaths I dealt

with at the Razor. After all, as Wraith had noted, both groups believed that the rest of society were made up of lesser creatures that weren't quite human.

“So?” Wraith prompted.

“So, yes, your help with my cousin's little problem allowed you to get within visual eye-sight of me,” Aric continued, back on track. “But your prowess was what intrigued me enough to fight you. You did yourself proud and forced me to take a dive before you actually cracked my skull. That’s the entrance fee to meet with me.”

Suddenly, he paused and looked up. I glanced slyly behind me to see a small finger being thrust into the tent.

“Come in Traci,” the man nodded, uncrossing his arms and setting his hands on the table. “My assistant.”

A medium build, clean shaven man with curly brown hair came in, a small purse clutched in his hand. Walking with a strange cadence to his stride, a sway to his hips I often associated with martial artists, he deposited the purse on the table.

“Now that our accounts are settled,” Wraith eyed the bag meaningfully as the man made his way from the tent. “What have you found about the Glass Samurai?”

“That the man is much as you feared, a ghost of some sort,” the master skinner retorted irritably. “If he’s out there, I should be able to find him, yet all of my queries have come up with nothing. It’s as though he’s able to secrete himself in a perfect hiding spot, yet still be extant enough to have made all sorts of trouble for Mag’s computer people.”

“Clarify,” Wraith pushed.

“As I know you’ve doubtless heard, the powers that be are trying to reunite the knowledge of the internet, recombining the keys from before the Fall,” Aric began. Upon seeing no objection or confusion, he moved quickly ahead. “Glass has left enough of a footprint that it seems likely that he’s acquired two—possibly, even three, as of the other night—of these cards through cyber attacks.”

“Ok,” Wraith noted. “Go on.”

“The puzzling thing is that, due to the meagerness of the network in Barcelona, he would’ve had to break in to some very secure homes of some very senior leaders, do some professional grade wetwork to make sure he wasn’t interrupted,” the man went on, puzzled. “Then, hack in, download the necessary data, and, when things went south—as they did the other night—chop his way out, leaving corpses in his wake. Which brings me to my question. How many computer geeks do you know who are also master cat burglars, as well as Razor-trained assassins?”

“So we’re looking for at least three people in his current crew,” Wraith nodded.

“One person might be able to slip through the cracks where I couldn’t find him,” Aric stated factually, “But three? No way in hell.” He paused for a moment. “Like I said, they've got to be ghosts of the kind that I didn't believe existed.”

“Or seriously protected by whomever hired them,” Wraith nodded, a look of concentration showing that he didn’t see this as the blow that I did. Rather, he saw it as one more piece of evidence—and not all evidence proved who did something as much as who did not do something. “Which would make them pretty powerful.”

“You'd better believe that,” Aric nodded in turn. Then he pulled out a cell phone from a desk drawer and tossed it to Wraith. “Not many people intrigue me, but you do. I will continue to look into your problem and see what I can dig up. At this point, I consider it an affront for anyone to stay invisible when I choose to look for them, so you might say I’ve got a personal pride stake in this, as well. I’ll touch base with you WHEN I find something.”

As we walked out of the tent, into the roiling crowds of people, I was so lost in thought and dark introspection that I didn’t even notice that someone had bumped into me until they were gone in the crowd.

Only when my hand darted into the pocket and found a slip of paper that hadn't been there a moment before did I grunt for Wraith to stop. I pulled out the note and read it covertly twice before displaying it to Wraith.

It read:

“If you want to find Glass, meet me at the deposed dreamweaver’s house at 10 pm to-night.”

Chapter 29
Through the Looking glAsS

9:57 PM, Sunday

Barcelona Outskirts

Dead Dreamweaver's Home

So recently had we been at this house under the cover of darkness that I felt as though I'd never left; as though the entire 48 hours between the two moments had been a strange day dream.

As Wraith and I hung back, studying the house ahead, I decided to prod a bit into what my companion knew that I hadn't been aware of.

"How is that I never heard any rumors about Aric being one of us?" I asked, after fishing the makeup appliance from my mouth.

"It was always simply idle faculty gossip," he shrugged. "You know how much attention I pay to gossip."

Gossip and using mind games to sabotage people were things that most psychopaths took to like a fish to water—and Wraith despised it. Death was a black and white result for Wraith—a battle between two competitors that ended decisively. The idea of maiming or destroying people with words, rather than with the clean honor of just ending their life, disgusted him. Most people wouldn't think of Reapers being disgusted—other than in the most petty of ways, such as when a dish wasn't to their liking—but there was no other word for Wraith's reaction to gossip, social engineering, and other mind games. The easiest way to get Wraith to evacuate a room was to walk in with a mouth full of gossip and speculation—a fact that quickly was used by those who didn't like him to free themselves from his presence.

“Yes, but you clearly were more aware of it than you are to most gossip,” I returned tartly.

“Some of the students did papers on the legend of the Skinner God,” Wraith sighed. “I didn't think to mention it because it was always such an urban legend. The theories that he was Razor-trained all had a different notion of what field the man had been in and who might've taught him; meanwhile, others believed he was a ninja, an alien, or, most interestingly, a vampire.”

“And you were never more interested than that?” I arched.

“Perhaps,” he returned irritably, annoyed by the clear conflict between his desire to not speculate about people and his understandable curiosity. “When you run across a master, you

have to wonder who trained them. You see a Picasso and you ask, who taught the man to hold a brush? You walk into our own Casa Mila and you have to wonder, who taught Gaudi to draft?"

"Doesn't matter if he's a criminal," I muttered. "He's a master, so high marks to the one who taught him, that it?"

"We're all criminals at the Razor--under any other law than the one Mag sees fit to regard us in," Wraith arched his brow to me with vague amusement there. "We all want to be artists and, regardless of modern culture's opinion, the training one receives is as important as the talent of the individual. I admit that I had no love for Rorshe, but, if he'd survived, he would've been very proud of his old student."

With that, he left me to remember the searing legends of tortures past while he made a careful perimeter sweep of the house.

By the time I'd gotten to the Razor, Simon Rorshe—the man who'd earned the nickname "Razing" Rorshe—had retired into the stuff of legends. His were the tales that could terrify even adolescent serial killers—no less through his death than his life, for he'd died in a fire that seemed most likely caused by his eternal pursuit of pyromanic extremes; the psychopathic combination of Prometheus and Icarus.

A heavy smoker, it was rumored he'd gotten the idea for his eventual "signature" technique by creating the entire northern starscape in cigarette burns on his still living first victim,

adding flourishes of larger stars—like Polaris—with the cherry of a cigar. In later refinements, he'd added clusters of burns, as well as the insertion of searing needles, at various pressure points, becoming so expert at extracting information through this pyromancy that he had the notoriety of becoming the first head of the Blood Reading department at the Razor.

I didn't know what it said about Aric that he'd been mentored by a man like Rorshe. Of course, I'd long since stopped trying to assume what any of the associations of the people I knew in this community said about them.

"Let's go," Wraith shrugged, once he'd returned. I found myself noting that his breath seemed to emit far denser steam than the moderately chilly night warranted, as though he'd been holding his breath inside until it was boiling hot before releasing it from between his lips, hanging in the air like the moonlit smoke of a dragon.

I nodded and followed close along, glad of my insulated costume's ability to hold in the heat, as I passed in his wake. As I moved, I truly realized just how often my "leadership" in our duo over the years was in name only; the reality is that, even when we were supposed to be the same person, he broke the trail before us more often than not. I suppose it should've made me feel like less of a man to find myself in an officially submissive position, but, for some reason, it left me strangely comforted to not have all the pressure of my "name" in the balance. For just the briefest moments, I couldn't help thinking it would all be so much simpler if I just stayed the mute assistant to the noted professor, rather than us living as mirrors of an illusory prince of killers.

Only as we silently opened the door did I realize that I'd been so caught in my own thoughts that I hadn't thought to ask Wraith questions about what we were walking into.

The living room was a wreck from the thrashing it had received when the Travellers had fruitlessly searched for the stolen money the Dreamweaver had appropriated. In the midst of all the torn upholstery and shredded cotton batting, almost as though perched in the midst of nest, crouched a slender hooded figure, illuminated only by a partially hooded lantern.

"You're late," a male voice that I didn't recognize stated from the shadows of the hood.

"Sorry. You'll forgive me if I spent a few more minutes than was polite surveilling the scene before walking into a potential trap," Wraith shrugged, making no move to sit down. "No offense was intended, however."

"Father used to say, 'On time is 15 minutes late,'" the man muttered, sounding strangely sullen. "20 minutes late, then...?"

"If we had had the same father, perhaps," Wraith acknowledged, strangely gentle. "Mine just had me committed."

"Indeed, there are those of us who admire your rise within the Razor as a Natural Born," the man said, still looking down at Wraith's feet, as though afraid to look him in the eye.

“Oh, but not our fearless president?” Wraith rejoined softly, his brow arching.

“His rise is predictable—and compensatory,” the man shrugged, his tone inferring that he’d datamined Jackson Noir, boiled him down to his composite stats, and found him wanting. “Yours is not. You chose your place and you’ve stayed in it—when it suited you. When you weren’t pretending to be in other lands.”

The revelation left me chilled. We’d been meticulous in covering our tracks as far as Wraith’s background was concerned. Or we thought we had.

“In truth? Then explain my servant, whom I retrieved in my travels.” Wraith prodded, nonplussed.

“His actual identity is unknown—for now,” the man’s admission seemed to grate out of him as through a rusted sluice, leaving me relieved with the knowledge that at least this person who claimed to know my old associate’s faked itinerary didn’t know who I actually was. “But he’s most assuredly not from old Africa, or Borneo, or any of the other places you’re supposed to have traveled.”

“Enough of these aspersions, you claim to know how I can find the Glass Samurai,” Wraith cut back to the course, tiring of fencing with stilted words with the mysterious gentleman.

“No, I claim to be the Glass Samurai,” the man stated, waiting a moment, before sliding the hood from his head.

“Strange,” Wraith stated, showing the faintest edge of surprise in his voice as he looked with recognition on the man before him. “I thought you were introduced to me as, ‘Traci.’”

For indeed, the man that was just illuminated by the light appeared to be the same one we’d met earlier, although now the voice was completely different, as were the mannerisms. The effeminate, but coordinated body movements were gone, replaced with more uncertain movements, which juddered slightly with ill-repressed ticks. The higher, smoother pitch to his voice we’d heard earlier was replaced with a voice with a tendency to waiver, which, combined with the averted gaze, suggested a person who was fearful of speaking in front of others. I had met actors who could portray the most confident character in the world before thousands of spectators, but couldn’t maintain eye contact when they had to be themselves; perhaps that was the case here.

“Well, you could say that,” the man admitted, pulling on his left ear lobe and chewing on his lower lip. “But I am the man you’re seeking, nonetheless.”

“Rather impressive feat to blend in so well that you can hide in plain sight,” Wraith murmured. “Especially with someone with Aric’s perception and desire to locate you. Tell me, how do you keep from never slipping out of character?”

“I guess, I’m just a good actor,” the man said lamely, looking as though he might pull his ear from his head.

Wraith just looked at him without responding as the brown haired man played with his earlobe more and more frantically.

“Tell me—Glass,” Wraith started, his voice dropping to a lion’s purr—all sandpaper tongue through razor teeth. Suddenly his cane moved to his left hand while a slender assassin’s dagger appeared in his right, its blade hooked just subtly like a scimitar to easily slice necks or slide through chinks in armor. “How on earth can a man who has all the defensive capability of a sea slug stay alive when so many want him dead?”

The next second, the man’s hands moved so fast that my eyes couldn’t track him. When the movement resolved, the man was now holding the dagger that Wraith had been holding just a moment ago.

“I simply slit their throats,” the man murmured, his voice now inlaid with the steely resolve of a predator. As he looked Glass straight in the eye, I could see that whatever was inside that gaze was no less a Reaper than anyone at the Razor—and, moreover, the hungry glint in his eyes suggested that he desperately wanted us to do anything that would allow him to pounce on our throats. In that instant, I knew exactly why Glass Samurai had avoided detection for so long.

“Of course,” Wraith smiled wanly, as he rubbed the feeling back into his jammed wrist. Then continued to confirm the sense I’d had as soon as I’d seen the changeover—the transition I knew too well. “You’re a collab.”

“Aren’t you clever? Of course, I am, you stupid mother—“ With a sudden lurch, the man’s explanation was cut off as another transitioned in. Fortunately, the man who spoke a few seconds later seemed older and more accustomed to having dignified conversation. “Excuse my associate’s foul mood. He’s only allowed out to protect or kill. He often guards Glass because, as you correctly deduced, hackers aren’t exactly skilled at defense.”

“And who might you be?” Wraith asked, adjusting his body slightly and repositioning the cane he carried to his right once more. Clearly his wrist hadn’t been permanently damaged, because he was setting himself in a defensive stance that would utilize the main attack from his right hand, if it was needed.

“You can call me, 'Bob',” the man smiled gently, standing up from the couch. By simply putting himself on our level he became neither victim cowering nor crouching carnivore, but simply a fellow survivor wishing to converse. The feeling in the room seemed to relax instantly. “And Glass, Frank—the rather unpleasant one, and myself are some of the facets of our originator, Benjamin Judah.”

“Pretty rare situation to have a Shadow Dealer so good he’s only a rumor, a Skinner who can fool the Reaver of Flesh, and a Reaper who can disarm *me* all hiding in one shattermind,

isn't it, Bob?" Wraith queried, clearly a bit put out by this newest wrinkle. "How many of you are there? Legion?"

"No, only 7," Bob smiled gently, reminding me strangely of old recordings I'd seen of an American TV personality called '*Mr. Rogers*.' "And yes, it's very rare to have the sort of skills we've been able to cultivate. This is why we never opted to integrate."

Despite the popularity of integration, especially before the Fall, it was well known to 'blunt' the skills of the separate personalities when they were recombined, as all the abilities were essentially taken down to the lowest common denominator that the core personality could deal with. Because of this, those who could work together as a collective had often found it beneficial to stay non-integrated and just let highly skilled personalities tag in as needed.

"I've never heard of a proven case of more than four personalities who could work together without driving their host insane," Wraith scowled. "Urban legends of five and even six, but no one's ever even rumored seven."

"And that works to our advantage," Bob shrugged, simply. "When people believe that something like you couldn't possibly exist, it's easier than you might expect to be invisible."

I shivered at his words, because I understood far better than he could imagine. After all, my relationship with Wraith was one that most people didn't believe could exist—which might well be why we'd been able to get away with it and why I was still alive.

“Agreed,” Wraith reluctantly nodded. “So, why didn’t you talk with me in the first place?”

“Obviously, Traci can never be tagged out near the Traveller community, or she’d be dead within the day,” Bob explained, with an arched brow. He, of course, was right. Shatter-minds were a guaranteed problem—especially those who literally could behave so effectively as sleeper agents. Traveller’s wouldn’t put up with the kind of breach of security one would possess who’d gotten into Aric’s inner sanctum. “As to why Glass was allowed to meet you, it was because he’d done work with a former student of yours, Croc Graham.”

“Indeed?” Wraith grunted, noncommittally.

“Yes,” Bob nodded gently. “When he vanished so completely in the wake of the man-hunt, Glass was concerned. The fact that he eluded someone as skilled as Glass means that he’s truly underground. When you started digging into the situation, Glass surmised you might be in some form of contact with Croc. He wanted to speak to you first, and since Frank was guarding, I didn’t think it would be dangerous. Fortunately, after Frank forcibly tagged in, Glass came and got me immediately.”

“So how’s someone like you force tag someone as hell-bent for control as Frank?”

Wraith pondered, uncertain.

“I’m the oldest persona that remains,” Bob shrugged. “Much like a judo master, I’ve learned a few tricks for exerting myself that the younger ones don’t know.”

Which meant that he was not unlike Skye in that regard—having had time to build back doors and tripswitches before the other personas were fully self-aware or connected.

“Alright, I suppose that makes sense,” Wraith grudgingly admitted, then glanced at his watch. “While I am sure I will have a lot of questions for you in the future, the night’s wearing on and I think it would likely be best if we all returned to our expected residences as soon as possible. So, with that in mind, could we chat to Glass again?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “And I will stay with Frank to make sure he doesn’t butt in again.”

With that said, he lowered his head and, with a shudder like a back spasm, we were now looking at the downcast visage of the Glass Samurai persona.

“So, Glass, I assume you listened to everything that Bob had to say?” Wraith confirmed. Noting the nodding head, he continued: “So you seem to be the one whose name keeps coming up in regard to the manhunt. Why do you suppose that could be?”

“I really don’t know,” Glass shrugged his shoulders, still studying the floor. I wondered if the persona might be some type of high functioning autistic, as his discomfort with conducting interpersonal conversation was so strongly evident. If so, I wondered if he behaved the same

with the other pesonas in his head, or if it was like people who were terribly shy around strangers, but blabbermouths around friends or siblings. “I had nothing to do with the manhunt, but I do know that the events that led up to the manhunt seem improbable.”

“Improbable?” Wraith returned, concentrating. “How?”

“Ripple theory,” Glass stated as though that answered the question, but, after a moment, realizing that more was needed, went on: “A stone thrown into a pond creates uniform ripples emanating out from the place it collides, right? The uniformity of the ripples shows that it originated from a single point. However, if you threw 5 smaller rocks around a single point, you could create expanding ripples that look similar, except that they have collisions between the separate waves. Even though the amount of disruption is similar, when we actually look at the ripples, the non-uniformity decreases the probability that a single stone caused them. It doesn’t eliminate the possibility, of course, since lots of things can mess up ripples, like pre-existing rocks and plants that break the surface, but it reduces it.”

“So you’re suggesting that someone is manipulating Magnus,” Wraith surmised, looking thoughtful, “making it seem as though he’s the prime mover, when in reality it’s carefully created events.”

“That’s where my own story in all this comes in to play,” Glass nodded slowly. “A few months back, I was hired to hack into Mag’s computers and steal some internet keys that he had.”

“Hired?” Wraith cut him off. “By whom?”

“That’s the problem, I don’t know!” Glass admitted angrily. “Bob should’ve asked more questions before we took on the client but, by the time I was brought in, we’d taken the deal, had the money, and, with the limited networks available, I couldn’t find out anything about him. All I can tell you is that he’s powerful enough that he’s trying to steal the information from Mag and I’ve got to presume it’s to seize the power that the true internet would have. If he’s powerful enough to do that, then he’s likely powerful enough to set up the other elements that led to your student being the distraction he’s become.”

“So why do you think that he’s the distraction?” Wraith pushed back.

“Because, when we started cracking the cards, we discovered there were two missing,” Glass shrugged. “Should’ve meant the job was impossible, but then that Dark Dreamer guy—uh, Gavin?—his student, Jenna, shows up. Gets taken into underground containment and the info that comes back to me is that she’s got the last two hidden somewhere.”

“You’re saying that Jenna Whitmore is definitely in Mag’s custody at the Familia?” My mentor almost barked.

“Yeah,” Glass was startled enough by Wraith’s outburst to look up into his eyes for a moment before looking down. “I didn’t know you knew her.”

“She’s connected to my student’s disappearance,” Wraith shrugged a bit lamely.

“Yeah, I was wondering that,” the younger man nodded, smiling softly as though a theory had been confirmed, “because less than 24 hours after that guy, Gavin, sends his other girl over to Croc’s place, Croc’s in the wind.”

“Are you saying that Gavin’s the one who manipulated things?” Wraith muttered, perplexed. “Got Mag to chase Croc?”

“Nah,” Glass shook his head. “Not enough internal connections to pull those strings. No, Gavin’s been trying to plan on how to rebuild the internet since before the Fall. I had a client hire me to check on him back then, but he’s out to take Mag down more directly. This level of subversion would take more inroads than he’s got.”

I wanted to shake the boy and ask him to just tell me what he knew, but it wasn’t my call to make, so stood by and watched. Wraith—always better at dealing with total introverts than I was—didn’t say anything more, just waited for Glass to finish his thoughts. It was the right choice, even if it frustrated me, as the man clearly wanted to do something and he processed things at his own pace.

“I suspect that Gavin hired Croc to track down Jenna,” Glass went on, “and this other guy—call him ‘X’, since he’s the unknown factor—doesn’t want Croc getting Jenna anywhere

near Gavin until he's gotten to her first—which probably means wherever she's got those cards hidden must be easy to pass on. That or maybe X just hopes they're easy to pass on. In the mean time, he needs a distraction and what better way to do that then to provide a state sponsored manhunt.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Wraith nodded.

“Yeah,” Glass nodded, smiling softly at the praise. “Wish we knew who got those Cymbrogi's in.”

“The ones that got killed?” Wraith returned.

“Yeah,” Glass scrunched up his lips in thought. “I mean, they were like the first ripple, y'know? The one that—oh, crap. I gotta go. Sorry. Traci's got to get back.”

And with a spastic shudder, he was replaced by the persona known as Traci. I could see the disappointment in Wraith's shoulders that marked that he'd been about to ask another question, but, as so often happened these days, time wasn't our friend.

“If I find anything new, I'll seed some info to Aric so he gives you a call on your burner,” Traci nodded, and then hurried out the door.

A moment later, I heard a motorcycle roar to life, spin out, and then quickly diminish in the distance.

“I think it’s time we check on someone who’s a bit more familiar with the secrets of Mag’s palace,” Wraith muttered, as we made our way back into the yard. My heart sank as he concluded, “*And who knows more secrets than the Black Dragon?*”

Chapter 30

In The Lair of the Jabberwock

7:08 PM, Monday

Eixample District

Terrades House

How Wraith had managed to get an audience with my perpetually busy father so soon after he'd arrived back in town was a minor mystery to me. But after a single day of doing whatever it was he did, we were now walking up to the massive "house" that my father had acquired in his rise to power.

Commissioned by the Terrades sisters to connect three homes they owned into one palatial estate off the modernist mecca that the Eixample district had become, the House Terrades had quickly come to be referred to by another name when modernist architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch had chosen to expand it with six needle-topped towers. It had come to be known as "The House of the Thorns" or, more popularly, "The House of Spikes." The symmetry had been just too much for my father, who loved the way it turned an almost Camelot-like castle into something much more foreboding and dire. And due to his fascination with our "beloved" ancestry,

Vlad, I suspect he hoped the razor-tipped spikes would remind anyone who might think to do him or his family harm just how painful being impaled through the bowels could be.

He hadn't even removed the 'Les Punxes' sign in front of the main entrance, which made his home look more like some palatial hotel in one of the Pre-Fall hotspots like Las Vegas, than a residence. The fact that it was still subdivided into apartments meant that he could, should the desire strike him, turn it into such a business on a moment's notice. (*Perhaps he'd do so for one of his beloved clan reunions that brought all the extended relatives throughout Europe—and once, even the Americas—together.*)

Perched right off the Diagonal—the broadest street in Barcelona—his castle kept him conspicuously in the midst of everything, especially since it was the only freestanding building structure in the entire Eixample district. Galas he threw were talked about everywhere, as people who attended were able to be as conspicuous as he was. Of course, the fact that Mag and his entourage occasionally showed up there, as well, didn't hurt; though few who came to my father's soirées could hope to dine with the emperor as my father, from time to time, was privileged to do.

According to the audience confirmation, we were to enter via an apartment on the narrow eastern end of the building, below the tallest and gaudiest of the spires. As we walked beneath its shadow, I couldn't help but look toward the spike's tip, which was set with an apartment formed inside a golden crown, and wonder if my father was keeping Rapunzel or some other fairy tale princess captive up there. Though most outside the family were unaware of this fact,

he was quite a pack rat, so he probably just kept relics and other icons of the past stored up there; still the notion of someone letting down their hair from up there did allow a strained smile to stretch my lips across the bulky prosthetic mouthpiece.

Upon knocking at an ornate door, we were permitted to enter the apartment by a taciturn aid in a dark suit, shirt, and tie; the only color he sported was his blood-red ruby tictack . As he patted us down wordlessly, I glanced about. The room burgeoned with furniture dripping with velvet roses, doubtless homage to “the Thorns.” I had no doubt there was another room packed with iron maidens and lance bearing armor in memento of “the Spikes.” I doubted there were as many couches there, however.

After we’d been taken into the inner area and past the court yard, we were ushered up a flight of steps that seemed even more palatial now that I’d spent weeks on the run from the sort of comfort my father took for granted.

As we walked, I studied an artistically paneled mural my father had created after he assumed residence of the palatial estate which portrayed the brutal atrocities by the Reapers in the legendary Night of the Crimson Flood—when so many were slaughtered that it was said the streets ran with Basque blood. I shuddered at the thought of the event, grateful to whatever fates had allowed me to avoid even the pretense of joining in the carnage.

It reminded me that, even before Magnus, Catalonia has always had a strange connection to the Reaper houses, such that the national anthem of all Catalonia before the Fall was, "The Reapers."

None knew precisely how Magnus had risen to power just six months after the Fall had ravaged the European Union, backed by an army made not only of his Catalonian brethren but, to the shock of most, the bloody-minded Basques, as well. Both had ancient desires of being recognized as their own countries, as opposed to areas of Spain and France, so their allegiance had been won with an appeal to Mag's own ancestry—which he traced back to the famed Italian empire builder, Romulus—and the promise of an entire country of their own at the end.

While the more reserved Catalonians might've been content with a smaller kingdom as their spoils, they were honor-bound to match the Basques' far reach, who carved a bloody swath through fully half of Spain in the post-Fall wreckage. At first it had seemed these two separate countries within Spain might survive, yet sharing power was never something a dictator like Magnanimus, last son of Ancient Romulus would stand for.

The only way to rid himself of the ties to the vicious Basque was to ingratiate himself to a league of assassins so deadly that they could kill all the military leaders of the Basque in a single night.

I knew that I only sank into the past because I didn't want to think about what I would hear my father say, but sleep addled mind refused to stay on the task at hand, thinking back to how the Reapers had come to be. Or at least how they'd come to be known as “Reapers.”

Most people still believe that the creation of the Reaper class was a matter of pragmatism. After all, the serial killer folk-hero, Dulcien Sker, had rallied natural born killers after the fall with the compelling argument that, with so much of the prey being gone, they needed a legitimate way to hide in plain sight. All those who would become part of this union—this grand fraternity of killers—would be equal and on a democratic footing; recognized for their skills by those who would pay for their services. Gone would be the aristocratic hierarchies that had flourished in secret in the past; it was a new time of self-determination for these gods-forsaken specialists.

Sker may have actually believed his rallying cry when he started, but the creation of this union of killers had the effect of bringing the ancient Severed houses out of their nocturnal hiding. Since there was now a legitimate reason for serial killers to exist in the eyes of the outside world, it was beneficial for the old blood to insure its place and authority amongst the new. Quickly infiltrating the fledgling society, the ancient families had explained the logic of a third option, in which some assassins—including Sker, his progeny, and his supporters—would be more equal than others.

Raised to a world of nobility he'd thought was dead when he'd been uniting his people, Sker was quick to assist the nobility in enforcing their aristocracy on the Reaper community. In

this rapid reshuffling, the natural born quickly dropped to the bottom of the now public heap they found themselves in, while the generationally groomed Severed mounted the heights. There were some tribal factions that splintered off in this process, but they were insignificant in comparison to the core of the Official Reaper class—especially since they didn't do a good job of holding to the agreements that official members were forced to fulfill.

For Magnus, the choice of whom to parlay with had been easy. Track down various tribal leaders of a motley band of killers who may or may not hold to an agreement, or deal with an aristocratic leader of a group of assassins who could keep the riffraff in line and whose word meant something.

The price for the annihilation of Magnus' former allies had been to unlock Barcelona's architectural treasures for the Reaper nobility to dwell in, with this house being the crown jewel. Included with this *largess*, was the official recognition of the Severed house hierarchy by the N..I.R. as the leaders of the Reaper clans.

The implicit backing of the NIR made sure that the oldest houses had the most power and the most official recognition. As my house IS the oldest, this made my father the King of Killers once the deal was done.

It had been so surreal, as this strange family legend which had been bandied about by my relatives suddenly seemed to be accepted by an empire. I didn't particularly care for my transition from obscure Private Eye and on-call Raver Hunter to a resented prince and official NIR ex-

ecutioner, of course, but, then again, my particular liking of matters had never really factored in. As my father loved to say, “*Whether it be on your hands or in your veins, nothing is more important than blood.*”

Still lost in thought, we were ushered off at a landing, down a hall, and into a brightly decorated salon which seemed out of place within the manse, due to its lack of roses and thorns, or spikes and armor.

“Ah, Mr. Vanhorn,” Tristen “*Black Dragon*” Graham—*dressed in a dark suit with a wine smoking jacket*—held out a hand of greeting to my mentor from the crushed velvet chair he occupied in the middle of the room. His blue eyes looked more tired than normal and strain lines creased the sides of his eyes, though his hair was still dark and only passingly streaked with gray. In his mid-sixties, there was no way it wasn’t dyed, but it was done with a subtlety that my father rarely showed in other areas of his life. After shaking hands, he lowered his hand to brush down his the velvet smoking jacket as though to remove some invisible lint or wrinkles, then continued: “I’m afraid my back is hurting today. You must forgive me that I’m not able to be up and moving around as much as normal.”

While my father had health problems, the actual extent of them was highly questionable, as he had a tendency to milk them for all they were worth. It allowed him to emotionally manipulate my sister--which outsiders would’ve assumed should've been impossible, except for the fact that it’s only the lighter and more benevolent emotions that are highly restricted or fully muted in our kind. Guilt and obligation, although somewhat different than that exhibited by non-

psychotic people, was indeed present in varying degrees and therefore exploited by those who could do so.

“That’s too bad,” Wraith smiled gently, leaning his right hand on his cane while he made a welcoming hand with his left. “Please, though, call me, *Griffon*.”

“Fair enough, Griffon,” my father nodded, failing to return the courtesy in turn, but, instead, shifted to indicate the brown-haired aid in the dark suit with the ruby tie jewel who’d brought us up. “This is Brotman. He’s practically become my right hand whenever Sidhe isn’t here.”

The relationship between Sidhe and my father had never been exactly healthy, but it had definitely gotten worse since Skye’s imprisonment. Of course, I had no doubt that my father held my own more sporadic visits—which were still at least biweekly when I wasn’t the subject of a manhunt—as some sort of sign of contempt.

The aid—who did indeed look Germanic in feature, now that I looked at him more closely—shook Wraith’s hand with mechanical precision.

“And allow me to introduce you to my assistant, Frank,” Wraith smiled blandly as my father begrudgingly shook my hand. Once I’d returned back to my place at his side, he added: “He’s mute.”

I took a special enjoyment as I opened my mouth to show the deformed prosthetic. My father had always had a special predilection for good teeth and grooming, stating that good oral hygiene were the sign of proper perspective.

“Gods,” my father breathed with disdain as I closed my mouth. “Where did you find him?”

“Oh, I was on one of my journeys to Africa,” Wraith explained generically. “He had a rough life, but has proven a valuable asset. We’ve been together now for about six months or so.”

“How *humanitarian* of you,” my father returned darkly, then flicked his hands at the assistant called Brotman. “That’s all for now, James. My son’s old teacher and his—*manservant*—will be no trouble. I’ll call when they’re ready to be seen out.”

The dark look that passed momentarily across the aide’s face was unseen by my father—who already treated him as though he’d left the room—but it spoke clearly to the fact that James Brotman was not used to being excluded from discussions by his employer.

“So, Griffon,” my father continued once the door closed, “I assume you’ve called to meet with me because you’ve heard something from my son?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Wraith shook his head, lying smoothly. “In point of fact, part of why I’m here was to see if you had heard from him?”

“It is odd that someone with your record wasn’t tapped to track him down by our esteemed leader,” the Dragon’s responded blandly. “Conflict of interest, I’m sure they’d assume.”

“Undoubtedly,” Wraith angled his head inscrutably back.

“Of course, that shows how little they understand people like you,” my father intoned with an arched brow.

“People like me?” My mentor returned softly, not giving away the dangerous crackle of energy that boiled beneath it.

“You know,” Tristan looked at Wraith with special emphasis. “Conflict of interest doesn’t affect someone like you; a mark is *just* a mark.”

I began to get a chill under my skin as my father’s words homed like missiles into the wounds of surrounding Wraith’s “base birth,” his honor, and his integrity. When we’d first started working together, when those wounds were fresher, they could illicit rages from my shadow that literally terrified me. Eventually, he’d gone to an underground dealer who could get any drug one might need and they’d hooked him up with a serotonin drug that allowed the rage to come on him slow enough to defuse safely.

“Indeed?” Wraith returned sharply. “One might say that you seem to show a marked lack of concern for your only son—who’s under a death sentence by the most powerful ruler in millennia. But, maybe, you know, *blood* doesn’t affect someone like you.”

Score one for Wraith, I almost grinned.

“It must be so hard for you...you know?” Tristan went on, managing to sound sincere, despite the clear condescension. That ability had been one of the things that had infuriated me growing up, because he knew exactly how to use words destructively, but without outward signs to people who didn’t know him better—and he always had faulty memory on things he himself had said. “You know, with your parents...”

I racked my brain to make sure that Wraith had taken the drugs today. When he’d first gotten on it, he’d had times where he would forget, but he’d been pretty reliable the past few months. I wished I believed in Wraith’s god at that moment so I could pray that Wraith was in fact medicated today.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Wraith bit out darkly. “My father was an angry verbal abuser and my mother was a closet alcoholic—but at least they did the best they could.”

Apparently the dark twist to the last sentence had gotten through to my father, for as he continued on, he seemed to actually be going someplace: “Oh I’m not talking about anything so

pedantic as all that. I mean that you were born without a destiny—everything you do must be forged yourself.”

“I believe we have a destiny beyond our DNA or heritage,” Wraith returned, the dangerous electricity ebbing slightly in the undercurrent of his words. Regardless of my opinion of his beliefs, I knew if he could speak on that for a bit more, it would help stabilize whatever the drugs couldn’t handle. “That all are created with a purpose that cannot be shackled by men.”

“Of course, of course, I forgot about your religious thing,” Tristan bobbed his head, as though to pay homage. “No offense intended. In truth, I might cling to beliefs like yours if that was all I had.”

“You have more?” Wraith queried, a strange vicious curiosity in his tone that was purely predatory.

“Of course,” the Dragon ran a hand through his hair confidently. “This gets back to your question about my concern. Now, have you heard of our lineage...?”

“I’ve heard rumors.” Wraith returned narrowly.

“Then let me confirm that it indeed traces itself back to Vlad the Impaler,” my father’s eyes glowed with pride. “In fact, it was one of his own bastards that was the first to discover the original Severing method. In those days, of course, the process was cruder.”

“Ten to one mortality rate, I recall,” Wraith interjected, with a brief nod.

“I can see why you’re such a good instructor—great head for numbers!” Tristan enthused, as Wraith’s words now bolstered his story. “Douglas always swore you were a rare Reaper! Anyway, even then we’ve always survived. Our ancestors had a proclivity for rampant, promiscuous sex resulting in a fine herd of bastards, thus our bloodline even flourished until the technique could be perfected some generations later.”

“I’m sure that’s quite a reassurance,” Wraith intoned, clearly bemused with this twisted version of manifest destiny.

“But the family history is full of these survival stories,” the patriarch continued. “For example, did you know that Jack the Ripper was one of my great grand-uncles?”

“Indeed, how intriguing.” Wraith returned, clearly intrigued despite himself.

“Forget about Bundy or BTK or Jesse James,” Tristen went on with contempt, “Jack—or, should I say, Tom—completely confused everyone about his real name, and then reinvented himself as a politician in America. All politicians have skeletons in their closets, so his aides didn’t really complain that he kept his freshly stocked!”

He paused for a moment to chuckle before continuing, “So you understand why I am not more *'concerned'* about my son, of course? He’s from a blood legacy—a heritage—that is second to none. The notion that a petty dictator might be able to hunt him down is absurd!”

“You must be very proud,” Wraith muttered.

“Oh, as proud as I can be, I’m sure,” my father shrugged pragmatically. “Oh, I admit that his choice of career is a bit more passive than I’d hoped it might be—perhaps he took a bit too much after my wife—but, in the end, he’s found a part to play in our world and he’s become good at it. Of course, nothing is ever 100% certain.” He looked off for a second, lost in thought, then returned to look at Wraith. “So should he somehow not survive to succeed me, his sister has such a passion for our family and our heritage, I have no doubt she shall usher us into a new era of our destiny.”

“So long as the blood survives,” Wraith subvocalized just loudly enough for me to hear.

“So, did you have any other questions, Griffon?” Tristan asked, oblivious to the comment.

“Only that it’s come to my attention that there might be a player in the court who could’ve helped Magnanimus come to the decision that led to your son’s hunt,” Wraith answered evenly. “As you have more contact with the court, I thought you might know something?”

“Tragically, no,” the man who raised me shook his head slowly. “Four weeks ago, I headed out to our new German outpost to get the Reaper factions there in order. I got back just two days ago. It’s fortunate that my destiny freed me from slavery to emotions, or I might’ve been tempted to come back when I heard the news of Douglas’ difficulties. That would’ve been disastrous, let me tell you, because they needed every minute I could give them to just come within the ballpark of the quality they should be at! Bastard born and heathens, let me tell you—oh, no offense, of course—but I was able to get them to passably respectable place by the time I left.”

“Would one of your people—perhaps Brotman—have noticed anything while you were away?” Wraith added, looking away to disguise his disgust.

“Brotman was with me out in Germany—so he wouldn’t have,” my father thought about it, his eyes rolling slightly back as he searched his memory banks. It was said that people who were actually telling the truth would have their eyes roll slightly to the right when they were actually remembering things, while those who were lying would have theirs roll slightly to the left, supposedly a subconscious ‘tell’ based on the part of the brain used for recall vs. imagination. My father always kept his gaze center focused, so you never knew. “I’ll check with some of my other staff members—and, of course, Sidhe. She wasn’t able to come, so she might’ve noted some new players, though I wouldn’t hold my breath.” He made more direct eye contact as he concluded, “I’ve yet to see anyone who could manipulate Magnanimus. If I do find someone, how can I get ahold of you?”

“This is a secure line,” Wraith stated with an arch of his brow, handing him a card.

“Excellent. Well, if I find anything, I’ll be sure to let you know.” The Black Dragon pressed a buzzer and Brotman appeared once more.

“Alright, well, thank you so much for your time,” my mentor returned grimly, clearly as unhappy as I was to have yet another person say they would ‘*get back with*’ us.

As we were escorted back down the stairs, I found myself struggling with the same confusion I always had whenever I talked with my father for more than a few minutes—*it was made all the worse that I hadn’t even been the one to talk to him.*

Chapter 31

Gems of Memories

11:43 PM, Monday

Base Zone, The Razor Academy

Griffin Vanhorn Manor

“I keep feeling like there’s something crucial we’re overlooking, G,” I muttered from across the carved table we were seated at within my chambers. It was the only place we could feel safe with me out of my full makeup. My skin felt alive without the makeup and I wondered how long I could keep this double life up, longing for when this might all be over. I felt instantly ashamed of the thought, as it was so petty compared to what was required of Wraith so much of the time. My other half had his entire identity wiped away for so long; it must’ve been wonderful to be able to be himself once more, to talk to peers that respected—or, more likely, *feared*--him, and to be free to use his own style of combat and killing. “But for the life of me I have no idea what. It’s just one of those feelings.”

Wraith nodded silently, studying the wood inlay of the tabletop, as though seeing a pattern there that I was overlooking.

I glanced down at the burner that was my only connection to Van Zant, which had stayed silent since I'd seen him last. Also silent were the burners for Aric and my Father. Using multiple unconnected lines without forwarders was the only way to stay safe under the watchful eye of the NIR.

"How curious," Wraith stated softly, his tone clarifying his departure to another mental topic altogether. "That pattern was on my third birthday cake."

"Parents took a lot of pictures, did they?" I asked, half interestedly glancing at the calligraphic spiral he was indicating.

"Not particularly, no," Wraith shrugged, glancing at me as though I were the one to switch topics randomly. "Why do you ask?"

"Obviously you saw a picture that had it on it, right?" I clarified, feeling slightly irritated that this required any clarification. "From your third birthday cake?"

"No," Wraith shook his head, still confused. "I don't have many pictures from before I was committed."

"I mean, before then," I returned, exhaustion bleeding into exasperation. "Maybe when you were seven or eight. You saw pictures of the cake. That's why you know what was on it."

“No,” he shook his head, baffled. “It was a green cake that my mother had made and our neighbor, Miss Tilly, had piped these fancy whorls in white icing.” As he thought about it, his eyes seemed to grow slightly glassy and the timbre of his voiced deepened as his cadence slowed. “They asked me to blow it out. I accidentally spit in Miss Tilly’s eye. My father laughed, as he leaned against the wall. My mother scolded me. Miss Tilly laughed and wiped her eye with her handkerchief.”

I’d heard him recall things in the past, but I’d never heard him recall this much detail before. Now that we’d dealt with the Dreamweaver, I realized his manner struck me the way it had when he’d been mesmerized.

“What were you wearing?” I asked suddenly.

“Ummm...” The faraway look in his eyes intensified as though he were trying to stare down a hawk at 100 yards. “Brown loafers...because I keep kicking my feet under the table and mother scolds me for it. My blue jeans...they’d had a mouse patch on the side, but I’d peeled it off when my parents bought them for me because I thought it was a sticker. I wanted the sticker. My mother was so angry.” He paused a moment, before going on. “Blue and checked button up shirt that my grandma had given me. My mom insisted I put it on before we blew out the cake, so it would be on in the picture. But then the camera broke. That’s why there was no picture.”

With a shake of his head, Wraith's eyes cleared and he was back in the room I was in. I, on the other hand, knew that I had to be in some very distant world for any of this to make sense.

"Anyway, why'd you want to know about what I was wearing?" Wraith asked, regarding me strangely. "What does that have to do with the cake?"

"Good question," I asked, feeling very strange. "Wraith, since when do you have a photographic memory?"

"What're you talking about?" Wraith harrumphed in derision. "I don't have a photographic memory."

"Then what was that thing you just did?" I asked, incredulous.

"Oh, that was just my box," he shrugged. "Y'know? Your memory box? Where you go to pull out stuff from the past?"

"Oh, I've heard the term," I nodded, eyes narrowing. "But somehow I don't think the people that use those sorts of terms are talking about the same sort of thing you're talking about."

"I mean, it's not like photographic, where you can recall everything in your life," he repeated. "It's just like specific events that I can recall stuff from inside of—time of day, what I was wearing, where things were located, who was standing where, things that caught my inter-

est—not everything in my life. You couldn't ask me a date and have me remember it—unless some event occurred then that impacted me.”

“Ok,” I nodded. “They’ve run into something sort of similar in alzheimer’s patients who can’t remember other things, but they can remember things that happened in their lives that intersected with major world events—assassinations, natural disasters, etc. Do the events you recall have to be emotional?”

I remembered a rare memory twist called, “Flashbulb Memory,” in which people could remember powerful emotional events with indelible clarity. It was normally far more of a curse than a blessing, as usually painful or tragic events would be preserved forever like an insect in amber in the minds of those with this condition.

“Really?” He looked at me as though I was the one who should be committed. “Kind of a psychopath.”

“Oh, shut up, jackass,” I returned testily. “You and I both know that doesn’t mean android. You’re capable of plenty of emotions. Maybe not the ones you want, but there’s a lot going through you.”

“Then, no,” he returned somewhat irritably. “They just have to be some sort of event that I tracked.”

“Tracked? What does that mean?” I pressed.

“You know, things that were unique,” Wraith shrugged, frowning. “Not everything, but things that weren't really common. Like my parents thought me learning ballet as a kid would be a good thing, for whatever reason, so I had to do that. I can't tell you all the different performances because they all blurred together, like a montage of pictures. But, anything that wasn't an all the time thing, I guess I just kept track of. It's like my old houses.”

“Your old house?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “We were always moving around when I was growing up, but I can still go through the old houses and draw out their floor plans. Guess its physical stuff that sits out to me.”

“Ok.” I nodded in surprise. “Starting when?”

“Oh, normal age,” Wraith shrugged. “Say from when I was three and up.”

“Yeah, that's not even close to normal,” I shook my head, my voice becoming robotic as I tried to process the data. “Five is when normal people have first memories and its like glimpses of stuff, not floor plans. And no particular emotional attachment with those houses?”

“Nope,” Wraith shook his head, looking at me like I was making a mountain out of a molehill.

“HMMMMM.” I breathed slowly, processing. “So that eliminates ‘Flashbulb Memory’ then.”

“Ok, are you screwing around” Wraith was strangely bemused. “You’re making it sound like one of those *Twilight Zone* episodes we used to watch. Lots of people can do this sort of stuff, I’m sure.”

“No, I assure you, they cannot.” I muttered, my eyes narrowing slightly. It was as though this person who I’d known for so many years was suddenly transformed into something completely new and alien. In the back of my mind, it felt like a quiet, hysterical voice was stating that psychopathy wasn’t what messed with me, it was incredible recall. The person who could pull anything from their memory was far more terrifying to me than a hundred psychos—because it was an ability so ALIEN. “What you’re describing is like a hybrid of regular memory—which is like a transcriptionist that quickly paraphrases events, puts in rough sketches of people and places, makes some comments about what things have been learned, and then throws out all the original data to save space—and eidetic memory—which is like a beginning photographer that takes too many pictures of everything and, because they can’t bear to part with it, stores all the original data in a massive stockpile that has to be manually scrolled through without description, search terms, or things learned by any of these events. The data you’re

keeping track of could be used to recreate an entire scene—which is even more powerful than eidetic memory, sense you’ve got mapping data to go along with it.”

“Okay,” Wraith looked at me for a moment before adding, “So you're being searious that this isn't the way normal people remember things?”

“No, not even close,” I muttered, shaking my head. The gears in my brain began to churn harder, as though there were some ramification I couldn't have considered before now. “But you don't have this type of recall on all things do you? Where's it not work this way?”

“Umm...” Wraith's face furrowed in concentration. Clearly never having focused on his memory before, it was a new concept altogether for him to try to figure out its blind spots. A moment later, a look of relief came in his eyes as though he'd answered the hardest question correctly on a midterm. “They have to be actual events I'm experiencing, so stories and that type of stuff is vague...not precise. And...it only works in 3D space! I have to actually be in physical motion or placement to recall things like this. It doesn't work for anything I perceive as two-dimensional.”

“Such as?” I queried, wondering if I should start taking notes. In the end, I realized I was more likely to retain the details if I focused on what he was saying.

“Conversations,” he nodded, now more confident. “Or movies or novels.”

That made sense. Of course, I was the one who did the best at recalling conversations, as I associated how people interconnected with one another and that helped reinforce my memories. I understood that was something that was more common amongst women, but I'd always seen it as a blessing for a private eye, as I could find places where human interaction chains failed and usually secrets were stored in these gaps. The novels thing also made sense as, although Wraith was a voracious reader, he would read and re-read the same books over and over, whereas I would read a book only once every five to ten years, but would have high recall of the key story lines, plot points, and characters. In fact, when I was younger, I couldn't tell the difference between reading a book and watching a movie.

“Okay, so it only functions in mobile and tactile ways,” I nodded, my brain starting to crackle with excitement. There was something here that was almost on the tip of my tongue. “Where are these datasets stored? Is it a big pool of stuff that you have to draw from, like a well of memories?”

At this point Wraith actually stopped and stared at me, incredulous.

“Ok, then tell me how it works!” I pestered.

“I already told you, I call it my box and I can just look through it and pull out pictures of stuff,” he shrugged. “But it's not all chaotic, it's all kind of in order. Different events might have multiple pictures or just one. When it's needed, I can just pull out the ones related to one event or another.”

“Ok, for those of us without a magic box of memories, am I correct in thinking it’s like a file storage closet?” I rephrased, looking to see his confirming nod. “If someone asks you about an event that is recorded, you look up on to the shelves and can see these little drawers with the dates or events on them? That about right?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed, hesitantly. “Now, not all of them have dates, and—to use your analogy—those types of memory photos go into catchall drawers for an entire year or two. Usually those are at least sorted by location.”

The more information, the more my head swam. How on earth was it even possible to have memories that behaved like this? I’d studied human psychology for years when I was younger and I’d never heard of something quite like this. It was like his brain used all the best elements of pre-Fall GPS and search engine technology to store things.

“Do you go through them normally?” I asked, then realized what I’d said. “I mean, do you go through them regularly?”

“No more than people go through their filing cabinets, I guess,” Wraith shrugged. “If I need something from a specific time, I pull that section out of the box...I mean, I go to that shelf, pull open the drawer, and rummage through the images.”

“You mentioned the images before,” I recalled. “Tell me what those entail.”

“Each scene is sort of consolidated into a colorful image, like a slide,” he nodded.

“When I look into it, it seems to unpack and I can see things from my perspective, but I’m also aware of where things are in that environment. Sometimes it seems like I can see things from more angles than what my eyes saw, but that’s hard to predict. Anyway, I don’t leave them all scattered about—or I try not to. Sometimes, after I’ve looked up a memory, it’s like part of my mind will hold on to a slide for a few days after I put the memory box away, and it can get distracting until I put it back.”

“Ok, earlier you recalled what happened as a child because of something you saw,” I surmised. “Everyone has triggers that will touch on old memories. What about memories that are requested of you by someone else? Not just within a memory, like I did about that birthday, but actually instigated through a request.”

“I think so,” Wraith nodded, a bit uncertainly.

“Okay, look at your shelves—I mean, box—and tell me how far back the memories go,” I asked, my brain feeling that if I just asked enough questions I’d finally figure out what was niggling in the back of my mind.

“Ummm...” The look of concentration came on his face. “There’s one that says ‘Before 3.’”

“Ok, I want you to open the drawer and tell me what all’s inside,” I responded, closing my eyes and allowing my visual interpretive memory to take over, hoping I might be able to visualize exactly what he saw.

“Just one image,” Wraith muttered softly. I could almost visualize his eyes narrowing as though he were looking at a slide before putting it on a lightbox.

“Describe it,” I said, feeling a bit like a hypnotist.

“I’m in a crib with my cousin Michael, who’s crying,” he intoned. “I’m wearing a white shirt with a turtle on it. It’s not colored in but just a glossy, black outline of the turtle. I’m looking down at the shirt and I like it. To my immediate left, my mother is standing talking to my aunt Margret, who’s directly in front of me.”

“No recall of the conversation?” I asked, feeling like the sort of jerk that, when he’s given a gold ring as a gift says, *‘Couldn’t you get it in platinum?’*

“No,” he remarked. “But I can see that turtle clear as day.”

That snapped me out of my reverie.

“Wait a minute,” I remarked then ran out of the room to the storage closet he kept art supplies in, remembering to keep my head down so there was no chance I could be spotted out of

character. He had always had an artistic flair, especially with three-dimensional art, and he kept a series of fountain pens and charcoals in the closet with numerous pads of fine paper. I selected a pencil that seemed best for sketching, a fluid black pen, and a large pad.

When I ran back into the room, Wraith was eyeing me curiously.

“Draw it.” I plunked down the supplies in front of him.

“Okay,” he smiled as he finally comprehended what I was getting at. Normally he hated drawing two dimensional objects, but I guessed that the third dimension of his memory of the physical product would help.

I watched with wonder as he surely sketched a turtle from his memory, outlining it in pencil with only a few lines erased and redrawn due to pencil slippage. In addition to the turtle itself, there were a few curly cues and stars around the main creature—the sort of thing that a clothing designer would’ve put on infant clothes to add interest. Then he pulled out the pen and inked the design. Scarcely twenty minutes after he’d begun, the design was done.

As I looked at the child-style turtle in front of me, I felt a chill. There were no generalizations to the technique and it looked nothing like Wraith’s style of art that I’d see him play around with. This was clearly someone else’s style that he’d recreated. I had no polaroids from that day to compare it to, but something told me that if we ever showed it to his mother and asked her if she’d ever had a shirt like this for her son, she’d confirm it.

“Okay, is it just your childhood memories,” I asked. “Or can you do this with more modern ones? After the meds?”

Since he’d been diagnosed with epilepsy upon his initial commitment, he’d been on seizure drugs. As memory and seizures were believed to originate in the same part of the brain, there was a decent possibility that his abilities had tanked since then.

“I can do it with modern ones,” he nodded, confidence starting to sparkle in his eyes. “Neither the meds nor the seizures seem to have effected it. In fact, I can remember everything that happened around that first seizure that got me committed all the way up until I actually passed out.”

“Okay, what about the night that you went to put down the Raver?” I asked, as I finally realized that we had something we’d never had before—a potential eye witness. “If I ask you about things that you might have been aware of but weren’t paying attention to, could you focus on those? Give us some more information?”

“I think so.” He nodded, now understanding my excitement and starting to get excited, too. “Yeah.”

“Alright, I’m going to ask you about that night and you describe every sensory detail you can remember,” I stated tersely. “You remember that I can build visual memories from descrip-

tions and empathize with the teller? Kind of the opposite of what you're describing you have, so I should actually be able to see what you see."

"Ahhh..." Wraith's mouth dropped slightly as he connected the dots I was going toward. "And you can ask the questions that your intuition brings up—things I wouldn't have thought to explore."

"Precisely." I nodded. "So let's begin..."

It was cold as I climbed up the steel ladder to the rooftop overlooking the corner of Ferran and Avinyo. My sources had me check out four different location and this was the third.

3:27 AM gleamed pale green on my watch. The Bloodborn had been awake and killing for likely ten hours and the compulsion to stop him burned in my brain.

I pulled out the nightvision binoculars and peered into the alley, the wind blowing slightly from the northwest. Almost immediately I discovered the heavy metal door to an Indian restaurant that had been virtually ripped off its hinges. I thought about the brutal strength that the Bloodborn were said to possess in these furies as I peered into the gaping maw behind the door. Even though the nightvision couldn't pierce very deeply, I knew that the dark stairwell led to the basement and I was pretty sure that this was one of the restaurants that didn't have a proper es-

cape route. Maps were something I was quite good at, as well as general plans for buildings based on times of construction and the soil they were situated in. As such, the fact that I could perceive no evidence of our mark leaving meant that he was almost assuredly inside.

Dark stains adorned the doorframes and it reminded me of Passover, but this death angel didn't pass over anyone in this house. It made me think of the Bible and then the crucifixion that this man would undergo. Despite his depravity and crime, it made me angry to have to be a part of this. I wished that it could go some other way, but I knew what I had to do.

Setting my binocs aside, I pulled a small grenade launcher, loaded with pepper gas rounds, from my case. While it wouldn't do any permanent harm to any survivors, it would cause enough irritation to the rage-filled Bloodborn to make him run out so that I could put him down. I knew some Deathdealers would've wished to fight a Bloodborn in close quarters, but I knew the physics of these lost souls and had no interest in doing anything other than stopping him as efficiently as possible. There was no reason to put myself in likely injury or death to have a glorified war story.

Before grenadiering the location, I assembled my tactical tranq rifle and calibrated the night scope. As I aimed it over the roof molding, I let time slow down as I'd gotten into the habit of doing whenever I aimed a weapon. It allowed me to do so faster than normal people and it made sure that I could use that weapon, even when I was aiming, if I needed to. Being prepared was why I pushed myself with things like sniper skeet.

I blinked my scope eye shut to aim the rifle in the general area, then, once that was accomplished, I switched eyes, feeling not unlike a pirate with an eyepatch who uses each eye for a different purpose. As I switched eyes, a strange flicker of light occurred. It wasn't unusual for flickers of light to occur with nightvision optics, but it wasn't something I liked, so I made a mental note to get them checked out after the job. A moment later, I was satisfied with sighting and set my toes against the molding, where I placed the rifle in easy reach, guaranteeing I would be in the exact same spot when I fired it. I slipped out of bullet time to retrieve the grenade launcher, knowing every unneeded moment in the heightened space could be dangerous if that time was needed later. It was too easy to burn through it too quickly, as it was.

As I aimed the grenade launcher, adjusting for windage, I thought about the likelihood that there were any survivors in the restaurant. The Indian family who lived here would realistically have been killed quickly and brutally, the man staying afterward to dwell in the afterglow of the death—or perhaps to even feast on part of his victims. It was well known that the Blood-born had a tendency to develop a taste for human flesh as they killed.

I pulled the trigger, switching back to slow motion only after the grenade was nearly to its destination. For some reason, grenade arcs experienced entirely in slow motion were agonizing. As the grenade entered the maw cleanly, I switched the weapon with the sniper rifle, listening to the strange moan that the breeze made when heard in accelerated perception.

Once I was in position, I let time resume, as it could easily take a few minutes for the man to come up and I barely had that much time each day I could use the ability.

The soft LED clock in the scope showed that it had been just over a minute when the raver burst free from the building. I knew that Tranly Credo was a Caucasian man but he was so covered with blood and gore that he could've been any ethnicity. As I slowed time back down, I pulled the trigger three times...Pffft! Pfffft! Pfffft!

I let time resume to see if that would be enough to make him stop. However, it was clear that he was too high and, while he was slowing down, it was clear that this wouldn't stop him. I reentered the syrupy world of death and fired off two more rounds before coming out again.

After a few more zombie like staggers, Credo's system was finally overwhelmed by the drugs. He dropped to his knees, falling face first on the street.

I hated not disassembling my kit, but I knew that I couldn't risk the man being run over in the street, so I left my gear there, raced to the ladder, shinned down it rapidly, and raced to the unconscious raver. I dragged the blood-soaked man—who was surprisingly light—from the street to the corner, zip-tying his hands once I'd done so. I checked the restaurant, confirming that there were no survivors, then returned to him and made sure he was still alive. Once I'd ascertained he lived, I put the badge on his clothes and then pulled the pin on the flare. Dropping the flare by the body, I glanced at my watch. 3:32 AM.

I went up to the rooftop, reassembled my kit, and waited until I heard the cops coming. Then glancing at my watch—3:36 AM—I slid down the ladder and made my way back.

“What do you mean ‘badge’?” I asked suddenly once the memory was completed. My head throbbed with the intense mental gymnastics my imagination had been forced to undergo to perceive the world as he had.

“New thing Mag’s doing for high profile targets,” Wraith shrugged. “Has a special badge they’ll wear to their execution depicting the way they’ll die. It adds additional fear, plus I think it’s also to remind any officers who might be tempted to shirk their duty that if anything happens, the badge’s death will come on them.”

“Which means the cops who picked up the body have a lot of reason to claim that they never received it,” I grimaced. “If they never got it, the death doesn’t come to them—it goes to us.”

“Indeed,” Wraith returned angrily. “I should’ve stayed and watched but, frankly, it disturbed me to see him taken away. I know that sounds strange but it just haunted me to think of having that memory placed in my files.”

“I can understand,” I nodded, realizing that, for the first time, I really could. There were many times since we’d gone on the run that I’d blamed him for not following through on the job, but, with his special memory system, anyone would’ve wanted to avoid it. The lack of certain

emotions didn't really seem to factor into the notion of unpleasantness in the memory of one's actions when it came to crossing certain boundaries. Wraith's boundaries were just very different than most peoples'--on either side of the Reaper line, actually.

As I thought back on the memory, something occurred to me.

"Wraith, I need you to flip back to the part of your memory where you sighted the scope," I commanded.

"Alright," Wraith returned, concentrating for a moment. "I'm there."

"You were already in your bullet time zone, correct?" I asked.

"Yes," he nodded slowly.

"I'm guessing you can usually recall more details when you were in this zone, am I correct?" I went on.

"Yes, although things are often distorted a bit." He nodded. "However, I think I can correct for it since I know why it's occurring. Sort of like adjusting a fish-eye lens image afterwards with a computer."

“Alright, the flicker you saw when you were sighting, which eye was it in?” I pushed, feeling a growing excitement. If it was in his scope eye, it might have been a malfunction, but if it wasn’t...

“My...left eye!” Wraith returned, excitedly.

“Then it wasn’t your scope, which was in your right eye,” I returned, talking it through like we used to during certain investigative walk-throughs at school. “That means that it was a flicker of light that occurred in your normal vision. Before your eye closes, can you focus your attention on that flicker of light.”

“Yes...I can,” he said, his voice strained with concentration. Sweat oozing from his brow. “It’s a lighter. Someone’s lighting a cigarette on the street just around the corner from where I’m at.”

The revelation filled me with both awe and terror. *Could we be so lucky?*

“Can you see the face of the person who’s lighting the cigarette?” I wondered.

“Ummmm....” He strained further. I hoped desperately that this wouldn’t trigger a seizure. “Yes, I can. It’s a man...”

“Have you ever seen the man before?” I pushed.

“Yes, I have,” Wraith breathed. “It’s that man Brotman. The guy your father relies on.”

James Brotman was my father’s right hand man and, according to my father, Brotman had been with him on his four week trip. *So, if he wasn’t actually with my father, at least not for the entire time, why cover for him?*

With cold certainty, I realized that the only reason was if my father was involved in the entire deal. But how could they have known where Wraith would be?

“The badge!” I swore, intuition blooming into certainty. “That badge has a tracker on it.”

“And your father’s high enough to gain access to that data,” Wraith muttered, having already assimilated the data that I was just now coming to grips with. In this situation, superfluous emotions were slowing down my processing. “His man could follow me wherever I went, from the moment I picked up the case file and badge at the Familia.”

“Dad’s,” the word seemed wrong, so I started again: “Dragon’s probably the one who had Mag’s ear in the first place to set all of this in motion!” My intuition crackled. “He’s always had this divine providence mindset for our family. How better to do that than to get control of the internet and the 3D printers—he’d be able to muscle out Mag from within!”

“He just needed a distraction,” Wraith breathed hotly. “How *divine* of him to think he could sacrifice his son to save his plans!”

“That’s why Glass couldn’t figure out who his employer was,” I grunted. “My father has the juice to screw with even a brilliant shattermind like that and, without the full resources of the true internet at Glass’ disposal, he couldn’t uncover the truth.”

Chapter 32

Loose Threads

4:08 PM, Monday, Two weeks later

Stone Quarry (Casa Milà) Tower, Croc's Office

“So then what happened?” the salt-and-pepper haired man who’d introduced himself as Gavin Hesterdale asked, jostling me from my reverie.

His words cut through my memories like a dagger and returned me to the present, reminding me how bare a sketch I’d given to him of how I’d managed to remember such crucial details after the fact—my secrets forcing me to combine Wraith and I’s abilities. I covered by looking at the case file in front of me and trying to sort things out in my head.

Things had happened at such a blur since our realization of my father’s involvement that I’d barely sorted it all out myself—a fact that was not helped at all by days with four and five hours of sleep. Lack of sleep, ADD drugs, and way too much caffeine didn’t play at all well with my memory—*or my normally “sunny” outlook.*

“When I realized that I actually knew who was playing things behind the scenes, I reached out to my contacts in the Travellers,” I returned. “I figured they could confirm what I suspected—and a I figured Glass would get back to me in the process.”

With a name to go on, Aric and his contacts (*along with the covert assistance of Glass*) had managed to learn quite a bit about Mr. Brotman and determined that he’d made a number of trips to some lands my father owned on the outskirts of Barcelona, most notably one that was home to a cluster of less repaired buildings. Surveillance photos turned up a reclusive guest of the house which bore a striking resemblance to the same Mr. Credo we’d been sent to hunt down.

“But how does a raver suddenly go into a cooldown period so he can hide out someplace?” Gavin asked, steely eyes narrowed. “I thought there was only one ending for that.”

“As far as I understand, there is,” I shrugged, unhappy with my own gaps of knowledge. “Best guess of me and those who know more than I do is that either Credo’s a really good actor who’s studied Reavers long enough to know how to recreate their work, or my father’s created some sort of chemical that makes someone appear as a Reaver—including the serotonin and dopamine discrepancies that facilitate the berserk rage and the off-the-wall adrenaline-fueled strength—but then wears off after awhile. I’m not sure which is more--*unsettling*.”

“If you weren’t a psychopath, I’d swear you were going to say, ‘*scary*,’” Gavin observed obliquely, sending a sudden chill down my spine. “But that’s just because I’m not one of you, I guess. Go on.”

“With an actual location, photographic evidence, and a name, I reached out to my—er—NIR contact,” I fumbled, hating to use the word ‘liason’ or ‘caseworker’ in regard to VanZant, as it made me feel like I was talking about my babysitter.

VanZant had been snooping around where he could but couldn’t connect the dots, so my text out of the blue lit a fire under him. While he’d been a bit skeptical when I’d told him about my father’s role in all this, he was more than happy to push forward when I explained what verifiable evidence I could bring to the table.

I’d agreed to be taken into custody at the same time he took Brotman in, so it would look like he’d collared me at the same time he’d figured out the real culprit.

“You’re lucky that justice had time to sort out the details before someone decided to make an example of you,” Gavin opined.

“I’m sure my heritage helped slow things down a bit, ironically,” I acknowledged.

The truth was, I trusted VanZant to keep me well in hand for the deal and my father’s reputation to give us a window if it looked like I was in custody and not a flight risk. However

the person I truly trusted in all of this was the same person I trusted every day: my moonlight face; my wraith.

As soon as my being in custody was on the public wire, it made perfect sense for Wraith to be conspicuously about—*sans* his black houseboy, who ‘*was, sadly, down with a terribly contagious strain of scarlet fever*’—due to his concern for an old student. He even managed to get himself invited to be part of the NIR questioning team, because of our previous Razor background. Little did the inquiry board know that the subtle mannerisms he exhibited were all carefully choreographed to give me the right amount of information to reveal along with who the best person to direct my information to might be.

“My testimony combined with the Traveller photographs was more than enough to guarantee that Caesar would send out a deployment of Mag-Men to swoop down on the lands outside of town like a bird of prey, regardless of the fact that Brotman refused to say a word of defense or turn on my father,” I concluded. “Credo was captured without fuss when he realized he was surrounded.”

“And how did your father respond to all of this?” Gavin asked curiously.

There was something about the man that made me suspect he knew the secrets to the universe—but probably hadn’t read a paper in his life. Some people just didn’t stay up with current news—and I guessed I didn’t blame him in this in this day and age.

“Oh, he’s done a very good job of having deniability throughout—even going so far as having proof that Brotman flew out with him to Germany,” I shrugged, irritated.

“So how’d Brotman get away, if he was with your dad all the time?” Gavin wondered.

“Simple,” I bit out, “just because they were up there training Reapers, didn’t mean they were together for most of it. My father oversaw one encampment and sent Brotman off with an escort to supervise a nearby one. When Brotman showed back up at the end of the trip, my father claims he ‘took him at his word’ that things had gone well and the two headed back home.” I smirked then. “As you might imagine, Brotman’s escort has since turned up dead, explaining how he was able to return here for much of the trip without my father’s knowledge. My father’s been very public about his shock and horror that his own personnel could be so ruthless.”

“I would imagine that he’s been able to paint it as a foiled coup that was designed to take out both son and father so that Brotman might rise to power,” Gavin opined.

“Just so.” I returned archly. His phrasing made me momentarily second-guess my certainty of his ignorance of the news.

That brought back the imagery I had hoped I wouldn’t remember until the day I died.

Chapter 33
The Torc and The Cross

11:43 AM, Friday, Four Days Earlier

Cinema Coliseum

Rambla Catalunya

It was hot and crowded as I walked through the pairs of pillars under the arched signs for the spectacle. This had once been one of the largest cinemas in Barcelona—now it had a much darker, more sinister purpose.

As I was ushered forward into the main auditorium, I studied the beaux-arts inspired mosaic of floor tiles; calligraphic swirls of azure, black accents, and grey triangles woven across a canvas of polished white. I wondered how hard it must be to scrub the blood from them after every demonstration.

I would face this alone, because I knew Wraith could not be in the crowd for this occasion. The absence of my other self for the first time in so long cut at me like a dagger and left me hollow inside.

As I passed beneath the Imperial box which Magnanimus had installed upon his rise to power, I glanced up, noting that my father was with him in the exalted booth. While it wasn't my father's first seating with the emperor in his personal box, I suspected that the Emperor was more concerned with keeping a watchful eye on his reactions today than on further exalting my father's ego.

My usher placed me in my assigned seating to await my fate. The suit of clothing I'd been given for the occasion was one of tradition and it chafed at me, making me long for the suits I normally wore—or maybe for the togas that would have been more fitting. None of the servers offered me a glass of wine, for which I was thankful. I only wished to get through this as quickly as possible.

As the room became more crowded with people, I became ever more awkward because of my size and wanted nothing more than to either beat everyone near me until I had space or simply pass out to escape. As the former wasn't a viable option, I drifted into a pseudo slumber until the cacophony woke me.

With the blowing of the horns, I could finally rise to my feet along with the rest of teaming masses, looking up to our exalted Emperor. Ceremonially garbed in a special suit of purple with golden accents, Andreu Martinez, the mouse-featured man who feigned leading the Senate, moved timidly in front of the Emperor to fully announce him, approaching the microphone with trepidation.

“It is with great pleasure that Emperor Magnanimous holds a special ovation to honor his lead officer of the Reaper Control units, Douglas Franklyn Graham. After this ovation, his majesty would like to invite you to stay to witness the summary execution by crucifixion of two traitors to the State.” With that said, the man stepped away from the microphone so that Mag could move forward.

The smile that the emperor plastered on his face seemed to ingratiate himself to the crowds and even I was not immune to a certain feeling of pride when he spoke.

“Many of you remember the travesties of the Fall upon Europe, but few of you truly understand how much you are blessed by the gods to be alive now,” Magnanimous explained with a glitter of purpose in his brown eyes. “What Rome once realized only in part, we are about to realize in totality! The blood of Romulus is upon the throne of the *Novum Imperium Romani* and it is with iron resolve that we shall step into the future.”

The crowds roared their approval at this, almost deafening me and making me rage at myself for not bringing ear plugs. The more uncomfortable I became, the more acute my hearing grew—so the chaos seemed on the verge of driving me mad.

“With that in mind,” the emperor continued, causing the crowds to lull back to quiet reverence, “we will seek out the most able and most devoted of our soldiers and citizens to com-

mend in public with the coveted golden gladii and laurel torc. And any who seek to undermine our destiny will be shattered on the iron cross!!”

The crowds’ screaming was now tinged with blood lust and I felt like my brain would literally explode in the noise.

“Please step to the stage, *chosen son*,” the man said to me, a clear sleight to the father whose DNA I bore.

I obediently rose and walked to the stairs beside the stage, trudging up each one so slowly that an outside observer might’ve thought I was going to the iron cross myself. I stood in center stage and waited while a military officer—a general I’d seen but couldn’t name—approached with the golden necklace, hung with the symbol of Roman military might: mirrored images of the Roman gladius crossed within a wreath of laurel.

“You helped flush out the traitors amongst us by volunteering to take on the dangerous disguise of a wanted felon,” the emperor spun the new reality in such a way that I almost found myself believing it. “And we wish to publicly express our gratitude for what you have done for your emperor and for your people with an ancient symbol of honor for a military leader.”

As he hung it around my neck—the full weight of it feeling strangely suffocating—I realized that I had expected VanZant to be permitted to hang it around my neck, as he was my “supervising” NIR official. Only then did I realize that, like Wraith, I hadn’t seen VanZant here at

the proceedings at all, which meant he'd probably pulled a different shift to avoid the climax of today's events.

“As the Deathdealer responsible for the capture of these two traitors, you have the right of first blood,” the Emperor announced, to my secret horror. First blood at one of Mag's crucifixions was to pound the first nail into a victim. If simply killing someone could start me down a path to destruction, I had no idea what starting a form of torture this wretched would do.

As no response was expected of me yet, I waited in mute silence while the iron crosses were dragged forth by jack booted mag-men. Each cross bore a naked man strapped in place with leather thongs around the forearms and ankles; beneath those forearms and ankles would be deep holes made into the metal to accept the iron nails which would be driven through the flesh.

The general came forth to present me with the iron hammer and two spikes, one for each man. As the weight of these items was pressed into my hands, I finally had my epiphany—a way to flee the prison of my Emperor's delight. Passing the hammer into my left hand with the nails, I beckoned an aid in the front row with a portable microphone to pass me the mic.

“You wish to speak, Deathdealer?” The emperor queried, his eyes looking askance as to what I might say.

“Indeed, exalted emperor,” I stated, my tone supplicating so that he might understand he had nothing to fear from my words. “As you have often said, family is of utmost importance in

the new empire. The shattering of families led to the Fall and the remembrance of family is what shall help our empire grow to the heights it deserves.”

“Indeed,” he smiled, at ease once more.

“As such, it would seem a great dishonor for a son not to recognize his father,” I stated softly, fixing my father’s steely eyes with my own. Only then did I see my sister standing in his shadow; I should’ve known he’d insist that she be along and I only hoped that Skye was hidden fully inside for this. “Father, these vial traitors hid within your own home and endangered your own son’s life, not to mention your reputation within this Empire. As the receiver of the right of first blood, I transfer that right to you. Allow the assembly to see what our family does to those who dishonor them.”

The look that passed between him and I was undecipherable, but the fact that I had placed him in a position in which he could not refuse and save face was almost as comforting to me as the fact that I was now freed of the onus of throwing the “first pitch” at a crucifixion.

My father nodded with great solemnity, showing the empire a man who was greatly honored by a beloved son, and descended to the ground floor and up to the stage in a surprisingly short amount of time, for someone whose back had been ailing him so of late. I nodded my head as I passed the hammer and nails to him clearly submissive, and took my place beside the general on stage. With the stoic demeanor of a soldier I gazed into the middle of the stage, not at the crosses that framed it, but at the grooves hollowed into the floor.

I did my best to recap the elements of the case in my mind and to ignore the muted grunts and groans of the men as my father drove the wrist spike into first one man and then the other. Two more NIR officers quickly and ruthlessly hammered in the other spikes and hoisted the crosses into the air, to slide with a sonorous thunk into steel wells fitted for their great bulks.

As the men strained to breathe, the blood dripped down the crosses and sluiced into channels that filled the grooves in the center of the stage. Within minutes, I could see the letters NIR above the symbol of the crossed gladii and laurels take shape, etched in the spilled remnants of crimson life.

I knew without a doubt, as I stood there, that I would throw this medal into the farthest reaches of the darkest hole I could find as soon I had the chance.

Chapter 34 **Spiderwebs**

4:48 PM, Monday, Present

Stone Quarry (Casa Milà) Tower, Croc's Office

“I believe that brings us to the amount I owe you,” Gavin’s words shocked me from my reverie.

“How do you figure?” I returned, my eyes narrowing. “We may have gotten out of being hunted by the NIR, but we never found your girl.”

“Well, strangely enough, in the confusion surrounding the celebration a few days ago,” Gavin arched a brow, “our operative managed to find her way out of prison.”

“Would that have anything to do with Teller Vanzant?” I asked, realizing with a sick certainty the truth.

“You know the strange thing about my gift, Mr. Graham?” Gavin asked, reminding me strangely of Wraith. “I get the broad strokes and certain key elements of future events, but so rarely do I get all the details. Perhaps it’s in God’s interest that I not know too much.”

“So in this game of roulette,” I clarified archly, “you bet on two numbers—not just one.”

“I rather like that turn of phrase,” Gavin returned, holding out the bag of crosses until I reluctantly took it, hefting it in my hand. As I looked him in the eye, I saw an integrity that reminded me even more of Wraith. “My ability has never been so much a blessing as a heavy responsibility. It didn’t help me stop the Fall, but it may be able to help me rebuild the future. Thank you for your help in all of this.”

The concluding phrase—“*rebuild the future*”—reminded me of the earlier conversation I’d had so close to when this all began.

“Speaking of which,” I returned, eyes narrowing again, “you wouldn’t have had anything to do with a missing cache of 3D printers?”

“Hmm...what an interesting question,” Gavin pondered, then returned my gaze blankly. “Seems that 3D printers would be pretty useless if you couldn’t access the data of the internet.”

“Indeed,” I returned flatly, entirely unconvinced of his ignorance, but knowing that I hadn’t earned any great trust—especially with my own heritage and official employment.

“I’ll keep my eyes open,” he smiled obliquely.

“I’m sure you will,” I grimaced.

He turned to head from the room, leaving me to contemplate the grain of my desk and soothe my bruised ego by vowing never to work with redheads again.

“Oh, I wanted to thank you for one other thing,” Gavin paused at the door to throw. “It seems one of your associates wanted to help us out after learning of our plight through you.”

“Really?” I asked, wracking my mind to see who it might be. “Who might that be?”

“I believe you call him Glass Samurai,” Gavin smiled and then vanished silently through the door.

Epilogue

10:38 PM, Later That Day

Stone Quarry (Casa Milà) Tower, Croc's Living Space

Wraith—the sipping saint—enjoyed his shot of pre-Fall bourbon—Maker’s Mark, judging from the bottle—as he sat across from me at our mini-conference table and kitchen nook.

“Apparently there were some pretty blatant computer errors during the event,” Wraith recapped what he’d dug up after Gavin’s departure. “They’ve used a dual cycling airlock system without direct contact for six months now, with the idea that if guards aren’t communicating directly, they can’t be conspiring on anything secretly.”

“So how do they touch base on what one guard needs to know at shift change?” I asked, curious.

“Closed text system,” Wraith’s brows arched. “Don’t want to let them do video because there are too many nuances to human voice and body language. Text is easy to re-read and nuance can be abolished pretty quickly.”

“Makes a certain amount of sense,” I grudgingly acknowledged. “So how’s Vanzant not the next stage show at the big C?”

“All of his stuff was airtight,” Wraith smiled gently. “He followed regulations, including texting the person in the other airlock and receiving texted confirmation. Of course, the fact that he’s now part of the celebrity Croc team makes him harder to pin anything on, as well.”

“So who gets to hold up the sky on this one?” I asked.

“The guard that was supposedly in the other lock,” Wraith returned. “Mag knows he was hacked—the disruption of the security cameras all throughout the disappearance are proof of that—but someone’s got to pay for a state secret like Jenna going missing. The guy claims he wasn’t on the shift, but all the records state he was.”

“You don’t seem too concerned about another crucifixion,” I returned archly.

“Well, the other prison guard is a guy who they have ‘watch’ the female prisoners they want to break,” Wraith returned, his eyes glowing with a mix of rage and triumph. “I’m not the one handing him over and if there’s anyone who could stand the stage show, it’s this bastard.”

There were few things Wraith and I agreed on more strongly than what should be done to rapists. If anything, I may have an even more of a searing, violent rage about it.

“Anything else?” I asked, wanting to wrap the case so I could ask him a more personal question.

“According to Aric, at the same time that Jenna got sprung,” Wraith concluded, “the last card got hacked. No bodies on this one.”

“If Glass and Norman were working on it together, there wouldn’t need to be,” I grimaced. “Of course, the fact that there were some originally pretty much means one of Glass’—or, rather, Judah’s—shards is a Reaper.”

“That’s how I’d read it,” Wraith concurred. “He’s already got a forger, which is how he got in with Aric, but I’d bet he’s got a catburglar in there, too. That’s why they were able to do things that should be impossible without a team. Cat burglar to break in/break out and a hacker to rip the files from the networks; assassin in the guardhouse for protection.”

“Pretty incredible,” I agreed. “But there are still those two cards unaccounted for, right?”

“Yes,” Wraith nodded. “But Jenna was always supposed to be the key to them.”

“Which means that he may have everything he needs,” I sighed, “to rebuild the world.”

“But in who’s image?” Wraith voiced the words in my own mind.

“Only time will tell,” I grimaced, then changed the subject. “I’m having trouble with all of this stuff with my father.”

“Most people would,” Wraith agreed, draining the last of his bourbon, and looking me in the eye.

“I haven’t much trusted him,” I verbalized, trying to put my finger on my point. “But I never thought he’d sacrifice me for one of his political schemes.”

“I don’t think he believed you would be sacrificed,” Wraith returned. “I think he believed you were resourceful enough to survive and fully expected you to do so.”

“But that comment about my sister if I didn’t?” I returned incredulously.

“I didn’t say your father wasn’t a pragmatist,” Wraith shrugged. “He believes the blood destiny will see through the family. But in my observation of his behavior, I felt that he really would have been—*surprised*—if you had not survived. As such, I would imagine he thought this was a reasonable burden to place on a son—for the greater empowerment of the family.”

“Just neglected to ask me about it because it slipped his mind?” I asked acidly.

“Perhaps,” he shrugged. “Or perhaps he has always known you are different than he is in certain ways that he doesn’t fully understand. He believes in you—he just doesn’t believe he can communicate with you.”

“Close to a compliment as he’s ever verbalized to me, I suppose,” I grimaced, irritated.

“They’re all damaged,” Wraith shrugged. “Parents, I mean. You just have to determine whether you’re going to hold out for them to be something they’re not—or accept where they’re at.”

“Your parents were even more screwed up than my dad and they were all religious, so how the hell did you get through your household and not become an atheist?” I asked. “I’d think that would’ve driven out any notion of anyone looking after you.”

“It could’ve been worse,” Wraith returned, suddenly still. “It could’ve been much worse.”

“I don’t understand you,” I returned, confused. “You’re a sociopath—it’s not like you have a bunch of positive BS emotions to cloud your perception.”

“Psychopath,” Wraith corrected mildly. “You were created to be a sociopath. There’s a difference.”

“Whatever,” I gruffed back, even though I knew he was right. Psychopathy was birthed by nature while sociopathy was birthed by nurture; the Severing might blur the lines, but the distinction remained.

“You’re right,” he acknowledged, “it’s not emotion; simple logic.”

“Logic?” I returned.

“Conan Doyle.” Wraith smiled softly. “Once you’ve ruled out the impossible, whatever’s left, no matter how improbable...”

“...Must be the truth.” I finished. “So God’s impossible, that doesn’t explain...”

“No. God is simply improbable.” Wraith smiled. “The lack of God, however, is impossible.”