

DARKENED STREETS



A World of Darkness Anthology



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Special Thanks

To all the fans of the World of Darkness, past, present and future



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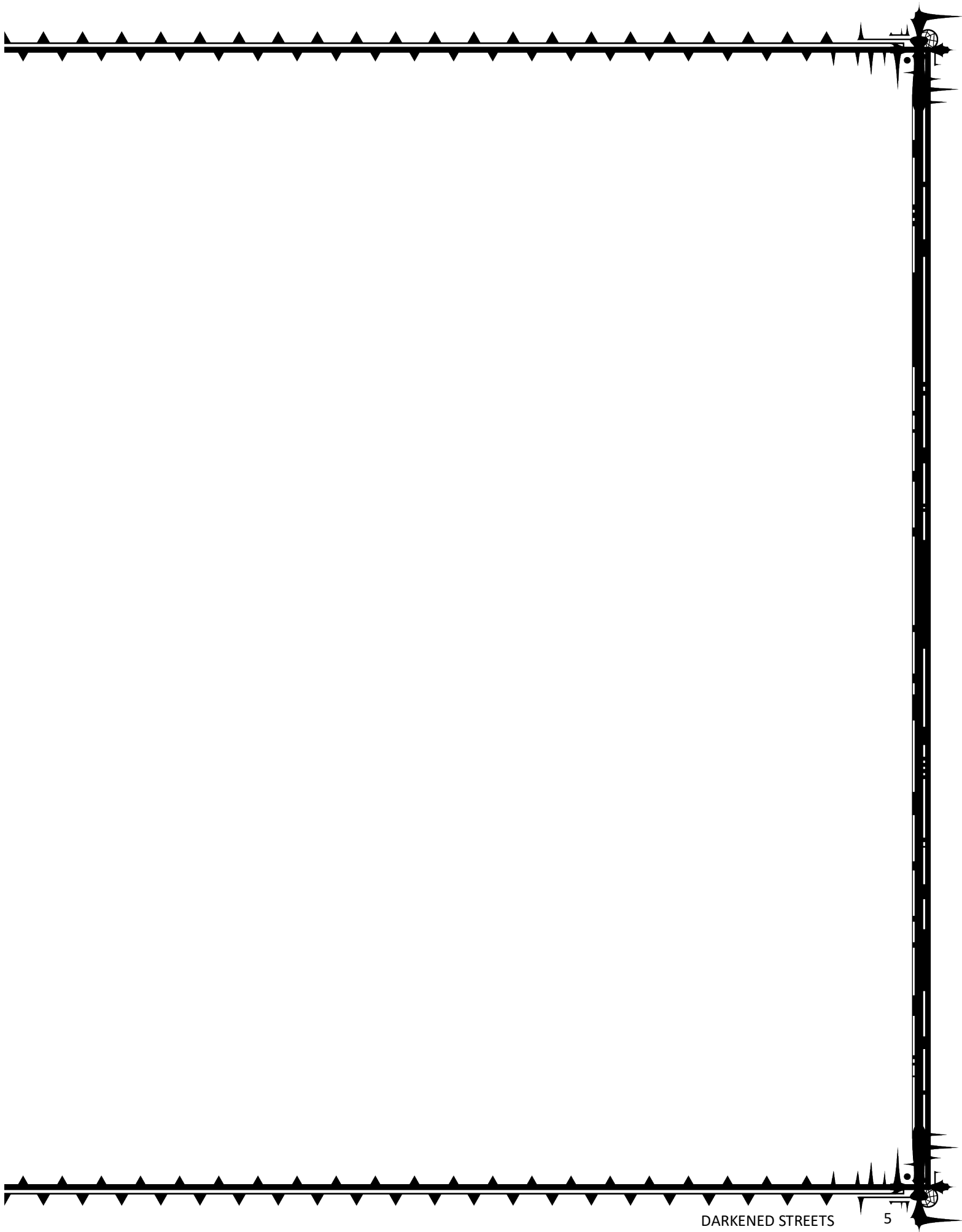
DARKENED STREETS

A YEAR OF THE ROAD

ANTHOLOGY

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DARKENED STREETS



WATCH THE ROADS

BRANDON STEWARD

Sunday, September 29, 1:25 a.m.

Agent Tyrone steadied himself against the old black LTD with his left hand, careful to avoid the shards of fallen glass peppering the hood. He allowed himself a few moments to catch his breath, to give his vision time to steady and his ears to stop ringing, and to let the oncoming curtains of rain pour down a welcome cool against the back of his aching head.

At his side, the handle gripped tightly in his swollen and partially numb right hand, hung a large metal case: The Package, their objective, or rather, its housing. Tyrone didn't know what was inside — not because of the current fog in his brain or any state of shock — but because he was never told. All he knew was that it was being kept inside of a lock-box made of solid primium: the metal used for counteracting, negating, or otherwise containing the manifestations of reality deviants. Which meant that whatever was inside was important and, he thought to himself as he placed it into the car and paid one last look at the scene, *hopefully worth dying for*.

He hadn't felt shaken when they stormed the motel for The Package and found themselves in a firefight with two reality deviants. When nearly every electronic within half-a-mile got fried, he didn't notice himself flinch. The sigils written on the walls in blood didn't seem to give him pause, neither

did those things that came out of them. Even as the bodies started to pile up and he watched that deviant burn from the inside out while screaming horribly and nearly taking the entire building with him, he was sure he held it together.

It wasn't until he caught himself forgetting which key started his car and being puzzled at the sight of his own drenched tie hanging down from his neck and gliding across the vehicle's chassis that it occurred to him that he might be just a bit rattled.

Tyrone shakily climbed into the driver's seat and wiped some dust from his eyes. His ears were still ringing, but he recognized the sound of his partner's voice from the other side.

"You're in bad shape, Boss. Be careful. Watch the road." She looked at Tyrone with concern as she got into her seat and shut the passenger door.

"Yeah, sure Kid." Tyrone's response was a mixture of distraction and shock, and he spent the next several seconds staring out the window at the phosphorus glow of distant red and blue emergency lights before his hand blindly located the ignition. What the hell just happened?

Tuesday, September 24, 2:32 p.m.

"This tea is cold." Damurah declared, staring derisively into his plastic cup. He had yet to make eye contact with the confused waitress.

"Um..." the young woman blinked, looking as though she'd just been presented with a riddle. "Yes sir. That's, uh, how iced tea comes."

Damurah eyed her without lifting his head. "It's cold," he reiterated, hoping the frigidity of his tone might accentuate his lost point.

She glanced over her shoulder and then back, looking increasingly hopeless. "I'm...sorry. Do you want me to, um," she paused, "*microwave* it for you?"

Damurah, nearly expressionless, slowly looked down at his cup and then back to the woman. "Well, that wouldn't be very good, would it?" he asked.

"Um, no..." she conceded with an uncomfortable shrug. "No sir, it would not."

They stared at each other in long, awkward silence, enough to allow nearly a full chorus of the establishment's personal take on a happy birthday song to be asynchronously belted out by the staff at a nearby table.

Damurah slid the cup to her in defeat. "Water, please."

"On it!" the woman chirped elatedly before Damurah could scarcely punctuate his sentence. He noted her half-skipping in visible relief upon her departure. Had he been so unreasonable? He chose not to reflect on it.

"What sort of place is this," he implored the empty space on the other side of the table, "that the tea is weak *and* cold?"

Seated across the booth, unseen by all but his master, the djinni Shalms laughed and shook his head. "Ask the prancing young lady. No doubt she is smitten with your charms."

Damurah caught himself scowling at the jab, but otherwise offered his companion a customarily silent response. He shrugged his leather jacket off of his shoulders, pulling his arms from the sleeves and folding it up neatly in the seat beside him. He then checked his watch and stared out into the sea of patrons.

"They should've been here thirty minutes ago. I need to know the location of our quarry, and I did not travel all this way to be kept waiting."

Shalms noted Damurah's survey of the crowd and opted to do the same. This did not mean he couldn't multitask, however, so he continued to speak. "This *is* a family place, Master. It's on the sign. Perhaps you could embrace the spirit and will yourself to do something besides brood while we wait? Actually eat, perhaps?"

Damurah remained silent just long enough to receive his water from the returning waitress with a polite nod. He sipped once, slid the cup out of his way and resumed his vigil. "To hell with their sign. I have been to Ireland. Their tea is hot and strong. *This* is a place of plastic and lies. Nothing more."

Shalms grinned. "The restaurant or the country?"

Damurah scoffed, sitting up slightly for a better view of the front door. "This is not a restaurant. This is a prison."

"Well, yeah," a smooth, unexpected voice suddenly piped in from around the corner. "But the fries are great."

Damurah and his djinni both sprung to their feet just in time to come face to face with five men, all nearly identical, wearing pressed gray suits, ties, and sunglasses.

The tallest of the five flashed a porcelain smile. "Damurah Meghwal, yes? Pleased to meet you. Welcome to New Jersey."

The back of Damurah's neck grew warm with tension, and he fell utterly still. Technocrats. Followers of Lies. *Dregvanti*. How had he not seen them approach? He felt the tips of his fingers begin to tingle and his muscles tense. Clenching his jaw, his eyes darted almost imperceptibly in the direction of his as-yet unmanifested companion, and he registered the nod of understanding from Shalms. They counted in silent accord: 3...2...

Before he could finish the count, the room began to spin. Damurah felt his knees weaken and his mind start to cloud. As he struggled to center his thoughts, the restaurant and its patrons became an incoherent kaleidoscope of colors and shapes.

In perfect unison, the four gray-suited men in the rear each reached a hand into his coat. The man in the lead glanced back to them nonchalantly and spoke. "As soon as the EDE even thinks about moving, take him down." He punctuated this with a nod and an angled, two fingered wave toward the djinni before smiling back to Damurah.

"The Sindhi will go for his pockets or his jewelry. You know what to do."

Both Shalms and his master looked to one another in disbelief. The entire scene seemed to be playing out in a bubble, as though the rest of the restaurant were oblivious. Damurah felt his stomach churn as his vision continued to blur.

The lead man continued, "Now, it looks like you're waiting on someone, and you're going to

notice some dizziness setting in from that water soon. So in the interest of everybody's health," he made a small sweeping gesture toward the booth, "why don't you have a seat?"

He didn't remember sitting back down or how much time passed, only the rage he felt as he struggled to process each and every humiliating aspect of his situation. Directly across from him, the lead man — at least, he was fairly certain it was given their near uniform appearance and his impaired vision — had taken a seat as well.

There was no sign of Shalms or the other four agents, but Damurah currently felt oddly little inclination to look anywhere other than directly into the man's shades.

"Shal...Shal..." he sputtered.

Damurah watched the agent shake his head and become a mess of blurry after-images.

"Don't you remember, Mr. Meghwal?" The agent smiled. "You ordered him away. He had to go." His voice was friendly. Almost soothing. "That was a while ago. Please, continue with what you were saying. You were looking for The Package?"

Damurah blinked, struggling to make sense of the dreg... of the man's words. Why would he have sent — what was his name — away? He must have had a good reason. He always did.

"The...Package?" Damurah hesitated, trying to center himself.

"Yes. You've been looking for it for some time, very noisily I might add. And you've been asking *questions* of certain interested parties, haven't you?" The agent began to nod slowly as he awaited confirmation.

"Y-yes." Damurah felt himself beginning to nod along.

The agent's voice was warm and friendly, and he spoke with a calming cadence, as if to a child. "And you were here to meet someone, weren't you? To help find it?"

Damurah continued to nod in agreement. It was true, of course, and what was more pure than Truth?

"I really am sorry for all this, Mr. Meghwal, but please understand there are a lot of bad men looking for The Package. Now then," the man brought his elbows to the table and pressed his hands together, forming a triangle with his fingertips, "why don't you tell me who you—"

"I will...not suffer this..." Damurah interjected, staring at the reflection of his own hate-filled gaze in the operative's glasses. It was a struggle to speak,

and he practically spat out the last word, "... *indignity*."

The gray-suited man raised an eyebrow and shook his head, careful never to break eye contact. "I understand how this must look, Mr. Meghwal, and you have every right to be angry. But these were necessary precautions given the circumstances. Please believe me when I tell you that we are not here to ruin your day. We're here to talk. That's the truth."

Damurah sneered at the use of that word and let his teeth grind painfully against each other. The discomfort seemed to bring a spark of lucidity. The world around the agent was an incoherent gaussian fuzz, and the man's rehearsed platitudes and checklist of trite power plays made the mage every bit as sick to his stomach as whatever they'd managed to drug him with. This meant that, even in a diminished state, Damurah was able to convey a remarkable amount of hatred to his sole point of focus. "I am Truth. And I would not believe you if you told me the sky was blue."

The agent nodded, and offered Damurah the type of smile that was prepared to sell him a car. "It's not," he retorted, taking a sip of the water which had somehow found its way over to his side. "Ahhh. Would've preferred iced tea, but at least it's cold."

He slid the cup over to Damurah before offering a coy aside, "Now you get to wonder if I'm immune somehow, or if I just *convinced* you that your drink was spiked."

The agent's words came true immediately. Even Damurah was surprised at how much hatred he now saw in his reflection's eyes.

"The point that I hope you'll take away, Mr. Meghwal," the agent continued, "is that, believe it or not — and forgive me if I expect your people to lean toward the former where belief is concerned — we actually have *quite* a bit of respect for you."

Damurah, continuing to focus on his own rage-filled expression, offered no reply to the agent's mocking or flattery.

The agent continued, "We've done our homework. My people don't normally come loaded for Extra Dimensional Entities like your friend, and if you'll pardon a little inside info..." he leaned partway across the table, bringing one hand up to the side of his mouth to whisper, "...These suits aren't even normally waterproof these days, much less *fire* proof." The man smiled again and leaned back to his side of the table.

"We're not stupid, Mr. Megwhal. But we believed it in all our best interests to attempt a sit down and, well, Damurah Megwhal doesn't just *sit down* with the enemy..." he paused long enough to reach down into his seat below the table and produce Damurah's still-neatly-folded jacket from where it had been left minutes ago, taking just a moment to admire the various multicolored designs adorning it before sliding it across the table to its furious owner, "...unless he's off-balance."

Damurah saw his reflected eyes widen and his nostrils flare. This man's every gesture; the platitudes, the body language, the deconstruction, even switching their seats — was a calculated taunt: a power play designed to make him feel helpless, angry, and disoriented. But even knowing that, the methods were not wholly ineffective. Damurah was at a disadvantage, and he could literally see it in the face of his enemy. He worked to clear his mind and watched himself take a breath. Slowly, he began to speak with a deliberate, forced calm. "Balanced or not, why would I speak with you?"

"Because, Mr. Meghwal, you're on a mission. You're practical. And you're one piece of information away from going free." The operative's face seemed to stretch and distort. "Let's be upfront. Your little cross-country jumps with your friend here haven't exactly been subtle. I'm frankly surprised you're not sporting some statistically inevitable glow by now. You've left quite a trail, and it seems to match the chatter of some, well, let's call them 'disruptive elements'. I don't think that's a coincidence."

"And what...*do* you think, dregvanti?" Damurah snarled impatiently.

"I don't think you're directly involved with the would-be thieves we're after, Mr. Meghwal. They're too — mmm — understated for you. But I also think you're a resourceful man who's willing to talk to people he might not like to get what he wants." The man smiled warmly, watching Damurah's glazed eyes flicker. "Now, don't you want to tell me who you came here to meet and be on your way?"

"...Yes." As Damurah spoke, he saw the flicker in his own eyes as well. Now it was his turn to lean forward, though not without difficulty and the use of the table for balance. He pushed himself as far as he could toward the visibly eager agent, until they were nearly nose-to-nose. "You, dregvanti," he declared. As he watched himself utter the words in the startled Technocrat's glasses, he felt some of the fog lift.

The man seemed visibly taken aback, but forced a bemused chuckle, "I'm sorry, *me*?"

Damurah continued to focus on his own reflected face, which grew more steady and defiant by the second. "I saw myself meeting you. Here." He paused long enough to get his breath and moisten his lips. His voice was nearly monotone. "It is where I tear the location of Al-Eajib from your soul." At these words, Damurah could see the other agents standing behind the booth starting to come into focus.

The agent's expression went cold. He shifted in his booth, and leaned forward to meet his jousting partner's face. "We're surrounded by sleepers, Mr. Meghwal. And I know how your kind feel about subtlety." He leaned in even farther, nearly whispering in Damurah's ear. "Is this really where you want to die, deviant?"

Damurah smiled as the reflected sight of his own steadying visage drew closer to him. As he spoke to it, he seemed to forget about the Technocrat, and in doing so melted the remaining fog. It was an affirmation of will to himself, from himself. "In the vision, there were two birthdays. They started clapping their second song just before my will was made manifest and you began to scream."

The agent drew in a sharp breath and started to pull away. As his face passed Damurah's, he caught sight of a gathering of servers, just over the mage's shoulder, presenting a small chocolate cake to a young boy. The agent's mouth fell open.

At the same time, just over the Technocrat's shoulder, Damurah could see the overhead lights beginning to intensify above the four agents as they moved for their weapons, and he could hear the sound of the water in his glass start to boil and hiss. Damurah opened his mouth as well, uttering a single invocation, "Shalms."

And then they clapped.

Sunday, September 29, 1:28 a.m.

"So what exactly happened to that one back there?" The Kid whispered with some reservation while fastening her seatbelt and glancing back over her shoulder through the rear window of the car. There was little visibility left in the absence of any functioning street lights, but she still managed to follow the rising cascades of smoke and steam a few feet back, now illuminated red like flares in their taillights, to the still-smoldering scorch marks in the rain-battered parking lot.

Tyrone, still feeling fuzzy from the recent conflict but doing his best to focus, offered a matter-of-fact reply as he turned on the windshield wipers and slowly and carefully pulled back onto the highway. "Statistical inevitability, Kid. Had to happen sooner or later."

The Kid blinked twice in mild embarrassment and fought the urge to tilt her head like she was prone to do when utterly lost. She felt the heat rise on the back of her neck and desperately hoped the steady drum of rain against the roof would mask her confused silence long enough for some sort of recognition to finally set in. To her relief, she only needed a couple of seconds, "Oh! You mean par-ado—"

"I *mean*," Tyrone interrupted without even considering a glance toward his young associate, his distinctive baritone growing even deeper as he reemphasized, "sta-tistical inevita-bility. Was bound to happen."

The Kid's face betrayed her frustration immediately, though her new riding partner, apart from his periodic wincing, never seemed to take his focus off the highway. "Oh, give me a break. It's just us. What happened?"

Tyrone shook his head, stifling another grunt of discomfort he hoped she didn't see as he began to slow down ahead of the next exit. "You saw it. SHC, Kid. Spontaneous human combustion."

The Kid stared at him in disbelief, simultaneously grateful and furious that he wouldn't return her glare. "Spontaneous. Human. Combustion. *Right*. Don't hand me the sleeper line," she insisted, "Go on."

Tyrone offered no answer. As he calmly took the exit, the Kid caught a glimpse of his newly-illuminated face amidst the cascades of working street lights as they passed. Damn, she thought. They had done a number on him, and he was playing it off like a soldier. She looked down at her fried cellphone and sighed.

Several miles later, Tyrone, eyes practically unblinking, peered ahead at a forthcoming road sign before speaking up again. "It's called the wick effect, Kid. They've tested it. On pigs."

The Kid jumped frantically at Tyrone's sudden unceremonious re-emergence into the conversation, startling herself even further as the leather of the seat beneath her squeaked. She had been lost in thought about the events of the past few hours, most

specifically her current state relative to that of her partner.

"Wait, do what?" she inquired with some exasperation while steadying herself. "'Wick effect'?"

Tyrone nodded, still looking ahead with a squint at the road sign and reaching to activate the car's brights. "Yeah. Like a candle. Wound exposes subcutaneous fat. Fat gets exposed to flame. Fat heats up, soaks into clothing, clothing acts like a wick. Body burns from the inside out. Happens." It sounded as though he had been waiting to share that, or had already recited it a dozen times.

The Kid glared for a moment before turning her attention to the road marker.

Tyrone continued, "All that fire? Wounds like that? Bound to happen. Statistical inevitability."

Thursday, September 26, 2:30 p.m.

The whites of Damurah's eyes blazed with deep, orange flame as they rolled back into his head. He surrendered himself fully to his trance, flecks of blood flying from his mouth as he repeated his chant, "Glory be to Me! I am Truth!"

His words were met with a flurry of wooden shards from what had once been a painstakingly crafted jandi chair, now reduced to splinters by the angry spirit. Damurah's outstretched hands quivered as the wood dug into his limbs and tore across his face, but still he continued, "Glory be to me! I am Truth!"

The spirit thrashed once more, its gaseous form bending at the words as though struck by a whip. It began to spill out into the room, filling the small chamber with a noxious, black fog.

"Glory...be to... *me!*" Even in his ecstatic state, Damurah felt himself choking out that last word as his mouth and lungs began to burn.

The fog began to ripple and spark as it pushed against the wards holding it captive, and tiny orbs of burning light started to flicker in and out of the blackness, as though it were alive with a thousand fireflies. Damurah's long, pleated sleeves started to sizzle away in dozens of small circles like cigarette burns as the lights in the fog made contact with his body. He felt his throat begin to tighten as he screamed out the rest, "I! Am! Truth!"

Upon that last cacophonous syllable, the blaze in Damurah's eyes spilled forth from his splinter-perforated face, briefly igniting some of the larger pieces like matchsticks as it arched and swirled around his body in an ever-widening twister of flames. The

spirit's black fog undulated and writhed on contact, slowly being pushed into the corner of the room. Damurah's bruised body drifted into the air as if held on strings, and his voice boomed, "By my name of Al-iirada, I lash you! By my name of Al-iirada, I bind you! By my na—"

"Wait. No more." the spirit pleaded suddenly, its voice emanating from everywhere in the room. **"We offer you a boon. For our freedom."**

Simultaneously, the spirit's lights flickered away as quickly as they had come, and Damurah's flames began to fizzle and subside. Within seconds, the ritual space was eerily silent, save for the shifting and sizzling of furniture debris. The negotiations were finished.

"You," the battered spirit whispered as it began to coalesce. **"We know you, Al-iirada. You are a Taftani. A subjugator."**

Damurah dropped to the ground, feeling a surge of pain pulsing through his body as the adrenaline began to leave his system. He addressed his subser-vient adversary coldly, abandoning Arabic in favor of his native Sindhi tongue. "I am. And I require a task of you."

The spirit was now a shadowy, rippling human-oid shape with multiple long, spindly arms which seemed to flow in and out of its body, and six vertically set, glowing eyes, all of which lit up in curiosity. **"And what does 'The Will' want of us?"**

Damurah stepped over some debris and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, managing to hide his surprise at the sheer amount of blood. "My djinni and I have been tracking an object of great importance for several months. It has the potential to awaken thousands to Truth, yet does not wish to be held. In just the past three weeks, it has passed through no less than four owners."

The spirit seemed to perk up, its eyes now beaming like flashlights. **"It has seen much of the world. Your mentor called it Al-Eajib. He searched for it years ago in Haiti. It is why you came to New York."**

Damurah smiled slightly, looking rather impressed. "You know of that?"

The spirit nodded. **"What you seek is known on both sides of the gauntlet..."** It paused briefly to consider its words, **"...and many of your thoughts were laid bare to us when we tried to eat them."**

Damurah blinked, unsure of how to respond to that. After a few seconds, he opted to continue, "It is in the possession of the dregvanti here, and I have

foreseen where they will lose Al-Eajib. You shall be the 'how'. You will bring their stolen quarry to me."

The spirit nodded and clasped four of its hands together. Damurah interjected before it could speak.

"Loudly," the Taftani clarified emphatically, briefly recalling the New Jersey agent's screaming face. **"Fuck the Technocracy."**

Hours later, the ancient djinni, Shalms, shook his head in disappointment. "Master, you are neither a novice nor a complete fool. Why would you fill a *ritual space* with so much *furniture*?!"

Damurah offered the beleaguered djinni a single glance over his shoulder from the couch, largely to verify that he was still pushing the broom despite his protests. "Was it not all made by my will and my hands? What better to fill such a space? For a creature that powerful, it was important that we both be reminded whose home he entered."

Shalms kicked another piece of ornate lacquered wood into the pile and glared into the next room at his master. "This apartment is a rental, and you could've died. You should have waited on me instead of cluttering up what is supposed to be a pure space with crafts you no longer wanted."

Damurah glanced back over his shoulder and answered matter-of-factly. "We must travel light. Regardless, they were not unwanted. They were beautiful, practical expressions of truth and will, and they had a purpose to serve. As did you."

"You had me out getting tea!" the djinni bel-lowed in frustration, wishing he could throw down his broom, if only to throw up his hands.

"It is important that you rest after consuming so much paradox if you are to remain useful, devil. And besides," Damurah paused and offered an innocent shrug before bringing his cup into view over the couch and taking another sip, "it's very good tea."

Shalms shook his head and returned to his maintenance, but not before he paused to count the slashes now covering his master's face. "Six..." he whispered to himself indignantly.

Damurah started to respond, but instead placed his tea back onto the table and stood up to welcome the return of the spirit as it suddenly rematerialized.

"Give it to me," Damurah demanded. Several seconds passed, and then the spirit's eyes dimmed. **"We cannot."**

Damurah's usual stoic expression began to break. "You are in *my* service. You would deny our pact?"

The spirit's form rippled as it shook its head, **"You misunderstand. They no longer have it. One has taken Al-Eajib and managed to hide it from us."**

Damurah slammed both hands into the table, nearly knocking over his tea. "What?! Speak plainly, spirit! How is this possible?!"

The spirit flickered, **"There was an ambush set by another. Wards. Flames. And odd blood magick. It reduces our sight to impressions. Fragments."**

The Taftani's brow furrowed hard, sending lines of blood from his unbandaged splinter wounds trickling down his forehead. Damurah stroked his beard ponderfully, took a breath, then spoke through gritted teeth. "So you would you give up a chance at freedom so quickly?"

Four of the spirit's eyes began to glow. **"Hold. You would not have called us were our knowledge not substantial. We cannot tell you where the object is..."**

"Then what good is your 'knowledge' to me?!" Damurah yelled, causing Shalms to peek out of the adjacent room.

The spirit continued with a deliberate, spiteful calm. **"But we can show you the face of individual who took it. Will that satisfy our accord?"**

Damurah's eyes widened and, after a moment, he slowly began to nod. "One man? Very well, spirit. We have an accord. Tell me, truly, who is this warrior who has managed to impose his will on the dregvanti all alone?"

The spirit had no visible mouth to speak of, but Damurah could swear he saw it smiling.

Saturday, September 28, 5:33 p.m.

It was just after 3 p.m. outside of the Bronx when Janice first shouted "Fuck!" to herself in what would prove to be a near-hourly situational assessment from then on. This pattern would be broken up only by the rare bout of sleep which was, itself, to become increasingly broken. Now, just two days later, barreling through Mississippi, little had changed.

Recent complications — a kind descriptor for no small amount of vulgar magic — had led to her suddenly speeding down I-59 toward Port Fourchon, Louisiana with a deep, profusely bleeding gash in her left palm and half-a-dozen smoldering, molten imps roughly the size of house cats clawing and biting at the hood and windows of The Royal We, her

van and intermittent residence. Janice spun the steering wheel with her remaining good hand, narrowly missing an oncoming truck.

Though one wouldn't know it to look at the young lady now, in another life Janice Milliano had been a drug abuse counselor operating out of the Midwest. She'd had her share of excitement and close calls since her Awakening, but despite it all, she'd still had a home, a good family, a girlfriend, and a sterling reputation for helping people, all bolstered by her gifts.

Though she had sometimes felt distant from the so-called sleepers, she had never thought of her new awareness as anything but a blessing. *"The Kid's one of the lucky ones"* seemed to be the running assessment amongst her senior practitioner friends. She used to laugh at that.

But that was all before she had tried to use her practice to help others Awaken; a decision that she considered a natural extension of both her talents and her desire to help people, if not an ethical obligation. Others cautioned her about the risks, but she dismissed their warnings more and more with every promising encounter. Surely, she reasoned, she was beneath the notice of all that Tradition-Technocrat political crap. But within two months, there were multiple false claims of inappropriate conduct, a doctored video, and a pound of cocaine in her trunk, and it didn't take a degree to know who was responsible.

Now? Her world was a combination of constant running, vulgar hit-and-runs against the Technocracy, half-finished Enochian translations, obfuscation runes, perpetual fatigue from bloodletting, morally dubious mind wipes, gas station energy shots, and most recently, a stolen premium box which had just slid itself somewhere to the back of her van alongside a fumbled ritual dagger, a depressing amount of empty Vienna sausage cans, and a much-needed roll of bandages.

Janice had assumed she'd found some of her old luck by even getting the box after all the stories she'd heard. The chatter in the Digital Web had made it sound too good to be true. The perfect thing for getting one's stolen life back, sure, but not the sort of thing she imagined she would ever get a real shot at. But over the past few weeks, her contacts' intel had made it seem more and more viable, especially if one was willing to bend the rules.

Janice was always paradox-prone — it's what had kept her an Orphan among mages. In another

life, she would never have taken the risk. But then again, she reminded herself, in another life, she wouldn't have needed to.

For the first several hours, she figured she'd gotten off the hook for her little vulgar fireworks display with just a few weird pains and some nausea. The presence of the six flaming paradox spirits who were now melting holes in her windshield, however, said otherwise.

Initially, Janice had opted for the much more conservative plan of flooring it to shake the little bastards off. Failing that, and observing The Royal We's exterior paint, along with the embedded obfuscation runes beginning to burn away, she had opted for the slightly less conservative option of supercharging the vehicle's reawakened spirit and flooring it in the hope that it might afford her the extra *mmmph* and maneuverability necessary to shake her unwanted passengers loose.

Normally, this process took place over a few hours and involved something like a nice wash, a new coat of wax, some sweet words, and finally springing for super unleaded, but Janice had learned long ago that there were quite a few things one could do in a pinch if they were willing to bleed for it and worry later.

She wasn't entirely sure how fast she was going at this point. The Royal We's speedometer had long since laid over with no sign of the engine shutting off. Still terrified and driven back hard into her seat like an astronaut at launch, she managed to jerk the van back into the proper lane just in time to avoid oncoming traffic. She wasn't sure in the moment if the squeal she heard belonged to her tires or to the wide-swung imp that found its dangling lower half directly in the path of a passing motorist's rear view mirror. Either way, the sight of the first devil losing its claw hold and being sent careening into the street was a welcome one.

"Comeoncomeoncomeon, sweetheart. You can dooo thiiiiis..." Janice choked with as near an air of confidence as she could muster amidst the vehicle's continued banging and shaking.

As the van continued to pick up speed, there was the stomach-tightening sound of shredding metal and fiberglass as a second imp was tossed from its perch and desperately raked its white-hot claws along the right-side sliding door. Janice swerved left-to-right and was gifted with the satisfying thump of her persistent hitchhiker disappearing under the wheels. She knew none of her highway theatrics

could actually kill these things — she wasn't even sure if they could be killed — but damned if she wouldn't let herself enjoy each and every second of consigning these toothy little fucks to the 'Later' category in her list of concerns.

It wasn't until she'd managed to swing and weave enough to shake another three loose, leaving only a single imp hanging on to the rear of her van by a single smoking claw, its body whipping back and forth almost comedically, that Janice could comfortably breathe again. She glanced down to the center floor boards just long enough to check the integrity of the awakening configuration that she'd rather haphazardly managed to paint with the blood from her pulsing right hand. It was a miracle it had worked. "You just stay right there," she coaxed, wiping her hand on her pant leg and offering a mock-pat to the air above the symbols.

Saturday, September 28, 6:30 p.m.

At the end of the day, Tyrone considered himself an old Crescent City beat cop. A peacekeeper. Sure, he had been given the same talks as a thousand other operatives about being a soldier, reality's first and last line of defense, a bulwark against the tide, a light in the darkness, etc. but Tyrone had never served in the Army like his father and was never comfortable thinking of himself in such terms, and all that *light in the darkness* type rhetoric just struck him as too grandiose for a guy who liked his meals simple and his coffee black.

He understood the purpose of that kind of talk, of course — it was his job to understand its application better than most — and there was a certain demonstrable value in buying in, but in Tyrone's mind he was a guy with a patrol route who did his best to keep it safe for honest people, regardless of the suit he wore or the toys he got to use. He told himself this sort of thing a lot when he was out doing his job.

In fact, in but a few short hours he would be telling himself just this sort of thing as he stood over the bleeding, rain-soaked body of a reality deviant and squeezed the trigger.

For now, Agent Tyrone leaned forward in his seat and lowered his sunglasses. "What exactly are we looking at, ma'am?"

The senior operative, an impressively wrinkled, almost gaunt old woman, clicked a button on her remote, and the projector image switched to a different angle of the massive sinkhole which, earlier, had

appeared in the Bronx. In the background, amidst a cloud of dust and debris, laid the flipped, smoldering remains of the New York agents' SUV.

She gestured toward the footage as she spoke, "New York City. Aftermath of vulgar reality deviant activity two days ago. Reports have the catalyst linked to a series of complex hemoglobin patterns covering the intersection of Walton Avenue and East Clarke Place. Someone knew our route and sprung a trap. Explosion and subsequent cave-in damaged every one of our vehicles on scene. We're down a HIT Mark and there're three agents in intensive care. The Package is believed to be in the hands of the assailant."

Tyrone's new partner, chiefly known as "Kid" amongst her elder agents, chimed in. "Sleeper casualties, ma'am?"

Tyrone's new partner was not nearly so jaded as him, nor could she imagine ever being so. It was only a short time ago that she had officially become a field operative and, for all of her training, she was as in awe of the reality of the world as she was mortified by the threats to its very fabric that seemed to lurk around every corner. Though she knew better than to speak of it publicly, she often wondered about her old friends up north in Cape May, back home in the old life. What could they possibly be doing? Going to college? Working in their father's businesses? Raising babies? Had any of them even left town? None of them had any idea what was really out there or how much danger they were all in. Or how small they really were. Not like she did. They couldn't possibly sleep otherwise.

The senior operative continued, "One in hospital for lacerations from a blown out window. No fatalities. Multiple damaged vehicles. Sound went out four blocks. Attributing it to a ruptured gas line. Narrative is already in play in the news. Our immediate concern is the missing Package."

She clicked another button and a still image of a large metal case appeared, followed by an image of the SUV. "Vehicle One was our carrier. It went airborne on impact. Testimony has The Package missing within a thirty second window after the vehicle flipped."

Agent Tyrone stroked his chin. It was rough and stubble-laden. He had hardly had the chance to sleep over the past twenty-four hours, let alone shave. He took another swig of coffee and spoke up again. "Says here our boys don't remember anyone on-scene, and all the security footage from the

intersection and due south is corrupted. Possible reprisal from the Hermetics up in Fargo?"

The senior operative turned to him. "Not ruling it out. M.O. matches a few known deviants, but we're still cross-referencing the Digital Web chatter about The Package with the hemoglobin samples. Hopefully the lab'll get something out of the HIT Mark, but all the footage is too scrambled so far."

Tyrone's new partner looked up from the dossier. "So wait, if we've got a transport on the run that's scrambling security cameras...are we looking at a trail of scrambled security cameras?"

The senior operative seemed visibly impressed. She clicked again, and the projector shifted to a map of the eastern United States marked by scattered dots trending south. "Quite possibly. That's why we're alerting you, Louisiana. It's not a solid trail, but there's a statistically significant trend of both deviant energy and corresponding security failures that matches the timetable following the attack."

Tyrone spoke up again, doing his best to hide the exhaustion in his voice. "I'll start going through our communications records. See who's lit up since the incident. Far as The Package, I've got the specs on the casing, but what about its contents? What is this thing?"

The senior operative continued to look at the projector. "Need-to-know, Louisiana. Your concern is that the last potential uptick was near your neck of the woods. Priority is retrieval. You've got the code for the tracker in the housing, but it's gone dark, so I need eyes and ears open. Eyewitness reports, suspicious chatter or transactions, Digital Web activity, anything that leads us to The Package."

At that, she reached into her breast pocket and proceeded to, without ceremony, light up an abnormally long cigarette before continuing. "Its return is top priority. You are to consider it a potential Upsilon-level hazard and handle it as such. Dossiers will be updated as soon as the lab boys finish their analyses. Any further questions?" She filled the following moments of silence with a long drag. "Good. Get it done."

Saturday, September 28, 7:05 p.m.

As Janice peered with bloodshot eyes out her windshield toward another sign for New Orleans, she felt a vibration in her pocket. *That had better be them*, she thought. She wiped her hand on her pant leg one more time for good measure and reached for her phone with her fingertips.

"It's about goddamn time!" she yelled. "Line secure? Yeah. Coming into Louisiana. You on schedule?" She took a breath and did her best to sound calm, suddenly becoming very aware of everything that had happened over the past day. "Yeah, I'm good. Caught up to The Package just where you said it would b— shit. Really? I'm not on film, am I? ...Yeeeah. Things got a bit crazy, but everything's okay." She felt the urge to twitch as she said this and checked her rearview mirror, relieved when there was no sign of the last paradox spirit or anyone else.

She continued, "Nah. Been headed straight through the big cities. They'll only see enough not to drive through me. 'Sides, it's faster. Sooner you get this, sooner you can help me use it, right?"

She tilted her head to the left and took a hard turn, speeding past two cops who never even seemed to notice. "Few hours, depending. Gas is an issue, so I could really use — do what?" Janice blinked and glanced over the back of her console toward her ill-gotten mystery box nestled against the rear doors and beneath some empty chip bags. "Uh, yeah. The box's safe. But listen, gas is low, can you get me some mo—"

Before she could finish, Janice heard a series of thuds and thumps echo from the back of her van, followed by the sight of her bandage roll tumbling out from under the seat. Thank God, she thought to herself, her eyes shifting to the wads of blood-drenched napkins on the console.

"One second." Janice tucked the phone between her shoulder and ear and reached down for the rolling bandages, nearly capturing them before hearing the scraping sound of the large premium box as it came sliding to the front of the cab at high speed. It bounced directly into the half-coagulated blood configuration she'd used to awaken the spirit of The Royal We.

"Fuck," she caught herself saying aloud. She could already see the smudge trail and feel the vehicle starting to slow.

As she looked up toward the windshield, she saw a familiar diminutive sight perched on all fours atop the hood in the center of a broken rune, grinning maliciously with a mouth full of fire.

"Hey, uh..." she whispered, "Lemme call you back."

Saturday, September 28, 8:15 p.m.

Tyrone placed a fresh cup of coffee in front of his partner. "Good news. The lab boys salvaged

some footage from the HIT Mark's head. It ain't pristine, but we've got a blue Ford Econoline leaving the scene with a partial plate. I'm running it and pulling the tire tread analysis."

She nodded without looking up from the data map on her phone. "That's great, sir."

Tyrone's smile wilted at his partner's distracted response "Somethin' on your mind, Kid?"

She nodded. There was a notable confusion in her voice. "What are these dots here?"

Tyrone squinted and leaned over. "Extra dimensional energy spikes. Why?"

She looked nervous. "Well, I mean, it seems like a lot here."

Tyrone took another sip of his coffee. "Nah. They're within standard measures, Kid. It's the whole damn coast. Worry about that security cam trail and leave this kinda stuff to the Void Engineers."

She shook her head, tracing a finger along the dots. "But look at the time stamps. Doesn't it look like some of these line up with the security cam trail? Like it's following them?"

Tyrone shot her a quizzical look. "Heh. What, you think there's an EDE following our target? Kid, I know you're smart, but we're not even sure if these camera blackouts are a pattern yet, and you want to correlate them with Extra Dimensional Entity trails? You're reaching pretty far."

He noticed her trying to hide the anger in her eyes as she nodded reluctantly, and almost instantly he regretted the condescension in his tone. The Kid may have been green, but she was damn-near an analytics prodigy.

Tyrone drew out his next swig while he came to a decision. "Okay, Kid, it's not like we've got much to work with. Let's say I make a call. Exactly *what* do I say is tailing The Package?"

Saturday, September 28, 9:05 p.m.

The djinni sighed as he continued to repack their belongings for what seemed like the dozenth time.

"Your mentor would not approve, you know."

Shalms mused with a smile, clearly curious for a reaction from his master. "Has he not said time and again that a Taftani should focus on more..." he paused long enough to throw another bag over to the doorway, "practical craft?"

Damurah, perspiring and hunched in front of his canvas in an increasingly uncomfortable looking position, offered no immediate recognition of the

looming djinni's obvious needling. The air within their latest motel was increasingly hot, soupy, and unpleasant compared to their apartment, and it left the already hot-natured Taftani's band-aids hanging loose while his paint-stained shalwar kameez was soaked with sweat and clinging to his thin frame from top to bottom.

He's still neglecting to eat, Shalms noted silently to himself with some visible concern. When it came to his master, he could never be sure whether he was witnessing a purposeful ritual fast or neglect born of single-mindedness and obsession.

After applying a few more strokes of white with a deliberate, but only somewhat spiteful slowness, Damurah bit the tip of his brush handle with his back teeth and nodded in appreciation. "More red," he whispered almost inaudibly to himself, the only listener he currently valued, before reaching for the rest of his paints.

It wasn't until he had finally cleaned his brush and set back to work, secure that his message had been sent, — and perhaps willfully oblivious to the djinni's fluctuating expressions throughout — that he offered a response. "If he truly believes that a painting is any less capable of bringing understanding than a song or a poem, then tradition has blinded him to Truth."

Shalms snapped back into character and feigned shock with an exaggerated craning of his neck so as to better peer over his master's shoulder at the nascent working of crimsons, oranges, and pinks. "But *this* is a cultural tradition of yours, is it not? Can you be so sure that *you* are not the one who is blind?"

In response, Damurah leaned farther into the canvas as if trying to stare his creation down or perhaps probing it for answers to an inaudible question. He held this position for several arduous seconds, nearly touching it with his nose and contorting his spine forward in a way that gave even Shalms pause before flicking the bottom edge of his several-day mustache with his tongue and suddenly springing back into a more comfortable posture. "Go as far into the world or thread yourself as deep into the tapestry as you like, my friend, you will never find expression more true than Sindhi art."

"Oh?" The ancient djinni made no effort to hide his anticipation. He relished dances of all sorts, practical or not.

"It is as true as your binding to me," Damurah continued. His tone was quite deliberate, if not a little venomous on that line, before settling back into

his flat, preoccupied cadence. "And it ultimately conveys my will. What else matters?"

Shalms nodded with a raised eyebrow as the painting's warm, cascading sunset continued to take shape against the gold-drenched figure below. "And you're certain this art gives your spirit strength and not just nostalgia for home?" he quipped with faux curiosity and his own slightly more playful venom, "I recall the seyal dabroti in Hala is particularly delicious."

Damurah's answer was stoic, but immediate this time; he even paused from cleaning his brush. "You live in the handle of my knife, devil. Answer yourself."

Shalms glared at him with pursed lips as his thoughts turned to the bejeweled vessel he now called home, and for a moment the room began to grow ever-so-slightly-warmer until the djinni settled into a dry, throaty chuckle. "Are you truly so arrogant as to think yourself wiser than both your esteemed mentor and the entire history of your Taftani lineage, Master?"

"Yes," Damurah replied matter-of-factly while searching for the perfect shade of brown to complete the likeness' eyes. The resemblance to this Janice woman was coming together, and, with every refinement, his will continued to build the bridge across which Shalms would carry him to her. Damurah would offer no more words until then. They would be traveling again soon, and he had no time to waste on impractical conversations.

Saturday, September 28, 9:30 p.m.

Agent Tyrone was visibly excited as he peered over his sunglasses and nodded to his partner from the driver's seat. "Sighting's confirmed. The blood and van plates're a match, Kid. Belongs to a suspected deviant terrorist — Janice Milliano. And our VE says we've got a fifty-four percent likelihood of an EDE tail on the same route. Resonance signature matches an incident at an O'Tolleys in Jersey." He waited for a moment before whispering appreciatively, "Good hunch, Kid." Even when speaking softly, Tyrone's distinctive baritone had a tendency to boom and fill whatever room he was in, to say nothing of an old Ford with decent acoustics.

"Intel's got the target going southwest down thirty-two thirty-five in Cut Off, most likely headed toward Port Fourchon." He took one last swig of lukewarm coffee before putting the car in gear. "I'll get on the horn with the VE's and coordinate. You

verify that we've got enlightened citizenry at the docks, but call our blues down in the speed trap first; let's buy ourselves time."

The young woman nodded with familiarity. She'd had some personal experience with the "trap" in question on her first trip to Louisiana prior to her Enlightenment.

Tyrone checked his mirrors and continued, "I want sleepers on scene for the reality deviant. This Milliano kid got out of NY loud, so let's keep her quiet. We keep this contained. Calm and easy."

His partner flicked her cigarette out the window and reached for her phone. She hoped Tyrone's mission statement of "Calm and easy" would prove prophetic. No, accurate — she had to get the nomenclature right, she reminded herself — but what little she was privy to about this Package they were chasing had her spooked. She tried to push it out of her mind and set about making the calls.

"You think it's real, boss?" she finally asked after a few miles of quietly mulling it over and fidgeting with an unlit cigarette. "The rumors about The Package? I've heard some deviant chatter..."

Tyrone let a deliberate silence fill the car for several seconds, which he knew would feel much longer to his nascent partner. When the next traffic light turned green, he eyed her from behind his shades and offered a cool response, "It doesn't matter what's real, Kid."

"It matters what's true," she recited. She may have been young, but she knew when the training was being used on her. Not that that made it ineffective. "And that's up to us."

Tyrone smiled. "Bingo. Let's go."

Saturday, September 28, 9:47 p.m.

"Fuck!" As the flash of red and blue police lights filled her rear view, Janice frustratedly hammered her good hand against the top of the steering wheel. She was already dehydrated and sleep deprived, not to mention she now had a throbbing burn mark running down the left side of her pallid face and neck as a result of her unwanted passenger, so it hadn't taken much for her to talk herself out of expending any more blood for concealment rituals when The Royal We's empty gas tank had necessitated a visit to the plasma center back in Raceland.

She recalled the sudden drop off from 65 to 50 mph that she had neglected to obey, and dejectedly pulled her sputtering van over onto the shoulder of the road. Janice fumbled around in her glove box

filled with empty packs of Circinus Menthol 100s on top of crumpled pages of Latin script and wadded napkins scrawled with runic configurations until finally retrieving her driver's license from under the pile. She regarded her years-old smiling photo with a scowl which only deepened upon her raising up and catching sight of the friendly, bird-emblazoned city limits sign in the distance which read, Golden Meadow Welcomes You.

Janice grumbled and quickly flipped down her mirror to practice pouting and to tousle her hair. Giving cops memory loss had proven effective what few times she'd done it, but she really didn't want to test her luck anymore today. Hopefully she could just hit him with the 'young and sad' routine. It was technically true, at least.

Sunday, September 29, 1:45 a.m.

"Boss," the Kid tried to choose her words carefully, "between us, we've really got to stick to that line here? In the field? After what just happened? There was nothing *left*."

Tyrone shook his head, making an abrupt turn before answering, "Kid, unless you wanna get sent to Lex-Ed — or worse — better get your terms straight and keep 'em current ASAP. Trust me; it's only trouble for you if you don't."

As the sound of screeching tires filled her ears following Tyrone's sudden change in direction, The Kid scrambled for the overhead grab handle. She looked over her shoulder toward the road sign Tyrone had been trying to read as it disappeared from view and sighed inaudibly. This was still fairly new to her, and it hadn't exactly been the sort of evening that held one's hand. She made sure that Tyrone was focused on the road and stole another glance toward the box in the back seat.

Tyrone hazily recalled his first trip to Lexicon Re-Education years earlier for deviant nomenclature following a comment about some fellow agent's resemblance to a vampire for wearing shades at night. He held in a smirk. The top brass had changed between then and now, but proper vernacular was still a sticking point in most places. Best the Kid had that drilled in early, he told himself.

The LTD's left tire caught the edge of a pothole, snapping Tyrone out of his memory. He reflexively moved to adjust his sunglasses, his bruised forehead creasing into previously undiscovered lines when he found the eyewear uncharacteristically absent. He quietly struggled to remember the events of the past

half-hour and soberly imagined his glasses shattered back on the side of the highway alongside the shards of exploded street lights. He made note of the time on the radio, as it now looked considerably brighter than usual. 1:50 a.m.

Granted, it was far too late for sunglasses under normal circumstances, but the practical benefits of his particular shades aside, he wasn't one to be caught out of uniform. Without looking, Tyrone adjusted his tie with one hand, largely to confirm its presence. There it was. Single windsor. Thank God.

The two continued in silence for several miles. There was traffic again, and Tyrone seemed to be wincing and swerving slightly almost every time another set of lights would dart across his face.

"Hey, Kid." Tyrone was still fixated on the highway but was fumbling around near his hip with his right hand.

The Kid, who had been stealing glances at a particular car behind them, shifted uncomfortably, not that anyone was looking at her to notice. "What are you doing?"

Tyrone eyed that same vehicle through his mirror. His expression grew increasingly worried, and his voice was softer than usual, "What happened to my gun?"

Saturday, September 28, 11:20 p.m.

After nearly an hour stuck on the roadside, Janice, soaked with rain and loaded down with armfuls of precariously balanced, overstuffed bags and one primium box, came tumbling in through the motel door. She let out a sigh that was half-exasperation and half-relief as she let her drenched belongings collapse onto the floor with a noticeable THUD before permitting herself to do the same on her bed.

Janice grimaced on impact as a surge of pain shot through her face. "Little fucker..." she muttered carefully, lightly dabbing at her cheek with the tip of her middle finger. After applying yet another round of aloe vera, she then spent the next several minutes navigating the setup for the motel Wi-Fi while she waited with growing impatience for a call from her people.

Upon success, she opted to reward herself with a cigarette, and was able to locate her lighter in only three pats this time. Sure, the room was technically non-smoking, but she'd had a shit day, and that was the kind of rigid, inside-the-box sleeper thinking that she'd been fighting for years now.

Any room can be a smoking room, if only you believe, she rationalized with a right-sided smirk while continuing to flick her thumb fruitlessly across the striker to no avail. Janice moaned defeatedly, "Fuuuuck..."

She glanced around her room and muttered further to herself, though this time in something far more ancient than her native language, and with one last strike of the wheel, her lighter gifted her a small jet of flame — just enough for her oft-rationalized 'cigarette of success'.

Several menthol successes later, Janice's phone rang. She answered with a 100 still in her lips while she fumbled with more bandages. "Hey. Just now hit the marina. Yeah. Got held up. Had to ju-ju a cop." She twitched at the sudden nervous yelling on the other end and pulled the phone away. "I know, god-dammit. That's why I need you guys here quick." She took another drag. "Mmhmm. At the motel. Yeah. One sec." She paused to poke her head out the door and verify the room number.

"Yeah. That's right." She squinted as she spied multiple figures exiting vehicles out front. "I see you guys."

"Wait. Do what?" Janice felt her stomach turn at the reply. "Raceland? Then who's...Fuck!" Janice's eyes went wide like the headlights of her van. She never even processed her cigarette falling to the ground. Immediately, she shut the door and stared dumbfounded at the primium box for several seconds as the gravity of the situation set in. Her next words were breathless and urgent, "Compromised. Meet at the fallback spot."

Throwing down her phone and racing over to her bags, she began to pull out everything she could think of; bags of ashes, rune sketches, angelic translations, scrawled formulae, and finally her ritual knife. Janice bit her tongue as she drew the blade hard across her palm.

Roughly two minutes later, gasping and bleeding, Janice finished her slapdash scrawling and shut herself in the bathroom. As she fought unconsciousness and scrambled to put something else together, the lights began to flicker. Placing the box in the tub, she looked up and caught a glimpse of her disheveled face in the mirror, only to gaze in horror as it slowly began to contort and ripple like water.

Within seconds her reflection was replaced with the visage of a bearded man in a turban who proceeded to unceremoniously step through the glass, over her sink, and into the room with her. The man

was dark-skinned, covered in small, glowing cuts, and both his clothes and his hair flowed as if he were swimming underwater. He took a moment to look around before settling his gaze first on her, and then, finally, the box.

Damurah moved to speak, but his voice was interrupted by the sound of a door being kicked in, followed by several footsteps. The lights flickered and the Taftani nodded to an empty corner, reaching for the bejeweled knife on his hip.

Just beyond the bathroom door, Agent Tyrone peered down the barrel of his gun at the bloody patterns haphazardly smeared on the walls. He motioned to his partner and their fellow agents who began to take their positions.

Running her bleeding hand along the tub, Janice held in a scream and reached for the lighter in her pocket. She swallowed hard and muttered something in Enochian. The flickering lights throughout the motel began to hum violently, and the crude runes started to sizzle and smoke.

In the final moment of stillness, Tyrone saw his partner, flanked by unenlightened personnel, prayerfully mouthing the words, "Calm and easy."

Sunday, September 29, 2:10 p.m.

"What are you talking about?" The Kid asked with some concern.

"It's gone." Tyrone's voice was deflated. "And we're being followed. Red Pontiac. Two lengths back."

The Kid nodded. "I see it. You sure?"

"Yeah. Past few miles. Not ours. Could be deviant, but I've got no shades to check. Yours working?"

She shook her head, "Nah. Fried in the blast, seems like. Shit."

Tyrone clenched both hands on the wheel "...No problem. Get The Package into your lap for me. Don't want it sliding around in case I need to get fancy."

The Kid slowly turned around in her seat and reached for the box. Unable to get a grip on it from her current position, she unfastened her seatbelt and leaned farther into the back until she could get a grip. As she started to pull the box toward her, there was a sudden tap on the back window. She looked up to see a small, smoldering humanoid creature, waving at her and smiling sadistically.

"FUCK!" she screamed, and let the box drop to the floor. Upon impact, the spirit offered her a wink and vanished in a puff of smoke.

Tyrone jumped as he heard the noises, and he instantly spun around in his seat to check on her. "Kid, are you —" he stopped mid-sentence and stared in disbelief; his partner was nowhere to be found, but there, in the seat next to him, staring in equally bloody and bruised disbelief, was Janice Milliano.

Tyrone felt his heart pounding in his chest. His legs tingled, and a sudden nausea came upon him. It was only then that the veil started to lift. He saw flashes of the chaos at the motel. The smoke. The flames. The Void Engineers getting thrown around by that thing. He remembered the lights starting to explode and his partner, covered in glass, shooting at the man with the knife while those little creatures cackled and started to bring down the roof.

He remembered the sleepers screaming and the explosions ripping through the walls. And he recalled being dazed, bruised and burned, stepping over the bodies, and chasing The Package — chasing her — out of the crumbling inferno. He remembered standing over her and squeezing the trigger of his gun. And he remembered her throwing something in his eyes and commanding, "Wait."

"Keep," Janice gasped for air and steadied the gun in her hand, "driving."

Tyrone silently obliged.

The next few minutes were filled with little other than road noise as the two continued down the highway, alternately eyeing one another and the car following behind.

"Here," Janice ordered, motioning for Tyrone to turn.

Tyrone complied, quietly wondering where the hell they were. This wasn't the road back to New Orleans. And then it dawned on him.

Their conversation came flooding back: Brake. Here. Slow down. Left. Right. She had been giving him embedded instructions. He glanced over to her. She was good. Sure, she looked half-dead, burned, and sickly pale. But then again, he reasoned, he probably did, too.

He turned his face back to the road and spoke. "Is my partner still alive?"

Janice blinked and tightened her grip on the gun. "D-do what?"

Tyrone's voice was low and wistful. "Woman. Suit. Around your age. You tried to throw a fireball at her."

She took a long breath before answering, doing her best to hide the look of surprise on her face. "I don't know. It was such a mess." As Tyrone looked at her, Janice found that she had to force herself to keep eye contact. "Figured emergency services were probably your people, so I didn't wait around. I'm sorry."

Tyrone forced an exhausted smile and turned back to the road. "Well, at least you're sorry."

The silence over the next minute made Janice miss the noise of the paradox spirits. "So, what now?" she asked abruptly.

Tyrone nonchalantly flipped on his left turn signal and changed lanes. His demeanor was calm, but his voice sounded utterly broken. "You tell me. I'm guessing that's your friends back there. You leading me somewhere safe so you can kill me and take The Package?"

Janice stole a glance toward the mirror. "That's the plan. Getting that box to my friends is the only way I get my life back. But honestly?" She caught herself letting out a small, exhausted laugh, "I don't even know if that's them or not."

Tyrone felt a pain in his ribs as he held in a laugh of his own. "Yeah, guess this thing is kinda popular lately."

"Yeah..." Janice trailed off.

After another long thirty seconds, the Pontiac edged closer, and Janice caught Tyrone eyeing her. "You're going to try something, aren't you?"

Tyrone shrugged. "Don't really have a lot of options."

She tightened her finger against the trigger and did her best to steady her quivering, half-numb arm. "You really shouldn't. I promise I'll get the shot off first. Your reaction time isn't shit right now." She took a deep breath. "And I tend to get pretty lucky."

Tyrone tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "I don't." He trailed off for a moment, squinting at the bright headlights of a large diesel on the other side of the road. "It's why I can't afford to unbuckle."

Janice's eyes went wide with realization as Tyrone cut the wheel hard to the right, directly into the path of the oncoming semi. The sound of the gunshot was only slightly louder than the truck's blaring horn.

EPILOGUE

October 1, 12:33 p.m.

Damurah awoke feeling as though his body was on fire. He gasped in confusion through singed lungs and was answered with shooting pain all over his skin and on both sides of his ribcage. Covered in bandages and unable to sit up, he struggled to take in his surroundings.

The air around him smelled of burnt hair and some sort of ointment. His left eye was swollen completely shut, but he was able to make out the blurred, milky outline of an overhead ceiling fan and hear its steady hum. He took another painful breath and noticed the faint smell of chai wafting in from somewhere. "Shalms?" he coughed.

"Ah!" Shalms' voice replied. "You're awake, Master! Try not to move!"

Damurah heard not a single footstep, but within moments he was greeted with the familiar sight of his djinni companion's face looking down on him. "Wh-where..." he sputtered weakly.

"The apartment, Master. You've been asleep for some time."

"What... what hap..." Damurah broke into a series of painful coughs.

"There was a backlash, Master," Shalms forced a reassuring smile. "I did the best I could to mitigate it, but —"

Damurah interrupted with a gravelly wheeze. "Al-Eajib? D-did you follow?"

"Only once you were secured, Master. There was a massive wreck. A dozen car pile up." Shalms hesitated, and his bedside smile fell into a frown. "There was no sign of it. I am sorry."

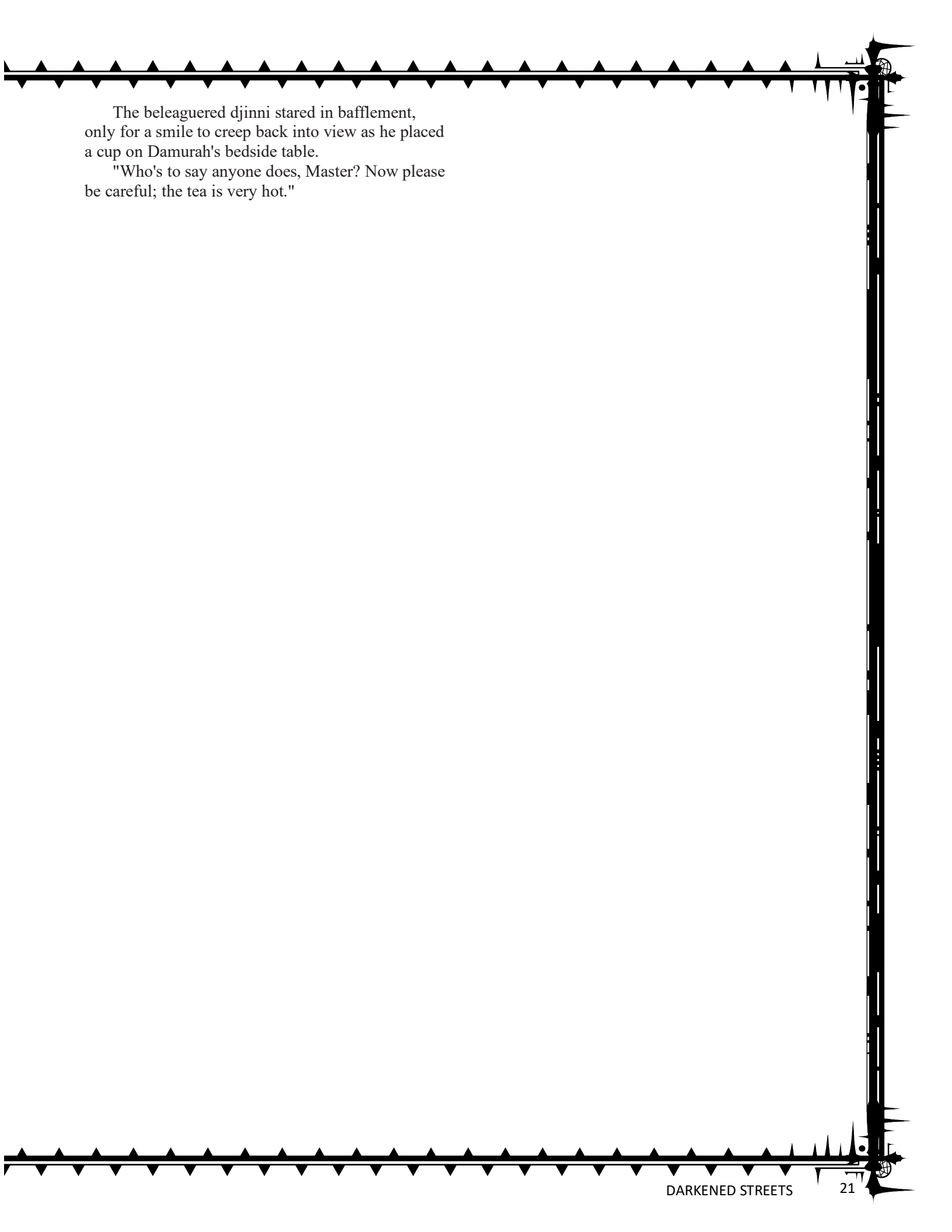
The Taftani fell silent.

"Master?"

Damurah's mind was ablaze, racing and grappling with possibilities and their implications. Once again, Al-Eajib was lost to him, and he had nothing to show for it but a host of unknowns.

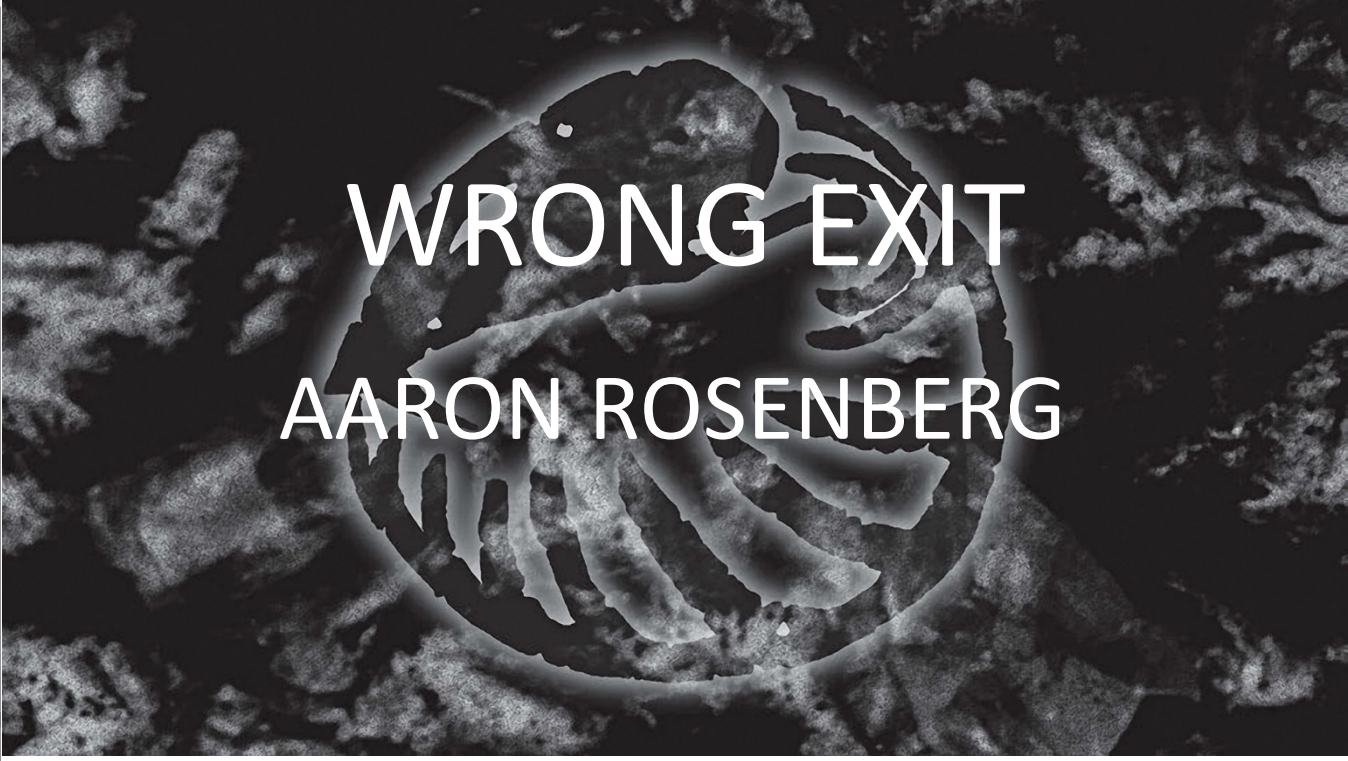
Who had robbed him of his prize? The Technocracy? The woman? Or any one of the Traditionalists they'd all used to lead them to this point? Perhaps even a sleeper? As confusion mixed with anger, irony, and exhaustion, the Taftani could find only one answer.

He laughed. "Who, Shalms?" he whispered in between painful chortles, "Who could have a stronger will than me to ever hold on to such a thing?"



The beleaguered djinni stared in bafflement,
only for a smile to creep back into view as he placed
a cup on Damurah's bedside table.

"Who's to say anyone does, Master? Now please
be careful; the tea is very hot."



WRONG EXIT

AARON ROSENBERG

I walk into the truck-stop diner, sniff at the biggest guy there, and say, "Eighteen to two and you'd still never keep up."

The big man glares down at me—taking in the worn riding leathers, the midnight-blue hair falling almost to one eye, the tattoo radiating round the other. Then he laughs, steps out from behind the counter, and wraps me in a hug that could swallow an industrial freezer whole. Smells like butter, flour, sugar, coffee, and bacon grease. "Griff, how the hell are you?"

"Good, Puff, how 'bout you?" I pound him on the back, best I can with my air cut off, and he lets up enough for me to breathe again. Whew!

One of the diners, stocky type all ginger bristles and flannel, scents of cigarettes and Mountain Dew lingering despite the grits and coffee he's got now, glares at me from under his cap. Guess he doesn't like the nickname. But Puff doesn't mind, he laughs, showing a maw you could shove a whole turkey in. Did the same first time I called him that, hasn't changed any.

"What brings you out this way?" he asks instead, moving back behind the counter while tugging a rag from his apron and wiping the counter as he talks. Same as always, can't be idle long. Me, I'm more fits and spurts—total stillness, then sudden motion. Just

one of the ways we differ, lot more than we match, but we still get along, Gaia knows why.

I nod, acknowledging the subtle dig. It's true, I don't venture out of the city much. I know my place and it's there, surrounded by glass and steel and brick and stone. Highway's too open for me, no place to perch, no place to hide. Still, Flight likes it when I open her up, and I've owed Puff a visit for a long time. Just took a good reason to get me out here.

"Looking for a guy," I explain. "Thought maybe you could help. Average height, maybe six feet," I hold a hand up to my nose, "skinny, scruff beard, wears an old jean jacket and a bright red cap. Know him?"

"He drive a rig?" the big man asks, though he already knows the answer to that, else why'd I be here? "Doesn't sound familiar," he admits, frowning. "Anybody here seen him?" That last is to the room, voice raised, and heads pop up. Listening already, course, but now they can own up to it.

Bristles scowls. "Even if we did, why should we tell him?" he asks, poking his spoon toward me. "He's not one of us, and we don't rat on our own."

Statement's got layers, and I step over, then squat to eye level. "Take a whiff, pard," I tell him, low. "We're alike more'n you think."

He does, and squinty eyes go wide as my scent hits. "Got it now," I say, clapping him on the back. "But trust me, this guy? Definitely not our kind."

Scowl's back, but not aimed at me this time. "Yeah, I've seen a guy matches that," he admits slowly. "Pass him at a stop every now and then." The glance he shoots Puff looks almost guilty, like he feels bad visiting other truck stops. But that's the long-haul game, not like you can just hold off on coffee and a piss break til you're near home.

"Got a name, license plate, anything I can use to find him?" I ask. Grasping at straws, maybe, but it's all I've got right now.

Bristles starts to shake his head, then stops. "His hat," he says slowly, gaze somewhere else. "It's from a bar. I see the sign for it every time I head west. The Devil's Own, off Exit 13."

"Perfect." I give him a nod. "Thanks." Then, to Puff, "Catch you on the way back."

He grins at me and hands me a brown paper bag I didn't see him get. I can already smell the fresh pastry dough and cinnamon and icing inside. "For the road," he tells me, and I dip my head. Bearclaw earned his name, right enough, and his pastries are like Gaia Herself came down and blessed them. Cindy's got a to-go cup of coffee to hand off, too, and I leave there loaded for bear, or least by one.

This day's already looking up.

Not my normal beat, for sure. Not how I do things, either. Patrol the city, right enough, put out fires here 'n there, foil Wyrms whenever I get the chance, help people where I can. Chasing some guy outside city limits? That ain't me.

This guy, though, he rubbed the wrong way. Got my hackles up on first sight. Down by the underpass, not the nicest place, lots of people there with nowhere else to go. I swing by time to time, drop off some food, a few blankets. Wish I could do more. Spotted him last night, as he stuck out like a sore thumb. Too well-dressed—even with his worn clothes—too well fed, even his wiry frame. And way too nervous. Folks there, they're run down, beat—lots of despair but no energy left for fear. Fear's for those that got something left to lose. This guy, he was sweating up a storm, smelled of cheap pizza and cheaper beer, some subpar pot. Nothing stronger, though—not an addict. In his right mind, meant he was there with a purpose.

But any purpose besides helping those folks was bad news.

"Hey!" I called, pulling Flight up alongside the chain-links separating us. "Help you with something?"

Dude took off like a rabbit. Like waving a flag saying, "I'm up to no good." His scent hit me as he fled, close enough now to get undertones, like after-shave, deodorant, breath mints—and something a whole lot more wrong, a sourness that had nothing to do with body odor.

Taint.

Not strong enough to be Wyrms himself, but contact, and plenty of it. Pentex employs loads that aren't actually corrupted, lots of 'em have no idea what their bosses get up to. Others know, even go in for it.

I had a feeling he was one of the latter.

Took off after him, course, but by the time I circled around he was gone. Only caught sight of his rig thundering off, too far to read the plate. Gave chase but he hit the onramp and was out of there. No sign of him in town since, but I just can't let go.

Bearclaw's not the closest truck stop to the city but it's not far, and it's people I know and trust. Seemed a decent place to start. Turns out I was right, and now I've got a solid lead.

The fresh pastry and coffee don't hurt none, neither.

The Devil's Own ain't my kinda place. For one, it's too far out of anything I'd even remotely call a town, let alone a city—sitting by itself just off the highway, way too much open land around it, nearest building a gas station a mile or so away, and past that a few fast food joints. Place has a huge parking lot, though. Needs it, what with all the rigs already here middle of the day.

Second thing is, it's a trucker bar. Or pretends to be. Really just means the owner went for "shabby chic" but wasn't sure what the last part meant. Place's a wide, one-story wood structure, flat tin roof overhanging an open front porch. Pair of dark glass doors for an entrance, and you step into a manmade cave, dark and low. Air's stale, not enough circulation, years of beer and cigarettes layered one over the other, mixed with old fryer grease, sweat, dirt, and metal. Windows all shuttered, only thin slivers of light sneaking through the cracks. Long bar against one side, half the stools full with customers so

slumped into habitual poses they've gotta be regulars, swinging half doors on the back to the kitchen—the light from there's about the only way to see anything—and tables scattered around the rest, mostly empty. Everyone at the bar turns to stare at me, keeps on staring when they realize I ain't one of their own.

This oughta get interesting.

"What can I get you?" the barkeep asks. Average height, doughy, red face under short dark hair, callused hands say he works hard, narrowed eyes say he don't like strangers.

"Beer," I tell him, slapping a bill on the counter. "Whatever's on tap."

He pulls something, sets it in front of me. Glass's clean, at least. Beer's so pale might as well be lemonade. That's fine, though. I didn't come here to drink.

"Maybe you can help me," I tell him, settling cautiously onto the stool. With my weight, can't be too careful. "I'm looking for a guy, think he's a regular here—leastways, he's got one of your caps. Skinny, maybe six feet, scruffy beard, dark hair? Wears a jean jacket?"

Barkeep's shaking his head before I've even finished. "Doesn't sound familiar," he claims, but I can hear his heartbeat race and smell his sweat. Like I didn't know he was lying. "Glad to hear he's representing us, though. Maybe somebody gave him the hat as a gift." He nods toward a rack holding several more. "Only twenty bucks and you can walk away with one, too."

"Thanks, but I'll pass. Red's not my color." I sip at the beer. "Too bad, though. He's got some money coming to him, I promised I'd track him down." I squint down at him. "Sure you don't know him?"

I hear the stools scrape as they're pushed back, the floorboards creak as boots hit the ground. Swivel to take in the three guys glaring at me, two of 'em clutching beer bottles by the neck, the third armed with just fists and drunken courage. I raise my hands slowly. "Not looking for any trouble here," I warn. "Just asking after someone is all."

Another scrape to the side and I twist about, but too slow. Just means I see the butt of the shotgun right before the barkeep slams it into my head. Impact knocks me off the stool. His backup singers are on me before I hit the ground, pummeling me with those bottles. Then the drunk one rears back, kicks me in the face with a steel-toed boot. The others join in. Normally, four yahoos wouldn't be much of a threat but I left my guns back on Flight—to avoid

problems—and these guys hit me so fast and frequent I can't catch breath.

Next thing I know, barkeep's standing over me, shotgun raised like a club. He does his best Sammy Sosa, my head for the ball and him swinging for the bleachers, and I'm down for the count. Last thing I hear is him saying, "Sammy, go open up the back room."

That can't be good.

Good news—"back room" meant "office," not "freezer." 'Cause of the two, I know where I'd rather wake up.

When I do come to, I'm on the floor, bound to a radiator by heavy-duty chains wrapped around my chest. Guess they figured ropes wouldn't do the trick. Good call.

I'm alone, not counting the smells of bourbon and cheap cigars and old sex. Heavy wood desk just past my feet, scarred but still sturdy, matching desk chair behind it, old-school with a high slatted back and real metal wheels. Big old leather couch against the opposite wall, sagging but functional. Filing cabinets in the far corner, door between them, back out to the hall and then the bar from the faint sounds I get. Seems the barkeep's trying to decide what to do with me now he's got me.

Probably best I don't wait to see what he decides. I doubt I'll like any of the choices.

They left me alone, must have figured I'd take a lot longer to wake up. Most people would've. That's good, 'cause this isn't something I want an audience for.

I close my eyes and concentrate. Then I shift—not up, like most. Down.

And grit my teeth to keep from screaming as flesh and bone compress into a smaller frame.

Gaia, that hurts! Always does, why I don't do it much. Still, handy when you need to squeeze through a tight spot—or slip some chains.

I feel them slide down—and think to grab just before they can clank. Definitely don't need company right now! Lift them over my head and duck out of the way, draping them back down again. Right.

Standing takes a second—I'm dizzy from the change, and the shift in perspective. Everything always seems so damn tall when I do this! Doesn't help I'm swimming in my leathers, jacket hanging on me

like a little kid playing dress-up in Daddy's clothes, feet sliding in my boots. But at least I'm free.

Now to get out of here. Might be back later—score to settle—but for now best to clear out, rethink. No other door but the one, and that just leads to trouble, but there's windows along the back wall covered in shades instead of shutters. I ease one open quiet as I can, punch out the screen, and squeeze through. Good thing I haven't shifted back yet, else I'd never fit. Then, for good measure, I slide the window shut again. Let them figure that one out. Regular leather Houdini, I am.

I shift back up at last and try not to sigh in relief. Much better! Main reason, though, was 'cause sneaking away with my boots knocking and my pants falling down would've been too big a risk. 'Sides, they catch up to me again, better I'm dressed for a fight.

Good news is, they don't. Better news, they didn't find Flight, tucked away atop an empty rig's back tires, just behind the cab. I lift her down, retrieve pistols from my saddlebags, and then slide in the key and start her up.

Temptation's real strong to roar back in there, bust open those doors and then a few heads til I get the answers I need. I'm on unfamiliar turf, though, and I don't want to put my foot into something I shouldn't. So, after a second, I rev the engine, point Flight toward the exit, and hit the road.

I'll be back, though.

Eleonora of the Keys is an old friend. Maybe overstating it—an old acquaintance. We get along fine, long as we don't spend too much time together. Still, when I need to know what the computers say, she's my go-to.

I find her in the usual spot, corner of Roast Beans, oversized mug steaming just past her hand, laptop glare lighting her narrow face. Slightly glazed blue eyes flick up on my approach, smile almost deigns to brush narrow lips. "Gryphon." No real warmth but no bite either. I take it for an invite and sit opposite, chair creaking beneath me. "What can I do for you?" Slender fingers haven't stopped tapping at the keys, eyes go back to darting across the screen, but I don't mind. Just the way she is.

"Need a favor," I tell her. "Place out by Exit 13, The Devil's Own. What can you tell me about it?" I flick the upper edge of the screen with one finger,

makes her eyes dart to the point of contact. "What does the magic box say?"

"Not magic," is the reply, same as always. "Technology. Information. Data and code." But now her eyes are alight with more'n the screen's reflection. Her interest's piqued. "Think it's Pentex?"

I shrug. "One of its customers, definitely. Place itself? Not sure. Why I'm asking." I bought a coffee when I came in, and I take a sip now. Strong stuff, fresh-brewed, sharp and almost bitter. Nice. The warmth fills me, making my blood sing. That's good stuff!

No answer for a minute, but I leave her to it. Then, no warning, she starts talking.

"The Devil's Own, founded 2005, owner one Gary Paneer. Sold 2014, Michael Paneer, relationship, nephew." Family business, then. And individually owned, not a Pentex front—they tend to use shell companies, makes it harder to trace back. "No obvious Pentex connection," she confirms, eyes leaving the screen for half a second to gauge my response. "Bills paid on time, taxes show a moderate profit, mostly because they own the land." Sure, makes sense—no rent or mortgage means you don't need to make as much to cover costs. "Anything else?"

"Just one." I lean in a little. "This Michael Paneer—you got an address?"

When I leave a minute later I'm one favor down—she'll text she needs something, usually it's fetching or strong-arming or transport, saves her having to leave her precious corner—but one address richer.

Michael Paneer, here I come.

Paneer's got a house in the town nearest his bar, another ten minutes past those fast food places I saw before. Small two-story, patchy front yard, rusting fence, sagging porch—guess he's not big on home repair. Pickup out front is one I saw in the lot of the Devil's Own, big and shiny, gleaming like new. Guess I know his priorities. Front room has a light on but that goes off while I watch from down the block. No other lights, so bedroom must be in back. I wheel Flight behind a clump of bushes at a neighbor's house, then hoof it on over and circle around.

Postage-stamp yard and an old, leaning shed complete the picture. Light from the upper back window, single silhouette shifting about before it clicks off. Gotcha.

I jump the back fence without a sound. That's the easy part. Next question is, best way in—straight up or through? I can reach the window, no worries, but shattering the glass is a lot of noise, and it's quiet out here—sound'll carry. Better to go through.

There's a back door, screen and then storm door past that. Screen isn't locked, storm is but it gives when I apply pressure. Can barely make out the whine of the lock breaking.

I ease it open, take a quick sniff. Good—no pets. Floor creaks under my boots but hopefully not enough to be noticed. Shut both doors behind me—careful not to let the screen bang the frame—and then ease across the room. It's the kitchen, just smells of dust, guess Mikey eats at the bar. No sign of anyone else here, which is also good. No worry about witnesses.

Ease my way down the narrow hall to the stairs. Dark up there, and I stop to listen. I can hear his breathing. It's steady and slowing. Falling asleep. Good. The stairway's barely wide enough for me to fit, and the steps are old enough to creak, so I opt for speed over stealth, charge up it full tilt, down the up-stairs hall, into the bedroom.

He's sitting up, groggy and confused by the sudden racket, blinking, as I cover the space to the bed and crash down on him, one hand over his mouth. Just like I thought, it's the barkeep, the one who clubbed me. "Remember me?" I tell him. His wide eyes and racing pulse say yes. "Good. So tell me about the guy, the one you lied about earlier." Tries to shake his head but I've got his jaw in a vise grip. "Don't," I warn. "I ain't in the mood."

I grin at him then, letting the teeth show, and watch him pale. Skin's growing slick with sweat, odor's sour but all human.

"All I need's the name, and where to find him," I promise. "Then I'm gone. But till I get it"—I squeeze a little, feel his wince—"I stay. Understood?" He nods, best he can. "Good. I'm gonna let go now. You scream or try anything, though"—I pat his cheek, my nails pricking his skin—"it gets ugly."

I remove my hand and he gulps a little but doesn't move otherwise. First smart thing he's done all day. "Tim," he gasps after a second, voice shaky. "Tim Beck. Stops by for lunch every other Thursday, like clockwork. Likes the chili, extra crackers, a pale ale with it. Drives long hauls, coast to coast I think. That's all I know."

I frown, but his heartbeat's steady—racing, but steady. Truth.

"Fine," I tell him, getting to my feet. "Now, this is our little secret, dig? Say a word to anyone—most of all Tim—and I'll be back. Be good, never see me again. Fair?" He nods frantically.

He's still sitting there, wide awake, sweaty and nervous, when I let myself out.

It's Tuesday now. I don't know if this week's off or on for Tim Beck, but it's worth finding out, so I stake out The Devil's Own two days later. Not in the lot itself, course—I find a spot between there and the gas station, makes me just a dark speck from either but I can see well enough. 'Sides, rigs are easy to spot.

Gaia's smiling on me, 'cause noon-thirty hits and there's the rig I want, pulling in. Scrawny Tim hops down and strolls to the door like he owns the place. That's fine. I let him go—for now.

Thought about storming in and dragging him out by his hair, but not sure how many I'd face. Had a far better idea. "Control the conflict," my mentor always said. "Pick the time and place that work to your best advantage, not theirs."

Would rather get him all the way back to the city, my home turf, but can't be sure he's going that far. If he shacks up outside city limits, I might play into his hand instead. So I settled on somewhere in between.

Give him twenty minutes, then I drive over to the lot. Park on the outer edge behind Paneer's truck—he won't mind—and walk up to Tim's rig. Squat next it, just ahead of the rear tires, right beside the gas tank. Pull out my knife—could use a claw but safer to go with steel. Reach under and stab through, opening a nice V-shaped hole in the tank where you can't see. Wipe the blade on a cloth, sheath it, and straighten, then head back to Flight. Hope that's enough to do it, otherwise I'll have to go with Plan B. More fun, honestly, but more risky, too.

Another hour goes by. When Tim finally comes sauntering back out and climbs into his rig, I'm ready. He leaves a puddle behind when he pulls out, and a steady flow of droplets after. I follow him from a short ways back, far enough he won't notice, close enough to keep tabs. He's heading in the right direction, at least, so that's one in my favor. Now we see how I did with the rest.

Guess I'm running low on luck, 'cause we near Exit 3 and he's showing no sign of slowing. Damn. Plan B it is.

Enough traffic on the road that I ease around one car, then a van, and accelerate, closing the distance. Nearly level to his rig I cut across so I'm right alongside, up near the cab. From his elevation I should be out of sight—dangerous to be in a rig's blind spot, but right now I need that.

Now for the tricky part. Take my right hand off the handlebars and draw that pistol, rest it almost in my lap. Enough wind out here, and engine noise, pop shouldn't be too audible.

The thunderous roar of the tire blowing out definitely is, though.

Second I took the shot I holstered the gun and slapped my hand back on the handlebar, revving and pulling ahead and away. Good thing, too—as the tire parts a huge slab of steel-belted rubber comes whipping away, nearly takes my head off. Wouldn't that be a sad way to go! I can just make out Tim's cursing from inside. Rig's got spares, of course, but it throws him off, makes the whole truck wobble. He's gonna need to check that out, make sure nothing's broken.

Good thing we're almost up on Exit 3 now. And there's a sign saying "truck stop," like a gift from Heaven.

Tim's gotta cut across two lanes to get there, plenty of honking from angry motorists, but he makes the exit and barrels toward the Promised Land.

I'm ahead of him, and pull around to the side as he brakes and clambers down. By the time he's straightening from checking that tire, I'm almost on him.

"Yo." He turns, glaring from under that cap. "Everything okay?"

"Fine, fine." He waves me off, barely even registering. "Just a blown tire. Thanks."

"You sure? Maybe I should take a look. Cargo could've got jostled loose."

Now he does eyeball me, and I can see the recognition click in. I'm not easy to forget. Still plays it cool, just muttering, "I'm good, thanks." Hand's starting to reach behind him, though, toward his waistband.

"I wouldn't," I warn, sweeping my jacket back so he can see the pistols there. "Promise I'm faster. Besides, I just want to chat. No harm in that, right?"

He starts to answer but a sound cuts him off, the roar of a big engine. Another rig sails past, accelerating toward the exit and the highway.

Got to give Tim credit. Snap decision, he turns and bolts for the rig, throws himself at its back, latching onto the mudflap and trying to haul himself up onto the empty platform. Not something you'd expect from any but the bravest—or the most terrified.

I'm after him in a flash, though. Grab him by the back of that jean jacket, yank him back to the ground. Not gentle, neither—knocks the wind outa him, just lays there a second. Another rig comes cruising past, this one heading for the diner just behind us, and Tim takes advantage of the distraction, leaps to his feet and bolts after it. Spry little guy, I think as I turn and trudge after him. No need to hurry, he ain't going anywhere.

When I enter, he's in there babbling about the mugger and how he needs to call the cops. The owner takes one look at me, frowns, then nods to two fellas in the booth nearest the exit. They both stand, move either side of me—and scoot past to lock the door.

"Now," Bearclaw—Puff—says, "what's this all about, hm?"

"He's trying to kill me!" Tim shouts, pointing my way. "Look at him! He's got a gun, too! Call the cops!"

"That true?" Puff asks, those massive arms folding across his chest. "You trying to kill this little guy? What's he ever done to you?"

"Don't know yet," I answer. Truth, that. "But something ain't right with him. I aim to find out what." I glance over my shoulder, out the window. "Bet it's his cargo."

"Yeah? What're you hauling, anyhow?" Puff asks Tim, who's starting to realize this ain't the shelter he was hoping for.

"None of your business," he spits out. "Private contract, and not somebody you want to mess with." He's looking all around, realizing he's the center of attention—and not a friendly face in sight. "Look, forget it, okay. I'll just be on my way, no harm done." He turns to go and there's an arm the size of a log barring his way.

"Answer the question, please," Puff says, his voice that soft rumble like a big cat about to pounce. "Easy enough, right?"

Gotta hand it to Tim, he's got guts. Most folks'd shrivel up, faced with someone Puff's size. Or mine. He just straightens, juts out his chin. "My clients pay for privacy," he insists. "I ain't breaking their trust." His hand dives into his jacket, comes out with a phone. "You want to know, ask 'em yourself."

I let him call up the number before slapping the phone out of his hand. Catch it mid-air, glance at the screen. "Black Rock Consulting," I read out, and every face here darkens. Known Pentex front, that. Suspicion confirmed.

"Hand over the keys," Puff says, holding out a palm big as a Christmas ham. "Not your fault—you can say we forced you to."

Tim gulps—and now he goes for the gun. Points it straight at Puff. Damn. "Back off!" he says. "I mean it! Anybody moves, I shoot!"

Everybody freezes. Everybody but me. I glance around, then back at my friend, eyebrow up in a question. He gives me a nod, barely a tic but I catch it. Good enough.

"Tim," I call. He stiffens. He didn't know I knew his name. "Look at me."

Most can't help it, and he's one. He shifts, gun still aimed at Puff but head swiveling around.

When he's looking right at me, I shift. Not down this time, either. Up.

The ceiling seems to race toward me as I shoot up, passing Puff by a foot or more. My vision goes red but sharp, every hair on Tim's head distinct, every drop of sweat standing out. I see his eyes go wide, pupils dilating till the color around them's all but gone, mouth open, gun falling to the floor as his limbs go slack. I growl, the sound filling the little diner, and those same eyes roll up. A little sigh slips from his lips as he passes out, lands on the floor with a dull thud.

Back down and I look around. "All okay?"

Everyone nods. Ginger Bristles—I saw him there but didn't say anything—looks impressed. "Never seen one your shade before," he admits. "Cool." He holds up his fist, and we bump. Dude's all right.

"Nice move," Puff tells me, gathering up Tim's gun and tossing it behind the counter. "Smart."

"Thanks." Still a risk, even with his nod—what if he'd missed someone, a random customer? But I trusted him, and he was right. I knew he and Cindy'd be fine, 'course, and Bristles, and the others I'd scented.

Advantage of being Kinfolk—seeing the change doesn't mess with your head. Not like it did for Tim. And a diner run by Kinfolk, for Kinfolk and Garou? Safest place for me to change, outside an actual cairn.

Somebody checks Tim's pockets, tosses me the keys. Cindy unlocks the door. Bristles and Puff follow me out to Tim's rig. I unlock the back, yank the

door up. Smells hit me the second it starts to rise—sweat, feces, dirt, fear.

The truck's full of people.

A few I recognize from the streets. Most I don't. All of 'em scared, tired, hungry, dehydrated. Some injured, some drugged, most just defeated. I feel the rage building the longer I look. People like this, they ain't being collected for slaves—no money in damaged goods.

Their only use is as lab rats. People no one misses when they're nabbed—or when they're disposed of, after.

A big hand lands on my shoulder. "We'll take care of them," Puff promises. "Feed 'em, get 'em somewhere safe."

I nod. "The truck?"

"I got it," Bristles offers, holds out a hand for the keys. He grins. "I know a place, they'll have it stripped in under an hour. Nobody'll ever find the pieces."

"Good." I glare toward the diner, the man within. "Same'll be true of Tim." Not just yet, though. I've got some questions for him still.

Twenty minutes later, I'm headed home, the city beckoning with her lights and her skyline. Tim's trussed up behind me, looking like he's just sacked out but tied tighter 'n any hog. I'll bring him to the cairn, the pack can question him, find out just how much he knows. With any luck, it'll be another chink in Pentex's armor, something we can exploit.

And nestled in front of me, a to-go bag with another of Bearclaw's signature pastries, my travel mug full of piping-hot coffee.

I should get out of the city a little more often.



TAKERS

RUSSELL ZIMMERMAN

The Atlantic Ocean 1725

The pair sat together in the oil-lantern-lit quarters of a privateer captain; an office, meeting room, and home all efficiently combined with a half-educated man's library and a mapmaker's asylum cell. The two men shared between them companionable silences when that was what the night called for, and passed between them a clear mantle of leadership that kept either of them from dominating their nightly, night-long, conversations; both of them were charismatic, affable or cruel as command required, but one of them born to it and with an unmistakable aura of authority, the other a man who had clawed for and hard-earned every lesson of leadership the ugly way, who perhaps bore less innate allure but who was the master in this place, in this cabin, in these quarters. The ship's captain was of inestimably lower birth than his passenger, but his rank was supreme aboard this vessel...for so long as he held it.

The captain had long straw-yellow hair and a four-week beard over a perpetual sunburn that turned his face golden even in the oil lantern's dimness. The passenger's hair was black as sin but he had Englishman-pale skin that matched his accent. Both of them were broad of shoulder and narrow of hip,

powerfully-built men but still athletic and quick despite their bulk, and they moved with an easy grace. The captain was more accustomed to the rolling deck upon which he lived his life, but the passenger moved with a feline smoothness that simply refused to let any wave-tossed awkwardness shine through.

Night after night, week after week, the two of them forged a friendship together as the ship sailed them west to the New World. They laughed together, lied to one another, spun fanciful stories and madcap jokes, talked of plunder and war and leadership in quiet voices. The captain smoked tobacco and drank rum that came from the colonies, occasionally used Scottish whiskey to wash down his cook's best efforts. The passenger politely declined time and again, begging off, blaming the sea for his lack of appetite.

As all friends do when days turn to weeks, and especially when a voyage nears its end, eventually they stopped lying and boasting and joking at one another, and turned their words thoughtfully inwards. They spoke only truths. They explained themselves to one another as best, and as earnestly, as they could. They spoke of who they were and what they did, simply.

"We are just...takers," the captain waved with his pipe, taking in himself, his crew, the sleek, piratical warship of which he was lord and master. Virginia's

lights were in sight; they would make landfall before he and his passenger had another night to spend together. "Black or white, Jew or gentile, Muslim, it matters not. We're all the same."

"My lads and I..." He spoke of men his age and more than a few who were older, but it didn't matter. They were his lads. They always would be. "We are what we are. We do what we do. We truck in no slaves, nor call friend those who do. We serve no masters but those we choose. We obey no orders but those from leaders we've voted in, meself included. They're loyal to me only so long as I'm loyal to them, and we all know it. Takers like us, we bow to no god nor man, and spit in the eye of any what tries to make us kneel. We're rowdy, mad bastards, and not a one of us isn't likely to die for it sooner instead of later. Until then, we're *free*."

The captain nodded, rolled the word around in his mouth like his favorite Scotch.

"Free. Free, and strong, and takers. We know it's in our blood, to steal. To scare and hurt those that would try to stop us. We take, it's in our natures, now, because we all – every one of my lads – got a taste for it and decided to keep at it until we couldn't stop. We've got some letter, now, makes us privateers instead of pirates, but it's just paper. It's just ink. It's just words. We're the same, no matter what some letter says. We'll take, my lads and me, we'll take. From whoever we can, whatever we want, however we need to."

He sighed out rich Virginian tobacco smoke.

"We're takers. And we'll sail oceans of blood to do that taking. Mark my words."

He was drunk enough, bare-souled enough, to tell his passenger nothing but the darkest of his truths.

"It's a funny thing, being a taker," his passenger smiled, teeth flashing white and sharp in the lantern-light. He was sober enough to only share his darkest truths, too.

"I know, because I am the very, very same."

The vampire lunged, and drank, and fed. Captain Nathaniel Shaw died.

Then Captain Nathaniel Shaw came back a dead and hungry thing, thirsting for lifesblood to fill a hole in him that it never, ever would.

**The Atlantic
Hotel & Spa, Parking Garage
Fort Lauderdale, Florida
2000**

They stood in a ring, most of the city's Kindred, watching a duel.

It had been a short one.

"And that," I spat out a mouthful of vitae, had it dripping down my chin, my neck, the half-torn front of my once-white tee, felt the warm life of it soaking into my jeans. Overhead, effortlessly, I held a battered, broken, vampire; the source of the sweet red mess I was covered with. A Malkavian. We'd wrestled. I was a better wrestler.

"Is that."

I flicked my wrists and gave the crumpled creature a toss. Bones shattered as the wet, red ruin of a Kindred smashed against a concrete pillar; another splatter for the Prince's harried cleaning crews to scrub up, another mess to be swept under the rug before the construction signs went down and the garage reopened as suddenly and mysteriously as it had closed.

The Malkavian loser groaned and everyone present could hear bones grinding against one another as he tried to stand. I'd left a bit of blood in him. I'd pulled up short, not let myself feed the Beast enough to get anywhere near draining him, heart and soul. I'd leashed myself, even as I'd feasted. I'd wanted to keep going – I always wanted to keep going – but I'd pushed back the dark thirst, bitten it down, swallowed it like bitter bile. I'd been thirsty since that first night. I'd lusted after vampire blood most of all.

But I'd won. I'd stopped myself. Maybe I shouldn't have. Had I left a little too much gas in the tank? Was this aristo pain in the ass wanting to go another round? We, unliving though we were, held our breaths to watch him try.

He held himself up on broken arms for a few long seconds, then shuddered and fell and lay still.

A handful of Anarchs cheered.

Everyone else groaned.

I smirked and sucked the blood off my teeth.

"I believe the matter of honor is settled, my Prince," I flashed a smile at the sun-baked city's moron-in-chief. He was a Nosferatu. That's part of why I'd picked a fight with someone else.

"Or, well, *their* Prince," I gestured airily to the city's assembled killers, thieves, and blood-draining monsters of the night. I was one of them, too, mind

– a vampire, I mean – but not one of *them*, not one of this particular city’s.

Me, I wasn’t any city’s. I was a monster of the world.

“It is done,” the Prince conceded. “Our...*guest*...Mr. Shaw has, we can clearly see, settled the matter.”

“With the duel finished, the insult answered, and the trespass paid for, let the matter be done. Final Death is not needed, the Don is clearly beaten, and with him the charges of Clan Nosferatu brought to bear against the Caitiff, Mary Jo.”

Say what you will about the ugly bastards, but some Nossie’s sure can muster up gravitas when they need it. This particular Sewer Rat’s supernatural deformity expressed itself by way of monstrous sunburn, and his skin flaked and peeled and wept tiny droplets of red even as he spoke...but his eyes were as dark and sharp and as cold and cruel as those of any Prince I’d ever met.

“And she’ll be released from your cells, put over into the care of the city’s Brujah, and will be restored and maintained to the, ahem, ‘full entitlement to all rights and privileges belonging to all Camarilla Kindred?’” I arched one brow, doing my piratical best to look dignified while I quoted the only document in the world I gave a single bloody shit about, the Treaty of the Convention of Thorns. “Also, she’ll be given, I believe the phrase is, ‘the freedom to act as she pleases, short of breaching the Masquerade imposed for the protection of all Kindred.’”

“She shall.” The Nosferatu gave me a look that could curdle milk.

“Then my work here is done.”

I gave the Prince a sardonic bow, my very favorite kind, and as I straightened the city’s starving handful of Anarchs whooped and hollered. They were a rowdy, frat-boy bunch, but in their defense Mary Jo was the only one of them not to have been an *actual* rowdy frat-boy in life. Fort Lauderdale. What could you do?

I let them cheer me and slap me on the back, returned their high-fives and fist bumps before striding to my aide-de-camp, the lovely ghoul, Miss Elizabeth Lafayette. She was taller than me, and, not that it’s hard, far prettier. When we’d first met, she’d’ve been called a mulatto. These days, smart folks just called her gorgeous and went about their day.

“That does it for the FLL, boss.” She kept a nice, leatherbound, notebook in-hand everywhere we went, wore a nice, cropped leather jacket, and kept a

.454 wheelgun in a leather holster. She was a complicated gal, my Lizzie. She kept her Anarch style just this side of professional - classed the joint up a little - and still carried a fuck-off big handcannon for when trouble hit. “Sovvie’s gassed up and we’re good to go.”

My bloody right hand, a Mexican Gangrel so scruffy he made my decades-old rockerboy-biker look clean-cut and professional in contrast, was there, too. Alejandro and I had ridden together for a blood-soaked century before Elizabeth came along. He’d upgraded his firepower, and mine, from the Winchesters and Colts we’d played with in those heady days of the bloody Southwest, but his own claws and fangs were, hands-down, the deadliest weapons he carried.

He tossed me my jacket – moose leather with internal pockets for ballistic trauma plates, a savvy Anarch can’t be too careful in these dark nights – and I shrugged it on. The jacket felt like home. Black leather, silver studs and zippers, so many patches, pins, and buttons it almost didn’t need the armor.

It was our uniform. We kept it simple, like Anarchs should, and rode the stereotype into the ground. Black leather, denim, and the open road were the constants in our lives; everything else was secondary and open to interpretation and added flair. We all rotated through a half-assed mess of gas-station and gift shop tee-shirts, but the jackets were our real treats. Happy face buttons with fangs, Batman symbols for the manbat, Black Power fists, Mexican flags, peace signs, Anarchy A’s, anti-war bumper stickers, a row of stolen 1% biker patches, a knotted boot lace with appropriated fangs; we kept a motley assortment of decorations coming and going on our scuffed black leather skins, trophies and ranks, prizes from hard-fought battles and bloody, debauched nights off.

Which reminded me...

I pulled a scratched-up Leatherman from a coat pocket and flicked it open, striding back over towards the twisted, shattered, blood-drained form of Don Agapetus. In life he’d at one point been the wealthiest Marquis in New Spain. In undeath, he was an obsessive Malkavian Primogen who’d flirted with joining the Sabbat in dusty decades past but who had, in the meantime, contented himself with sating his razor-sharp proclivities against wayward Anarchs. He’d been the sort of bastard I preyed upon centuries ago, and it was unfortunate to see he was still the sort of bastard I had to fight against, now, in these modern nights.

The assembled Kindred of this silly, sun-drenched, city backed away from me as I opened and closed the pliers at them a few times.

I pulled the Don up by his hair and gave him a shake until the eye that wasn't swollen shut could open up and look at me.

"You leave Caitiff be. You're no Scourge. You're no Sheriff."

I closed the pliers on one of his fangs.

"If they're not breaking the Masquerade, you don't get them. You don't lock them up for wandering into your bullshit domain. You don't starve them. You don't *peel* them. You don't fucking touch them, mate. They are officially accorded the full protections of the Convention of Thorns."

I leaned in close, let him smell his own blood on my breath.

"And of me."

I wrenched and twisted and tugged, tossing the broken mess of him in one direction, pulling his left fang in the other. I quirked an eyebrow at the assembled Kindred – their sunburnt Prince and his burly, sell-out Brujah Sheriff included – as I tossed the fang into my mouth to suck it clean, then jauntily spat it into my hand.

"I have taken all Anarchs as my province," I announced, wishing I still had a good cloak to twirl as I spun and strode away.

There was nothing like a good cloak twirl.

My right boot and Alejandro's left jangled as we walked, a set of ancient 7th Cavalry spurs shared between us, stolen fair and square. Elizabeth led the way, chattering on about destinations before sun-up, about Google Maps, about mileage and fuel ranges and estimated times of arrival. Alejandro and I handled the night-to-night violence of our chose unlife-style. Elizabeth took care of basically everything else, but especially the mundanity of the *Sovvie's* thirsts.

The *Sovereign State* was our headquarters, haven, and heaven, but deep down inside she was a class-A Winnebago that chugged diesel as hungrily as I drank blood. She wasn't the frigate I'd had before Edward, the Black Prince, had fanged his way into my life, no. She didn't have dozens of cannons on her side and all the Atlantic to claim as her own. But she was *mine*. She was home. She was freedom. She was a statement of domain, everywhere we parked her, and wise vampires knew it, Kindred and Cainite alike. She flew our skull-and-crossbones, she kept the sunlight off our faces as we slept, she carried

an open-topped trailer full of chrome-gleaming motorcycles...and I did still have myself a bloodthirsty crew of ruthless takers, albeit a smaller one.

We eagerly hit the road, leaving Fort Lauderdale's bloody mess behind us. We had another city to go to, because we *always* had another, just as I used to always have another fat galleon – low in the water, pregnant with gold – to chase after. Now I've always got another Prince or Primogen, like a bloated tick, fat with blood, to chastise and another neonate, thin-blood, or free-fanged loser to defend.

In life, I had been Captain Nathaniel Shaw, The Black Shaw, one of the Atlantic's piratical scourges. Now, simmering almost to legitimacy in my old age, I'm the 'Anarch Archon.'

We followed, in our red-soaked way, the letter of Camarilla law. We made Princes and Primogen follow their own rules. We spoke up for Kindred who were promised protection in exchange for honoring the Masquerade, and we made sure they got it. We got emails from young Kindred in need, we looked through them for the ones we could help, and we helped them.

Everybody needs to make a living. This was mine. It kept me feeling free and young. It kept me active; kept me from turning into a hoary old monster, all paranoia and hunger, stale-blooded and black-hearted. I still got to travel. I still got to move.

I still got to take, and to choose who I took from.

And this is the story of my trip to Elysium in Baltimore, Maryland.

Pfft. Elysium. Vampires are a proud and prickly lot, and nobody knows that utter truth better than we do. Just ask us and we'll tell you; we're dangerously stupid. We claim neighborhoods and our Beasts within bare fangs at one-another for daring to draw too near to our marked territory, but then we all force ourselves to go a-mingling at some pretentious twat's art gallery or insufferable boor's museum kept open after-hours. We make ourselves chit-chat – chit-chat! – with other apex predators, all preening and strutting like peacocks, to show off how we ape mortal culture and taste, how we all cling to mortal wealth.

Bollocks, all of it.

'Elysium' had meant paradise to the Greeks. These nights, though? To us, to them, to the stuffed-shirt Camarilla in their crooked, bloodstained ivory tower, Elysium just meant predatory posturing draped in inanity and a thin veneer of gossip.

When it all turns bloody – and it eventually always does, we're fucking *vampires* – and it's the little

guy getting preyed upon, I hear about it. Then Alejandro, Elizabeth, and I saddle up in *Sovvie*, and we hit the road to try and put a thumb on the scales of justice.

So. Onwards to Baltimore!

It's a bloody town, and I don't just mean to curse it. They had Sabbat inroads from time to time, just like all the East Coast. There was all sorts of fucked-up human swill - racism and poverty and the like - that kept guns in scared hands and blood in the gutters. But we'd gotten an email, and we had nowhere better to go; so off we went. It took us a few nights driving up through my old stomping grounds, hugging the coast, but we made it there. We always did. The three of us could drive the *Sovereign State* anywhere, at any time. The night's roads held no fear for us.

"Bodystore, Murderland," the graffiti glowed beneath the *Sovvie*'s headlights at long last. Alejandro rode as outrider on his chrome-and-black monster of a bike, Elizabeth was on shotgun and reading over our notes, with me at the helm in the comfort-laden, absurdly padded, faintly oversized driver's seat.

"So, I suppose I've put this off long enough. Who's our Prince?" I drawled out around a toothpick.

"Venture," Elizabeth didn't quite roll her eyes. I did. Some nights, they all felt like Venture. "One Alexander Gladwell, sounds to be roughly two hundred years old, childer of the original Prince of Baltimore. He's been Prince for roughly a century now, but he had just one childer himself, and lost her to Final Death in a Sabbat incursion ten years ago. He's started to crack down since, harsher and harsher rules."

"I knew him," I piped up helpfully. Elizabeth didn't rise to my conversational bait, but I didn't let that stop me. "The former Prince. We lent him some muscle when Sabbat attacked back in, oh, hell, I don't recall. Just after the Revolution, I suppose. Martin, his name was. Stuffy London fellow, a banker in life, I think. I called him 'Marty' once, then I left for a few decades."

She didn't seem to care about my impromptu history lesson much. Fine. Her loss. I'm a national treasure. She flipped a page.

"I did some asking around with local contacts. The city's been a real mess under Gladwell's rule. High turnover, several elders and ancilla slain even, and then a few more when they didn't take Gladwell's new rules and safety protocols seriously enough."

"Is that why our 'caller' is in trouble?" I'd stolen the term from radio shows. "Some new Primogen unhappy with how the iron-fisted Prince is cracking down?"

"No, it's a secondhand report. Let's stick with 'defendant,' sir? But no. *He* is a Caitiff," Elizabeth turned a page. She wasn't being very chatty. "Brayden, just Brayden. Midwestern kid on vacation, truck stop Embracee somewhere in Delaware, took to the roads...six months ago. Sire left him our email address on a receipt after the bite, and not much else. She told him to use it in an emergency, he said."

"That's nice."

"Is it, sir?"

"Word of mouth. Best advertisin' there is, I hear."

Elizabeth sighed. No doubt about it; she was in a mood.

"Cammies got on him for wandering into a local Toreador's domain. She's the one that charged him before Prince and Council. Brayden says he was searching for Elysium and broke into the wrong art gallery, panicked and made a fuss when he got confronted."

"The Torrie?" I swung the *Sovvie* around in a long turn, leaned into the Winnebago's tilt like I'd once braced on the deck of my ship.

"Toreador Primogen of the city, one Isabella LeRoy, sir. Only recently elevated from Whip, after the last Primogen, her Sire, fell afoul of the Sheriff. She also claims to be roughly two centuries of age, but spent most of that overseas. A duelist."

"Oh?" I quirked an eyebrow. It had been all the rage to Embrace swordsmen, back in the day. It was nice to see a few of them still hanging around.

"Mm-hmm," Elizabeth just shrugged away my curiosity. "She argues that our baby, Brayden, violated the Masquerade when he flashed fangs at the security guard who caught him and it was only dumb luck that the guard was a ghoul."

"So we've got a not-quite Masquerade breach perpetrated by a baby-fanged thinblood, the complainant's a Toreador with a penchant for swordplay and a need to be taken seriously by her city, and our Prince is a stuffy Venture getting harsher about the rules...which is how said Toreador found herself with a new job?"

"Mm-hmm."

"And what's our complaint say happened next?"

"They threatened a stake-and-bake on the fang-crazy little bugger but settled for a lashing and a

branding. For now, they say. The Primogen council is still discussing the matter. The Prince is drawing things out to curry favor from the new Primogen – after that high turnover rate in recent years – and it’s currently the Brujah standing strongest in dissent against Permanent Death for the boy.”

“Who’s our buddy?”

“Hmm?” She arched a brow at me, playing coy.

“Our Primogen, who’ve we got?”

“Our?” she lifted both eyebrows my way.
“We?”

“C’mon, Lizzie, you know what I mean.”

“Oh, *your* Clan, the Brujah? Mm-hmm. Out to save our fair Caitiff is one Catherine Washington, ‘Catherine the Greater.’ Or maybe ‘Grater.’ Street-type, came up bloody and stayed that way, has the financial pull to keep her voice thanks to drug money, mostly. So I doubt it’s the kindness of her heart that has her helping our precious Brayden, sir.”

The *Sovvie* trundled to a stop at a red light. I swiveled my captain’s-chair/driver’s seat around enough to give Elizabeth a long, pointed look.

“You don’t particularly like this Brayden, do you? Normally we save that for the Primogen, Princes, and that sort of scum. Why are you disliking this dumb kid?”

“It’s not my job to like or dislike anyone, sir.”

“Nate, not sir.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” She gave me a long look, tasted the word before she let it slip out. “Sir.”

The light turned green. I stayed put at the intersection, drawing in a breath just so I could sigh it out gustily; nobody does drama like a vampire.

“Liz, I know you’re not a big fan of strays, or their Sires. I know you’re mad at Brujah, sometimes. I know why. We’ve talked about it, though, and I’m in no mood for you to take this out on me again right now. You feel you deserve it. I know. I agree. But I can’t tell Alejandro to do it, it’s not right, telling another that they *have* to procreate. The Embrace, it carries a terrible weight with it, and a responsibility, and makin’ a new vampire, Kindred, Cainite, whatever th’hell you want to call us, it has to come from a place of—“

“How would you know?” She slid her eyes away from me, looked forward, pointedly at the green light.

That one stung, I won’t lie. I loved Elizabeth, but for just a blink-flicker in my mind’s eyes, I imagined myself tearing her throat open for the insult. The steering wheel groaned a little as I tightened my grip

too much. The light glared yellow, then red. I slowly turned away from her.

“That’s not fair.” I put my foot on the gas; it was two am, the red light could go fuck itself. The *Sovvie* rolled forward.

In my first frenzy ever, when the moonlight had touched my dead skin and fangs grew in my mouth and all I heard in the whole world was the pounding of terrified prey-hearts and the roaring of blood through the veins of my lads, my takers, my killers, my murderous crew; when the howling rage of Brujah and Beast, together, had first been planted in my breast by Edward, Prince of Wales, and when the Black Shaw had gorged himself on his crew, I had learned a terrible thing.

One of them, as the red veil fell away and the night turned clear and cold, the last of them, I had regretted. Edward, my Sire, had whispered to me how to save him, how to save anyone.

“It’s in the blood, and it only takes a drop,” the monster-father had told me. “Share it and play a trick on death himself.”

I had tried. It hadn’t worked.

The next night, Sire and Childer tried it again, studious as young boys, serious about solving a problem. Other lessons came – sunlight and fire and other threats were warned about – but the tricky knots of the blood had to be untangled. We found a cruel man, some Virginian slaver, and methodically opened his throat; to give him the blood and kill him anew if it ‘took,’ try to determine why not if it didn’t.

It didn’t.

Neither did my blood stay with the next slaver, or the next, or the next. We tried larger amounts of blood. We tried healthier prey. We tried at different times of the night, with me more sated, less sated, and even on the edge of frenzy from hunger. We tried.

We gave up after a few months of preying on predators. Edward lectured to me, I argued philosophy and morality with him, we wandered the bloody American South dressed in turns like princes and paupers, living high off the hog with slaver’s booty and slaver’s blood.

After a few years, my Sire drifted north and settled somewhere colder than I liked. I stayed on the move, stayed an outlaw, stayed away from him and the rage the sight of him began to stir in my belly. I went every which way but home. I spent decade atop decade running with my fellow Brujah and burnt down whole neighborhoods that deserved it. Hunted through woods alongside Gangrel and traded blood

with them after we feasted on Lupines. Fought with everything that walked, swam, or crawled. I never settled down except in various incarnations of ships and saddles over the years; always on the move, always bringing trouble with me, always with a handful of friends but never any family.

I couldn't Embrace.

And I had, over time, grown scared to try. Who would want to kill someone you thought deserved eternity beside you while only gambling that your unholy vitae would bring them back?

I had learned long ago that I was only fit to take. It was all I could do. Steal. Loot. Pillage. I couldn't ever really hold anything, or protect anyone, or build anything that would last forever. All I could do was take blood from others, just take.

Only, ever, take.

We drove in the dark and the quiet. She sighed and shuffled papers in her leatherbound notebook. I brooded and chewed on the Baltimore information we had like a dog chews on a bone.

We pulled up to Alejandro's bike in a nightclub parking lot, kickstand and leather boots on the ground, his Gangrel eyes glowing soft and red above the cherry of a lit cigarette. The *Sovereign State* purred from idle to dead, and when Elizabeth moved to leave my arm flickered out snake-quick and held her hand; as gently as I could, but as strongly as a vice.

My accent fell away, the Scottish burr from my days in the sun, the Virginian drawl I'd kept for so long, the Southwestern mannerisms Alejandro and I had shared with six-guns in our hands, the cinematic, piratical, gibberish I'd taken to in recent years. I wasn't play-acting with her. Not for a minute or two.

She paused and gave me the chance to talk. I'll give her that much.

"I'm sorry." My eyes held hers, but no blood fueled my voice, no vampiric tricks held her attention. "I'm sorry I can't give you what you want, what I want to give you, what you deserve to have. I know you're tired of being...just...what you are. You deserve better than being my ghoul – you *do* – but I can't fix it myself, and I can't tell Alejandro, or anybody else, to do it. It ain't right, Lizzie. You can't force someone to share that, or at least I can't."

I shook my head and relaxed my grip. She squeezed my hand back.

"It's fine," she lied. "I understand, Nate."

Not 'sir,' at least.

"Let's just do the job." She slipped free and stepped down out of *Sovvie*, stretching as she did so, then checking the wheelgun in its holster. She was every bit as smart as she looked.

"Elysium?" I hopped down and stretched, myself, but made a big show of not checking any guns in any holsters. Anyone who was spying on us had to know it wasn't a gun that made me dangerous.

Alejandro breathed out a lungful of smoke and disgust in equal measure, then flicked his cigarette halfway across the parking lot. "That's the rumor. 'Midnight,' is all the place is called."

"At least it's not a fucking art gallery."

I led the way, one of them on each flank, and we strode into the nominally-closed club. The windows were tinted enough so no light escaped, no garish neon sign promised openness, no music dropped a skull-throbbing bass beat at us; but the door opened, all the same, and in we walked.

A pair of men – ghouls, really – flanked the door. Sport coats over black tees and jeans. Broad shoulders. No necks to speak of. They were the same everywhere. Bouncers in the early evening, something more serious late at night.

"Gentlemen!" I raised my hands with a flourish. My swagger was back, my silly accent, the wildness about the eyes that kept me young and vital. "Nathan Shaw, Brujah visitor to your fair city, at your service. Take me to Prince, Sheriff, or Scourge, as you please. Dawn's not far off, and we're a law-and-order bunch, we are!"

It didn't take long. An empty, half-dark nightclub is a pathetic beast and the stony-faced ghouls performed admirably. One led us where we needed to be; the other adjusted an earbud, spoke into his wrist, and dutifully manned the door.

Baltimore is a bigger 'burb than many, so I knew the small crowd we walked in on couldn't be every Kindred, but it was enough. Pale skin, dark hair, hungry eyes. Some in tailored Italian affairs, some in off-the-rack suits, some in blue jeans torn just so and black leather jackets that reminded me of my own little dog pack. A few sniffed of sewers and secrets and lurked in the shadows, others would no doubt be devastatingly beautiful if you gave them the second look their so dearly wanted. A very few did their skittish, Neonate best to be overlooked.

The Prince, seated in a high-backed leather chair while everyone else stood and posed and postured around him, took the wind right out of me, or, well, he would have if I'd had any in me. Every inch the

Mafioso, this one, the up-and-comer, the lean wolf in a mobster flick; slicked-back hair as black as a bastard's heart, dark and dangerous eyes to match, subtle pin-stripes on a dark suit, the shadows broken up only by a silken splash of red thanks to a pocket square.

I knew him. From a long time ago.

Alejandro, as a peer, filled in the wide-eyed silence I left in my surprise.

"*Hola*. I am Alejandro Murrieta, 'El Lobo Rojo,' the Red Wolf of the Hills." He growled it out like it was a challenge as much as a greeting, and like anyone, anywhere, still gave a fuck about his outlaw band formed in the wreckage of the Mexican Empire of Iturbide. "I am of Clan Gangrel and the seventh generation, childer of The Dutchman Janszoon."

He was all stubble and wild hair, scars and denim and leather waiting to cat-scratch anybody who held his gaze for too long. That was Allie being friendly. We'd waded through blood together for a long time. Hearing him introduce himself – challenge – a whole damned room of Baltimore's gathered predators put some wind back in my sails.

"And I'm Nathan Shaw, the Anarch Archon. Clan Brujah, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, title, title, title, if you're looking for my Sire ask for Edward up Milwaukee-way." I gave it half a tick, to let the gathered Ivory Tower types wrinkle their collective noses at my lack of decorum. Then I lacked it a little harder. "But don't tell him where to find me 'cause I owe him twenty bucks."

That got a few titters here and there, because they didn't know what else to say.

The Prince lifted two fingers for silence, and got it. His dark eyes bored holes in Allie and me. I waited for his finger to turn into a point, an accusation, a sentence of murder. I forced my Beast not to howl in rage and denial. I balled it up and kept the monster inside me hungry, at least until I could get Liz out; if they broke Elysium's peace and half Baltimore's Kindred opted to murder us, it'd be no place for a ghoul, a smart, loyal, strong one or not.

"Who was it that summoned you here?" their Prince asked, softly, in the silence his negligent gesture had earned him.

"Yo." A black woman stepped up, half-pale from Vampire blood, chin high, dreads bouncing as she tossed her head. "My boy, Brayden, asked me to reach out and get them up in here, to help us get to the bottom o—"

"There is no bottom to get to."

The correction came quickly, and not from the Prince. Razor-sharp. Epee-fast. A woman with the poise and accent of a highborn French lady – an old one – stepped into the half-light of the dance floor. She moved with a grace I hadn't seen in a long time.

My Beast stirred at the sight of the elegant, slender sword at her hip. The embossed leather belt didn't clash with her outfit, the silvered pommel and crossguard were easy for her to accessorize with without violating traditional Cammie-goth mores.

"The idiot thinblood violated Domain and Hospitality alike, and sank his fangs into the Masquerade so soundly that only dumb luck kept it, too, from being totally broken. My accusations are not only my word, but clear evidence, audio and video both, the word of my servant, and an admission by the fool himself. He broke the Second and the Third, and punishment was meted out. I only know argue that the punishment be finished, and he meet the sun for his threat to the First."

Prince who called himself Alexander Gladwell; Brujah Primogen, Catherine the Greater; and Toreador Primogen, Isabella LeRoy. One, two, three. All our players were gathered, Kings and Queens and Knights aplenty, everyone was here except the idiot pawn.

I was only terrified and enraged by one of them.

"Yeah, but what I'm sayin' is Brayden don't gotta die for it." The Frenchwoman's tone didn't back Catherine down, I'll give her that much. She postured up, instead, keeping her head high, stance aggressive, arms moving. The aristocratic stillness of Isabella, the Toreador, was a stark contrast, as was the utter, clearly inhuman, patience of their Prince.

The two of them continued an old argument, whatever other business they had planned for the evening was being thoroughly ignored. The Prince tapped his finger against the armrest of his red-leathered chair, keeping time...until he lifted two fingers again.

"You know who I am." He spoke only to me, those eyes boring into mine. I held his gaze. I'd learned a lot on my centuries on the road, and rule one was that yes you could avoid Dominate if you never looked a Ventrue, Lasombra, or Malkavian in the eye, but doing so showed fear. Fuck fear. I'd rather let them try their tricks and win.

"I hear you're the Prince." I didn't blink, didn't flinch, didn't look away.

"Why are you here?"

"Yo, I told you, we got him a messa—"

“Silence.”

The Prince’s whisper rang out like a gunshot. Catherine had matched his gaze, too, and his Dominated command had shut her right up.

“I was asking our guest.” He gestured to me with an open hand, a friendly gesture, an invitation to speak, a harmless flick of his hand.

I tensed up, waiting for the other shoe to fall every time his black gaze was on me. It never happened.

“The Brujah Primogen’s not wrong.” I didn’t let my tension show, didn’t let the bastard see me sweat. “She reached out with an email, we answered. Her message reached me by way of my aide-de-camp, and here we are.”

I liked to mix it up, sometimes calling Elizabeth my ensign, other times my adjutant, a few times my squire, sidekick, or – only once – secretary.

I interrupted the gathered Kindred’s murmurs – “*Oh, imagine that, the Brujah is speaking up for the other Brujah, and, I say, Jeeves, whatever is an ‘electronic-mail’ again?*” – by barreling ahead.

“But since I’m here, and I have the conch, I just thought I’d let you know that everything the Frenchwoman said is wrong. Brayden didn’t violate the Fifth. ‘When thou comest to a foreign city, thou shall present thyself to the one who ruleth there.’ He was trying to do that, he just stumbled into the wrong trendy nightspot to do it.”

Murmur, murmur, murmur went the assembled Harpies and goodly Kindred. “*Look, dear, the Anarch can quote the laws at us! I wonder if he does any other tricks?*”

I let myself pause just long enough that Isabella would want to speak up after a polite silence, then cut her off to keep my momentum. Nothing throws a social busybody off-guard like almost stepping on their toes.

“Brayden didn’t violate the Second, either. ‘All others owe thee respect while in it,’ it says, and ‘None may challenge thy word while in thy domain.’ Brayden didn’t disrespect you – or anyone – when he got lost and was too embarrassed to ask for directions. He didn’t challenge your word, either. Even you said he admitted to the mix-up, right?”

Whisper, whisper, muffled gasp. “*Ho ho ho, look at that Primogen get mildly taken aback, I say, did her eyes widen ever so slightly? Such a scandal! She almost showed emotion, it’s like it’s the roaring twenties all over again!*”

“And while he might have fucked up the First by snarling and going fangs-out at your boy, the truth is he didn’t. It was just a ghoul that saw him, and even if it hadn’t been trying to scare a guard away by making a funny face is way better than fanging him up for real, and, as far as I can tell, the only reason anybody but your ghoul even saw him trying to look all toothy and scary is that you’re hanging onto a security tape and showing it off to whoever asks to see it, right?”

“I say, Jeeves, this scruffy little mongrel’s onto something, eh? Why, I remember Isabella showing that video to me, to try and sway me against that dirty little Caitiff, quite right!”

I kept my foot on the gas. Smaller pauses. I let a little Presence slip out, too, just to make sure every eye on the place was on me. It was anyways, but it felt good to let the Beast mark its territory a little, and dabble in my abilities.

“If anyone’s breaking Traditions tonight, ma’am, it’s you. I’m sure you’re familiar with the Sixth, *either* reading of it, aye? We are, all of us, forbidden to destroy another of our kind. ‘The right of destruction belongeth only to thine Elder,’ the rest of it says, and ‘Only the Eldest among thee shall call the Blood Hunt.’ I know you’ve got a belly full of Old World blood, Miss LeRoy – can I call you Isabella? – but I doubt you’re the eldest among all Baltimore’s Kindred, are you? Cammie scholars tend to only offer up three interpretations there, meaning actually the oldest, or the city’s Prince...”

I looked up at the monster on the throne again. He was listening to me, which means he didn’t know what I knew. I kept talking.

“...or a tie to the Fourth Tradition, that of Accounting. ‘Thine Elder,’ it says, after all, not just ‘the Eldest.’ So which is, Izzy? Are you the oldest vampire in town, calling the Prince a liar? Are you the Prince of the city, so we’re all suckers? Or are you the one who traveled to some gas stop after a big show at the Dover International Speedway and sucked off this kid in the bathroom, and you’re now claiming responsibility for him as your childer?”

That got a few giggles and gasps again. Isabella’s hand slid towards her sword hilt. I was winning. I flashed my teeth to show that I knew it.

“I’m a simple Kindred, Your Grace, dusty from the road and tired from a long night’s drive. But sometimes simple is enough; here, in the case of this Caitiff and this Primogen, we face a simple truth.”

I gestured with both hands, taking in the whole whispering crowd of scandalized blood-drinkers who

were rocked by blunt rudeness. The Prince's dark eyes stayed on me, as calculating as a crow. Or a vulture.

"Brayden's probably a fucking idiot."

I let them titter again.

"But he was trying to find you to present himself. He was trying to find all of you, because maybe he heard Baltimore would treat him fair. Maybe he heard the Traditions were respected here, the laws of all Kindred, those protections that the Convention of Thorns swore would cover even the humblest Anarch, which Brayden surely, surely, is. He got bad directions. He went to the wrong place. He got spooked when he got caught, but even then he tried to scare a guard off, instead of hurting anybody. Hell, maybe the kid thought he was shooting off a flare, sending up a smoke signal; maybe he knew the Prince of this great city could smooth over a little wrinkle like that and he thought it was a safe way to draw your attention so he could follow through on Hospitality."

I shrugged.

"I really don't know."

My hands went to my hips, my chin lifted, my feet spread. Just enough defiance to look sincere.

"What I do know is he didn't violate half the stinkin' Traditions like this dame says. What I do know is he got whipped and burned for it already, anyways. What I do know is that – unless Isabella does want to claim she, ah, 'met' him at some truck stop in Delaware – from all that I've heard, I'm the closest thing to a Sire this kid has."

It felt strange to say it, knowing that I wasn't anyone's Sire, and never would be, but it was winning me the argument, so I ran with it.

"The irresponsible Lick that did drain and feed him in a gas station bathroom, they gave him my contact information and precious little else. They told him how to reach me in an emergency. They, whoever they are, told him I'd look after him if he needed me. And he needs me now."

I kept my head up in a challenge, turned it to look at the Toreador and away from the raven-dark monster on his throne.

"So if you want to see that idiot kid dead, you've got to go through me. Trial by combat. Right here. Right now. I'll wager a lady like you doesn't leave home with only one good sword in her retinue. Lend me some steel and we'll finish it right now."

I sent out a surge of confidence through my Brujah blood and the Presence it lent me. My Beast growled happily inside my black heart. I knew she

had one, too. Maybe not the same type of blood-soaked wolf that howled away at my insides sometimes, but even the prettiest Toreador poodle still had teeth and hunger.

"My Prince?" Her French lilt lifted, along with one graceful eyebrow, as a polite question. She wanted this chance to prove herself. Wanted to show she was ready to spill blood for the Camarilla, despite her Sire's death. Wanted to be taken seriously.

Murmurs abounded. I'd planted enough seeds of doubt – hell, I was actually right, unless Washington and the kid had lied their asses off to me – for uncertainty to set in. As was often the case with old, hungry, mean-spirited monsters like us, once you left a matter of life and death in doubt, a good, confident challenge to personal combat could settle matters.

Truth be told, I'd been flirting with the idea as soon as I'd heard she was good with a sword. It had been positively *ages* since my last good sword fight. Alejandro'd had me settling lethal affairs with claws, fangs, or guns for so long, it sounded absolutely thrilling.

Even before I saw the Prince squatting on his dark throne, I'd wanted to stab someone pretty good. This might just be a two birds, one stone, type of deal for me.

The Prince let her request hang in the air.

"Madame Keeper," the Prince's voice rose like the moon, the loudest I'd heard him speak. His dark eyes swept the room until he found her, "There you are, Miss Combs. Are we quite certain that Elysium is free, and will remain so, of mortal eyes for the evening?"

I bloody well hope so, mate, we've all been jawing on like it's pretty secret. I dug my phone out of my pocket, making a big show of Anarch impatience while the locals talked, and I started to thumb at it, sending out a text.

A gorgeous blonde woman in a curve-hugging red silk dress nodded her head. Her lips were as red as blood or rubies, and an obsessive madness lurked behind her eyes; she reminded me of Don Agapetus. A Prince could do worse than a Malkavian for seeing to his Elysium.

"We are, my Prince."

"Thank you, Odia. Sheriff!" the Prince's voice was loud and clear again. "See to it no others interfere."

A lantern-jawed fellow in a tragic Men's Wearhouse Big And Tall suit gave a nod, all cop mustache

and cop haircut. Elizabeth's notes said he was a Brujah, but I didn't know him or his sire.

"Scourge," the Prince's voice had a razor's edge to it, the word itself was dangerous. "Assist your Sheriff. Should any bare steel, raise a hand, or wield Kindred powers to influence this contest, end them swiftly and surely."

A grunge-rocker kid, all hollow eyes and layers of flannel hiding old bloodstains, nodded in return. Rumor was he was Gangrel, but Alejandro'd never heard of him or his Sire, either. We were clueless about just how gnarly the Prince's hired muscle was.

It wouldn't matter for this swordfight, though. I glanced from pillar of the community to pillar of the community, half-interested, thumbs jabbing my phone. Alejandro wasn't paying much attention to them, either. Elizabeth scowled into her leather notebook.

"Keeper of Elysium, I charge you to formally suspend the peace, for just this one contest, just until I say otherwise. Anyone who interferes and spills Kindred blood this night will face The Final Death. At mine own two hands, if they must."

I wondered how many of the city's vampires he'd killed with those two hands. Or through other means.

Odia Combs, the devil in a red dress, gave him a white-toothed smile and a nod.

"Let it be so. Elysium's peace is on hold. Just this special once. Just this lucky night."

I put my phone away and gave a cocky grin to Isabella LeRoy, the Toreador so fine with a blade it was an art form who'd earned her immortality.

"Shall we dance, m'lady?"

She licked her lips, stepped into the light more fully, barefoot for practicality and dance-quickness in our fight...and lifted a pair of stakes.

Oh.

Aww.

One of the wooden instruments – no crude affairs, these, but finely honed, fire hardened, with leather-wrapped handles and silver butt-caps for flair and balance – sailed through the air towards me in a graceful arc. I caught it, disappointed there wouldn't be flashing swords, but working up a new battle plan, adjusted for these new weapons.

She lifted hers in a salute, perhaps only half-sarcastic. I returned it, just as sincerely.

Oh, wait, I should quip!

"I must say, m'lady, it will be a shame to ruin such a fine boso—"

She came at me, fast and hard, stake a jabbing blur. I deserved it. My quip was going to be garbage.

Alejandro sulked away from the fight like a good lad, Elizabeth crossed her arms, angry with me but backing away, as well.

Sticks clacked against one another as I parried, riposted, slid into a proper stance and the dance began in earnest.

First off, to be absolutely clear, let the record show that Isabella LeRoy is really, really, quite good. I'm not taking away from her ability, at all, when I say that my heart wasn't really in it and I didn't feel very scared. Her strikes were accurate, measured, and precise. Her balance was phenomenal, her footwork everything you would expect. Her slender limbs hid more strength than you would expect – a common vampiric trick – even if it wasn't much compared to my particular vintage of artisanal Brujah blend. There was power in her attacks, in her parries, in her stakeplay. She was fluidity given martial form, every inch of her.

And as we both leaned on our speed – that special speed, the Celerity that Brujah and Toreador have in common, that we usually use in very different ways – our combat turned to a blur. I prayed that she was leaning on another Discipline, as well. The preternatural perceptive abilities of Auspex come easily to the Toreador, and I'm not certain I've ever met a single one that didn't at least dabble in that power of their blood.

Me? I had picked up the rudiments of Auspex from Alejandro decades prior. He had learned it from a Malkavian bandit, internalized it and used it to escape the Sabbat and Camarilla both for long years, and had shared it with me, alongside the Protean and Fortitude native to his Gangrel blood. Alejandro and I were partners and lovers alike, and shared everything. He had all my fierce strength and speed, and I all of his tricks.

So I knew a thing or two about Auspex. The lowest tiers of it. I was, in fact, using it myself during the duel; Isabella and I were moving so quickly that the uncannily heightened senses made it easier to keep up, easier to offset the darkness of the half-dead nightclub, easier to pierce the shadows that lurked, liquid and murky, all 'round the edges of our duelist field. I could see in the dark well enough to see Alejandro sharking through the Kindred-filled waters, could hear well enough to hear Elizabeth's exasperated sigh and see her go pale against the harsh white light of her phone, could hear every slap of

Isabella's bare feet on the dance floor and every whisper and hiss as her hair and the cloth of her dress snapped and whipped during our duel.

She had to be doing the same. For me to survive the night, she *had* to.

"I hope you can hear me," I spoke quickly, because just right then I was doing everything quickly, clack-clack-clacking my stake against hers in a swift trio of parries as I backpedaled from her lunging at my heart.

"Are you serious?" she hissed at me, pressing her attack.

"Deadly," I slapped my stick against her, backhanded hers melodramatically off-line, and lunged at her like a, well, like a sword-fighting movie pirate.

"Play along, I beg you, on behalf of your city and all those who fight the Sabbat."

She stabbed me in the leg, instead, then the ribs, then the shoulder. One-two-three, quick as you please, then spun away like a, well, like a bullfighter.

"Damn it, woman, listen to me!" I lunged after her – stabbing didn't really cause muscle tissue damage or slow me down, not like it had when I was alive – and tried to draw her back into the fight. I telegraphed every attack, exaggerated every parry. She had to see it. She had to know I was up to something.

"Your Prince is not your Prince," I said, another parry, three steps back, parry, block, counter. "I know him. I saw him. I knew his Sire, my word on my life and that of my friends."

I hissed at her aloud, melodramatically, as she sank her stake low in my belly. She pressed her body close to mine as she did so, though, and hissed back at me; another whisper, an unintelligible message to anyone not operating at our speeds, with our senses.

"You're mad," she said.

But she didn't mean it.

One learns the difference between insults and sincere observations, after more than a dozen decades spent causing trouble everywhere you go.

No, hers was a half-hearted denial, a knee-jerk response. She knew something was wrong with her Prince, deep down. Maybe she'd suspected for a while. Maybe – and here, my black heart nudged me into guessing – maybe her Sire had suspected something, as well, and that was why Isabella was the Primogen now.

In the argument, I was pretty sure I had her.

"You know I'm right. I trust you." God, I was stupid. "You'll do what's right."

I had to trust my gut. Undeath would be boring if we only made good choices, right?

And besides, Allie and Liz were still in the crowd. As aces up your sleeve went, they were a solid pair.

I shifted my feet, cast my arms wide, twisted this way and that, overdid it with a lunge and-thrust. She twisted away from it, masterful, elegant, perfect. The tip raked against her ribs, drew blood, ruined her dress with a red, ragged, tear.

She let out a triumphant yell, gave her stake a flourish-spin, and began a thrust.

My too-sharp senses and enhanced speed felt it happen with grotesque precision. The fire-hardened tip pierced long-dead skin, parted my ribs, slid through the red mess of my dead organs, and angled up, up, up. I stared her in the eyes. I felt the tip prod against my roaring, rushing, beating, heart. I forced my eyes to widen before I seized up.

"Oh, you fool," she cursed me as she felt the stake hit home, too.

I stiffened and fell, every inch of me frozen solid except for my eyes, free to roll in my sockets. I thumped to the floor, helpless, and heard a gasp from Elizabeth and a low growl from Alejandro.

"Cur!" Isabella LeRoy snarled at me and lashed out with one bare foot, jostling me around. It was a scream, a roar, a jet plane taking off against my heightened hearing. It wasn't for my benefit. Was the kick? It had angled me a bit better to see the Prince – black suit, black throne, a shadow against shadows – stand and stride towards us.

"Oaf!" She kicked me again.

"How dare you!" Another kick. I wasn't entirely sure she was still on my side.

"My dress!" She was really letting me have it.

"Hold. Let the matter be settled," the Prince's voice was satin-smooth but another lion's roar to my hyper-acute ears. "The Anarch made his arguments, said his words, and swayed our sense of justice enough to allow this challenge. His guilt has been proven by losing this brutish challenge of his. I allowed him the opportunity, trusting – as do you all – in the wisdom and competence of my Primogen. I knew you would defeat him, my dear, and I knew that you would be right to do so. This...Anarch..."

From my perspective, I saw the shadows twist around his face and his lip curl as he spat the word Anarch.

Just like a Ventruel.

But I knew he wasn't.

Another step closer. Another.

"This Anarch..." He made a big show of stroking his chin, deep in thought. "Yes, this Anarch can join the Caitiff in Final Death, I think. As must all who threaten our city. I will brook no threats to my city, as well you all know."

I wanted to spin my stake in my hand for balance, adjust my grip on the leather-wrapped hilt, tense up my muscles and make ready to defend myself. I couldn't do any of it. My body – my greatest weapon, my oldest ally – had abandoned me over a stake in my heart and an awful idea in my head.

Prince Gladwell nodded, and his beefy, broad-shouldered Sheriff repeated the gesture. One of his no-necked ghouls came from someplace I couldn't see, toting a fire axe. The Prince gave a rueful smile and handed the Sheriff his coat before methodically beginning to roll up his sleeves.

"Let there be no doubt among Baltimore's Kindred," he said, reaching for the axe and hefting it, posing over me like he expected news cameras at any moment. "That their Prince will get even his own hands dirty, should the need arise. No threat will be allowed to stand. Whether vile Sabbat, reckless Caitiff, or vicious Anarch, Baltimore will stand."

"It might. But you won't." Elizabeth couldn't take it any longer. Her big matte wheelgun came up, a monstrous Taurus popular in Alaskan bear country.

Baltimore's top cop and scruffy killer were fast, and so were plenty of other Kindred, but all my ghoul had to do was squeeze her trigger finger. The revolver roared like thunder, spat a grotesque fireball, and a huge, powerful round shattered Gladwell's axe handle, blew through it like it wasn't there, and tore a fist-sized hole in his dead gut.

Vampires are tenacious once granted undeath though, and every ghoul is taught to shoot for the head. Bullets to the torso do precious little to those who need only a heart to fight on. Elizabeth knew that. She was only the distraction.

Alejandro's claws raked into Gladwell from shoulders to small of his back, shredding his fancy shirt and gouging him to the bone, I saw, as he spun and fell to one knee.

A bullet's one thing; the black talons of a Gangrel are another story altogether. Only those Clans blessed with Fortitude stand any chance against such tremendous, supernatural sharpness. Only those with the gift of the blood, or those who have shared and learned it. The Gangrel are one such Clan. The Ventrue another.

And Gladwell was no Ventrue.

He howled insensate rage as his vitae poured from his ravaged back and he lashed out against this fresh indignity the only way he truly wanted to, the precise way I'd prayed he would, the most dangerous way he possibly could.

I knew him. I'd fought him centuries before. I just remembered my opponents better than he did. We Anarchs are easy to dismiss as rabble, easy to confuse for one another, easy to write off as mongrels and troublemakers.

The Lasombra-Prince roared and the shadows all 'round the room leapt to obey his dark will. Tendrils of pure night impaled the crew of the *Sovereign State*; sick wet sounds tore through the nightclub as sick, wet tendrils tore through my best friends. Alejandro would survive it, I knew. Gangrel, as I've mentioned, take a lot of killing. He kicked and spat and howled and fought the nightmares entangling him, fought the dark-eyed Gangrel Scourge and the brush-cut Sheriff; antitribu, both, I was certain. Sabbat.

Only a single inky-black sliver of night had targeted Elizabeth, though. I saw it wriggle, slick and coated in red, at the edge of my vision. I saw it flicker away and let her tumble to the floor like a cut-string puppet. I smelled my blood mingled with hers as everything she ever was poured out of her impaled body.

All around us Kindred shrieked and ran and hissed and snarled, a few of them sleepers finally revealing themselves, more of them wrestling with shadows or tainted ghouls, others fear-frenzying and rabbiting away, perhaps one or two using the chaos to settle old grudges. Catherine Washington, the red-dressed Odia Combs, and Isabella LeRoy, though, struck; the stake was pulled from my heart and the Toreador duelist pressed the attack against her city's bloated parasite, the false Prince, the Sabbat corpse wrapped in indignity and shadow in equal measure.

A wall of shadows rippled into her path as she began to stab him, and ribbons of vile darkness entangled her as she roared and struck – his heart obscured by shadows just enough for her to miss again, and again, and again, turning his chest to a red ruin but never quite landing a flawless shot – over and over. The tendrils lifted her off her feet. She was low on blood from our fight, from exerting herself against me so hard, for so long.

I wasn't exactly full, either.

But, by all the gods of salt and storm and blood, I was *free*, so I could sate that hunger.

I rode the Beast up off the floor and into a howling leap, tore my way through his wall of shadows with inky-blank Protean claws and latched onto the spinning, roaring Lasombra, the Prince of darkness who'd turned Baltimore against itself for a hundred years.

I dug my fingers into him to grab him with impossible hooks, then I sank in my fangs and he almost broke his neck to do the same; mouth to throat, both of us, and it turned into a race, a feast, a pair of monsters gorging themselves until one of them died.

I gave in.

I loosed my Beast, the wild wolf of my soul, the pure, thirsting, taking murderer at my core, the blood-drunk Brujah monster always hiding just behind my smile. The one I always fought down, the one I hardly ever let loose, the one wise men feared and that made wild dogs run from me when I passed on the street. The raw, red spirit of me consumed him.

I drank, and I drank, and I drank.

The shadows raged around us like no storm I'd ever seen aship. The darkness howled and savaged me. Ghouls and Sabbat tried to tear me from my prey until Alejandro and Isabella and Baltimore's good, clean monsters killed them. Odia Combs, the sweet southern belle, hissed and raged against the Sabbat invaders.

Finally, Alexander Gladwell himself – his powerful Lasombra body, his ancient Lasombra soul, his raging Lasombra beast – tried to push me off of him, to no avail. I tasted his heart stop. I swallowed red gallons of his ancient blood, then kept drinking. I filled my mouth with his vitae, then pulled harder for more; amaranth. Diablerie. His soul itself. My Beast would not be denied. I would not deny it.

The storm of shadows fell away and the dead meat sloughed from his bones in my arms, as the unlife left him.

My eyes were half-shut from the pleasure of it all, the pure sport, the thrill of taking and of winning and of surviving, and the power-mad euphoria of the ultimate theft. In that moment, drunk on that slick, dark blood, I would have gladly throated Catherine Washington, Isabella LeRoy, or Odia Combs.

I began to swallow the last mouthful of blood, that I might bare my fangs in challenge to any of Baltimore's stunned, shell-shocked, Camarilla; that perhaps one among them would dare stand against me, now, and that, were I lucky, I might feed again on that sweetest of honey.

I began to.

Then I remembered *her*.

"Oh, no," Alejandro heaved out a sad, dusty, sigh kneeling over the ruin of her.

"Oh, Elizabeth."

He was red up to his elbows from Baltimore's ruined Sheriff and Scourge, but all he cared about was her blood pouring out, now in barely a trickle. Elizabeth had been run through, lengthwise, impaled on shadows that tore as their pierced her, bleeding out too hard and too fast.

I leapt and lunged and crawled to her on all fours, my mouth closed, my claws leaving marks on the floor in my haste.

She looked up at me with terrified brown deer eyes that turned dull and lifeless just as I got to her. Cold. Dead and gone.

No.

I bent down and I kissed her. I gave it to her.

Not my blood, my half-cursed vitae that could strengthen a loyal, beloved, ghoul but could never create life, no.

Not that.

Not mine.

His.

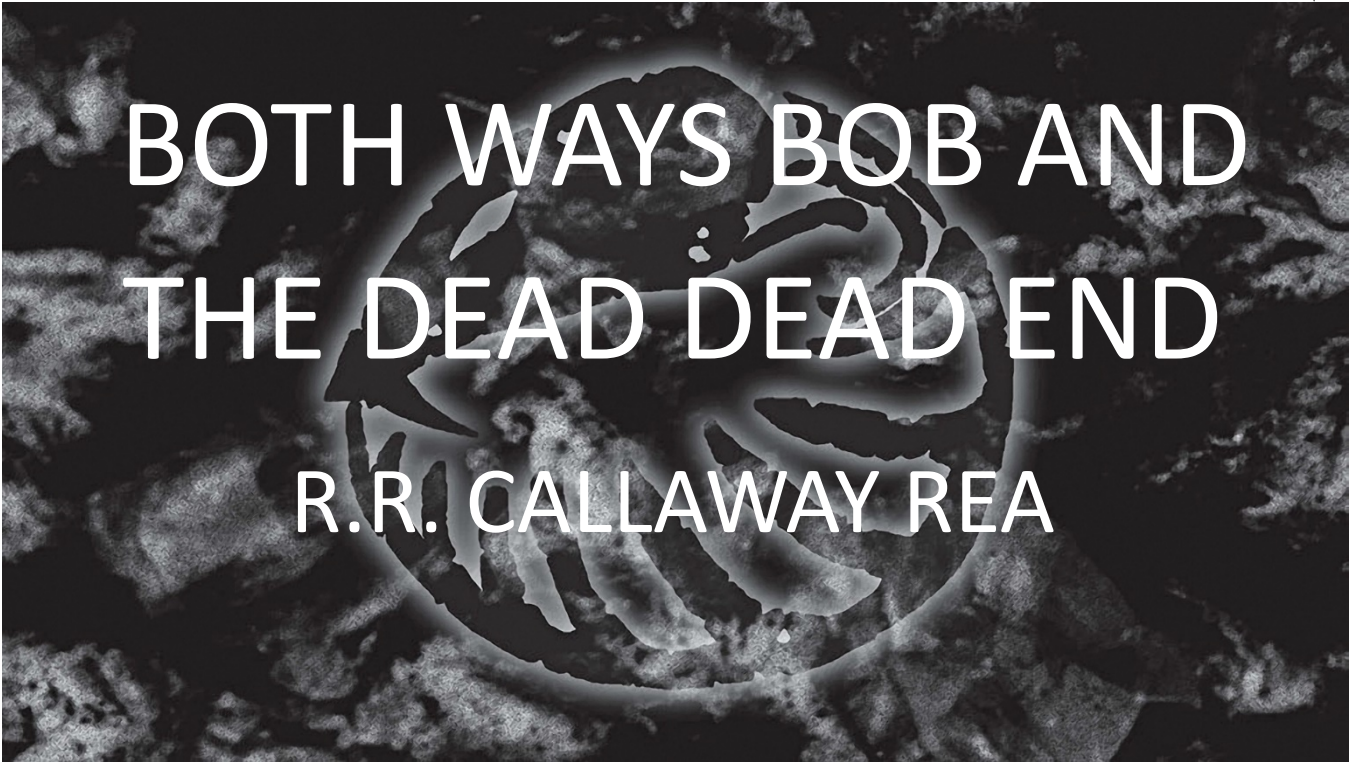
The rich, powerful, vitae of a wise, old Lasombra would make her a powerful creature.

She would live. A vampire at last. Loved by neither Sabbat nor Camarilla, never even remotely accepted by her Clan, doomed to never see the sun again and without a chance to say goodbye to it. She might hate me. The *Sovereign State* would still be her home. Alejandro and I would still be her friends and lovers, but now her peers. She would have strong, dangerous blood. We would find her teachers. We three, we would crew the ship, and sail the night's highways again.

I had only kept a mouthful of his blood. But it only takes a drop.

I could do more than just take.

Sometimes.



BOTH WAYS BOB AND THE DEAD DEAD END

R.R. CALLAWAY REA

“The roads like Bob. He looks both ways.
He’ll help you out. Without a doubt.
And do the job, where’er he strays.”

Waking up is always a challenge because I never know where I am at first. That’s a part of this wandering life that I’m still not entirely accustomed to. This morning, I have a few clues: air-conditioning, dark, bed. So...a motel? A bleary assessment indicates a decent, down on its luck, old, mom-and-pop kinda place. Right in my price range. Cheap.

But that’s not really the “where” I’m looking for. I’ve also got the stuffed-in-the-head feeling I get whenever there are walls between me and the Road. A symptom of the other thing I’m still getting used to. The magic part. With some groggy flailing around, I snag the map I left nearby, ready for just this. Last night, I bent it back on itself against the folds in a particular way and drew a symbol from The Code on it. A diamond in a circle, “You Are Here.” Brushing my finger across it, I cast a spell to fill me in...

Technical answer: Latitude 37° 29’ 37” North, Longitude 94° 16’ 20” West.

Meaningful answer: I’m fifteen yards south of State Highway 160. My thumb traces its line on the map. It feels like it’s in Braille to me, a ridge under

in the map’s smooth surface, but it’s really still just flat paper. And its presence is like a noise, but deeper than any sound. Like a vibration somewhere between static and a cat purring.

The rest tumbles into place as I fully wake up. I’ve got a job and it’s not just one the magical jobs I always get saddled with. It’s also a normal-world kind of job doing long distance survey work for the state highway department. Real world paying employment can be hard to get sometimes, considering my history. So, I need to get my ass to work. I heave myself out of the bed and indulge in the luxuries I can afford knowing I’m going to get paid – a toilet that flushes, a shower with decent water pressure, and a sink to brush my teeth in.

Another extravagance, a mirror. My start of summer buzz cut is growing out, so my hair’s become a mess. I need to buy a comb. And a new razor. The old one’s dull. I ditch it and go with itchy neck beard for now. Other than being scruffy, I’m still the ordinary guy I’ve been looking at since before I Woke Up and started with this mage business. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Glasses. A bit short. Dressed for hiking – Carhartts and a long-sleeved shirt, worn hiking boots, etc. All that’s missing is the bright orange high visibility vest.

Next, I sort through my gear for today’s hike. I always want to take too much, so I have to scale it

back from “might need” to “will need.” Do I need full on camping gear when it’s a day hike? I guess not. Everything to build a campfire from scratch? I just take the flashlight instead. After doing this little dance for ten or so minutes, I go out front and stow my selections in the back of my truck.

I am checked out of the comfy motel by a clerk who is unusually cheery for this early hour, and who calls me by the name I was born with, “Mitchell Roberts.” Something I barely ever hear anymore. I stop in at the diner next door and plow my way through as large a breakfast that I can afford to stuff in.

Time to take to the road.

* * *

Once I’m on my way, I cast another spell. The one I know best. I listen to the sound of my truck’s engine and its wheels on the asphalt, and I fall into the kind mental autopilot that can end a trucker’s life. My own type of meditation. The vibration I felt with the map comes up from the road, through the turning wheels, into the truck and through me, spreading from my balls to the back of my eyes. Route 160 begins to whisper to me about itself. I get to know it, and, in its own sleepy way, it knows me, too.

Route 160 is not too long, but not short either. It starts at the state border, a bit less than eighty miles as the crow flies from where I am but has already stretched for one and a half times that, bending north and south. From here, it swoops northeast, ending in small city tangled with its brothers and sisters. On the way, it goes through about a dozen towns, some of them big, most of them tiny. It crosses and recrosses other roads like vines, but also like dancers changing partners. Sometimes 160 swallows a smaller road. That road becomes a part of it until they part ways. It’s older than the big freeways, but not old, old. No pioneer or Native trails under it.

I shift down mentally and focus in on just the part of the road closest to me now: most of it recently improved – from a standard two lane to what they call a “super two,” meaning it has a third lane down the middle, for turns and passing. Resurfaced with new lines that makes it feel like it’s wearing a new suit; a nice one, but still a little stiff. Up ahead, it’s back to its older self, winding down and around in some river bottoms, crossing over a few bridges

that ache with the need for repair or replacement. It’s more comfortable in its “skin” there, but truth be told, a little itchy where the asphalt is patched.

I wonder how it’s going to feel about being a parent...

“BEEP-BEEP-BEEP.”

My watch alarm goes off. The spell ends. Back to reality. Eyes on the mundane road. I timed it about right. I’m close to the project start. I pick out a place to park and put on the flashers. Before I get out, I grab my big metal clipboard holding all the project docs. It’s already hot and humid outside. This job’s pretty much going to be one long hike after another, out as far as I can and back to the truck each day, until I’m done. And the job won’t pay enough to afford motels every night, so, from here on out, I’m camping. Sweaty hikes and sweltering nights.

I cast a spell to make sense of what I’ll be doing today. A kind of off-kilter tarot reading, I guess. No wind, so I spread out the papers and maps on the hood of my truck. I follow my instincts as I lay them down. In my mind, I start to see where the “baby road” is going to go, how it’s going to lay on the land, and which way I’ll need to walk to set it in place. The arrangement takes on the shape of a circle, crossed with an arrow. The sigil for “Go” in both the old hobo marks and their magical counterpart, the Vagabond Code, created in overnight camps on long trips.

I take out the last slip and lay it down. It ends up in the wrong place. In the Code for “Go,” the arrow’s end stops at the edge of the circle. That last paper makes the arrow go all the way through. That’s “Don’t Go.” That’s not right. I can feel the road-to-be forking off Route 160 right here. My feet are on where it’s going to be. Key words, “going to be.” I know in my gut that this new road is going to happen.

I pick up that last paper and look it over, giving a sigh of relief. It’s not part of the official docs. It’s all scrawled symbols. Looks like Many Maps Meg is giving me another lesson in The Code. I don’t even recognize the symbols that catch my eye – a diamond and a line, a circle crossed with two triangles and a foreshortened “X.” I put it back in the clipboard for later. I’ll look at it when I’m stuck camping in the backwoods. Who knows? It might go better that way.

Now that everything’s right with the world, I file the rest of the docs back into the storage

compartment in the clipboard, ready the gear I prepped earlier and put on my shiny orange vest. A last check, reminding myself it's just for today, and I take off a few things and put them back. Finally, I lock the truck up, then check the locks. I get a lot of flak from the others for over prepping.

As I set out I give Meg the call I promised her. Among the many other things I owe her, she got me this job, and I won't have reception later. Meg's a Vagabond like me, and maps are her thing. "Many Maps Meg knows where you are. She walks no more but travels far." Something bad happened to her that she doesn't talk about. It makes it hard for her to walk, much less go walkabout like the rest of us wandering road mages. But that doesn't mean she can't do miracles with maps. I mean it. Actual miracles.

I hit her contact and the phone only rings once before I hear her scratchy voice, "Is that you, Looker?"

I know she's trying to be nice. Since my Road Name is "Both Ways Bob," the standard Vagabond joke is to call me "Swinger."

I try to put a smile into my voice for her, "Yes, ma'am. I've set out for day one. I got everything you sent me. Anything else I need?"

"Don't you 'ma'am' me again. You should have everything you need. Have you looked over it all?"

"Yeah. Just tried a little something out using them and The Code together and got a read on the new road. Looks like a beaut'."

"A new highway, ready to be born. That's a rare thing anymore, what with all funding crunches."

I pause. Meg can be...cantankerous at times. "Hey Meg, what's with that extra thing you put in?"

"You mean my doodle?"

"Looks like another Code lesson."

"If it was, it wouldn't be like you couldn't use one, Kiddo. The Code is just about half of who we are. You need to pay attention. The more you know, the more it will show you."

"Alright, alright. But what's this one for?"

She gets a little testy, "Figure it out for yourself. I said you had everything you need. You'll need that, too."

Meg's got more experience than me. If she thinks I need it, I guess I do.

"Okay. I'll see what I can do. Tonight, maybe, when I camp. I've got a ways to go today."

There's a short pause. "Yeah, Bob, you surely do. You get out there and make sure this new road is gonna happen. Remember, you're the first one in on this, and sometimes that can be dangerous. Be careful. And try not to get lost."

Get lost? I can see why she's worried about me being the first one who tells people that the government is going to take their land. Many don't take too kindly to that. Sometimes there's threats...and shotguns. But since the Road called me, I don't get lost. Much. One thing I'm really good at is knowing where I am.

"All right, Meg. I'll give you a holler when I'm back at my truck tonight."

"Tally that." And she hangs up. That's an old hobo phrase that pretty much means the same thing as "ten-four." It also works for "Goodbye."

* * *

I hike, starting from where Route 160's going to divide and the new road's going to set out across the landscape. I go up and down. Through patchy woods and empty fields. Across old rickety, dangerous barbed wire fences and mostly dry creek beds. No one troubles me. I don't seem to be troubling anyone. I was right about the day. It's hot already and getting hotter. My get-up doesn't make it any nicer. But other clothing options are even less desirable with the scratches and the sunburn and the bugs, particularly the ticks.

As I hike, I keep up a version of the same spell I used earlier for Route 160. It's my own. I came up with how to do it. Not every Vagabond does magic the same way. Hell, some of them couldn't do squat out here, without their feet on an actual road. Some things can be common. Me and Meg both use maps, and so do others. But I'm one of only two I know who uses surveying. And I can't tell stories, whistle, or share a drink to cast a spell like some I've met. We can't all do the same things with our spells, either. I can't use a stone to brew soup or the names of the roads to start on one and end up on another. But, because I can "look both ways," I'm good with following roads. Where they go in space, but also where they've been and what their future might hold, too. For the road-to-be I'm on now, it's mostly that last one. As I follow down its future centerline, I get this amazing feeling. Pure potential. Like it's almost singing to me about what it's going to be as I'm hiking along where it will be.

But all that's just part of this particular job. I also have readings to take and measurements to make, so I can substantiate the report that will get me paid. So, I've set my watch to half-an-hour intervals to jolt me out of the spell, like I did in the truck on the way here. It only takes a couple of stops before my cell phone is getting zero bars. As expected. After the fourth or fifth stop, while I'm hiking under the spell, I feel a kind of echo up ahead. Like there's an old, derelict road the new one will cross. I check Meg's many maps. Like I thought, there isn't anything marked. Every abandoned, old right of way hasn't ended up in the archives. But if there had been a record, I can guarantee Meg would've found it. I smile a little, thinking I might have something special to give Meg when I'm done. A road that's not on her maps.

A few beeps later, I notice more. The possibilities for the new road are starting to...fray apart some. And they don't feel the same. Like the pulse is changing to a lower tone. Not a tone I really like, though I can't put my finger on why just yet. I can't sense much else about the old road ahead, only where it will cross the new one.

I'm not even halfway into the day I planned, but I decide to slow things up a bit. I throw together a new version of my spell, hoping to get more useful info. Frequent references to maps, compasses, and whatever, but I don't get much more. After that, I use my utility knife to scratch some Code onto the bottom of my compass, the sideways eight for "Don't Give Up" and the circle with the short line going up for "Straight Ahead."

That seems to work. It reveals a path like a game trail though the brush as the land rises ahead of me. It's going right along the route I've been following, heading towards the old road. As I go uphill, there's more trees, which makes this path even clearer. It's still following the centerline of the new road. The ground levels out, the woods thin as the undergrowth gets thicker. I follow the trail to an abrupt clearing of the vegetation. I'm looking right where the old crosses the new. But it's not a road, really. It's an old railroad bed, stretching out east-northeast and west-southwest as far as I can see.

That makes some sense. The Oldtimers call the railroads, "The Steel Road," the original heart and soul of both hobo and Vagabond culture. But they're not the kinds of roads I've known. That's probably why this one foxed my senses. I use my watch as a sundial for a spell to get a feel on the age

of this one. It's at the far edge of how old a railroad could possibly be in this part of the country. But, for all that, it looks pretty clear. You can see the gravel under the rails and ties and out across the shoulder. That's surprising, but you never know how roads will mark the landscape even long after they're no longer used. Even when one is dead, it's not really "dead dead," because anyone who travels it gives it back a bit of life. From the skeleton of a possum, it looks like this one has been used by at least the local wildlife. Across from me, I can see that the path I've been following continues, still right where the new road's supposed to go.

This is worth some attention. And not just for Meg's sake, but because it messed with my read on the future road. I figure I can spare some time to check it out. So, I step off the trail and onto the railroad right-of-way...

* * *

...And something goes really, really wrong. That may have started as a stride, but it ended as a stagger. Like when you miss the height of the next step on a staircase and lose your balance. But add in a twist in the insides like you're going to vomit. I keep enough composure to keep from falling onto my hands and knees. Or face.

When I get back my footing back, I notice some changes. Before, it was just after noon on a sticky, hot summer day. The light is more "near dusk." And the temperature is more, somewhere north of the middle of fall. Hot and sweaty, meet cool air. Add a full body shiver to the mix.

And the trail is gone. Both sides. Just underbrush along the edge, both sides, both directions. Not good.

I figure lost in the woods is probably better than staying here, so I try to make my own path through the underbrush. I get far enough that bushes snap back behind me to block my view of the tracks. I plow forward. A few scratches on my face and hands seem a decent price to pay.

And...I step out of the brush and right smack back onto the gravel of the tracks. On the opposite side of where I went in. I'd already gotten the idea that this was serious business and, truth be told, I was already scared. But that moment was when I knew I could be well and truly fucked, but I don't panic. Seriously. I don't. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. But, I need to get out of here. This is

way above my pay grade. There are others out there who could deal with this better.

I know there's zero chance it's going to work, but I'm going to try Meg. I lost signal a long time ago but...consider the situation. I tell myself that since I went uphill to get here, there could be line of sight to any nearby towers. It's times like this when I miss travelling with Bess Builds 'Em High, the other surveyor-Vagabond. She could whistle up a signal pretty much anywhere. But Bess is off building cell towers or windmills, or something else where you have to look up. And I mostly travel alone anyways.

I fish my phone out of my backpack and call Meg. My phone dies. I don't mean it loses power. I mean it dies. There's a popping noise, smoke comes out of it and the screen actually cracks. I drop it because it's hot and say a few choice and not so nice words. The fall onto gravel doesn't help. Not much even Bess could do with it now. I pick up what's left, wrap it in a fairly sweaty handkerchief and tuck it back in my pack.

When I pick my pack up to sling it back on, I notice something under it that I'm pretty sure wasn't there before. A signpost. An old one. The sign part is covered with a layer of fine mud or dust, but my backpack has smudged some of that away and I see some chalk marks on it. They look like Code. I try to carefully clean it off, using my other sweaty handkerchief. The symbols haven't lasted all that well, but two are clear enough: five diagonal hash marks across two parallel lines, like a Tic-Tac-Toe board with three extra verticals. That's "Unsafe Place." What could be a circle with two arrows crossing, both pointing right. "Get Out Fast." There are bits and pieces of more, but they crisscross and interlock in ways that would make them hard to understand even if they weren't in crap shape. I can make out something like a box. That could be "Danger" or part of "Afraid" but might just as easily be part of the sign for "Trolley" or "Boxcar." My last couple of tentative swipes across the bottom uncover one clear symbol nestled in a lot I don't know. That one symbol is a diamond with a short line coming out of the top point. "Be Ready to Defend Yourself."

All very disheartening, really. And not at all helpful.

The way the symbols are jumbled together makes me think there might be something more going on here. I'm a so-so student of The Code.

Other, older Vagabonds can do a lot more with it than me. Linking the sigils together is one of the ways to do that. Maybe I can work up a spell to show what's worn away? I get out my compass and clipboard, open that and take out a Sharpie and...a folding yardstick. The Code I scratched on the compass before I got here might even help. I look at what's left of the marks and try to let the compass and some contortionist unfolding of the ruler guide my hand in trying to put it back together as the compass spins, telling me when to stop and start.

While doing this, I get a sense of the Vagabond who made these marks. It's not someone I know. I also get a feeling of when the sign was made. I'm not surprised that it's the same as the tracks. Most importantly, I think I know what this is or was meant to be... a warning. And more than just a warning. It's...a lock, of sorts. Locking the world out?

I can't get anything more from the signpost, and it's too big and unwieldy to carry with, so, reluctantly, I put it down where I found it. Across the rails, like a thin bridge from nowhere to nowhere. If I can't find my way out, I guess I should take a look around and try to figure out what's going on. I stow my gear and do what I do best and start walking.

* * *

I don't have to go very far to notice that there are more dead animals than just the possum. Kinda like punctuation marks. Mostly skeletons. Some look very old. Some are not so old and not so skeletal. But there isn't much in the way of smell in the chilly air. Like there's a problem with normal decay here.

There's also some random junk scattered around as well. The kind of stuff you'd expect to see along long abandoned railroad tracks in the middle of nowhere – broken glass, including a few old looking bottles. Black rocks that turn out to be coal and clinkers. Some rusted barbed wire. The remains of a few old tools, like a shovel and pick with corroded heads and splintered handles. Even a busted old box in the midst of a scatter of cut metal nails. The best of the lot is a pretty much intact old lantern. I leave it all exactly where it lies and keep going.

There's this growing feeling I'm getting. Like there is something fundamental missing here. I realize I don't even know what direction I'm going. I

pull the compass out again. It agrees. The needle listlessly spins around, never settling on anything. I know how it feels. But I shake that shit off. I'm a mage. I've got abilities.

I fall back on old reliable and start walking with more purpose and less focus, until the spell takes hold and I understand where that sick feeling came from when I stepped on the tracks. It feels like these tracks road doesn't have a soul. Or...more like...there's an empty place like the void where a tooth was knocked out and the wound never healed, leaving a gap that hurts in the past tense... But somewhere back in there, there's almost a kind of hunger, too. Honestly, all these sensations just plain feel like death, or, really, maybe something even worse. I might have to revise what I said before. These tracks might just be dead dead. Gone in some kind of way that no travel will ever offset. If the new road and this...this thing should cross... Well, honestly, I don't know what would happen, but it's not going to be good.

But what's just as bad as all that is what I'm not getting. Like any idea of how far these tracks go, or where they're headed. Or how it fits in with the outside world. It's like there aren't any reference points. These tracks are just...these tracks. Alone. Bereft. Disconnected.

That's not enough. I need to know more. Walking harder, sweating in the cool air. I put the apparently useless compass away and stop to get the clipboard back out of my pack. And there's this lurch. Like when I first stepped onto the tracks. But it's not inside me, it's all around me. Like the whole world just staggered. Accompanied by a faint noise; a very distant creaking, metallic sound. I kneel down and touch the rail. There's the slightest vibration. Something just started moving. Not at all ominous.

Not knowing what else to do, I change tactics and cast something else. Taking drawing materials out of the clipboard, I look for a blank side on one of the project docs. Meg's puzzle-doodle falls out. I pick it up and file it back in. Not that one. I'd never hear the end of it. The map that doesn't show this railroad is one-sided. Perfect. I use that and try to get some idea of what's going on with these tracks. The result is more like an engineer would make than an artist. Clean lines of the underlying planning, not the plants and trees and whatever has cropped up since. My artist mother was always disappointed I liked drafting like this more than "real" drawing.

And I finally get it when I finish the picture. The whole track is bent back on itself, one continuous closed piece. That's why I couldn't get a sense of how long it is. Add that to how going into the bushes to the right ends up in coming out of the bushes to the left. Magic did this. From the feel of whatever was used, it was probably the same person who made that old sign, meaning it was one of us. A Vagabond. Who ripped a piece of the Road away from the world and twisted it up like an insane pretzel. And from what I've sensed of the soul of this place, they effectively murdered it, too. Making the ultimate dead end. This isn't out of my league. This is beyond the boundaries of what I had imagined was possible, and I have been on the Roads Behind the Roads twice so far. This needs one of the big guns. An Oldtimer. Maybe even Walk-Away Joe.

Like that's going to happen. I'm here. This job is mine.

I did learn something else, too. I get a sense of the length of the tracks. Not the actual length in feet or meters or miles. More the relative length, because, whatever it was before, it's shorter now.

That's when I notice it's started getting dark. Way too soon. It was barely after noon when I found this place. Along with the light fading, the temperature is dropping. The fake fall of the fake afternoon is starting to dwindle into an even more fake early winter evening.

* * *

I stay stopped for a bit. Taking all that in. But, do nothing and you'll accomplish nothing. Not seeing any other options, I figure if I'm at my own dead-end looking across space, maybe time has better answers. At the very least, I will probably figure out how long I have before this noose of rails and ties pulls itself shut around my neck. I start walking again. I time my steps as my feet hit the ground to send the echoes up and down my path from where I've been to where I'm going.

Turns out, time isn't tied up into contortions like distance is here. It's tied up differently. There is a sense of now and back then and later on, like usual, but they are blurred together in uncomfortable ways. There is a line from past to future, but both are so similar, it's hard to pick them apart. Not really helpful. I pivot. My casting, not my feet. And try the spell in reverse. I focus on the ground hitting my feet, sending the echo back up into me to get a sense

of my own timeline, instead of the one around me. Before you think this is wonderfully creative of me, full disclosure - I've done this before. What I usually get is a sense of where I am in time, where I'm going, and where I've been. Tracing the route of my own personal Road, as it were.

Not a big surprise, the results here are disheartening. Troubling even. The only part of my past I can sense is the part on these tracks. My now is this now, walking along the tracks, thinking about time. And the future? It's pretty much the same as the past, but it gets murkier and murkier, until all that's left is shadow. And, like the length of the tracks, my time on the tracks here isn't all that long. Probably shortening, too.

Nothing I'm learning is getting me any actionable info, but, maybe, like the plans and docs when I arranged them this morning, it's not the parts that matter, it's what they make when you put them together. I have an idea for yet another spell.

I stop walking.

The whole world lurches again. It seems worse than last time. I feel like when I cast the spell to try to get to know these tracks. But now the vibration is like a thin, shrill moaning full of abandonment. Like something left in a quietly agonizing sort of limbo, where it can't do anything or be anything anymore. And that thread of hunger. It seems stronger.

The sensation passes. I try to put it to one side and continue casting. I pull out my flashlight, set it upright on the most level of the railroad ties and turn in on. It's not that dark yet, but a little more light doesn't hurt anything. I pull out the docs again. Meg's damn puzzle floats to the ground. Again. I stick it back in the bin and find another empty page, tear it off and put the rest back. I set out my compass and try to use what I know to plot the tracks as a whole with all attendant weirdness, open to whatever message comes.

As I carefully lay down each line, I get the feeling that something about this place has changed... I drill down on the sensation with fast jabs of my pen, making short lines to give my drawing some texture and dimension. I raise up the marker. My hand hovers back and forth over the lines for the tracks, hunting for a particular spot. The compass needle spins. When I find the spot, I trace out a simple rectangle, two small circles and a short segment off the opposite side. The Code symbol for "Boxcar." A stab down right in the middle. A rectangle with a

dot? That's "Danger." I move the pen back until it rests where I am now and draw "You Are Here." Then the spell ends as my flashlight goes out.

Actually, the bulb explodes, smoke leaks out, and there's a chemical smell as something bad happens to the batteries. Shades of my phone. I look over at the compass. The needle has settled. It says the track is going straight east-west. I'm facing west, and the "Danger Trolley" is ahead of me along the tracks.

For hobos, even now, "catching the westbound" is what you say about someone who's dead. Or going to die.

I stand, turn and start walking eastwards.

* * *

It's colder and darker. I can faintly see my breath. I'm glad I'm not a shorts and t-shirt kinda guy on a job, because this is not great even with what I am wearing. The evening light has shaded into the gloom of an early winter night under heavy clouds. The kind that makes every shadow into a deception. The kind that leads to tripping, falling and broken ankles. I don't have a flashlight anymore, so I use my lighter a few seconds at a time, to get an idea of what lies ahead. It's all the light I've got left.

Even with the way distance is screwed up here, the "Danger Trolley" was a ways away, and I've been walking in the opposite direction. But any distance I've created is being erased if the danger is coming towards me. And the noises and vibration in the rails indicates that is the case.

I can't address a problem if I don't know what it actually is. And to live through this, I have to fix this. Do the job. I'm not just rescuing myself. I'm saving that new road. And that's my real job. The one in my verse of The Rhyme. The one the Vagabond Captains gave me. The one that I know in my heart comes straight from the Road itself. I'm supposed to "do the job". Sure seems like this is a job that needs doing. But to do it, I need to be able to see what I'm up against. Before it comes to see me.

I know this one is a bad, bad idea, but I start another spell.

I take out some surveyor tape and stop to kneel down.

Another one of those lurches. Not that much different from last time. I think the noise of the Boxcar moving might be a smidge louder.

Hunkering down, I mark out a triangle on the gravel, "Tramps Here." Namely, this tramp. Then, I put the compass face down in my right hand and grasped so tightly I can almost feel the needle moving against my palm. I put a knee on one of the rails and wait until I can feel the cold seep through and the thrum of its motion on the tracks. Finally, I hold my left hand up and flick the lighter, fuel turned up high, spearing the night with a sudden flare. I feel the rail start creaking more against my knee and the compass needle spins and stops in my hand, aligned to the tracks as I look down the rails...

And I see it. Just for a split second. I see what's at the other end of the track, up close and personal. Like I was kneeling right next to it. No big surprise, it's a boxcar. A black one, of course. A rotten sort of black. Black in the way only the most menacing things are black. I can tell it's the source of that faint hunger I felt before. Not so faint now. And I could actually see the hunger and malice. Like they were colors. Or shades of blackness. That's what made me turn. I don't want to see that. I don't want to know that. But that wasn't the worst part. Whatever it is, I know it saw me, too.

Turning away, however, doesn't mean I stop seeing things. The lighter is still going, after all. My vision continues, glances off the curvature, mixing left and right, going up, around, and spiraling back. I look past the Black Boxcar and I see...myself. Because this track is one big loop. Ultimately being farther and moving away seems better than turning and facing it down for now. So..."eastwards" it will stay. I start walking again.

A consoling thought is that, just maybe, if I make it through this alive, they'll change my Road Name to "One-Way Bob."

Oh, and I can tell the total length of tracks has diminished again as well.

* * *

It takes some near hopeless trudging before my brain kicks back to the sign. One of those half-erased symbols has to be the same "Danger Trolley" I drew. If I know that, what else could I make out? Wait. I had to have walked back past it. But, no sign. Is it like the trail? Is the Black Boxcar hiding it? Moving it?

What if I can still find the sign? I've looked for the trail and couldn't find it, but I didn't look specifically for the sign. I can even use the same spell that

showed me the Boxcar. That spell probably won't work for me to closely examine the sign for long enough. But...I've heard of a trick that I've never tried. Other Vagabonds can find something on the side of the road and grab it, even if it's miles away. I've never really tried it, but I know when I cast a spell to look for something far away, it's like I'm right there. Maybe, just maybe, if I can find the sign, I can try to grab it and bring it from wherever its current "there" is to my "here."

Downside is that this could mean seeing at the Black Boxcar again. I have to be honest. Having done that once, the thought terrifies me. But, if this track is all one loop, then the sign has to be between me and the Boxcar. There's no other place it can be.

However, I don't want to stop moving again. Every time I stop, things get worse. So, a few changes are in order to cast while still in motion. I get the tape from where I shoved in my pocket last time and make the triangle across my chest this time. Instead of kneeling on the rail, I jump up on top of it and start walking heel-to-toe, though it seems a little whimsical, considering my circumstances. Once I'm up there, I can feel the metal quivering through the soles of my boots as the damned thing grinds its way towards me. Last bit's the same. I light the lighter and I look east first, along the tracks. They spool out in front of me...and I almost miss the sign laying across the rails, just like I left it. Definitely not where I left it, though. It has to have been moved. The Black Boxcar moved it. It can move things. But at least it's not anywhere around the sign.

I keep the lighter lit and my focus on that sign. This here's the hard bit. I have to figure out how to reach out and grab what I'm seeing. While I try to keep my balance, my forward momentum and my eye on the prize, I do a quick mental inventory of the tricks I've used to see if any options leap out.

All for naught. The Boxcar must know I'm trying something, like it knows when I stop, because there's another one of those damn lurches. All of a sudden, that oblong bastard assemblage of dry rot, rust and what I hope is just black paint is between me and the sign. My concentration wavers. So does my balance. And what happens when you lose your balance while walking fast heel-to-toe on the top of a rail? You take a header.

I am not going to screw this up. With the way space is warped here and the spell I have going, I can still see the sign clearly, even though it's on the

other side of the Boxcar now and I'm falling flat on my face. Still, since I can see it, it stands to a peculiar sort of reason, that I can still reach it, right? Fine then. As I take my tumble onto the rough gravel and split and splintered ties, I use the tumble to grab for the sign, fingers reaching for the edges to pull it in towards me... because falling is motion, like walking.

And I get it. But there's another lurch and the Boxcar goes smashing right over the post while I'm still part there and part here, both at the same time. There's a sort of explosion as the whole signpost breaks apart. Meanwhile, I'm trying to tuck and roll, almost managing to land half on my back, half on my ass. But some kind of force from the "blast" kicks me down the tracks like a stone skipped across a rough pond. Lucky me, my big backpack cushions some of the bounces. But not all of them. I get to see the stars that probably never shine here. And there's a shrill ringing in my ears to go with it.

But I'm okay. A little winded. A little beat-up. Maybe a little concussed. But I got the sign. I unfold my arms to check on my prize. To be honest, it's not exactly what I hoped for. More than a little damage happened during the retrieval process. Which, I have to admit, I'm pretty stoked I was able to pull off. If I make it through this, I'm not sure how I'll manage it again without all the falling, the bruising, the ringing ears and the blurred vision, but I will.

What I end up with is about three quarters of the signboard, with about a third of that about to split off, and a useless section of post, which breaks off and I drop it. I take a look at the remaining sign, but, through the new scratches and old dirt, I can't make out much of the original Code or even my marks. But... I'm stopped again... and nothing happens.

I should feel another sickening lurch and hear it picking up speed, but I don't. Maybe that jump took something out of it. And put it a little farther away, too.

But still, time moved forward again. It's black night now and it's gotten even colder. Full winter with no coat now. I'm starting to shiver.

Back to the matter at hand. To be able to do anything with this, I'm going to need some light. To be able to keep doing anything, I'm going to have to have some heat.

I'll have to build a fire.

So, I look around to see if there's anything I can use. Because, despite the fact I'd predicted I needed it, I second-guessed myself and left what I need back in my truck. I have to work with what I've got. Flammable materials? There's the now-not-so-useless piece of post I retrieved. Splintered wood from the ties might work. There's still creosote left there, I'm sure. I pry up what I can with my rapidly numbing fingers, adding random bits of burnable junk, and, yes, even a few stray bones. They'll burn. The problem's going to be tinder. Something that will catch really fast and easy.

If I get up, get some dried plants from the verge, that's adding more stops. Magic and stopping bring the Boxcar closer. So I need to conserve the number I do of both. However, there's another option. One I'm not happy about. The storage compartment of my metal clipboard is filled with paper that would make great tinder. But which also happens to be the docs for this job. And maps that Meg sent me. If I burn the docs, I won't be able to explain it. Particularly considering my reputation. And Meg won't like me burning her maps. But if I don't, I can't look at the sign. Which also means I won't be getting paid for the job or have to face her. Because I'll be dead. I can deal with both consequences. The first will suck. The second... I can live with having to face Meg when both me and the new road are on the line.

I sigh, get out the now dented clipboard, crumple up the papers in its storage compartment bin, and lay out the other fuel to make this as proper a fire as I can. The docs light easily. There really must have been some creosote in the ties, because they catch quickly. Light, now, I have. And heat, too. But at a cost. I hear the creaking as the Boxcar wheels begin to roll. And I didn't stop or cast a spell yet. Unfair! And, as it moves, I can feel the tension in my stomach that I'm thinking means that the track is getting shorter. This fire is probably not going to last all that long, but it may last longer than I will.

I make the most of it and hold the pieces of the sign together while I take another look. Maybe it's the firelight. Maybe I've figured out enough context to get more from it. Maybe it's just desperation. Whatever the reason, it makes more sense. I see everything from before... "Unsafe Place," "Get Out Fast," and the now obvious combination of "Trolley" and "Danger." But now I can make out an upside-down "Y" for "Keep Away" in the jumble. That

"Defend Yourself" is balanced with the circle and line that means "Straight Ahead." I mistook that for part of the "Trolley" symbol. It's not, but it points at a tilted "X" I don't know from The Code I've learned but looks damn familiar. And that X is over...what is that?

That last symbol is on Meg's doodle. Which is burning up, right now. I drop the sign and it cracks in two. I poke the bin to stir the contents. Is it still in there? It's still there. Right near the heart of the fire, but, fuck it, I reach in, burning my damn hand as I grab it out and pat out the flames. It's scorched, but when I unfold it, enough remains to see I was right. There are symbols in common. With Meg's still smoldering drawing in hand, I match things up. Comparing both, some of the other symbols on both start making sense. That tilted "X" is the tracks. The circle there is "Go This Way," connected to a schematic train engine for "Catch Out," hobo for taking a ride or going somewhere.

So...to defend myself I need get off the tracks by catching out using...the circle with two triangles?

But that's not exactly the same on both. On Meg's there is a sort of half-circle loop coming off the top of the upper triangle. It's a lantern. And those lines coming out of it? Gotta be light.

I think I've got my way out.

Because, though I don't have a lantern, I've seen one.

A plan starts to come together. Doing what I need to won't be easy or neat. Or safe. But I've got all the bits and pieces. I only need to put them together just exactly right, with the right timing and I can make it out of here.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

* * *

I have as long as this fire lasts to plan. I could look both ways through time to try to plan this out, but you end up spinning your wheels doing that. Going back over and over your plans trying to find that one, best way to do it. A way that never really exists. All actions have consequences, and some are going to be negative ones. So, I plan this the normal way. Meaning, much of this is going to be pulled right out of my ass as it goes down. When the fire starts to dim and gutter, I feed it Meg's puzzle and put both parts of the sign in for good measure. The fires crackles merrily consuming them but dies

down again rapidly. Par for the course here. I rub my hands one last time in the warmth over what glowing coals there are and take a mental inventory of the things I think I'll need.

More as a mission statement than any actual magic, I roll up my sleeves and, using ashes from the fire, I draw three symbols from The Code along the inside of both of my forearms: Circle crossed with a short line, a capital "T" tipped most of the way over and the sideways "8" – "At the Crossroads, Go This Way," "Get Out Fast," and "Don't Give Up."

Okay. Ready.

First part I've done plenty. Not time for caution or care, instead of walking, hiking, trudging or any other kind of hoofing it, I get up, turn east and run like Hell is following close. Which it is or will be. Doing so, I send my sight corkscrewing along the twisted angles of this broken place. All to find...

The lantern. Got it.

Problem is, something else is near there. The Black Boxcar. And, because of what has to come next, I can't just look away this time. I try to keep my gaze as superficial as possible, but, even as I try hard to make the lantern my focus, I can't help but see the Boxcar's backside door has some carvings on it as my vision skates past. Right under some animal skull nailed dead center, like a doorknocker, there's Code. But it's wrong Code. I've heard of this. Yegg Code. Yeggs are the flipside of everything it means to be a Vagabond. The wanderers who've lost the Road and damned themselves. The contaminated symbol is black on black, but I can still see it – some kind of up and down cross-hatching, like "Unsafe Place," but bigger and bent straight. I don't know what it is saying, and I don't want to. I see more Yegg Code there, but, luckily, I can't make it out. I've got better things to look for.

But now the Boxcar knows I'm up to something. What I feel is like the lurches from before, but stretched out, time and space both shrieking like fingernails on a chalkboard. That plus the remaining ringing in my ears is...really awful.

Time to get the lantern. I know I said I'd do a better job when I cast spell next time, but there's no time for innovation. So, I leap for the lantern, reaching out to "there" to bring it to me "here." When I feel my fingers touch the rough and rusty metal, I grab, trying to bring it in close to my chest, while going for a controlled fall. Pretty sure I yelped as I hit the rails and rolled across the ties. This time

though, no tumbling ass over elbows like I was just hit by an oncoming car. The fall or the spell or the combination of both only added a notch to my headache. Still, there's gotta be a better way to do this.

But I've come to a stop again. That's two cues, stopping and magic, together. There's a squeal and the tracks start to shake as the Boxcar increases speed, adding to the ongoing earsplitting jangle from the extended lurch.

Now, however, I have the lantern. Next part is nothing but manual dexterity and speed. No tricks up my sleeves on this one.

Besides, my sleeves are rolled up anyways.

I'm still lying half on my side on the railroad tracks, with the backpack propping me up like a kickstand. Carefully, but quickly, I set the lantern upright on a tie and fumble around in its innards, to find where the fuel is supposed to go. I reach into my right front pants pocket and fumble out my lighter. Unscrewing the top, I pour most of the scant remaining fluid into what better be the right place in the lantern. But not all of it. I leave enough for what comes next.

Vertigo sweeps me up like a rogue wave and tries to drag me under. I can hear the wheels howling on the rails, which are convulsing like there's an earthquake. I'm a little surprised I don't feel the edge of the bow shock from the air piling up in front of the Boxcar as it bears down on me. That's how fast it feels like it's coming.

But I'm not looking up. Not yet. I will, though. Right after I do this...

I hold my lighter up to the lantern and give it a very heartfelt flick, offering up a silent prayer to...well, I guess, to the Road, really. There's a sputter. I have a split second of doubts. The lantern's too old and corroded for this to work. There's not enough fluid left in the lighter. That wind I expected just arrived and there's no way that little, feeble flame is going to stay lit...

The lighter, the lantern, and the flame join together to ignore me. The lantern lights up. And I mean lights up. Like a lighthouse. So...not an ordinary lantern, I guess. I don't have time to register any surprise, because now is the moment of truth. Did I solve Meg's puzzle correctly?

I look up.

And, really, I have to admit I'm just as much confused as terrified. My brain isn't processing what I'm seeing. The Boxcar is only yards away, bearing down on me. That's not the surprising part.

It's that it's bearing down on me from both ways, profane spatial distortion from the combination of its forward motion and the length of the track being subtracted from existence simultaneously. Leaving me square between the front and back of the Boxcar, with both ends hurtling towards me at body-crunching speed.

But the Light... Oh, the Light... It shows everything so clearly. I ignore the Black Boxcar and what it's doing to the mutilated space of this twisted track. The light clearly reveals the opening to the trail. I can even see how the Boxcar was hiding the trail, tied up in a knot of distance. But it's not hiding it anymore. Not in that light.

The way the Black Boxcar's ending this hunting...or haunting... It's actually a mistake. There's so little track left now that there the trail can't be that far from me. This whole universe is about two boxcars long.

I'm not catching this westbound train... east-bound train...train bound for nowhere...I'm catching the train out of here.

I jump over the rails and half-sprint, half-dive for the gap in the undergrowth.

There's an interval where the Boxcar could still end me, but it would have to derail and end itself, too. But it would win. I would die. It would get that, but just that. I can feel that it wants me with a naked hunger, but, apparently, not that much. It goes careening past as I sprawl forward onto the path.

I made it. Followed by a crunching, crashing, wailing wall of noise...

* * *

I landed on top of the lantern. A quick roll, and I'm looking up at a high, blue sky.

I'm back.

I sit up. The lantern is fine. It's out, but it's fine. I'm fine, too. Even though I'm beat up, bruised and burned, I'm not feeling that bad. I breathe in and out. The air is thick and hot. It sluices the cold out of me.

I can't help myself. I do an inventory. I lost my lighter. Flashlight gone. I still have my phone, but it doesn't work. When I was rolling around, my rain hat must have come out of my pocket. Going to be hard to replace all that when I probably won't get paid for the surveying job. Really, overall, not unhappy with the outcome.

I also lost the clipboard and burned all the project docs, my notes, and Meg's maps. As I said, there will be hell to pay for that. But...she can see further than me. If she saw all this and gave me puzzles and half-assed warned me...maybe...just maybe, I'll get a pass.

Yeah right. She's my best guide so far and serves the Road just like as I do, but those were her maps.

Luckily, I ended up on the trail on the right side of the tracks. Pretty sure I can find the way back to the road without too much trouble, even without the maps. Even without magic if it came down to it. And, if there's any trouble with me getting lost, Meg knows where I am. That's in the Rhyme. It's who she is.

Finally, I do the thing I want to least. I look at the trail for where it crosses where the tracks were. There's no trace of them visible to the naked eye, and this trail is barely enough of a road for me to cast the spell...but I get...almost nothing. Maybe an echo of that final din?

Which leaves me with questions I don't have answers for.

At the end, was it a roar of rage at the one that got away or did the Black Boxcar break space so badly that it ended up colliding with itself? Or, so badly that the whole damn place crashed in on itself?

Who made that dead dead-end? I know the Boxcar was awful, but how is anything bad enough to be worth slaughtering a road like that?

And what does the lantern have to do with it? Because I've still got that lantern and it seems like it's something unwise to leave laying around, but something that might be dangerous to carry with you.

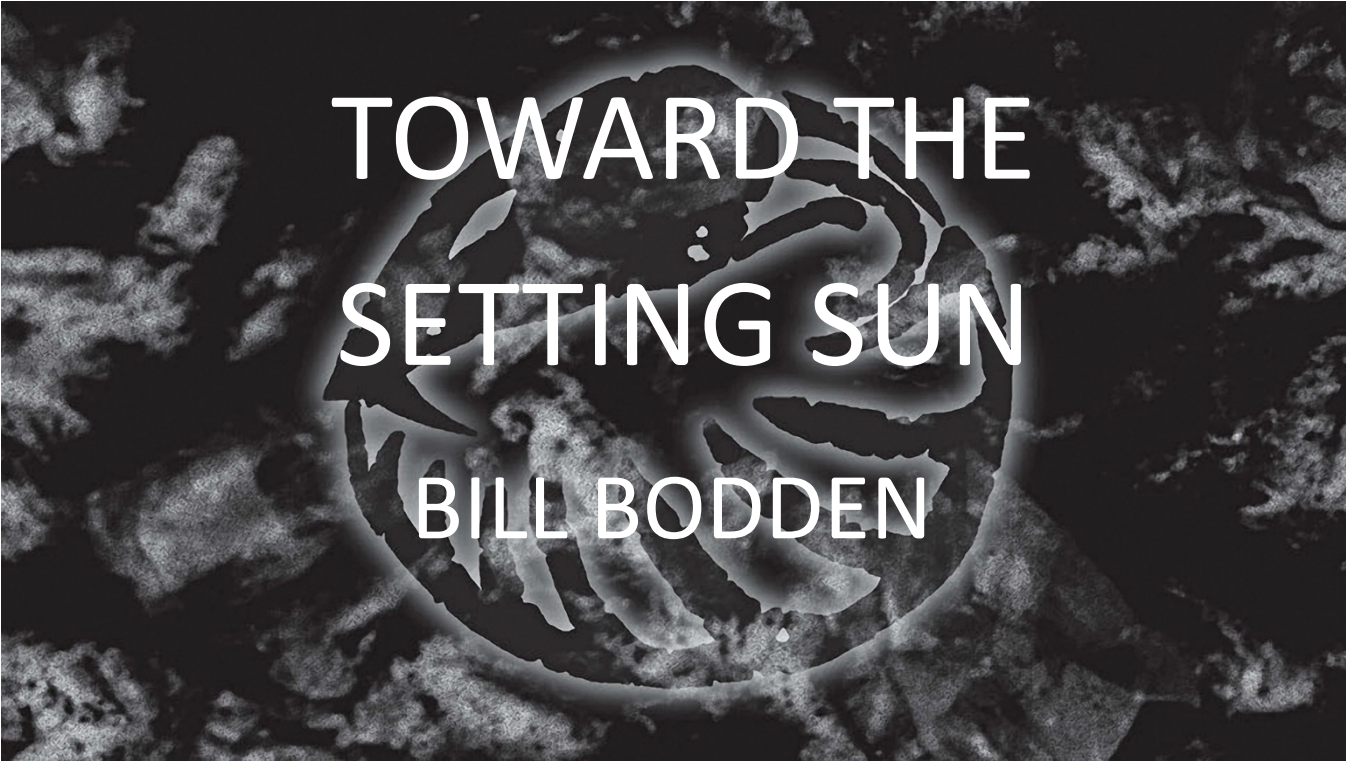
Anyways, I have some hiking to do. Back to the truck. Not ahead. Not today. I might not even make it back before real nightfall. If not...bringing the camping gear would have been really, really handy...

I'll check on the road-to-be as I go, but I'm betting that all that back there? Its problems have gone away.

I sure as hell hope so.

Tally that.

*"Mind the path. Keep your eyes keen.
When the track twists back, beware the Black
Or feel its wrath, 'Cause you've been seen."*



TOWARD THE SETTING SUN

BILL BODDEN

“Nobody move - this is a hold-up!”

The train rocked gently as the three men entered the car. I kept my eyes shut - well, almost shut. They were open just enough that I could see the shouting man and he wasn't a pretty sight. He was tall - taller than most - and his skin was turning a kind of purple color. His left eye was starting to bulge from its socket, and his fingers were big enough that he'd had to remove the trigger guard on his revolver to be able to fire it.

Clearly he wasn't right.

As they emerged from the previous car into my own, I'd let my hand drop to my side. Now I took the liberty of drawing my own pistol from its holster; I was gonna need it.

“Hands in the air everyone!”

This man was a bane-infected monster or my name was John Brown. Everyone I could see had their hands up, except me. I continued to feign sleep, my hat slouched low over my face making it tough for them to see my eyes. One of the two normal ones turned and locked the door behind him. Three of them, one bane-infected: five shots in my Colt Navy revolver.

This was gonna be close.

I'd come out west to get away from this sort of thing but, like a bad penny, it kept following me around. I'd spent five long years fighting against

the Rebs, only to discover near the end that agents of the Wyrms had been playing both sides against the middle. Took my mustering out pay and everything I'd saved, bought some gear and supplies and got on a train heading west. Just getting to this point was a tough journey, and it looked to be getting tougher still before the day was over. Don't know how long the wilderness would stay wild with so many people flooding the Plains and California, but I figured it couldn't be worse than things back east.

Now I wasn't so sure.

“We want your money and anything of value. Watches. Jewelry. Hand it over and you won't get killed.”

This from one of the two normal looking fellers. The third one had a sack and was walking down the aisle, holding the bag open to make it easy for the good folk to drop their valuables inside. My right hand was on the seat, my colt hanging down in my hand and just out of sight. I quietly pulled back the hammer. I doubted the man's promise about nobody getting killed; his bane-infected friend looked hungry, a rope of drool hanging from his lip.

Sure enough somebody was gonna get killed here just now. Maybe me.

He was holding the sack with both hands, which meant his gun hand was busy. The gun was pointing toward the floor, which gave me an advantage - at

least with him. Mr. Bane had taken a step or two forward and was eyeing a little one in front of him - a boy - with the kind of greed in his eyes that a starving man has looking at a banquet.

Time slowed down as the man with the sack came to the seat in front of me. Any second now he'd see my revolver, and it would be time to pay the piper for one of us. I slid my arm closer to my side to buy me a few more seconds. He stepped forward, grabbed my shoulder, and shook me hard.

My gun came up.

Lifting my head, I looked past the bane-infected monstrosity in the aisle to the door separating this car from the next, where the conductor's ashen face was framed in the window. I heard the click, click as he tried in vain to open the locked door. As if in slow-motion, the bane turned toward him at the sound.

I fired.

Bag-man went down without a peep, a hole in his chest big enough to ride a horse through. Second man turned at the sound of my gun, and I raised my arm as I pulled the hammer back again. My pistol barked once more, and the second man lost his face and crumpled to the floor. Two down, three bullets left. So far, so good.

Mr. Bane turned around, and I could see the horrified conductor reeling back from the sight of the creature's face. At least he'd stopped trying to open the door, so that would be one less potential victim.

Maybe.

My first shot hit the bane square in his forearm, forcing him to drop the gun. I didn't like wasting the shot but it couldn't be helped. I had to get that gun away from him to have a chance at surviving. My left hand slipped behind my back, drawing my totem-knife from its sheath, even as I pulled the trigger again. My second shot caught the bane square in the chest, but he was moving now, and coming fast. I stepped into the aisle, backpedaling as the huge beast-man bore down on me. I knew more body shots wouldn't do much good, so I aimed my pistol straight up and waited. As soon as his chest barreled into my hand, my left hand swung forward, plunging my knife into his body at an upward angle just under his ribs even as I fired with my right.

The top of his head exploded in shower of greasy, purple sludge.

Lord, what a mess!

Things had happened so fast that folks were only just now taking cover and those closest to us

got showered with the foulest-smelling stuff they ever come across, but those farther away were spared. He was still moving though, his momentum carrying me right along with him, slamming both of us into the door at the far end of the car, cracking the glass and the wood from our impact. Despite his terrible injuries he still managed to lift me up, both of his hands knotted inside the front of my shirt.

If I was gonna change, it would have to be now or I wouldn't get the chance.

I was a half-second away from doing so when his grip loosened, his bulging eye rolled back into his head, and his mouth opened. If the green goo smelled bad, his breath was worse; I nearly passed out from the stench.

Suddenly, my feet were on the floor again, and Mr. Bane's arms dropped to his sides. I could just make out a smoky, thin black cloud spewing out of his mouth, rising into the air and disappearing. Doubt anyone watching would've seen it unless they were as close as I. Then the bane tipped over backwards, falling to the floor like a mighty oak.

I pulled my kerchief out of my back pocket and wiped the mess from my face and hands. I felt itchy all over, but the sensation was fading; I'd pulled this off without changing in front of all these folks.

Lucky.

The clean-up took much longer than the fight.

I made up a story about leprosy - none of these folks knew any different, so convincing them to destroy anything touched by the bane's goo was simple. On my advice, they burned every rag, broom, and mop that touched the stuff. The Pinkerton man, who took the worst of it from where he cowered in his seat, looked uncomfortable standing around in his just his union suit after burning the rest of his clothes, but even he seemed grateful for my efforts. The conductor refunded my ticket, handing me my coins back with a smile.

"That was mighty good shooting, Mr....?"

"Johnson. Jake Johnson."

"Well, thanks again, Mr. Johnson. Much obliged. You can take compartment 6 in the next car, courtesy of the Union Pacific Railroad."

I nodded, reaching up to tip my hat before belatedly recalling that I burned it along with the other bane-polluted things. Instead, I gave him weak salute, and found a seat in the first-class car as directed.

It had gone from day to night while I was engaged in dealing with these things. As I passed the

windows in the Pullman car compartment I looked out at the stars, remembering what my mother told me - that the stars were a part of my legacy, and I should always find time to admire them. My father wasn't in on the joke, and Ma always reminded me to keep this heritage a secret, lest there be trouble of the worst sort. I hadn't known any other of my kind except my mother: hadn't looked, either, truth be told. The war had been over for five years now and I was free to roam. I was headed west, running away from the future I couldn't help but see. This was an age of the Wyrms and despair was its calling card. I would do what I could along the way to help in the fight, but once I hit the Rockies, I would build a place for myself far from other people and enjoy the rest of my days while I still had some left.

We pulled into Cheyenne the next morning, and my crate was carefully unloaded onto the platform. I had no horse - no hat, either - and I needed to arrange a few things before I could make my way into the wilderness. My intention was to head north-northwest to Fort Casper, then north from there - maybe as far as Canada. Carve out a small homestead and find a way to be happy. That was my plan.

I was able to find a hat to my liking in Cheyenne; also found a horse that would tolerate me. Most horses get spooked around us - we are big, scary predators after all. But this one seemed almost resigned to me. Since it was the only horse that would let me near it, I bought him. I rode him back to the rail yard where my crate had been unloaded, waiting for me.

Prying it open, I pulled out the saddlebags and rucksack, filling them with the bags of hardtack and jerky that I'd purchased, along with the fresh food I'd gotten at the general store on my way back to the rail yard. Apples mostly, but also a couple ears of corn for me and a bag of oats for my new best friend, Sampson. I managed to get everything loaded - including the small barrel of nails I'd brought with me from back east where they were cheaper - with room to spare. Just before noon, I got directions to the land office and rode there to find a piece of ground to call my own.

I was greeted by a clerk whose crisp white shirt seemed to light up the dim office. He wore tiny, round glasses perched on the end of his nose, and black half sleeves from wrist to elbow to protect his shirt from ink stains.

"Good morning, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking' to buy some land to homestead. What's available?"

I hefted a bag of coins onto the counter between us. I'd heard that, out here, folks preferred coin to paper money, so I'd converted all the cash I had into coin at a bank before I left Chicago.

"Well, sir, I can't really do anything for you until you've staked your claim to the land. What I can do is show you on a map the sections that no one else has a claim to and point you out that way. If you build some kind of house on it - even just a shack will do - that will help seal your claim to the land. Then all you have to do is come back here, pay the fee, and purchase as much land around your shack as you like."

He did as he suggested and I thanked him and then headed out. Once I got off the main trails I found what I wanted pretty quickly. The parcels he'd showed me were clear enough, and I found a nice patch just outside of Indian territory. I pitched a tent, got out my axe, and over the next two days I felled a few pines to build my cabin.

The location was perfect: far enough from town not be bothered, but close enough that heading in for supplies wouldn't take all day. Sampson helped me drag the logs closer to the site, and I rewarded him with some fresh oats from the bag. I even hollowed out a log to make a water trough for him.

So far, so good.

That night, dreams came to me; dreams of the Wyrms. I saw a deep pit full of hideous Wyrms - tainted servants, digging and blasting and trying to get at something deep in the earth. As they were lighting the fuse on a stick of dynamite, I woke up.

The explosion followed me from my dream and I nearly jumped out of my skin at the thunderous sound. Sampson was an inch away from blind panic. I patted his flank to help calm him. The campfire had burned low, so I threw another log on, and gathered my gear quickly.

I'd bought a rifle before I got on the train; it was from a new manufacturer - the Winchester Repeating Arms Company - and came highly recommended. I made sure it was loaded, chambered a round and then headed upslope to find the source of the explosion. When I got to the top of the hill, I could see a sickly glow coming from another hill over. Shadows were passing back and forth through the glow, and a sick feeling came over me. The moon was only half-full, but it shed enough light on the thinly-wooded slope that I could see once my

eyes adjusted away from my campfire. I crept to the top of the next ridge and peeked over.

There was a large pit below me, recently dug, and a couple dozen men were moving back and forth, carrying barrels of something from a pair of wagons to the edge of the pit, dumping the contents in, and moving the empty barrels away again. What they were dumping was the source of the sickly glow: it was a thick goo, bright green, and poured out like spoiled milk. The smell of the Wyrms was everywhere in this little valley, and a fresh whiff came with each new barrelful that they poured into the hole. Every so often there was muffled sound, like a scream, maybe, coming from deep in the earth. It didn't sound like a human being and it was more sensed than heard.

I pulled back from the hill top and rubbed at my week's-worth of beard, scratchy and stiff and prickly under my fingers. I left the east to get away from this sort of thing, and here I was smack in the middle of something awful again. I doubt any of the Wyrms-knives knew I was here, and even if they did, would they set such an elaborate trap just to catch one Garou?

New sounds came from below. I poked my head over the top again to see what was happening now.

The men had apparently finished pouring out the barrels and were now staring into the pit. One of them was clearly the leader: he was pointing and barking some kind of orders, and the rest went off to get something else.

Another scream: this time, I could sense more about it. It definitely came from the pit, and there was a strong smell to it, like burnt metal, that put me in mind of the earth and spirits. It was clear that they were trying to corrupt whatever was in there, either kill it or turn it to their side by drowning it with this Wyrms-tainted goo. I sure as hell couldn't stand by and watch them corrupt something so pure as an earth spirit.

My skin began itching, and before I knew it, the change was coming over me. I fumbled at my shirt, my fingers almost changing faster than I could undo the buttons. I grew huge, monstrous, and the pain of the change made me shudder. A howl escaped my snarling lips as I pushed out to speed the change, deciding I was all in.

When my transformation was complete, I dove over the crest of the hill and rushed down toward the pit. With that howl, all pretense of stealth was gone and I didn't worry about them seeing me coming. I

was going to battle now, and win or lose, it felt good.

They began firing as soon as they saw me coming. A few shots came close, but I was lucky and didn't take a single hit until I reached the clearing. As I did, I took in the destruction wrought by these animals to get at the thing in the pit: trees hacked down and shoved to one side. The smell of death was everywhere, but it was mostly small death; little forest creatures killed to make a clearing and path for the wagons. I smelled a dead man: old and frightened, but dead for more than a day. Must've been some prospector, or a recluse trying to escape the horrors of the world, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Just like me.

That was the tipping point; my rage exploded from me like a dam bursting under the strain of a too-flooded river. I covered the open ground like some kind of demon. No shots rang out as I closed with these men who gaped open-mouthed and terror struck, their eyes wide with fear. I tore into them like a tornado, limbs and heads and scraps of life flying in all directions. I had killed ten before I even slowed down; by then, the rest were running for the cover of the wagons.

I took my first hit as I turned toward them, my rage already waning. The survivors had rallied, passing out rifles they'd left there while they worked. The bullet stung, burying itself deep in my shoulder. It was not silver, thank Gaia: I'd never had a wound from silver, but I'd seen what it could do. When my mother died, she was showing me about the change, changing herself to help me understand. It wasn't the full-blown, monstrous Crinos form, but something in-between that and normal human. She called it her Glabro form, and while her body grew more massive and a little frightening, her eyes never changed, and I could still see her love for me in them. Shots rang out just then; some hunters had seen her cradling me, and assumed the worst - that some monster was trying to tear my head off. They rained bullets down on her, dozens in only a few seconds, and one of them used silver rounds. She pushed me behind her, shielding me from the attack. After what seemed like forever, though it had only been a few seconds, she crumpled to the ground bleeding her last. Unable to speak, she handed me her totem-knife, her eyes filled with sorrow and regret. I've kept the knife ever since, and it has served me well.

The lanterns were near them, so I still had a small advantage once I got away from the circle of torches. I dodged my way back to the trees and began to circle - quietly. Every now and then one would shout that he saw something and point, but they were only right once and their aim was high. I waited until most seemed to be reloading, and I charged. I made straight for the nearest wagon and, slamming my shoulder into it, I drove it eight feet into the other wagon, spilling most of the men from both out onto the ground. The second wagon tipped completely over trapping several men underneath. Some of those that fell out had dropped their rifles from the shock of impact; I ignored them and went after the still-armed ones first. I clawed one across the throat, the fountain of blood telling me I need waste no more time on him. I pounded another with my closed fist, a backhand blow that caught his body between my hand and a wagon, and crushed his ribs. He collapsed, his heart smashed by the impact.

Fire was leaping up now, lighting the entire clearing as the wagon burned. The tipped over wagon had crushed one of the lit lanterns, and the spilled oil caught fire from the still burning wick, spreading to the wagon itself. It would have to wait: there was still shooting, and I'd taken two more hits. One was just a graze across my ribs, but the other buried itself in the meat of my thigh. That one hurt a lot, and now I was limping.

The end was in sight: only a very few were left alive, and some of those were trapped beneath the burning wagon. Two ran off into the woods, and with my new limp I couldn't keep up to chase them. I flipped over the burning wagon, only to see two of the three men trapped there had died from the fire. The last was gasping and sobbing heavily, his legs little more than burnt-out matchsticks. He would die soon, but the pain would linger. A quick swipe of my claws put him out of his misery: even animals like these deserved a quick death.

I looked around the clearing; there was fire, there was death, but no more living men could be seen. I raised my muzzle to the moon and gave deep, long howl of victory. Aches and pains I had, true, but I put a stop to the Wyrms here - at least for now.

As the echoes of my victory howl died away, new sounds rose above the trees, and a chill ran up my spine as I heard them: battle howls - three of them. I swiveled my ears and head, trying to gauge where they were coming from, but they were all

around. I had heard of the Black Spiral Dancers, the werewolves corrupted by the Wyrms. If my end was to come at their claws, so be it: I wouldn't go down without a fight, injured though I may be. If my fate was to be devoured and end up in their bellies, I hope I gave them indigestion.

A black wolf trotted into the clearing, big yellow eyes staring straight at me. Hearing rustling behind me, I turned my head just enough to glimpse a Crinos-form werewolf dragging a dead man — one of those that ran away from me — into the clearing. The Crinos was a huge beast, much taller than I was, and had dappled grey fur and one milky-white eye. From up the slope — back the way I had come — another Crinos lumbered into sight, this one with reddish fur and a bloody muzzle, dragging the second of the two escaped men by one half severed leg.

Behind it came a fourth individual, a woman, and from her dress and appearance she looked to be a native. Cheyenne, maybe, though I couldn't say for sure.

"A strong victory, brother," she said. "All praises go to you for this hunt. What is your name?"

I looked from her to the wolf - who hadn't moved - and then to the two Crinos. One of them had flung its victim onto the burning wagon with a crash and shower of sparks. The lighter sparks drifted upwards until they winked out: the heavier ones dropped to the ground and tumbled, smoldering where they fell. All four were looking at me now. They didn't seem ready to fight, just wary.

"I'm Jake Johnson. My clan is the Stargazers. Sorry if I intruded on your territory. I'm more than happy to make amends for any trespass."

As I spoke, I could feel myself shrinking, my rage subsiding and my Crinos-form retreating back from where it came. I was naked, but no one seemed to mind. The other two Crinos werewolves began to shrink as well: the one with the cloudy eye looked to be an old man, but still muscular and strong despite his age. A fringe of gray-white hair stood out around the sides of his head, waving in the air with each movement or head bob. The second was another woman, tall and lean, with bright red hair. She daintily dabbed at her bloody mouth with one hand.

The wolf shifted then, changing into a shorter native-looking man with bright eyes and a big smile - and fewer teeth than he should have had. His thick black hair hung in waves over his shoulders.

They began to approach, warily, hands raised in a gesture of peace. They went around me to gather

by the native woman, who pulled off a rucksack and started to hand out clothes to the other three.

"Don't worry, Jake; as soon as I get my pants on, I'll help you find your clothes," drawled the old man. "No sense leaving 'em out here for the squirrels to live in."

"Thanks."

"I'm Ezekiel, but most people call me Zeke. This here," he said, pointing to the tall redhead, "is Amanda. That wolf feller there is Few Teeth. The woman's Kimimela, of the Lakota Sioux."

True to his word, Zeke stomped off and returned shortly with my discarded clothes. "Saw 'em when I caught that runner over there. Figured they was yours."

I noticed as he handed my clothes to me that they had been neatly folded. I nodded my thanks and began to dress.

"So what brings you to the lands of the Cheyenne, Jake Johnson?" This was Kimimela, re-shouldering her nearly empty pack.

"I saw a lot of killing back east in the war - even did some of that killing myself. Had enough of it. I came out here to start a new life, away from all of that."

"Looks like you didn't forget how to do it," chuckled Zeke, picking something dark from his teeth.

"Many of your people are making this same trip, now that the war is done and the railroad has come," said Kimimela. "We will soon be overrun by your people, and the Wyrms that some bring with them."

"Look," I began. "If it's about the cabin, I can go someplace else."

"It's not about the cabin," said Amanda, suddenly, and with great vehemence. "You were drawn here, same as we, to answer this threat. Kimimela, ask the spirit what we can do to help it heal."

Kimimela dropped her pack and went to the pit's edge. She knelt down and began to trace patterns in the loose dirt next to the hole. Then she began to sing. I didn't know the language, but it was beautiful. My heart soared with each word, each line, and after she stopped singing I realized I was still swaying in time to her song. I felt my face flush but Few Teeth was looking at me and smiling.

"C'mon, Jake: let's you an' me take a walk while Kimi and Few Teeth talk with the spirit. Some of these spirits are shy." Zeke laid a gentle hand on my shoulder, and I followed him away.

"So how long have you been a Were?" he asked once we were out of earshot of the others.

"Since my sixteenth year, I guess. Ma tried to help me through it, 'till she died."

"And your Pa?"

"He didn't know. He left us when he found out. Why?"

Zeke scrunched up his face. "Your Ma must've been a fighter, raising you all alone like that. Bet she was a tough one, too. That explains why you're so fierce; besides the skills you learned in the war, your mother gave you everything you needed to survive."

I nodded. Ma was often gone for hours at night - sometimes until dawn. She came back with grisly-looking injuries that healed almost miraculously. I'd had to be careful in the army: my own healing powers made people nervous, so I learned to hide small wounds, and trivialize the larger ones.

Zeke looked up at the moon, and sighed. "We can't stay here for long - and that includes you, Star-gazer. The Wyrms know about you now, and it'll send fresh forces to deal with this. The Wyrms doesn't like to be denied. U.S. cavalry will be here in a week at most, and they'll want to know why so many white men got killed here. Agents of the Wyrms will be among them,"

"Wait - I can't stay here either?"

"Nope. Not unless you want to meet a pack of Black Spiral Dancers. You know what those are, right?"

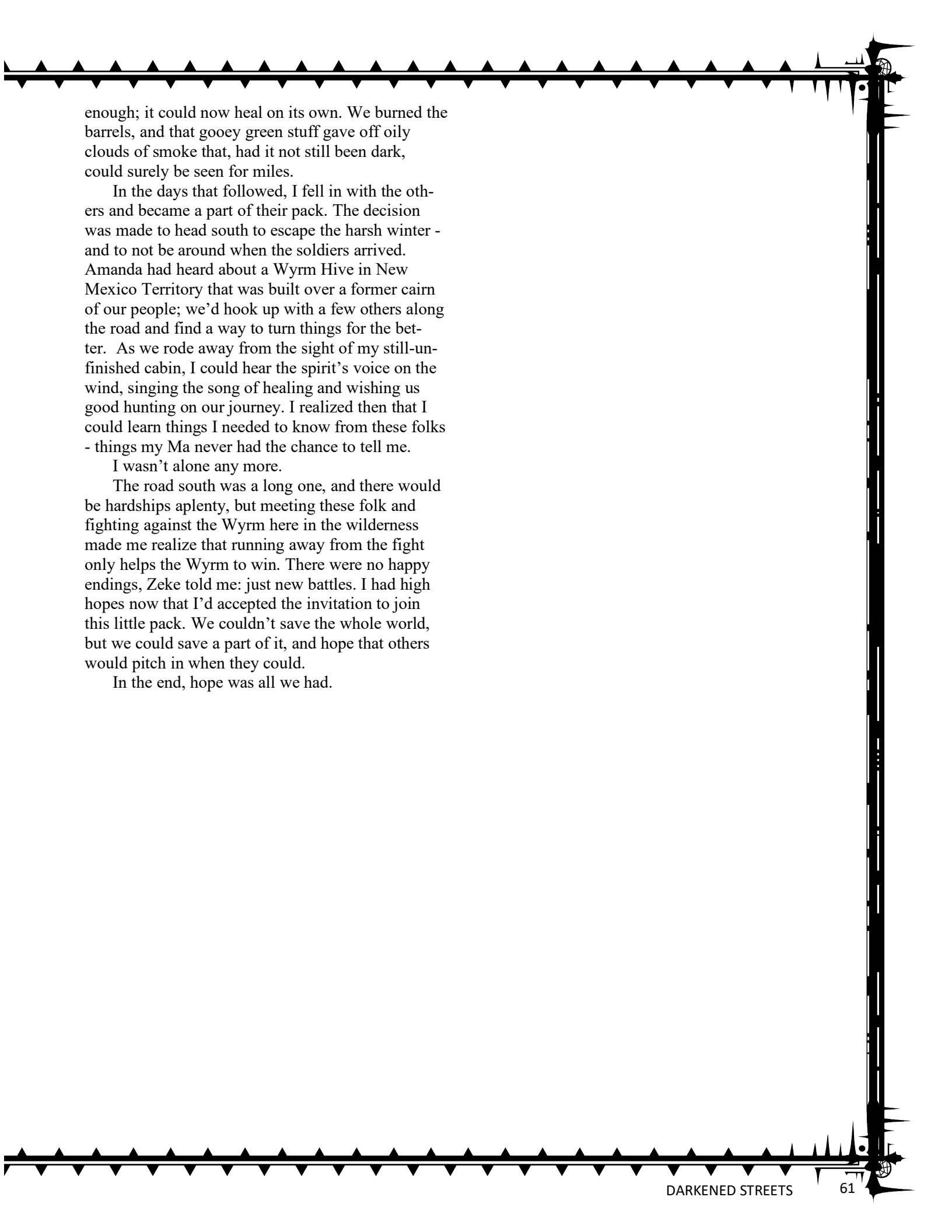
I nodded. "What about my cabin?" I wasn't too far along in building it, but it would be nice to have something to come back to. Maybe I could get it far enough along to file a claim.

"We can stick around for a few days to help finish it, but it'd be best if you weren't in it for a while."

Amanda called out from behind us. We turned and went back to the pit.

Few Teeth and Kimimela were already hard at work, refilling the barrels with all the green goo they could scoop out of the hole. Amanda, smiling, handed us both shovels. As I looked down into the pit, my hat tumbled off, falling into the pool of green poison, where it bubbled and sizzled. Guess I'd need another new hat.

We dug as much of the Wyrms-taint out of the pit as we could, and the spirit told Kimimela that it was



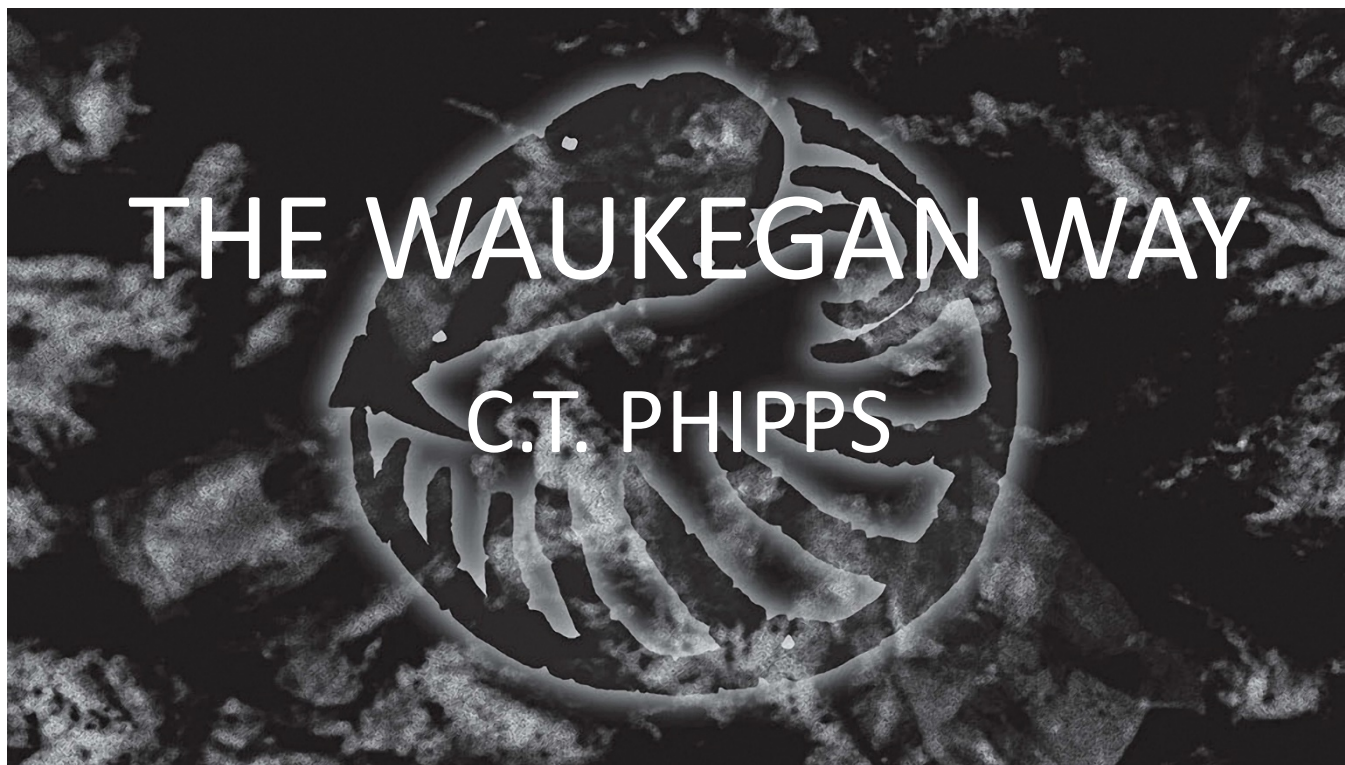
enough; it could now heal on its own. We burned the barrels, and that gooey green stuff gave off oily clouds of smoke that, had it not still been dark, could surely be seen for miles.

In the days that followed, I fell in with the others and became a part of their pack. The decision was made to head south to escape the harsh winter - and to not be around when the soldiers arrived. Amanda had heard about a Wyrn Hive in New Mexico Territory that was built over a former cairn of our people; we'd hook up with a few others along the road and find a way to turn things for the better. As we rode away from the sight of my still-unfinished cabin, I could hear the spirit's voice on the wind, singing the song of healing and wishing us good hunting on our journey. I realized then that I could learn things I needed to know from these folks - things my Ma never had the chance to tell me.

I wasn't alone any more.

The road south was a long one, and there would be hardships aplenty, but meeting these folk and fighting against the Wyrn here in the wilderness made me realize that running away from the fight only helps the Wyrn to win. There were no happy endings, Zeke told me: just new battles. I had high hopes now that I'd accepted the invitation to join this little pack. We couldn't save the whole world, but we could save a part of it, and hope that others would pitch in when they could.

In the end, hope was all we had.



"Why the hell would you want to hear my story?" Lancelot asked as he leaned back in the booth of the dingy bar.

The Cave was an institution for Chicago's Kindred, particularly its Anarchs, but the place had seen better days. It was poorly lit, the beer was cheap, and the entertainment performed behind a steel cage. Mind you, some found that appealing; only the poorest and most desperate Kine frequented the club. That made them easy prey, and few people missed even regulars when they stopped showing up. Bauhaus' "Bela Lugosi's Dead" was being murdered onstage by a heroin-addicted female singer who looked ready to collapse.

Lancelot was a big Kindred who wore a baseball cap backward, a heavy trench coat, and Motley Crew t-shirt that had been through the wash enough times it was starting to disintegrate. He was a Malkavian and wore a pair of sunglasses to hide how his eyes constantly darted back and forth as if seeing things just out of view. Lancelot wasn't his name, obviously, and the interviewer had figured out his identity but decided not to press the issue.

"I collect stories," Linda said. She was biracial with long stringy hair, cat-like eyes she disguised with contacts, and a loose-fitting dress that was distinctly out of place in the Cave. The Gangrel had

Embraced her but she was most at home doing research, rarely leaving her apartment save to feed. The exception was when she managed to finagle (weird how she'd picked up that word—her sire used it all the time) an interview with one of her fellow undead. "My current project is about the Waukegan Way. You know, something to share just between fellow Kindred."

"Pfft. Now I know you're crazy. No one wants to hear about that," Lancelot said, sipping his beer then spitting it out on the table. He either still liked the taste or he was just being an asshole.

"You don't think it's an interesting topic?" Linda asked, fishing for information. "That's what you Goblin Drivers are famous for, right? Making the trip?"

Lancelot stared at her. "Someone has been talking. Is it Bunches?"

Linda looked down. "I don't reveal my sources."

"It's Bunches," Lancelot said. "Party Girl will tell anything for a fix."

In truth, it had been Bunches. Linda hadn't been able to get her to shut up after she'd handed her a Kine hopped up on a mix of ecstasy and other drugs. Linda preferred her vitae clean and chemical free, which was increasingly hard to come by in this city. It was why she preferred to hang around the vegan

university crowd.

"Maybe," Linda said, confessing. "She told me that the two-hour drive from Chicago to Milwaukee was full of perils. That the Waukegan Way killed virtually every Kindred who tried to make it and the only way to get there safely was either by airplane, boat, or taking a Goblin Driver."

"Bunches is telling stories," Lancelot said.

"She's not wrong, though. Two hundred Kindred have tried to enter or exit Milwaukee via car in the past ten years. Like it was any other city that could just be entered, rather than the Wisconsin Mordor."

"The Wisconsin Mordor?" Linda asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, you don't simply *drive* into it," Lancelot said, putting his arms on the table. "They go there to fight the werewolves, to fight the Sabbat, to flee from the Primogen's wrath, or just because they want to catch a Panthers game. Just as many flee the city for all those reasons. Of those vampires who tried to get in or get out, I'd say about forty didn't make it. The rest either had Goblin Drivers or were lucky."

Linda blinked. "Forty vampires. You're saying the population of a major American city's worth of Kindred have died driving to *Wisconsin*."

"Milwaukee is a place where the war between Kindred and Lupines has never ebbed," Lancelot said. "The war here in Chicago killed as many in a single month, but it's just business as usual there."

"And what?" Linda asked, confused.

"Werewolves just know which cars contain Kindred and ambush them in the middle of the highway?"

Lancelot rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You're not getting it."

"Explain it to me," Linda said, lifting her recorder.

"You still use tape?" Lancelot asked, surprised.

Linda shrugged. "I like it."

Lancelot nodded. "Alright, I'll tell you a story. It's why you should never go on the Waukegan Way without a juju bag and a Goblin Driver."

"I hate nature," Lancelot said, trudging through the woods in his hiking boots. "I hated nature while I was alive, I hate nature while I'm dead."

Lancelot was trailing behind a group of four Kindred walking through the woods behind Thompson. Thompson was the eldest, though still a

Neonate as the Camarilla measured things, and looked a bit like David Duchovny if he'd spent the last decade on various drugs and a few days dead. He wore a long trench coat over a stained dress shirt and dirty slacks. Dude had a few animal features like extra-sharp teeth, long nails, and bat-like patagia to his ears. The Gangrel kept them well hidden, though, and they barely impacted his looks. They were a sign Thompson frenzied often, though. Few Gangrel lasted long unless they developed a lot of self-control quickly and Thompson didn't seem the type. Thompson was supposedly a former cop and Lancelot believed it. There was something about the guy's casual assumption of authority that offended Lancelot's Anarch spirit.

The other three Kindred were Bunches, Crawdad, and Renault. Bunches was a fellow Kook with long blonde hair tied into two high pigtails so that she looked like the Joker's girlfriend. She was dressed like she was going to a rave in hot pants and a tank top and her mouth had a little blood on it. A machete was slung across her back, though, so Lancelot didn't worry about her too much.

Crawdad was a Sewer Rat with a pair of glasses, knit beanie, and thick winter-wear despite it being the middle of July. His face looked like someone had dragged him back and forth over a gravel road a few hundred times. In sharp contrast, Renault was a too handsome Toreador with long flowing white blond hair and a perfect physique. Oddly, he was the only one dressed practically for travel in the woods aside from Lancelot.

"Quit your whining," Thompson said, having been stone cold silent since we'd abandoned our cars off the highway a mile back.

"I don't even know why we're here," Bunches said. "How is going out into the middle of the woods supposed to help the Movement?"

"You said you wanted to be Goblin Drivers," Thompson said, not looking at the Neonates. "The Movement in Milwaukee needs support: weapons, explosives, cash, and reinforcements. Moving that to and from the city is hard."

"Because werewolves magically find every shipment," Lancelot said, suspicious. "No one knows how."

"I do. The Lupines know the ways between worlds," Thompson said, looking up into the night sky. "They talk to the Land and the Land talks back. The spirits, the birds, and road itself give up the location of our kind. It goes beyond information too."

Stoplights, detours, and even the paths redirect those of Caine's blood to their awaiting claws."

"And I thought we were the Kooks," Lancelot said, looking at Bunches.

She shrugged.

"I don't give a shit about any of that," Crawdad said, his voice raspy and deep. "I'm here because I heard there was a lot of money to be made by being a Goblin Driver. I also don't see how that relates to walking through the woods in the middle of the night."

"We all have debts to pay, Nosferatu," Renault said, speaking with a French-Canadian accent. "I'm sure that we'll have our answers soon."

"You have a lot more faith than I do, Fabio," Crawdad said. "I ain't buying this whole Movement crap from Thompson either. I know the Goblin Drivers serve Cammies too. It just so happens I don't care. I'm here for the money."

"What does a Nosferatu need with money?" Renault asked.

"High speed Internet access," Crawdad said, sticking out a deformed forked tongue. Some people said Crawdad knew Followers of Set, and that answer was as good a piece of evidence as any.

Lancelot moved his hand under his coat and felt the stock of the sawed-off shotgun tucked into a holster on his belt. Lancelot didn't entirely trust Thompson and wasn't too fond of the other Goblin Driver candidates either. The only one Lancelot knew well was Bunches and she wasn't exactly a friend. They'd hunted together but she could turn on her partners on a moment's notice, depending on her mood.

"There's ways of fooling the Lupine's magic," Thompson said, turning and showing his eyes glowing a bright red. The Gangrel's night vision was far sharper than even the Kooks' and Toreador's tonight. It was also deeply unsettling.

"Fool it how?" Lancelot asked, feeling like the rat about to enter a trap.

"With other magic," Thompson replied.

"I don't deal with Tremere," Lancelot said, stopping. "Even when they're Anarch, the Warlocks are untrustworthy sonsofbitches."

"What vampire isn't?" Bunches asked, looking back at him.

"It's not Tremere," Thompson replied.

"Assamite?" Lancelot asked, confused. Lancelot heard they had blood magic as well, though only second-hand. The only time Lancelot ever dealt with

Kindred outside of the main seven was the time he'd hooked up with a Lasombra *antitribu* from D.C. A real uptown girl.

"They prefer to be called Banu Haqim," Renault said, sniffing the air.

"Shut the hell up," Lancelot said, already irritated with the Degenerate. "No one cares."

"You'll care if they take your arm off for it," Renault said, raising his right hand. "That happened to me."

Lancelot sincerely doubted that.

"The Followers of Set were casting spells thousands of years before the Warlocks even conceived of sorcery," Crawdad said.

"It's not vampires," Thompson said, his voice dry.

That silenced everyone and opened even more questions among the undead group. Before they could respond, Thompson entered a clearing and turned around to stretch out his arms. The moonlight shone down upon him and everyone got the sense that something was deeply wrong.

Lancelot sucked in a thoroughly unnecessary breath and was the first one to follow. "Okay, you need to stop dancing around and tell us what the hell is going on. If this is a test, then I want to know. Otherwise, get with the stuff we need to do in order to become Goblin Drivers or I am done."

The interior of the clearing looked like it had once been an idyllic clearing. Instead, all the grass was dead. Animal skeletons hung from tree branches like charms. There were human skulls, real ones not the Halloween kind, sitting on logs. Metal drums marked ENDRON, cracked and leaking, lay in a nearby creek. The place smelled awful even to his long-desensitized nose. It was like someone had spread out heavy metals for a Satanic mass then forgot to clean up. That was when Lancelot heard wolves howl.

"Fuck it, I'm outta here," Crawdad said, showing perhaps more foresight than the rest of the group.

"*Stay*," Thompson said, his voice commanding in a way that only an Elder Ventrue's should be.

Crawdad froze in place.

"Oh hell, this is a trap, isn't it?" Bunches muttered, pulling out her machete.

"Yeah, because that's going to do you any good," Renault said. "Maybe if it was silver."

Bunches stuck out her tongue.

"You had better explain fast," Lancelot said,

going for his shotgun again.

Thompson just laughed, like he was a goddamned supervillain. Then again, that was what happened with some undead. They got drunk on the power of feeding on humans and started acting like, well, vampires. Usually, the Prince ended up putting them down, or the Anarchs as a whole. The rest ended up trying to join the Sabbat with varying degrees of success.

"Try it, Lance," Thompson said, grabbing a small leather bag out of his trench coat and shaking it. "The only reason you're alive now is this. A juju bag full of medicine."

Lancelot was saner than most Kooks. Perhaps it was a bit of a humble brag that he only suffered minor fits of forgetfulness, a split personality, and the occasional hallucination. Compared to some of the Malkavians he knew, Lancelot was the picture of mental health. Nevertheless, there was something about the leather bag that called out to him. It was an unclean, sickly, and unpleasant voice that reminded Lancelot of his asshole father. It reminded Lancelot of the Beast and he wondered if he was about to have an episode in the worst place possible.

"I don't need your pills," Crawdad said.

"Medicine is also a word for magic among Native Americans," Renault said, showing how a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

"What, we're meeting Odawa wizards?" Bunches asked. "Isn't that a bit racist?"

"No," Lancelot said. "We're meeting Lupines. Bad ones."

As if that wasn't a redundant statement. The attack on Chicago had been before Lancelot's time and even if he'd been around, the Malkavian would have been one of the sensible Kindred to take refuge in Gary. Still, Lancelot had heard all manner of horrible stories of Kindred being attacked in their havens during the daytime, herds being massacred in the hope of drawing vampires out, and flagrant violations of the Masquerade by beings that people just forgot about hours later. In many ways, they were simultaneously more hidden and more terrible than the Kindred themselves.

Somehow, the creatures that came through the woods around us were even worse than Lancelot could conjure from those stories. Lancelot had never seen a Lupine up close before—the fact he was still alive was testament to that—but he'd heard them described as terrifying, yet noble creatures. These were deformed Peter Jackson orc-looking versions

of werewolves.

They had mangy bald spot littered coats, tumors, burns, and deformities that suggested their human forms were probably every bit as hideous. Each was about eight feet in height with arms twice the size of a normal man's and claws with an extra-joint. There were four of them and in that moment, Lancelot believed he was going to die.

"These are my patrons," Thompson said, smiling. "They are the enemies of the Lupines in Milwaukee."

"Lupines have factions?" Lancelot asked, trying to substitute curiosity for fear. It didn't work.

"Who doesn't?" Thompson asked. "But they very much want to keep the Milwaukee Lupines and Kindred fighting."

Everyone was silent.

"Good?" Lancelot said, slowly.

The thought that the war between Kindred and Lupines in Milwaukee was being fed by outside factions to kill both disgusted him. It meant Crawdad was right and this wasn't going to help the Movement in any way; quite the opposite. The Anarchs fighting in Milwaukee for turf were just cannon fodder for a war that wasn't their own. Lancelot clamped down on his next words before he accused Thompson of some Darth Sidious bullshit. Thompson probably wouldn't get the reference anyway.

"The juju bags hide whatever vampires hold them from the prying eyes of the Lupines and their spirit allies," Thompson. "Well, most of them at least. It's why Goblin Drivers can get in and out of Milwaukee at will. The problem is, they're only looking for one additional driver."

"I don't like the sound of that," Bunches said.

"No shit," Crawdad said. "Where did you hook up with these people, Thompson? I thought the Gangrel-Lupine Special Relationship was bullshit."

Thompson just smiled. "Let's just say some of us had family ties before our Embrace."

"What do they want? Money? Drugs?" Renault asked. "Blood?"

Renault's High Clan status was showing. The Toreador was thinking in terms of profit, pleasure, and gain. These things were something else. Something vile. Call it the Cobweb speaking to Lancelot, but the Lupines struck Lancelot as an evil only the worst of our kind matched. Lancelot never thought he'd be in the presence of something that made him feel like the good guy but those things

made him feel less like the wolf and more like the lamb. Which was obvious in hindsight. What else could Lupines make you feel like?

"Yes, blood," Thompson said. "But not the kind that makes ghouls."

"You will be hunted," one of the disgusting tumorous werewolves spoke in surprisingly good English. Lancelot thought they had to be unintelligent or at least unable to speak properly given their feral appearance.

"Hunted," Lancelot repeated.

"This is bullshit," Bunches said, holding her machete out in front of her.

"From here back to the cars," Thompson said. "If you manage to make it then you will be blessed with a juju bag and a hundred thousand dollars cash."

"You're paying us to be sport," Crawdad said. "Man, and I thought the Ventrue were fucked up."

"Where do these things even get money?" Renault asked possibly the stupidest question he could in this situation.

"Friends," the eloquent Lupine said before he and his associates started giggling like hyenas.

"And if we choose not to?" Lancelot asked, knowing the answer.

"Then you'll not be hunted," Thompson said. "Just killed."

"The Prince won't like this," Renault said, puffing up his chest.

"Which prince?" Thompson said. "The one of Milwaukee or the one of Chicago? Either way, who will care about a bunch of Anarchs going missing?"

Lancelot made a mental vow to kill Thompson after all this was over. Lancelot doubted any of the others would follow through, especially if the money for being a Goblin Driver was as good as it supposedly was. Then again, that presumed that any of us survived and Thompson chose to fulfill his side of the deal. This wasn't Westeros and a promise was only as good as your ability to scare someone into fulfilling their end of it.

Crawdad accepted that we were screwed faster than anyone else. "So, what are the rules?"

"Outrun the others," Thompson said, chuckling.

"Toreador run very fast," Crawdad said. "He should get a handicap."

"You bastard!" Renault hissed at the Nosferatu.

Crawdad shrugged. "It's every vamp for themselves here tonight."

The Lupines laughed again, apparently finding

the entire situation hilarious.

"I'm sure you'll figure something out," Thompson said, tossing the juju bag on the ground and pulling out a Glock 28 semi-automatic pistol. "You have until the second shot to run without being chased."

He fired in the air.

Crawdad immediately turned invisible, Bunches retreated into the darkness with a weaker version of the same power, and Renault sped out of the grove like a bat out of hell. Lancelot wasn't a weak Kindred for his age but wasn't exactly strong either. Instead, almost all his skill was in affecting the minds of others. Lacking any other options, Lancelot spun and ran as fast as he could. His only advantage was that he wasn't going to get winded.

Lancelot let his overweight body carry him over roots and through puddles. Not for the first time, Lancelot wished he'd been in better shape before his Embrace. His sire hadn't cared about that, and Lancelot's strength came from the blood anyway. Pushing the vitae in his stomach into his limbs, Lancelot felt his strength grow and his grace as well. Another advantage Lancelot had over the others was Caine's relative closeness in terms of lineage. Lancelot was of the 9th generation and compared to most Anarchs, he might as well have been an Elder.

Lancelot had also fed on a group of Neo-Nazis earlier that evening, picking a fight and draining them close to death before calling an ambulance. Lancelot didn't care whether any of them lived or died, but at that moment Lancelot he was glad he'd met them. His life was going to depend on their blood. Lancelot had to be careful not to spend so much that the Beast overwhelmed him. The Beast might be smart enough to avoid things like fire and sunlight on its own, but Lancelot didn't think it was intelligent enough to avoid picking a fight with a Lupine. Those things were the bulldozers of the supernatural world and the Kindred who claimed they regularly fought Lupines, like the Anubi in Milwaukee, were liars—every one of them.

Lancelot was feeling good about his progress, having made it halfway to the cars that he wasn't sure would even still be there, when he heard the second shot.

"Son of a bitch," Lancelot muttered, picking up his pace slightly.

Lancelot couldn't see any of the others but extended his hearing and his vision. He was assaulted by all the sounds of a forest at night, from

cicadas and crickets to the rustle of squirrels in the trees. They sensed the predator in him and ran, but Lancelot sensed a much greater set of monsters nearby. Lancelot turned and saw two enormous wolves flash from the trees and tear into a fleeing figure a dozen yards away. Crawdad's screams filled the air, then fell silent, signaling his Final Death. Apparently, invisibility wasn't going to do anyone any good with these creatures. They could smell, hear, or otherwise sense Kindred despite their powers.

Lancelot didn't get a chance to think more about his circumstances because he heard an enormous thundering *thing* behind him. Lancelot was already moving at his top speed. He didn't have the kind of supernatural speed that Brujah or Toreador possessed, something Lancelot vowed to correct if he survived this. Unfortunately, the thing moved like greased lightning. The Malkavian was vaguely aware that every living thing within half a mile was fleeing in terror, and then he felt it slam into his back, sending him flying.

"Dammit!" Lancelot shouted, bouncing across the ground and slamming against an overturned tree.

His eyes widened as Lancelot saw the thing approaching him. It was no longer the eight-foot-tall humanoid monster of the grove. Instead, it was a giant wolf the size of a small car. The thing was every bit as hideous and ugly, but there was something even more unnatural about it. Its eyes were a sickly green that trailed fire into the air. Its breath was putrid, like rotting flesh. Even his undead senses could barely stomach it.

Lancelot had seen a lot of weird, awful shit since becoming a vampire. Hell, he'd *done* a lot of weird awful shit since becoming a vampire. Lancelot had away people's free will so he could feed on them, murdered others to protect himself, or the Masquerade, and even lost control when angry. There was innocent blood on his hands, and Lancelot was comfortable admitting he was an evil sonofabitch who probably deserved the Final Death. In that moment, Lancelot felt like a soon-to-be-martyred saint.

The only thing Lancelot could compare this thing to was the wight he'd encountered in Gary one summer night five years before. Juggler had declared a Blood Hunt, acting more like a Cammie Prince than an Anarch Baron, and it had been wild trying to track it through the ruins of the old factory town. What Lancelot faced that night gave off such

a profound sense of *wrong* that it couldn't be put into words.

Some of the neo-hippie Buddhist types preach that the only way to achieve Golconda, Nirvana, or whatever is to reach an accord with the Beast. To find a way to merge the man and the monster. Seeing the Lupine before him, Lancelot called bullshit on that. The Beast was a thing that held nothing good—it was just a monster you fought until you couldn't fight it anymore.

Lancelot pulled out his shotgun, but the giant wolf just batted it away with one paw before putting another on his chest and pinning him to the ground. The creature leaned into Lancelot's face and stared into the Malkavian's eyes, letting its drool fall on his chest. The fetid smell of death, decay, corruption, and rotting meat blasted into his face. Like so many vampires Lancelot had met over the years, it enjoyed toying with its prey.

Lancelot met its gaze and then did something stupid. Desperate, really. Despite all the terrible things Lancelot had done, he still wanted to live. Lancelot wanted to continue to drink the blood of beautiful Kine, share blood with his Toreador lover, and watch the last *Star Wars* sequel even though he'd been underwhelmed by the previous two. Lancelot took all that desperate need and used it as fuel to shove a command into the brain of the monster on top of him.

"You want to kill your fellow werewolves more than me," Lancelot said, pushing harder and deeper into another being's mind than he'd ever pushed before.

It shouldn't have worked, really. The thing was so close to the Beast, it was more animal than man. You couldn't Dominate people into turning on their fellows violently, either. Well, not unless you were an Elder vampire with centuries of experience. Lancelot was good at wiping memories and bending wills primarily because he always phrased the commands in ways that people wanted to obey. Mostly, when Kine encountered him over a dead body or surrounded by gore, they *preferred* to forget.

The best Lancelot hoped for was the Lupine would hesitate, and the Malkavian might get another chance to run. Instead, the Lupine stared at him for a long second then bolted to the left like it was on fire. Lancelot heard in the distance, not nearly distant enough for his taste, the sounds of screams and battle.

Lancelot had only a second or two to speculate before instinct took over. Lancelot ran for his shotgun, picked it up, and took off. His only guess to why it might have worked was that he was either profoundly lucky or Lupines hated each other as much as some vampire coterie Lancelot had known. Even your so-called friends among the Damned were often simmering piles of resentments just waiting for the match to be lit, one that would turn it into an inferno of rage. Or maybe that was just his coterie.

Either way, Lancelot went back to running and somehow managed to increase his speed. Maybe it was possible to spontaneously learn Celerity under the right circumstances or perhaps it was just terror making him think he was moving faster. Whatever the case, Lancelot managed to hop over the guard rail to the highway and saw our cars. He'd made it. Of course, it couldn't be that simple.

"Lancelot!" Bunches' voice cried out behind him and Lancelot turned to see a one-armed, blood-soaked kindred stumbling out of the woods using her remaining arm to keep her guts from spilling out from where something had slashed her. She looked like something from the *Walking Dead* and Lancelot half-wondered how bad of a Masquerade breach we were making if anyone saw her right now.

The smart bet would have been to just get into his Jeep Liberty and drive off, leaving her behind. Honestly, Lancelot cursed himself for not doing that. Maybe it was because there was a time he'd been sweet on Bunches or maybe it was because the Lupines were such disgusting abominations that he would have rescued the Sheriff from their jaws.

"Get in!" Lancelot shouted, opening the backdoor of his jeep. She was in no condition to drive. It was probably the first time she had ever been grateful for the fact vampires couldn't suffer shock and didn't need most of the organs she was holding onto.

"T-thank you," Bunches said, climbing into the backseat and splattering herself against the upholstery.

"What happened to Renault?" Lancelot asked, tossing his shotgun on top of her.

"He didn't make it."

"Yeah," Lancelot said, for lack of anything better to say as he shut the door. "I bet there's not a \$100,000 in my front seat either."

"You're right," Thompson spoke behind him.

"Oh shi—" Lancelot started to say before he

found himself held by the throat with ten tiny little claws piercing his throat. Each of them burned like fire as Thompson pressed Lancelot up against the back of his jeep. Thompson had somehow managed to cross the entirety of the forest as well, perhaps turning into a bat or a wolf to catch up.

"H-how?" Lancelot managed to rasp out. His voice wouldn't recover for months after the event.

Thompson stared at him with his glowing red eyes. "The Worm provides."

Lancelot had no idea what the fuck the worm was. Was it the nickname for the Lupines' leader? Was it a Nosferatu? Thompson's penis? Lancelot didn't particularly care either way. Instead, Lancelot just kicked Thompson's stomach as hard as he could. It felt like hitting a stone wall despite how much the Malkavian had increased his strength.

Thompson wasn't that much older than Lancelot, supposedly a vampire from the Seventies. But everything Thompson had done tonight showed him to be far more powerful than someone that age should be. Some vampires were just naturally strong like that, but Lancelot believed it was something more. Lancelot's theory, concocted in that moment, was the guy had used his Lupine friends to help him hunt Elders and drain them of their blood. Either that or he'd sold his soul for power. Either way, Thompson started sinking his claws deeper into Lancelot's throat while opening his mouth wide. It would be, under any other circumstances, the end but sometimes doing "good" paid dividends—or at least doing another Kindred a favor.

"Move," Bunches said.

Lancelot threw his weight to one side and Bunches fired his shotgun through the backseat window, right into Thompson's face. The Gangrel screamed and fell to his knees, most of his face missing as a result. Thompson dropped Lancelot and the Malkavian couldn't say anything to thank Bunches because his voice box was a mass of bloody ribbons. Lancelot did see something sticking out of the right pocket of Thompson's coat, though. It was the juju bag that supposedly protected him from being found out by the other werewolves.

Reaching down, Lancelot grabbed the juju bag and felt it slither in his hands like he was holding a live eel. Still, Lancelot took it and ran to the driver's seat before tossing it in and peeling out. Lancelot saw Thompson grab hold of the back window like he was a serial killer in a slasher movie, but Bunches shot him again in the chest. Behind us, Lancelot

heard cars honking and swerving before there was the sounds of vehicles crashing.

In his rearview mirror, the Malkavian saw three deformed werewolves coming after him. One of them was heavily wounded, missing its right arm like Bunches. One of them, the one Lancelot Dominated, was missing and was hopefully roasting now in the fiery pits of hell. If that was where werewolves went when they died. They gave chase for a little while, but Lancelot was doing eighty within a few seconds and didn't stop until he was in the Anubis Bar in downtown Milwaukee.

They brought him a Kings Beer girl to feed on for killing a Lupine.

"Bullshit," Linda said, reaching over and turning off the recorder.

"Which part?" Lancelot said, leaning back into the booth and staring at her.

"All of it," Linda said. "Bunches' story was completely different."

"Well, she is a Malkavian," Lancelot said. "They're all crazy."

"So, which is true?" Linda asked, frowning.

"Maybe both are or neither," Lancelot shrugged. "Whatever the case, Lancelot never saw Thompson again."

"You think he died?" Linda asked.

"Either his werewolf buddies got him or their enemies," Lancelot replied. "Maybe he also decided to get out of town once he realized there were two witnesses, semi-credible, that said he was doing *The Most Dangerous Game* in the local Princes' backyard."

"Do you still have the bag?" Linda asked.

"Yep," Lancelot said, reaching in and pulling out before putting it on the table between them. "Lancelot made ten runs with it and didn't hear a peep from the Lupines. Lots of money and guns. Bunches did the same. We shared it until we tried to pawn it off on the other. Both of us are getting out of the game. Being a Goblin Driver isn't worth the nightmares. It whispers to you."

Linda looked sick just looking at it. Also, entranced. "What?"

Lancelot got up and left it behind. "If you want to know the Waukegan Way, you have to experience it. There are other things out there. Believe me when Lancelot tell you that vampires are meant to stay in

one place."

Linda took the bag in hand and put it in her purse.

Lancelot shook his head and departed.

"Time to do some field reporting," Linda said, eager. "How bad could it be?"

Lancelot never saw her again.



FIREBALL RUN

T.L. WEBB

The West Texas heat had baked the little town of Opacus all summer long, and the only green to be found at this point was on the Mulligan's diner sign by the side of the interstate. It was just after noon, and the sun was doing its worst, but the cab of the approaching eighteen-wheel transport was so cold that Dwight Cogmeister was running the defroster on the windows and wearing a winter coat and hat over his three-piece suit.

The freezing temperature was due to the glass tube fixed above the air conditioner. A single cube of ice, lit from below, hovered in the center of the tube. Motes of frost drifted off and filtered into the AC system. The device wasn't something you could buy at Star Mart.

Dwight was a black man of thirty, tall, and broad of shoulder. He wore his hair short. Like the device atop the air conditioner, his sunglasses wouldn't be found in a store. Their frames were lined with wires and diodes. Small flashes on the lenses fed him information from a complex AR system of his own design.

Following an indicator from the glasses, he pulled the truck into the parking area beside the diner and parked. He removed his winter gear before climbing out. Inside Mulligan's were a handful of customers. Most of them were probably locals, judging from appearances, but one man sitting at the bar

was out of place. He was a round bearded fellow wearing a three-piece tweed suit and eating a chopped steak sandwich with a knife and fork. His use of eating utensils was drawing more attention than his outfit.

Once he noticed Dwight standing near the entrance, he quickly finished the last few bites of his sandwich. He tidied up his face and hands, checked his watch, and signaled the waitress.

"I would like to reserve that table at the back" Dwight heard him say, "Some associates of mine will be arriving and we will need at least seven chairs."

"Honey, the table's empty. It's all yours. We don't usually need to reserve nobody's table."

"I usually find it good policy to ask."

"Okay hun, just holler when you're ready to order."

"As you say," he smiled and took up a briefcase from beside his chair. Waving Dwight over to the table, he set the case down, snapped the latches and opened it. He took out several folders full of printouts and began sorting them into even stacks.

"Welcome," he said "I assume by your vehicle that you are here for the Opacus Cactus Rally?"

"That's right," Dwight replied.

"Wonderful. I am Doctor Edward Desoto, the organizer of the race."

"Dwight Cogmeister. I guess I'm the first to arrive?"

"Yes, but only just."

As Desoto finished arranging the last of the stacks, the door opened and two more people walked in. One was a middle-aged Caucasian man with a shaved head. He had what might be called a beard, unless one compared it to Desoto's trimmed and oiled facial hair, whereupon it would need to be reclassified as wild facial growth. He wore faded overalls, work boots, and a green shirt.

The other arrival was a woman in her thirties. Her brown hair was in a bun. Her dress was plain office attire in grey and cream. She had the air of someone who was there against their better judgment.

"No," she was saying to the other man, as they walked toward the table. "I'm afraid I've never been to a Pink Floyd laser spectacular, so I don't have any frame of reference for

this experiment of yours."

"It's a great way to move quintessential energies in low volumes with minimal risk. The theory holds that sound made with intent acts as a conductive medium for these energies."

"I don't understand how progressive rock has any part in this."

"The more the audience infers meaning from the material, the more potent the conduction can be."

Desoto cleared his throat, interrupting the pair. Dwight was a touch disappointed. He did love to hear other Scientists talk shop but knew that this sort of thing could go on for some time.

"Albert T. Edison," the bald man said brightly.

"I take it you are Doctor Desoto?"

"Indeed, I am. And your companion?"

"We are not a couple," the other said quickly.

"My name is Doctor Minerva Featherstone. We only just met at a gas station down the interstate."

"Fascinating. Welcome to the Opacus Cactus Rally. I have some forms for you to fill out if you would be so good," Desoto said, handing them each a packet.

"What's this, an insurance form?" Albert asked as he shifted through the stack of paperwork.

"Not really insurance. More of an agreement not to press charges should you suffer any mishap in the race. This is supposed to be a test of combat ready vehicles, but accidents may occur. The last three pages will probably be of far more interest to you as

they are the application for the grant we shall present to the winner. Do review the paperwork. I trust you will find it all in order."

As they began going over the documents, more participants arrived. Food was ordered. Introductions were made.

The Gagnon Twins were Canadian and seemed to be telepathic, at least with each other. They were identical save for their hair, which they wore in different styles and with opposing color streaks, one blue, the other orange, dyed in. They were dressed in matching racing wear.

Philip Chandler was from New York. He offered this information as if it was meant to explain his entire life. He was a slightly built man with close cropped black hair. He wore a red button-down shirt and slacks.

They all took some time to go over the paperwork. There was a map of the track, two separate contracts, and a tourist pamphlet of the nearby town. Dwight was examining the latter when he noticed Albert staring at him, or rather, at his tie

"Son," Albert inquired, "why is there a cogwheel on your tie?"

"It's my tie tack," Dwight replied, a little irritated at a man half his size calling him son.

"Your tie tack. So it's just your cogwheel tie tack. Does it have a function," Al drawled, "or is it some kinda cosplay thing?"

"I guess you could call it that. I mean, I'm really into the whole steampunk thing."

"Don't much care for the whole cogwheel as costume stuff myself," Albert replied, his attention shifting to the parking lot.

"That's...nice for you."

"Fella shows up in public wearing a wacky costume, you gotta wonder if he's a big deal or just trying to grift everybody into thinking he is."

The door opened just then and a man in a leather trench coat trimmed with stylized fire strode in, pocketing a pair of obscenely expensive-looking sunglasses. His boots were many-buckled and came up to the knee. He wore huge motorcycle gloves with the same stylized flame design over the sleeves of his coat. His hair was long, curly and black and he was tall enough that he needed to duck slightly as he came through the doorway.

"Or maybe I'm getting too worked up over a tie tack," Albert finished as he locked down his facial expression at the sight of the newcomer.

The man in the coat, sweating from the drive, strode up to their table. He took a look around their group and then approached Dr. Desoto.

"Is this the group for the race?" he demanded.

"It is," said Desoto, politely. "And who might you be?"

"They call me," the young man paused for obvious effect, "Professor Asphalt."

Dwight noticed that Albert was turning slightly red as he fought back laughter. Dwight smiled and locked eyes with him, savoring the way the older man struggled to contain his snark.

"Glad to meet you, Professor." Desoto said pleasantly, either oblivious to the humor he might have found in the man's name or just far better at hiding it than Albert was. "We were just introducing ourselves before going over the rules of the race."

"That's fine. Let's hear them," Asphalt said, waving dismissively.

"Very well. The race shall be composed of three laps of the track, a map of which is included in the paperwork. These laps shall be transversed without the use of flight technology, time manipulation, or forward leaping teleportation."

"Excuse me," Minerva interrupted, "are you saying that teleportation is banned in this race?"

"Not entirely. You may transverse space in any number of directions. Simply not forwards along the course."

"Why a complete ban on time manipulation?" asked one of the twins.

"Because it interferes with the result matrix. We need to know how these vehicles perform under heightened conditions and how they traverse rugged terrain. Time dilation - both of the self and of the opposition - is not a test of the vehicle's capabilities."

"I disagree," Asphalt declared. "There are plenty of combat applications for time manipulation."

"Indeed, but it still undermines the purpose of this test."

Asphalt rolled his eyes.

"Are there any other questions concerning the rules?" Desoto asked.

"I have one." Dwight replied. "This track is all off road. Why is that? Why aren't we doing this on a real track with pavement and inclines?"

"Simply put, we feel that staying on the road during pursuit is too linear and plays into the hands of potential opposition. Many police chases end with

exits blocked and the road ahead spiked. We wish to pursue more abstract means of egress."

This seemed to satisfy not only Dwight but the rest of the drivers, and so they turned their attention to dinner. It was hot, greasy, and filling.

The silence lasted until Minerva asked about Asphalt's title.

"What are you a professor of?"

Asphalt faltered a moment, eyes searching the room for inspiration before saying, "The Road."

"You are a professor of highway construction?" If she was teasing the man, her tone and expression did not betray it. She seemed genuinely interested.

"No!" He was clearly uncomfortable but trying to hide it. "Like, a professor of driving."

"The society doesn't offer a professorship for driving cars. Neither does any university I am aware of," Minerva responded, puzzled.

Albert laughed, "Hun, I think it's more of a self-appointed title."

"You can't do that," Minerva said, with a slight frown. "Titles are serious business. They denote one's accomplishments and establish rank within the Society."

"I can call myself whatever I want," Asphalt growled.

"Not during official Society functions." Minerva said, "and this is an official Society of Ether function."

"Honestly I don't think it's going to be an issue," Desoto said, trying to keep the peace. His efforts melted as Asphalt's rage boiled over.

"Of course it won't, as long as this stupid bitch apologizes to me."

The table went silent, shocked at the raw anger on display. Etherites aspired towards elegantarian behavior and this sort of rudeness was almost unheard of.

Desoto cleared his throat, "Now, hold on just one moment, young man."

"I'm not going to take this kind of crap from you, from her, or from the council of fucking nine!" Asphalt shouted, turning back to Minerva. "Now, apologize for your god damn attitude problem, you sloppy thot."

This comment drew gasps from most of the diner. Asphalt seemed proud of the response.

"My good man, she is not the one displaying an attitude problem right now," Desoto said coldly. "I recommend you cease the profanity and personal attacks before I am forced to

reprimand you.”

“You going to call my mommy and daddy to punish me?” Asphalt sneered.

“As organizer of the Opacus Cactus Rally, I have full authority to eject you from the race for violating the code of ethics laid out in the agreement you signed not five minutes ago.”

A couple of the other drivers suddenly began pouring through the paperwork for this passage.

“You can't do that to me!”

“I assure you that I can.”

“Old man, you need to step off or I am going to have to absolutely wreck your shit.”

“Well, you will not be doing it as part of this event,” Desoto said, pulling a rubber stamp from his briefcase. He slammed it onto an attached ink pad and then onto Asphalt's paperwork. “I hereby eject you from the rally. You may see yourself out.”

Asphalt stared in surprise at the rejection stamp on his paperwork and then at Desoto and Minerva. His face clouded with rage and he literally trembled in anger.

“You don't have the slightest idea who you're fucking

with,” he growled, “not the slightest idea.”

“Son,” Albert sighed, “you're, like, twenty-two? Maybe you should grow a few more short hairs before you start in with that kind of gruff.”

“That will be enough from you as well, Albert,” Desoto said. “Mister Professor Asphalt, I suggest you depart peacefully and immediately. Perhaps next year your temperament will be more grounded and suitable for public discourse.”

Asphalt glared and seemed about to unload another burst of profane insults at the group but then stopped himself. His expression smoothed and he adjusted his coat before turning, trying to whirl it dramatically in the process. It would have been more impressive if it were not caught on the chair. He shook his coat free, knocking the chair onto the floor in the process. Ignoring this, he stormed out of the diner. The cook, the waitress, and the trucker who had just come out of the restroom stared on, confused, but glad to see the tension leave with him.

“Can I ask that we have no dramatic sarcasm about what just transpired?” Desoto suggested. “The boy provided quite enough and has managed to spoil my appetite for dessert.”

The drivers were put up for the night at The Panhandle Motel, a mom-and-pop operation that looked about ready to fold and was happy for the customers. Desoto was staying out at the track to calibrate the observation network for the race.

Albert felt that after the unpleasantness at the diner the drivers might need to reconnect. He went around to their rooms, inviting them for drinks by the pool. He was disappointed to find Philip wanted to turn in early and the twins were removing some prohibited equipment from their car. Dwight, however, was up for some drinks, and so Al went to invite Minerva to join

them.

As she opened the door to his knock he could hear another voice in the room. It sounded small and high pitched.

“Didn't mean to intrude” he said, before extending the invitation.

The other voice, emitting from the computer on the desk called out, “Hey Al you sound like a bro-what happened at the diner? I feel like I'm not getting the full story.”

Minerva grumbled under her breath and turned to Albert. “You promise that this is purely social and not a trick to make me listen to hippy guitar solos?”

“Scouts honor,” Al said, holding his fingers in the scout salute. He had actually been a scout until the incident with the catapult.

Minerva took her room key and brushed out the door, ignoring the voice on the speaker. Albert considered ignoring it, too, but whoever they were, they knew his name. Only fair to inquire.

“Mind me askin' who that was?”

“My lab assistant and colleague, Watson. Please don't encourage him.”

“You didn't want him knowing about Professor Vainglorious?”

“He worries. It's really just dependency expressing as overprotectiveness.”

“I see,” Albert said. He wasn't bothered by most idiosyncrasies. There were far stranger personalities in the Society.

They reached the empty pool where Dwight was already removing the caps from the first round of bottles. They talked for a while about their training and studies. Albert told them about the salvage yard he ran. Dwight operated an auto garage and made a living doing eotic modifications and vintage restorations. It all seemed to be going well until somewhere

around their third Shiner when Dwight called him out.

"I gotta know, Al, why were you on about my cogwheels?" he asked. "Can a guy not enjoy a hobby around you? Or did a cogwheel kill your parents?"

Albert laughed while taking a drink and beer poured out of his nose. He took a moment to catch his breath and towel off before responding.

"Your hobbies are fine. I'm just gettin' tired of the new kids gluin' cogwheels on everything and calling it Ethertech. That takes way more than leather and brass."

"Well, excuse me for having an aesthetic," Dwight said, with a slight belch.

"Albert, you are just as guilty of costume play as Dwight," Minerva said. "I've read your papers in the sub-paradigma forums and you sound nothing like you do in real life. You have never once dropped a G off the end of a word online or used y'all in a sentence and yet here you sit in your overalls talking as if you were Lord Yokel, King of all Rednecks."

Albert's drink stopped halfway to his mouth and for a moment he felt mildly panicked - as if his underwear had just been run up a flagpole. But this gathering was supposed to be about getting to know one another. No fair getting mad about someone being too good at it. He grinned and took a sip.

"Maybe it's camouflage," he said, his drawl fading slightly with his dialect. "Maybe I don't want people to see what's in front of them. Maybe I'm trying to lull the lot of you into a false sense of security before the race."

"Maybe you are just full of manure?" Minerva suggested. She was still on her first drink but she seemed to have no head for it. That was fine, and so was the jab. The important thing was to relax and remember this was all for fun and sport.

"Perhaps I am," Albert laughed, "maybe it's all the above."

"Camouflage is not such a bad thing," Dwight commented, taking another beer. "In the city most of the gear I have on my rig gets me pulled over for street violations. Most of it is perfectly street legal but the police see a bunch of copper riveted to the chassis and they pull me right over."

"Gotta know how to be subtle, my friend," Albert said. "The Technocracy doesn't see road-warriors as a huge threat because there's about a billion cops in the big city that can run you down just as

easy as they could. If they notice you. Take Minerva's all-pearl look."

"I just like things to be clean and smooth," she said, objecting to being drawn in.

"Nothing wrong with it," Albert said soothingly, "point is your Jeep still looks like a Jeep. Nothin' about it says, 'I'm a mad scientist looking to test out a death ray.'"

"Oh, I never bother with death rays," Minerva said. "Honestly, I don't even like the term."

"See?" Albert said, "She doesn't even do death rays. Totally not a mad scientist. Meanwhile, Dwight, your gear fits what you could call a profile."

"I assure you every cog on my vehicle serves a purpose."

"So sensitive. Look, Dallas cops will pull you over for having LED lights on your undercarriage. They see a bunch of spinning gears and inexplicable thingummies they're going to want to know what you're up to. It draws attention. So, despite having enough lights on my car to blind folks on the ISS, I don't go around flashing them. Some folks don't seem to be able to grock restraint. Take that jackass, Asphalt. Bet you ten bucks all that kid wants in life is attention. Bet his car has more than one spoiler."

"No bet," Dwight replied, with a laugh..

"I feel bad that he got kicked out," Minerva said, "All I wanted to know was where he studied."

Albert smiled. "You are a generous soul, Minerva. I'm still going to run you down tomorrow, though."

"If you are able," Minerva matched his smile, then took a drink. "Incidentally, what exactly is a 'thot'?"

A cold front blew through overnight and left a scattering of clouds and an almost tolerable temperature as the convoy drove from the motel to the canyon where the race was to be held. Several of the drivers had their vehicles on trailers and it took a bit of time to park and unload all the machinery. Nor was it a simple matter to fuel them, as several did not run on gasoline.

Minerva used a variant on zero-point energy to power her Jeep. It was silent and produced no ambient glow. In fact, the area immediately around the car grew somewhat darker as she powered up.

Dwight's car ran on electricity, which he gathered with a combination of solar cells and a complicated wire frame that drew in ambient charge from the atmosphere. It was a long, heavy hearse chassis, but the frame was custom. Rather than a cabin for a corpse, the back held a cylindrical dome with a secondary engine that was arcing electricity throughout the sealed chamber. The rest of the car was black save for the gold and brass gears that operated valves and sliding parts.

Albert's vehicle was a 1957 pickup truck. He had driven it in rather than carry it on a trailer. It ran on an ethanol and electrical hybrid motor of his own design. There were flashes from the electrical portion of the engine coming from slits in the hood. The vehicle was painted a faded maroon and trimmed in chrome. Most notable were the oversized wheels that had several small domes attached near each rim, the modern and sleek toolbox, and the overcomplicated rifle on his gun rack.

The Twins 1960s muscle car had the strangest fuel need, the mineral hematite, which they ground up and poured in through a tank on the back. The car was red, with a swirling trim of blue and orange that matched their hair.

Philip was the only one of the group whose car ran on traditional gasoline, but that wasn't all that unexpected since he was driving a Ford Edsel. He approached Minerva as she uncoupled a hose from her Jeep. She had adopted a white padded racing uniform and a matching helmet sat on the hood of the vehicle.

"I'm told you are the Dr. Featherstone who once worked with Gerald Watson," Philip said.

"That is mostly correct."

"I trained with him during our time in Gernsback. I just wanted to give my condolences."

"Are you under the impression that Watson has passed?"

"He's alive? Word came down he perished in a lab mishap."

"Oh, there was a terrible accident and he is, in his own words, not quite the man he used to be, but he didn't perish."

"That's fantastic! Can you put us in contact? I'd love to see him."

Minerva reached into her Jeep and produced a computer pad. The pad displayed a video feed from another device. It showed a desk full of carefully stacked papers and computer monitors, each running different sequences and tests. In the midst of this sat

a guinea pig, who turned to look at the camera and its mouth dropped open.

"My word is that Philp Chandler?" asked the rodent.

"Wait...what?" Philip sputtered, not understanding.

The guinea pig leaned in to fill the screen with an adorable fuzzy and very inhuman face. "Phil! It is you! It's so good to see you! I imagine this must come as a shock. Believe me, it was a bit of a surprise to me as well."

"What is this?" Phil asked Minerva weakly.

"Watson was trapped in a testing room when someone sabotaged his experiment," Minerva said, "Fortunately, the experiment was one of quantum entanglement on mental patterns. He sent his consciousness into this enhanced lab animal before the explosion tore his body apart. We've been unable to replicate the process safely as of yet and until we can find a suitable donor, it's quite irreversible. He has been residing in my lab where we can keep the degradation of his identity at bay."

"It's a bit of an embuggerance, isn't it?" Watson said cheerfully.

"You mean a full body donor?"

"Even a half body donor would do!" Watson laughed. It was a tiny chirping sound.

"Wow," Philip said, backing slowly away, "I am so glad you're doing...that you're doing. Good luck on the track."

"I think he took that very well," Minerva said, as they watched him shuffle back to his car.

Dwight's sunglasses were monitoring the secondary graviton engine in the back of his car when they told him there was a motion from the building between the cars and the steep hill leading to the canyon. He looked to see Desoto emerge from the ramshackle shack with a dozen football sized drones following him. As the drones cleared the door, they each flew off to their designated observation points along the track. They would serve to help him judge the race and also to provide markers so that the turns were identifiable. He was still wearing his tweed but had added a hat brimming with antenna and small receivers. He took a few moments to inspect the cars and handed each of the drivers a communication device.

"This is for emergency use," he told them. "I expect you all to respect the bandwidth and not fill it with idle chatter. Especially you, Albert."

"I feel attacked" Al said, grinning.

"Excuse me," Minerva asked, "will this interfere with my own communications? My support team will want to stay in contact."

"There is a privacy setting. I simply wish you all to be safe."

"Does the race stop if there is an incident?" asked Philip.

"I struggled with that but have decided no," Desoto said. "I will provide extraction and medical care should the need arise. Focus on the race and leave the rest to me."

This seemed to satisfy the six drivers and they moved their cars to the starting line. With the exception of the Edsel, none of the engines sounded standard. Growls and whines and the howls of strange matter being baked at unnatural temperatures filled the air as each car was warmed up. Birds scattered and small animals cleared out of the area.

Desoto stepped up onto a ridge and drew a small pistol composed of copper coiled around a barrel and a tube of orange liquid set into the grip. He looked to the lineup of cars and raised the weapon, firing off an enormous pillar of flame into the sky.

The cars roared to life. Dust flew and electrically roared through the miasma as the Etherites hit the gas or their equivalent proponent.

Dwight's long heavy car took an early lead as its weight shifted under the force of his gravity engine. Minerva's Jeep was right behind him, with The Twins and Albert following neck and neck. The Edsel was trailing behind at first but began to gain ground as something in the engine housing switched on and the car accelerated beyond the limits of mere internal combustion.

The cars entered the canyon in a whirl of excitement and thunder, the drivers as eager to gain advantage as they were concerned about the obstacles they could see ahead. This area was washed out by floods and strewn with rubble pulled from the sheer cliffs. The drivers found that many of the boulders strewn about the path were twice as large as any car present. They lost track of one another and their positioning as a result. Beacons flashed ahead from the monitoring drones, and while some of the cars had internal navigation capabilities, it was just as important to pay attention to the state of the terrain as it was to the path. The ground beneath their tires were

uneven and Dwight found his heavy car was not so advantageous when the road bounced him and threw him about. Twice he nearly lost his grip on the wheel.

The Twins were ahead of him now, as was Minerva. He was actually glad of this because he might not have seen the six-foot drop ahead of him had the twins not nearly flipped their car going over it. Minerva seemed to have no trouble with the drop, her Jeep landing as if it had been inches rather than feet.

It was when he initiated his graviton thrust and drifted into space on a cloud of excited particles, that he saw Albert taking advantage of the hangtime his system created and watched as the other man flew the Chevy past him with an audible "Yee- Ha!"

"Crazy redneck jackass," Dwight laughed as he dropped the graviton thrust and felt the weight return to his vehicle. He hit the ground with slightly more force than he was comfortable with and hit the accelerator.

The path out of the canyon went through a tunnel that led to an area the map called "The Deadwood". It was aptly named. The trees here had been dried out for decades and their trunks reached for the sky with broken, rotted limbs. Surrounded by dried and cracked mud, the whole area had a desolate, forbidding feel to it. The path laid out was narrow and lined with roots and stone. The cars had to slow to make the turns through the trees, and positions and fortunes changed. The Edsel managed to overtake the rest of the cars here, Philip laughing as he did so. The Twins gave him a double bird as he passed them. He returned the gesture and, distracted, nearly hit a tree.

As they left the Deadwood behind and entered the area of the map Desoto had labeled "The Beeline", Philip was in first, with the Twins and Albert close behind and Minerva and Dwight bringing up the rear. The Beeline was a stretch of desert hills that ran from the woods to the road they had arrived on. All the drivers opened up their vehicles to maximum and the air screamed with sound. Dust rose from the frontrunners and clouded the view of those behind.

Rounding the hillside, they came into view of the observation shack and the drones flashed with green lights above them. They could see Desoto standing on a platform atop the shack, staring intently at a handheld device as they passed him by. Dwight was more prepared for the canyon now and

was pretty sure he knew a better path through the stones than he had taken before. He kept his acceleration up as he entered and prepared for the rough ride ahead.

The sudden fireball that rose as one of the cars exploded unexpectedly caught him by surprise.

"Holy shit, who was that?" Albert cried on the public band, "Everyone OK? Desoto, you got them?"

The only answer came in the form of a second explosion from somewhere back near the canyon entrance.

"That was The Twins!" Philip cried. "They just exploded!"

"Did you get them out of there, Desoto?" Albert cried, "Are they OK?"

Still no reply.

The drone marking the trail erupted in smoke and fire.

"Gentlemen, I think we're under attack." Minerva said on the public band. "The blast pattern indicates that the explosions are from munitions fire. The estimated launch point is about a quarter mile away."

"It can't be the Technocracy," Philip said. "They have much larger issues to deal with than our little race."

"Agreed," Minerva replied, "and the Union would have used cloaked missiles to disguise their launch point. This was someone with a much looser grasp of enlightened combat doctrine."

Albert snorted. "Well, let's show 'em a new trick or two."

The cars slowed through the tunnel leading to the Deadwood, no longer pushing for position. All eyes scanned the exit, knowing it was an ideal spot for an ambush.

It was Albert who took point, the Chevy rolling out the tunnel and into the woods. The others slowed down slightly, appreciative of his initiative. It only took three seconds for him to come under attack.

A hybrid of at least six separate cars welded together spat dirt as it sped from behind a dried mud bank and accelerated towards him. Parts of the car separated and unfolded, transforming to unleash mechanical arms loaded with spinning blades and saws. When these hit the vehicle, the holographic

projection of the Chevy vanished. The arms flailed, some of them catching on a nearby tree trunk.

"Light em up!" Albert cried from his actual position back in line with the others.

Dwight unleashed a bolt of green lightning from the copper studded frame of his car. The amalgamobile went mad as the bolt struck. Limbs flailed and sparks erupted as circuits fried and systems overloaded. Smoke billowed and inside the chassis the flailing figure of a man on fire could be seen.

"Yeah, we are definitely under attack," said Dwight dryly. "Anyone got a plan?"

Albert spat out his window, "We drive like hell to the road and get back to town. If you get attacked, turn anyone in your way into roadkill and try not to die. Everyone else keeps moving."

"Anyone got another plan?" begged Philip.

"Stay three lengths apart and well out of Dwight's cone of fire," Minerva said, gunning her Jeep.

"So that's a "no", then." Philip grumbled as the vehicles began to speed out of the tunnel.

They drove into The Deadwood at half the speed they had done so earlier, everyone on the lookout for an attack.

"I'm getting some strange sonic readings just ahead," Albert announced. "I think we should get ready for-"

He didn't finish the sentence, because he found himself at a rare loss of words. A huge shape had decloaked in front of them, coming at high speed. It was a monster truck, with tires as tall as a house and a body painted in garish orange. Chrome pipes billowed pitch into the sky.

There were stories out there of such a truck, Albert knew, and in those stories, people ended up in tiny pieces in pools of gore.

His recollection broke as the truck barreled into Minerva at full speed. He cringed at the loss to the Society. However instead of a flattening crunch there was a green flash from above and below the Jeep's wheels.

Minerva's Jeep teleported straight up thirty feet, still moving at forty miles an hour. It flashed twice more, once reappearing just a foot lower and then again on the ground just ahead of Dwight. The pair went on ahead as Albert slowed to track Philip.

He located the man by his scream. After the truck's appearance Philip had veered off into the woods. Even as Al spotted him, he saw the giant truck skidding to a halt and turning towards the

sound of fear. That was part of the story, Albert remembered. It went after the fearful and weak. As its sideways momentum ceased, the truck began rumble after what it might now view as its legitimate prey.

Albert was paying way too much attention to the chaos ahead, as it turned out. A rusty old Cadillac had slipped in behind him despite his fishtailing all over the place. A hirsute man in the driver's seat flashed a toothy grin as saw Albert notice him. Leaning out the window, the man threw some kind of bent blade. It accelerated unnaturally, whirling in a blur towards Albert's Chevy. He tried to move out of its path, but it veered after him and sawed an inch wide line along the Chevy's cab. It missed him only because he was reaching to detach the firearm from his gun rack.

Looking back up Albert could see Philip had changed his mind about escape, turned 180 degrees in an impossible spin, reversed course, and was now charging the monster truck. Twin blue tendrils of energy erupted from the small domes attached to the hood. They lifted up tree trunks, whirling them around like batons as he charged the orange beast machine in a raw and vulgar display of power,

Albert finally got his home-made Rail Rifle loose and put his truck into a slide, bringing the rifle up to his shoulder and letting loose a round. He had little hope of hitting a target this way, but Vera had some unusual properties and he was counting on those to give his attacker second thoughts.

Vera shot out a steel bearing wrapped in rubber, accelerated down the barrel by a relay of electromagnets. He put every bit of juice the batteries had into the shot, and by the time the round left the barrel, it was moving at speeds more common during reentry into the atmosphere. His windows shattered at the force of the shot.

Vera was meant to be a nonlethal deterrent, really. The bearings were meant to be fired at subsonic speeds, and he had only ever used her highest settings during tests. But, this grinning loony had just torn part of his car off with some kind of stupid metal boomerang that was even now scything through the air for another strike, and he was really angry that the race had been ruined.

The disturbance the shot made in the air was visible to the naked eye. The air around the round filled with a heat shimmer and a haze that hung for just long enough to see before being ripped back by the round's wake. It always made things look as if they were being pulled into a small localized black

hole from the point-of-view of the gunman. It wasn't really possible to interview anyone witnessing it from the other direction. It tended to pull debris into its wake, too.

The custom cylindrical battery near the back of the gun dissolved, its power and molecular structure spent by the shot. The dust was blown free by a small fan in the housing to drift around the cab.

As suspected he missed the Cadillac, but the shot did have the intended effect of scaring the hell out of its driver. There was a ripple around the accelerating Caddy and it seemed to slip out of existence in every direction at once. Albert checked his equipment. There hadn't been an entanglement event and the heat in the air was dissipating, indicating the target vehicle was indeed gone. Had it switched dimensions? His gear wasn't designed to detect that. He looked around suspiciously in all directions.

That was why he was watching when Philip died.

The monster truck didn't get him for free. One of the timbers that Philip's energy tendrils were flailing around went through the windshield and tore off a significant portion of the passenger side of the truck. The other made a spirited attempt at piercing the right front tire. It shredded as if it had been put through a chipper rather than impacted a tube of half inflated rubber.

The truck moved on in spite of these injuries and the wheels seemed to widen as they overran Philip's car. It gave the act the energy of a pounce. There was a sickening crunch over the public band and then static.

Albert sat behind his wheel and gritted his teeth. His beard bristled in his rage and he put the Chevy into gear, centering the wheel on the orange monster. He could just make out a shape under the broken roof and webbed safety glass. It looked like a figure in a cloak made out of wires and cords. There were glints of light where eyes should be.

"Show no fear," he murmured, "and take no shit."

He hit the gas, slamming back in the seat and pressing a series of three switches attached by clamps and zip ties to the steering wheel. The radio roared out. Small speakers positioned all over the truck sang out a thumping classic rock track as attached LED lights began harmonizing with the sound waves, combining in ways modern science would not only deny, but want to take him to the woodshed for trying.

The monster truck answered with its screaming engine and the splintering of a tree in its path as it matched his course and bore down on him with homicidal intent.

Albert kept his eyes locked on the truck's supposed driver as he maintained direction and prayed silently that the system had the time it needed to reach maximum power before impact.

The music around him faded. It was still playing but the system drained the platonic constructs within of their meaning, leaving nothing but a hiss of white noise surrounding him as the yards between him and the monster truck gave way to feet. He watched as the hood of the thing seemed to open and close like a hungry mouth. He saw the tires reshape into spiked horrors meant to tear metal and flesh into unsortable confetti. He saw the gimlet glow of what might or might not be eyes behind the wheel. He saw a blast of accelerant flame from round the back of the demonic thing.

And then he threw the red lever.

It had to be red or other Etherites would accuse him of betraying convention. Besides, red was fun. Red levers were always for the most dangerous and explosive Society of Ether devices.

This one created what Albert called an "Inverted Kinetic Wave Event", which made a terrible acronym, but did make for an impressive battering ram. Simply put, it generated a wave that took any kinetic energy it encountered and reversed it upon itself. He had intended it to be a bullet deflection system, but had found that, like Vera, the applications were much more dramatic the higher the energy output. It also added the momentum generated from his own vehicle and the quintessential energies he had drawn from the power of Rock to its punch.

The wave hit the monster truck, and with a crack of thunder and a discharge of strange unnatural light, it threw the vehicle like a child's toy through the woods.

Albert hit the brakes and slid to a halt, staring at the line of destruction left in its wake that went on further than he could see through the dust.

"Holy shit," he whistled as he pulled out his ether goggles and scanned to the limit of their range for signs of return. There was only the sight and sound of falling debris. He dared

to hope he had won.

His excitement dwindled when a cheerful tune played out from a car horn. the sound seemed to come from all around. Albert only just registered

that the song was Dixie when the Cadillac reappeared in physical space and T-boned him at full speed.

Dwight followed Minerva through the woods, avoiding the automotive melee. The sounds of impact and explosions followed them as they headed for The Beeline. The open terrain would be a mixed blessing. They would be able to open up and accelerate but they would also lack any cover.

"We should call the police or something!" Dwight radioed. There were three more inclines to clear before the road leading back to town would be in sight.

"And exactly what would that accomplish?" Minerva countered. "Frankly the armed forces have a much higher probability of arrival given the use of RPGs. Destruction on this scale can be detected by earthquake monitoring equipment. I was having Watson keep an eye out for satellites shifting orbit to track this area when we lost contact."

"When was that?"

"Shortly after we left the cave. I didn't know our communications were intact until you said something."

"Why would they knock out long range comms but leave us this dinky short-range band?"

"Because it's so much fun to hear you all squawk as you die," a new voice whispered in their ears.

"God damn you, Asphalt, people are dead!" Dwight shouted, recognizing the voice.

"Yes, that's what I just said. I can't believe you survived this long with that slow of an uptake."

"The board of ethics is going to eat you alive!"

"Screw them," Asphalt laughed, "and screw you for letting a bunch of clerks tell you how to live your pathetic empty life. You want to be a quiet little lab rat or the next best thing to a god?"

"Perhaps you are unfamiliar with current scientific thinking on the existence of deific beings," Minerva said calmly. They were approaching the road now and she could see the dust of an approaching vehicle. Asphalt was making his entrance.

"Oh my God, you make me regret leaving this line open," Asphalt groaned. "I'm so looking forward to this."

Perhaps if Asphalt had resisted the urge to gloat, his last missiles would have landed. There was a

blur behind them, a centipede-like chain of images in space of a silver laced red glow. Dwight's sensors detected incoming fire even as they shifted into normal spacetime behind his car. He had just enough time to react, throwing the graviton manipulator's directional setting to the rear. The micro missiles hit the field and their course veered wildly. Their sensors were unable to correctly identify up or down within his field. One of them shot straight up, and the other hit the ground five feet behind him, detonating and sending rock flying. Dwight's windows were blown out and damage reports flooded his readouts.

But he was alive.

The attacking car passed them by, leaving echoes of itself ahead and behind. It looked like time dilation but there was some other layered effect in play.

Minerva didn't bother with conversation. A beam of light much like what emitted from her teleportation system shone from the headlights of the Jeep. It hit the ground ahead of them and left a huge square scar on the stone and rock. The line it had drawn in the ground was spitting sand into the air, and Dwight was still trying to determine what she was doing, when the twenty foot cube of stone vanished. It reappeared in mid-air and landed directly in the path of the shimmering blur that was Asphalt's vehicle. It seemed to Dwight that some of the echoes hit the stone and exploded. A couple clipped it and tumbled off into the hills to explode in translucent fireballs. Yet more simply maneuvered around the block and these seemed to gain solidity. He now got a clear look at the car that the so-called professor had brought to the race.

It was a custom machine, built along the lines of an oversized Formula One frame, only much larger and with off road in mind. A metal lacework was welded over the frame, spiked chrome forming an exoskeleton and a ridge that ran the length of the car. There were glowing lights along the red painted metal beneath this lacework, giving the impression of a skeleton that's innards were aflame.

"That was a good try," Asphalt crowed, "but you can't beat my baby like that."

"Dude, it looks like a baby all right," Dwight laughed, "if Lord Zedd had one with the Bat-mobile."

"I'm not even going to salvage the scrap I turn you into," Asphalt hissed.

Meanwhile, Minerva had changed course. Instead of making for the road, she was heading back towards the canyon and the starting line.

"Let me ask you something," Dwight said, as he saw the manyfold echoes of Asphalt turning to follow Minerva. "Who were all those Mad Max wannabes back there? You got a little cult to witness?"

"Love the idea," Asphalt said, "but no. I just put up a bounty on the Digital Web for anyone who could make it and help me end you all. Cost a pretty penny to do in under twenty-four hours but, I got to say, the show's been worth it."

"Let me get this straight," Dwight said, as he charged his lightning bolt thrower. "You want to kill all of us because Desoto wouldn't let you in the race? That is the saddest, pettiest thing I've ever heard."

"I mostly just want to kill Miss Priss there. The rest of you are dying because you disrespected me," Asphalt said. "You think you have the right to sneer at me? You can't touch me! Go on, shoot me with your little zap gun! I dare you!"

Dwight obliged the request, aiming for the centermost image. The bolt of lightning missed, passing through the image. It struck a corner of the canyon entrance up ahead, causing stone to tumble and narrow the passage further.

Minerva accelerated through the debris as it fell, weaving past larger stones and jolting as she hit smaller ones.

Dwight spared a glance at the observation shed but could only make out the scorch marks and scattered lumber strewn around. He feared that Desoto had been inside. It cost him focus and he clipped one of the larger stones as he followed Minerva and Asphalt into the canyon.

He had been giving some thought to the way Asphalt's car was flickering around. Clearly, from its speed, there was some time manipulation going on there, but also elements of spatial manipulation, and perhaps even of probability. It struck him that probability was the key to this. He recalled how when Minerva shifted the cube some of the echoes had hit. So maybe Asphalt was shifting his car out of synch with time and space and choosing a probable future more to his liking.

That theory fit the available data. But, what could he do with this information? His weapon system was damaged at the canyon entrance and he really hadn't built this car with offensive technology in mind. It was really just an optional application of the

graviton engine. He didn't think it was very likely that the graviton drive would be useful offensively without the bolt thrower.

And then he thought again.

Minerva was concerned for her life.

Asphalt, professor or not, was competent enough to have foreseen many of her preferred methods of escape. Whatever he was using to block long range communications was preventing her from teleporting out of the area. He was also countering her attacks very effectively and she was having trouble detecting a weakness in his defense. Since he confessed to wanting her dead, buying time for the others to escape or catch up was the best plan she had. Reaching over to the wheel of light hovering over her center dashboard, she realigned her displacement array and fired it at a boulder in her path. A green flash shot out and a cube vanished from the stone, leaving her enough space to drive right through. Behind her, the missing center fell from the sky and struck the ground at a point she was certain would be the most optimal area of impact upon Asphalt.

"Honestly you might as well stop and get out," Asphalt laughed over the public band. "It'll go easier for you."

She didn't respond. She didn't see the point in banter, but she worried about what he had said. Narcissists like Asphalt loved dangling information in front of people that they wouldn't recognize outside of context. They loved watching people miss critical warnings. Fright poured its ice across her nervous system as she entered the tunnel leading to The Deadwood.

Asphalt was setting her up.

This thought was derailed when in the rear view she saw Dwight's car driving on the side of the canyon. Electricity crawled out from its undercarriage. There was a pulse from beneath and Dwight's car launched into the air. It fell directly at an image of Asphalt's car. She marveled at the audacity of Dwight's plan. His car struck an echo of Asphalt's, and both machines bent and folded under the force of tons of metal in motion. Dwight had broken the code of Asphalt's defense, which she could now see must have operated by shifting him through probable locations to those that were under less of a likely threat.

The cars separated and spun off, parts flying, and she turned her attention back to her own peril, remembering that she had recognized an impending threat. She reached out for her displacement array and threw settings as she hit the brakes.

The explosives that were hiding along the tunnel exit went off as her hand pressed down on the teleportation icon, still catching her car as it shifted in space backwards by several yards. The Jeep spun as it landed, thrown back from the part of the blast it had absorbed. The wheels sank as rubber melted and leaked their impact absorbent liquid. Smoke rose from the engine and she undid her safety fastenings.

Smoke filled the tunnel, obscuring sight. A figure was lurching towards her and she strained to make out the silhouette. An orange light erupted from the hand of the figure and she threw herself to the side. It hit her car, spinning it again and leaving it tilted wildly on a pile of rubble.

"Why won't you just die already?" Asphalt cried out, as he staggered from the smoke. His coat was torn and there was blood running down one side of his face. His hair was matted and coated in muddy dust. One eye was covered with it, pasting it shut.

"Because I do not wish to do so," Minerva said, raising her hands in the air.

"Whatever. You can joke all you want. I won't miss this time."

"I'm really not fond of telling jokes." Minerva said, "May I ask you something?"

"Sure, it'll be funny when I shoot you and then say NO!"

"Are you angry because I am a woman or because I challenged your identity?"

He faltered at this. She wondered if perhaps he hadn't actually considered it deeply.

"No. This is because you humiliated me in front of all the others. Nobody does that to me. So now they're dead and you're going to die, too."

"I wasn't trying to embarrass you."

This infuriated Asphalt, who took another step towards her and aimed the device on his wrist more accurately at her helmet. Her hands began to twitch slightly, which Asphalt interpreted proudly as fear. He was wrong, but he was too wrapped in wording his dramatic speech to think about it. Indicator lights on her knuckles, hidden from his sight, began to light up. Several feet away Asphalt found his muse.

"When the books are written and history is laid down, it will remember me as a god of science and a master of the road. If it remembers you at all, it will

only be as a smear of blood in the sand here in this nowhere town."

"You do know I'm a published doctor of physics and biology, right?"

She gently pushed her hand forward in midair. Her glove indicator blinked at contact and a green light shone from her car. It rippled and danced across the ceiling of the tunnel. Asphalt flinched and then laughed as the beam winked out.

"You missed," Asphalt sneered, powering up the weapon on his gauntlet. He then noticed the motes of sand that were falling on his sleeve. His eyes widened and he looked up, but too late. The cube of stone fell from the ceiling of the tunnel and drove him a foot into the earth with a reverberating thud. Somewhere underneath his weapon discharged. The stone shuddered, then sunk lower.

Minerva sighed and disengaged her controls from the gloves. She removed her helmet, checking her head for injuries in the reflective mask. After confirming her car was immobile, she made her way to Dwight's wreckage, and was surprised to find his hand waving from within the crushed frame. He was alive, and other than bruises and cuts, he was whole.

It took them a while to bend the frame enough to get him out of the car.

"You figured out a weakness in his device before I did," Minerva said, "Very well done."

"Thanks."

He looked over at the pillar of rock that was Asphalt's impromptu headstone.

"I thought you didn't use death rays," Dwight commented

"That wasn't a death ray. The atomic displacer was designed originally for archaeology. It doesn't even work on biological organisms."

"But you killed him with it," Dwight protested.

"No, I killed him with a large rock. And, what I actually said was that I don't like the term. Any ray is a death ray if you deploy it creatively. The term is redundant."

"Hard to argue with that!" a voice called through the smoke. They looked and saw Albert stepping gingerly through the debris. He had a cut on his bald head but seemed otherwise alive and well.

"What happened to you?"

"A hairy maniac in a Cadillac knocked me ass over tea-kettle. When I came to, he was all set to cut my head right off with that boomerang of his. Just before he gave me the chop, his phone beeped.

He said something about not getting paid and that I was one lucky name breaker. Then he limped his car back across the dimensional barrier. How about you two?"

"Minerva squished Asphalt," Dwight gestured to the stone marking his final resting place. "If it was right before your friend got that text, then I guess we saved your life."

"I'm sorry," Minerva said. "What do you mean by we?"

Dwight decided not to argue the point. The three of them walked back through the canyon together. It took them a half hour to reach the starting line, whereupon an indicator light began to blink on Albert's Ether goggles. He scanned the ruined shack and laughed in delight, running over to the crater at ground zero of Asphalt's airstrike.

There, in a twelve-foot deep hole sitting at the bottom of a broken ladder calmly trying to rewire his equipment, was Doctor Desoto.

"How you doin' there, Doc?" Albert called. "You wouldn't happen to have a spare car in there with you?"

"Tragically, no," Desoto sighed. "I've been trying to pinpoint the device that's jamming our long-range communications. It's quite devious. I also may have broken my ankle in the fall."

"Yeah," Dwight said, as Albert brought over a roll of cable from the ruined trailers. "We had some trouble with it, too."

Desoto was retrieved and elected to stay and wait for the others to go to town for a ride. It was three miles to the motel, and he wasn't going to make that on a broken ankle. They all promised to retrieve the dead in the morning.

"You know what?" Dwight said, some ways down the path. "I just realized something."

"What's that?" Albert asked.

"Nobody won the race."

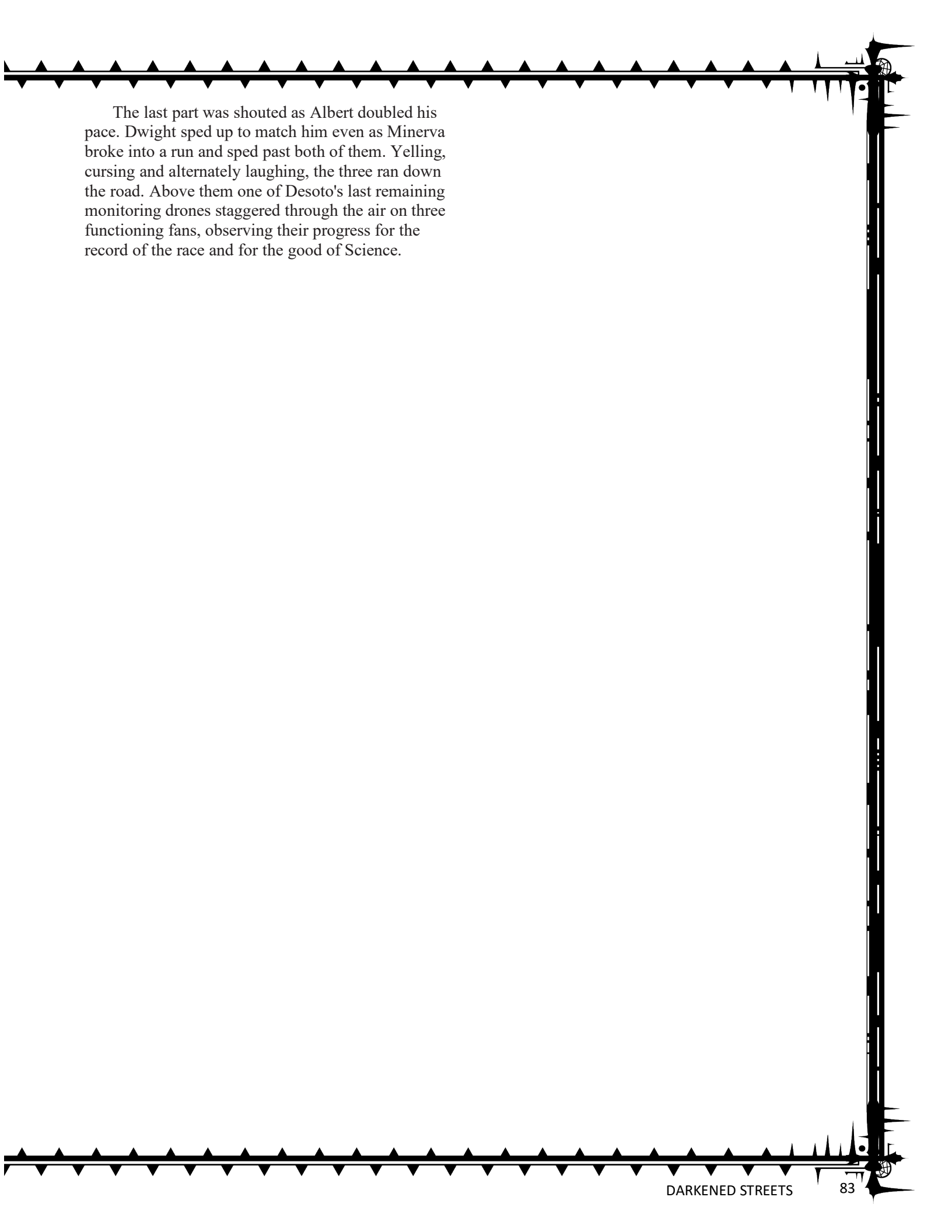
"You only just realized that?" Al laughed, "Don't feel bad. We've all got knocked around today."

"Yeah, but what about the grant?"

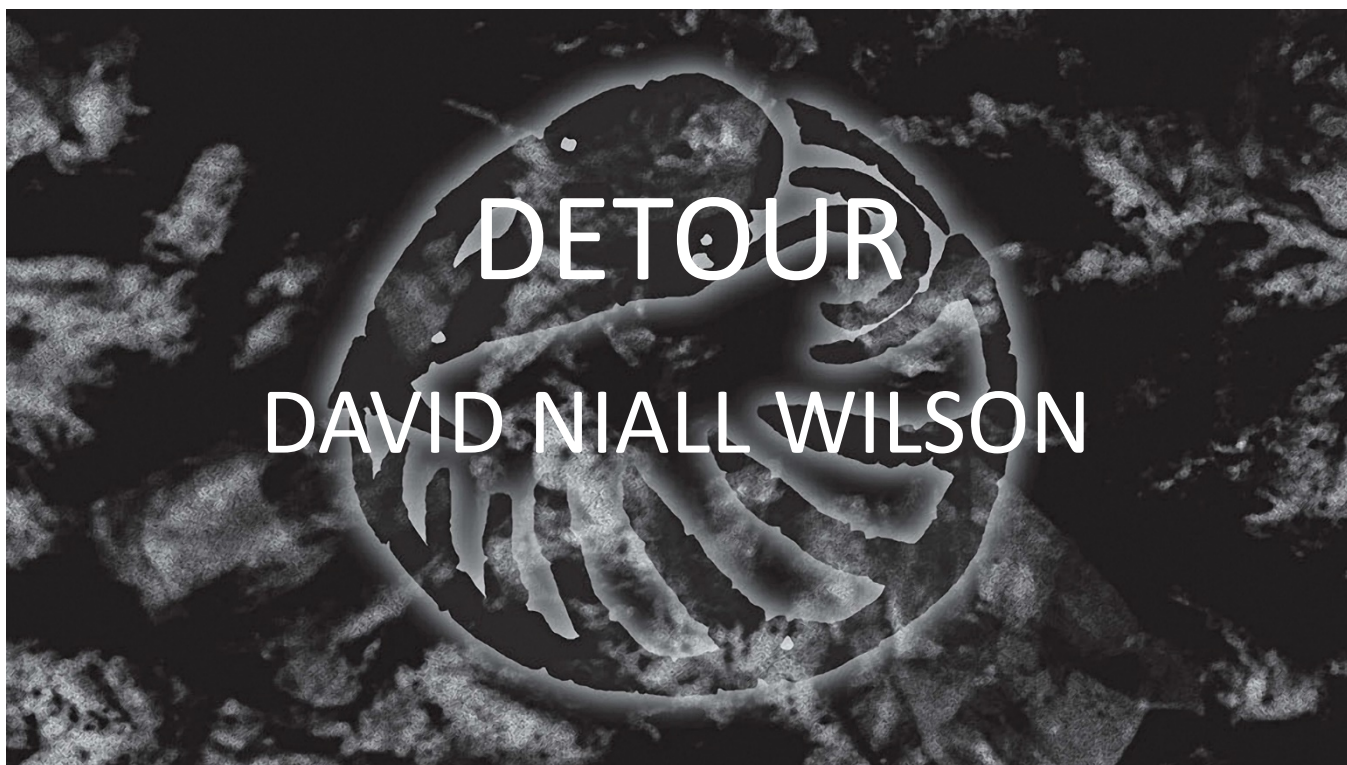
"I guess nobody gets it this year," Albert sighed.

"That's not necessarily true," Minerva said. "According to the terms and conditions, in the event of catastrophic vehicular failure, the organizer may choose alternative standards for victory."

"You mean Desoto can pick another objective?" Dwight laughed. "Like, who can still get their engine to turn? Or, who gets to town first?"



The last part was shouted as Albert doubled his pace. Dwight sped up to match him even as Minerva broke into a run and sped past both of them. Yelling, cursing and alternately laughing, the three ran down the road. Above them one of Desoto's last remaining monitoring drones staggered through the air on three functioning fans, observing their progress for the record of the race and for the good of Science.



In Northeastern North Carolina they say all roads lead to highway 17. There are also an inordinate number of roads with signs that simply say, “Dead End.” For the most part, out-of-state travelers, truckers on long hauls, and anyone “not from these parts,” as the locals say, passed through quickly, barely glancing at the endless fields, half-collapsed homes with pickup trucks in the yard, and long stretches with so many churches it seems impossible they could all be filled on a Sunday. It’s a dead spot. Nothing of any importance happens there, and the locals, roaring around in trucks with giant tires and glass-packed mufflers with stickers depicting cartoon characters pissing on anything and everything gracing their windows, were happy to see the traffic pass them by and head back out of town.

One stretch of 17, about forty miles north of Elizabeth City, cuts into a small town and becomes Business Route 17. There are a few scattered traffic lights, evidence of civilization interspersed with horse farms and corrugated metal buildings that are nearly identical, identifiable only by the signs out front proclaiming them to be auctions, or churches, or the occasional “gentleman’s club.”

Set back about half a mile from that road, tucked into a stand of trees that had somehow escaped the local lumber companies for many decades, was a different sort of place. The exterior, what you could

see of it from the ground, looked like a very large mound of dirt and vines. From above, if you were to fly over, you’d see a tangled mass of branches and leaves and, if you looked closely enough, just the hint of a road leading off from each end of the place.

There was no sign of cables, or lighting, but the interior was fed by power siphoned from the solar farm down the road, a well-concealed antenna provided Internet access via satellite. Shelves and pallets lined the walls of the interior, some loaded, but most empty. Dark monitor screens lined benches at one end. Cursors blinked softly, but there were no images. Nothing moved.

Beyond the walls, the sun dropped slowly toward the horizon. The treetops turned from gold to lavender and shades of purple, then melted the rest of the way to grey. As darkness dropped over the woods like a shroud, miles from the nearest home or streetlight, a series of panels opened in the center of the warehouse floor. Figures climbed from the rooms below. Some crossed to the benches by the computers. Others began shifting crates and pallets around to clear the center of the building.

They moved like a well-oiled machine, and the world beyond their walls took no notice.

Jeb down shifted and cursed under his breath. He had a schedule to keep, and it was about to take a shit-sideways turn guaranteed to wreck his plans. He had to be past Greenville before he could rest, or he'd never get his cargo to the freight yard in Rocky Mount on time. If he missed the train there would be fines and a cut in his take. The bright beams of his headlights illuminated a sign that read: "Road Work Ahead," and he continued to slow.

The GPS unit might save him. They'd come a long way since the old units that told you to take a right turn a hundred feet into a two-hundred-foot bridge, and he had the best on the market. The service monitored traffic, accidents, roadwork, and a lot of other things, and it was very creative at finding alternate routes to save time. Very slowly, he pulled over to the side of the road, being careful to park beyond the line in case some drunken redneck rolled up too fast behind him.

The GPS had a touchscreen, and he pressed the menu button, then chose "refresh route." A tinny female voice crackled through the speaker.

"Recalculating. Unexpected delay ahead. Alternate route selected."

Jeb waited, and a moment later the navigation screen returned.

"Downloading detour."

He watched the screen. Then he smiled. It wasn't as bad as he'd expected. Highway 17 had a short area of blockage ahead, but there was an almost equally short detour that would take him around it. There was no other traffic, so he wasn't in danger of being caught in an unexpected delay. It was going to be fine.

He cranked up the radio, smiled as the new Brad Paisley song rippled through the speakers, and pulled back onto the road. A quarter of a mile later the GPS told him to make a left turn, and he did as directed, rolling off down a bumpy dirt road between two cornfields.

The navigation screen showed a straight stretch for two miles, then a right turn, and a slow curve back to Highway 17 on the far side of the delay. He concentrated. It was a very narrow road for a truck, even without traffic, and the last thing he wanted was to have to explain how he ran off into a ditch in the middle of a cornfield.

The farmland ended ahead and gave way to a copse of trees. He rolled slowly and steadily forward, reached the turn, and navigated it cleanly. Smiling, he continued a bit more confidently. Then,

as if dark fingers had reached out and lowered his lids, everything faded. He had just enough awareness to reach out and turn the key, killing his engine. Then everything went black.

Inside the warehouse everything was a bustle of activity. One end of the building swung open, revealing well-concealed doors. Dark figures swarmed out and down the road, moving low to the ground, and very swiftly. They reached the truck and stopped.

"Looks like he managed to shut her down," a tall, dark-haired Kindred with piercing eyes said. "Saves us the trouble of dragging it out of a ditch and cleaning up."

To his left, a swarthy, bedraggled ghoul grunted something unintelligible in return. He lifted an arm, gesturing to those behind.

McAndrew watched as two groups moved forward. He was Lasombra, not terribly old, but not new to the blood. Phipps, the ghoul, had worked for him for decades; the two worked well together. One team dragged the unconscious driver from the truck, while another, a young Gangrel in cut-off denim vests and dark t-shirts, climbed up into the cab and started the engine. McAndrew and the others drew to the side as they rolled forward slowly and disappeared into the depths of the warehouse.

"Be careful with him," McAndrew said. "Don't let him get all bruised up. The less he suspects, the better, and we don't want any sign he's been roughed up."

Phipps nodded. He didn't speak often, but he was strong, and efficient. McAndrew thought—not for the first time—that he'd need to turn him soon. Loyalty was not an easy thing to find, and it needed to be preserved. He even thought, perhaps, that loyalty could grow into friendship over time.

The others back in the warehouse were a different story. The Nosferatu, Rainey, had his gnarly, misshapen fingers locked into the heart of the Shreknet and the Internet. He had worked out the method for taking control of certain GPS devices, bending the routes to his own end and directing select targets to the warehouse. The Tremere, a woman named Luanne Efird, had managed both to assist with the glamour that prevented their discovery and the wiping of the driver's memories. They were an unlikely alliance, none of them particularly

connected to the greater schemes of the Camilla, or the Anarchs—operating mostly off the grid and profiting from whoever offered the most for whatever came their way.

He turned and followed Phipps and the others carrying the driver. There was a cot inside where the man would be deposited and watched over while the cargo was unloaded. A call would be out for the second truck, garaged in a barn about ten miles away, to get moving. It was a smoothly oiled machine, and very profitable.

He'd met Rainey in a dive in Raleigh, North Carolina. Neither had been particularly tied to anyone, or anything. Rainey had mentioned the GPS hack, not as a reality, but as a possibility. It was intriguing. Using the kine's technology against them had been without purpose until McAndrew suggested the profit angle. It had taken several months to locate a proper crew to pull it off, and even longer to get the assets they needed to create the detour and the warehouse. They had not wanted to call on clan resources. It was their gig. Efird had been a stroke of luck, because the blood mage had blundered into one of their early attempts at a scam. She'd nearly killed them all, but McAndrew had managed to calm her just in time to explain. When her temper had cooled, she'd first called them idiots, and then offered to help. Cooperation on this level was not common, success rarer still. They had found both.

It was pretty slick. Rainey was able to hack into shipping companies, locate valuable cargo, ascertain schedules, and even lock it down to individual vehicles. They'd chosen Highway 17 because, despite being a two-lane mess most of its length, it was still a major route for shipping. There was little chance of anyone noticing if a truck turned off at an odd place or returned the same way. They spaced their hits as widely as possible and varied the carriers. They also varied the return and cut-off points, so it was less likely anyone would pinpoint their location. They rolled the trucks in, emptied the cargo, and sent the drivers on their way, usually to be as far down the road as the next weigh station before discovering their inexplicable loss. They were particular about what they stole, and always made certain they had an immediate buyer. As long as they were able to control their greed, it was an operation that could continue indefinitely. A perfect scam.

This truckload was medicinal. Crate after crate of Oxy, and unlikely to be reported stolen. It was black market, being moved double-crated and

marked as liquor. The top level of each crate was lined with high-end whiskey. McAndrew intended to keep that and pass on the main load in Raleigh. Their truck would be loaded and on the road in a couple of hours, and the minute it was unloaded the payment would process; dollars to bitcoin and cybercurrency, filtered through several levels of security and then encrypted on blockchain servers that could never be hacked. Rainey was the key, and the Nossie seemed content, as they all did, to play a part in a bigger whole without letting his greed get out of hand.

"Hey, Mac!" Rainey called out. "I got something you might want to see."

McAndrew crossed the warehouse to where the Nossie was bent over a keyboard like some sort of pale-skinned spider. Rainey was bald, and never wore anything but black. He sported a dark beanie that helped obscure his sunken, deformed features. For a Nosferatu, he wasn't too bad, but he still made McAndrew queasy at times.

"What is it?" he said.

"Not sure. Tracking a shipment of some kind, but the security is next level. I latched onto their GPS, but barely. No details in the account, not even weight, or cargo. Not sure how they plan on passing weigh stations, but this shipment is dark."

'Dark' was what Rainey called something under the radar, or difficult to hack. Protected, in other words. One thing was always true—the greater the level of protection, the more valuable the cargo was likely to be. They didn't mess with jobs like this often. The risk was considerably higher, but things had been pretty tame of late, and some of the others were growing restless. It was good to have a smooth, efficient operation but boredom could lead to carelessness, so every now and then they pulled something less routine. This sounded like that kind of opportunity.

"Let me bring in Efird," he said. "Might be time to try something a little more challenging."

"I want to know what it is," Rainey said.

He never looked up from the monitor as his nearly bone-white fingers flew over the keys. McAndrew shook his head and turned away. He could use a computer for e-mail or research but he'd never seen anything like what Rainey could do. Once that sewer rat was focused, it was nearly impossible to distract him. It could be a problem, at times, because if McAndrew and or Efird decided to let a job go, they often had a fight on their hands

pulling the Nossie off the keyboard. He was obsessed with secrets, and that would probably take him down the path to Final Death one day.

Efrid was standing, hands on her hips, watching the ghouls unload the truck. The liquor was being staged on one low set of shelves, and there was quite a bit of it. Two layers of bottles inside each crate before a second, smaller crate was revealed beneath.

"Going to have to watch that stuff," she said. "You're liable to end up with half the shipment in the woods outside with the ghouls."

"Half a shipment's not such a bad deal, considering they're doing all the work," he said. "We have something over here, if you've got a minute. Rainey found a 'dark' cargo inbound, tight security. Something important, but no idea what it is. He got into the navigation, but it's off-grid. No owner's info, or contract."

Efrid frowned. "Sounds risky," she said.

McAndrew was about to laugh at this, then he caught her gaze and remembered how they'd met.

"Maybe," he said, "but it's been dead around here, if you get my meaning. Might be a chance to shake out of the rut. Any way we play it, Rainey's in deep, and it'll be hell if we decide to pull him out."

Efrid rolled her eyes. "Not a good reason to go along," she said. "Still..."

"It beats sitting around worrying over whether the ghouls are going to run off with the whiskey," McAndrew said.

Efrid laughed. "Okay," she said. "I'm in. I'll check the wards."

McAndrew watched her walk away toward the door at one end of the building. The wards, as she'd named them, were the culmination of a series of rituals she'd performed that somehow cut their small square acre of North Carolina off from the world. They were there, but no one would find them. She was also the one who hacked the driver's brains like Rainey did the GPS. One big team.

His own contributions were the ghouls, and additional concealment on the roads. He always wove shadows around the entrance, and the exit, when the trucks passed to prevent any unwanted discovery of the side road. By day the glamour that Efrid cast rendered the turns all but invisible. By night, when they were allowing traffic, it was his job to be certain it was only the traffic they anticipated.

These custom jobs were trickier. That was the challenge, and the risk. They could go on taking loads of pharmaceuticals, guns, and who knew what

else night after night, but it was dangerous to get into a rut. It could breed carelessness, for one thing. For another, they'd all go stir crazy. It was nearly time for one of their quarterly shut-down periods, where they all took off to wherever they wanted to go to blow off steam. One big, custom deal could make that next break a good one. He turned and walked back to Rainey's desk.

"It's a go," he said.

Rainey glanced up. "What?"

"Do it," McAndrew replied.

"I already did. They are two hours out."

McAndrew closed his eyes and mouthed the numbers from one to ten. He thought about reminding the Nossie he'd told him to wait until it was okayed with Efrid but knew it would make no difference. They were in, and it was happening. All that remained was to make sure it didn't turn into some sort of colossal fuck up.

Leaving Rainey to his work, McAndrew turned and headed off at a trot. They had to get this load complete and out and prepare for the new arrival. He caught sight of Phipps by the shelves and the whiskey and flagged him down. Things were about to get interesting.

The truck cut through the moonlight and shadows at eighty plus miles per hour. Paulson barely glanced into his rear view. He concentrated on the road ahead, veering around any traffic he encountered with casual indifference. He had a schedule, and he intended to keep it. He had a clean slate from local law enforcement, and the pay for the job was top dollar. Not every night he got a month's pay for a single drive, even working for the Camarilla. He glanced down at the GPS and frowned.

About twenty miles ahead there was a detour. He'd scanned this route well ahead of time, but something must have happened. Some redneck wrecking a truck, probably. He checked the details and his frown shifted to a smile. The delay was minor, only about ten minutes longer than the original route. He'd be fine. He thought briefly of radioing in and reporting, then decided against it. The less contact he had with this particular client, the better, and it wasn't a problem that he couldn't solve on his own.

Paulson and several dozen other Brujah worked ran long haul jobs on a regular schedule, mostly for

the Camarilla elders. These side jobs, still clan related, fell only to a few trusted drivers. Trusted to keep their wits about them and their mouths closed. He had no illusions about this cargo. If he lost it, destroyed it, or anything at all went wrong with the job, it would not end well for him. Weighing the risk against the extra pay, it had still been a no-brainer.

He rolled through a small town, if you could even call it a town, lined with more churches than businesses, and cranked up the music. The Nossie version of Satellite radio was playing a new album from a Toreador band out of Louisiana. Not exactly rock, and not exactly country, but with the perfection of rhythm that only the Degenerates could produce.

"It's coming," Rainey said, swiveling in his chair and calling out to McAndrew. "Maybe ten minutes until it reaches the turn. No transmissions have gone out, and the coordinates are set."

"So, no one knows he's taking the detour?"

"Not unless they are tracking him themselves, and even if they are, Efrid's glamour should confuse them. We won't have a lot of time. We need to get it in, unloaded, and out. The driver will not be human, but I suspect they will also not be powerful. Powerful Kindred don't drive trucks."

"Point taken," McAndrew said. "I'm going to the road. On this one, I think we might want the 'A' team out front. We have no idea what to expect, and we want this to go quickly so that no one will notice."

"So," Rainey said, "you mean it will be like every other op..."

McAndrew thought about smacking the Nossie upside his homely head, but instead he smiled. "Right," he said. "Let's get to it."

Paulson squinted into the night. Even with the bright headlights cutting the gloom, it was dark and foggy. The road should have been one of those that ran straight down the side of a field, then cut straight across, working around the crops. He'd passed thousands of similar roads, but this one was somehow different. It started with a long curve, and then twisted right and left several times, as if it had been

designed to keep him moving as slowly as possible. It set his nerves on edge.

The cargo was starting to bug him, too. He knew it was the isolated road and the weird detour, but rolling along as slowly as he was, strange thoughts banged around in his mind like pinballs. He wasn't supposed to wonder, or even care, what was in the trailer. No delays, no mistakes, no questions. That was the deal. It was a good deal. Out here, though, away from the steady roar of tires on pavement, the crackle of the radio seemed garish, and out-of-place, and the pressure of being in charge of something too important to pass through a regular weigh station, and likely to cost him his life if anything went wrong, weighed heavily.

"Fuck this," he said. He punched his boot down on the gas and gained speed. There might be more curves ahead, but he didn't care. It was time to get off this shit-splat road and on to Raleigh. Hight time.

"Here he comes," Phipps called out.

McAndrew paid no attention. He was concentrating. It felt good to be out of the warehouse, in the night. He felt more alive than he had in weeks. He stretched his arms out and raised his face to the sky.

When he called to them, the shadows answered. He sent them rippling down both sides of the road, rolling like twin dark waves, parted in the center, and rising, first to the height of a man, then higher, until they curled over the road, meeting in the center and creating a black tunnel. The truck ground around the last corner and drove into that whirling darkness. McAndrew let out a scream that echoed into the night and slammed his arms down to his sides. The shadows thickened, whirled faster, and then tightened around the truck like a noose. There was a screech of tires as the driver fought for control, but he was moving too fast, and the only thing that prevented the rig from tilting and toppling off the road was McAndrew. He concentrated, thickening the shadows, drawing them tighter. He felt the truck within, felt it slowing, felt the diesel choking. He closed his eyes and sent a burst of dark energy that killed the engine and brought the truck to a sudden halt.

All around him, Phipps' ghouls rushed forward. Most were armed, but a few held back, just waiting for whatever trouble the driver might cause to be over and done so they could get the truck moving

again and into the warehouse. The shadows thinned, withdrawing like eldritch tentacles and then dispersed in the wind.

McAndrew opened his eyes and watched. This was the tricky part. There was probably a single driver, maybe a pair, at most, but there was no telling who, or what they might be. These custom jobs had far too many variables for his taste.

He almost laughed when the driver, a Brujah, dropped to the ground, started to run forward, and then stopped as he saw the wave of ghouls rushing toward him. He made a move as if he might charge, thought better of it and dropped to the ground, raising his arms and glaring at McAndrew, deciding not to trust the ghouls with this, strode forward.

When he was close enough to hear, the driver spoke up. He was a surly, dark-haired guy with a Dallas Cowboys ballcap.

"You're making a mistake," he said. "Already made it, in fact. This load is Camarilla. Important stuff. They aren't going to be happy."

"I suspect they won't be," McAndrew said, "but then, the only one they associate it with is you, so that doesn't sound like a 'me' problem. What's in there?"

"You don't know?" the Gangrel said, incredulous. "You just hijacked a Camarilla truck in case it might be important?"

"Oh, we know it's important," McAndrew said. "The security gave that away. Knowing it's important doesn't give me much to work with, though, so, what's in the truck?"

"Go fuck yourself. You can open it as well as I can. I don't question my clients. It keeps me alive, and in business."

"I guess it did," McAndrew said. "You want that to stay true, maybe you lose the attitude and gain a bit of curiosity."

The Brujah looked at McAndrew, not giving any sign of compliance.

"Get him out of here," McAndrew said. "Get him into the warehouse and contained. Phipps, let's get this truck inside. We'll check it out once we have it secured."

The ghouls swarmed over the truck, which, though canted to one side near the ditch, had come to a full stop. Moments later the engine ground back to life. Very slowly, the big rig rolled up onto the road and forward and disappeared into the warehouse. Shortly after that, the doors closed, and the road, and the night, returned to silent darkness.

They took every precaution once the rig was inside. McAndrew lined the ghouls up, weapons ready. Efrid stood ready behind them, and McAndrew stood beside her. Rainey manned his computers and seemed barely aware the rest of them were there.

"It's locked," Phipps said. "Not a padlock, some kind of..."

His words fell to silence as a series of sharp clicks echoed through the warehouse, and the door popped open with a snap. Rainey looked up from his computer.

"Got it," he said.

Everyone turned to stare at him. He shrugged. "It's part of the security system. I've been working on it since we decided to bring it in."

"And never bothered to mention it to anyone," Efrid said. She tried to frown, but it turned to a grin.

Phipps and two other girls approached the rear of the truck slowly, weapons drawn. The driver might not have been much of a threat, but he was also not likely to be the only security. The question wasn't if there was security. The question was what it would be. How dangerous?

Phipps motioned one of the other ghouls forward, and the guy pulled the door slowly open. Despite the lighting in the warehouse, the interior of the truck was ink black. No lights came on inside, and none of the exterior illumination penetrated. McAndrew was not a stranger to shadows, and he frowned. It was not normal darkness. He stood very still, blocking out the motion and sound from the ghouls, one by one, and concentrated.

There was a very, very light rustle from within. He started to speak, started to call Phipps back, but in the same second that he might have reacted, the shadows erupted from the truck. The ghouls went flying, as if struck by the impact of an explosion. McAndrew saw Phipps spin off to the left. McAndrew paid no attention, he was focused. He drew shadow around him like a wall, and he waited. He heard shots and knew that the ghouls were firing blindly. He willed them to stop.

Seconds later three figures spun out into the warehouse, spreading, one to either side, and the third driving straight at McAndrew. He ignored the others. Efrid was going to have to take one, and he hoped Rainey was out of his chair and moving. The

ghouls would help. There were a lot of them, and sheer numbers would lend them strength, but these were not normal opponents.

The Kindred coming straight at him, tall and dark, dressed in a long flowing coat, was at the truck, and then very suddenly in his face. McAndrew cursed. The Degenerate had used his Toreador speed, brandishing a pair of wicked silver knives that glittered as he moved. It was close. A microsecond longer and he'd have been done before he started, but McAndrew was no childe. He side-stepped at the last moment and swept a tendril of shadow low to the ground, tangling it in his attacker's legs. The Toreador was rolling away before he even struck the ground, but McAndrew had anticipated the move. Fast as he was, the Toreador was not old, and he depended too much on surprise and speed. He rolled right into a fold of shadow, and McAndrew wrapped it tightly around his squirming form. He tightened it further, stepped in, and pulled the knife from his belt. He drove it straight down into his attacker's face, dug in, twisted, and lifted to cut a huge gouge across his attacker's face.

He drove the blade back, again, a final time, and then, already turning back toward the truck, he stomped a heavy, steel-toed boot into what remained of the Toreador's face. The neck snapped to the side. It was possible the Degenerate would heal, if he was allowed, but not any time soon. McAndrew spun to see how the others fared.

Both of the remaining guards were Gangrel, but whoever had hired them had either not believed there was any danger to their cargo or had simply not been able to get more powerful Kindred to take on such a mundane task.

The Gangrel on the left had seen Efrid and recognized the major threat. Despite this, he'd underestimated her. She stood very still, one hand held out before her. Halfway to where she stood, even as the beast flowed out from within him, the tall, swarthy Gangrel slowed. He looked as if he were shifting, and running, wrapped in molasses. Phipps, who must have survived the initial blast from within, and two other ghouls closed on him and, as if he were standing still, cut him to shreds with automatic fire. By the time Efrid released her hold, nothing but flayed flesh was left to fall into a puddle of blood on the warehouse floor.

The third guard, though he'd erupted into the warehouse with the first two, had reconsidered. Rainey, for all his love of computers, was old. He

was older even than McAndrew, and the sewer rat was strong. He drew to his full, six-foot seven inches in height and his eyes glittered. If the Gangrel had reached him, it would have been his last act of defiance. Instead, he darted back into the truck. One of the ghouls, mistaking this for weakness, or cowardice, dove in after him. There was sudden crack, as if bones had shattered, and a scream, then silence.

McAndrew strode to the rear doors of the truck, peered into the trailer, and frowned. The darkness that had clouded it had dispersed. Some sort of protection spell, or unfamiliar discipline had created it, and then driven it out in a single burst. What McAndrew saw was a single crate, long and slender, strapped into the center of the floor. There were seats along the outer walls. The Gangrel had retreated to a back corner, eyes wild. The ghoul who'd followed him inside lay sprawled across the crate, his throat ripped open cleanly, blood soaking the wood and dripping to the floor.

"Come out of there," McAndrew said. "You come out now, maybe you live another day. You stay, and we have to come after you, and there won't be enough left of you to form a coherent memory."

Very slowly, hands raised, the Gangrel did as he was told. As he exited the trailer, Phipps stepped up and cuffed him. All the fight was gone, and McAndrew knew he'd been right. Low-level, hired muscle. Not ready to die for...what? A box?

"Get him out of here," he said. "Make sure he's out. Get him far away and throw him in a ditch."

Phipps nodded. He and two others led the Gangrel away. Efrid stepped up beside McAndrew, and Rainey slipped up on the other side. They stared at the crate.

"For that?" Efrid said. "We went through all of this, risked Camarilla detection and retaliation, for what?"

"Whatever it is," McAndrew said, "they went to a lot of trouble to move it. Not enough trouble, but still..."

"Let's get a crew in there," Efrid said. "We'll have to unstrap it and get this truck out of here. We have to clean it up, too. Nothing to do about the blood, but as long as the driver has no idea that he's even lost the cargo, it shouldn't matter. From here out it's just another job."

McAndrew nodded distractedly. He motioned for the remaining ghouls to climb into the truck and work on the crate, then he turned to Rainey.

"I have a strange feeling about this," he said. "Something is...wrong."

Rainey nodded. "I feel it. But what?"

Efrid cut them off. "Don't be ridiculous. You wanted some adventure, you got it. Now let's open the magic box and see what we got for a prize. My money says, we wasted our time and got at least one ghoul killed."

"We'll see," Rainey said softly. "We'll see soon enough."

The darkness peeled away slowly. Blood dripped languidly, tantalizingly, from somewhere above him. It rolled over his lips and into his throat. He felt it slide in, and down, but made no effort to swallow, or to gulp. He felt as if his limbs were encased in stone, and his heart was a ball of ice wrapped in barbed wire. But it was feeling, and sensation. What had been a slow emergence of memory and thought became a rushing current. Faces and names, Le Duc, Kli Kodesh, Owain, Nicolas.

That final memory snapped into place, and his eyes opened fully. He was encased in a box...not a coffin, exactly...but similar. The blood still dripped, and he caught it as it fell. He sensed those working to free him, sensed as well that they had no idea what it was they were opening. There were so many questions he had to banish them to the back of his mind and concentrate to remain coherent.

For a moment, he thought of the chained crate, how he'd been locked away—but that was eternities in the past. He'd been freed, and chased the cursed Owain, and the Grail. Then he had been consumed and now?

Suddenly impatient to be free of his confinement, he pressed his hands to the inside of the container above him and shoved. There was screech of nails tearing from splintering wood, and he rose, shrugging off the lid to what he now saw was a plain wooden crate. It struck a pair of ghouls and drove them back against the wall of some larger container.

Montrovant ignored all of it. He leapt from the crate and strode forward. There was a drop-off of several feet, which he took in a second leap, whirling to take in his surroundings.

He was in a place such as he'd never seen. The walls were lined with shelves made of metal. Lights glittered, but he did not catch the scent of oil, and he frowned. He turned slowly.

There were several gathered around him and, groping with his awakening senses, he sorted them. A Nosferatu to his left, on his right a blood witch of the Tremere, and closest of all... He smiled.

"This is a strange welcome, cousin," he said softly. I do not recognize you, or this place. I believe, in fact, that I will not recognize this time or place, but you are Lasombra."

McAndrew held his ground and studied the dark, oddly dressed Kindred. This one, he knew, was old, and somehow familiar, though he knew they'd never met. And what was an elder doing in that box, and that truck?

"I am," he said at last. "My name is McAndrew, Alexander McAndrew. And you are?"

"I've had many names. Most of them, I'm afraid, were not flattering. But if I am remembered in this time, you will know me as Montrovant."

McAndrew had to fight to prevent his jaw dropping open.

"Montrovant," he repeated... "The Dark One?"

"I am remembered, then," Montrovant said.

"I'm afraid, though, that I have no idea how, or why I am here. I should not be, and I do not know what sorcery could have brought it about. I was consumed in a great battle..."

"By Nicolas," McAndrew finished. "I know the story... and the Grail..."

Montrovant laughed bitterly.

"Was it found, then?" he said softly.

McAndrew shook his head. "There are rumors, of course. Many believe that the ancient, Kli Kodesh, is, in fact, the Grail. He claims to have fed..."

"From the Christ," Montrovant completed the sentence. "And his name, in Hebrew, means 'Holy Vessel'. Surely he does not still walk the night?"

"As far as I know, he does," McAndrew said.

"He is either a prophet, or quite mad, or both, but I have heard no stories of his final death."

"Excuse me," Efrid said, stepping closer. "Are we hijacking a truck, or having a family reunion?"

"I'm not really sure," McAndrew said. He turned to Rainey.

"Maybe you can find something on that Shrek.net of yours about this...why, how, who...and while you're at it see if you can find out who was expecting him, because I have the feeling we just called down a shitstorm on our heads. Anyone

powerful enough to play around with history in such a way is not going to be a pleasant enemy."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Montrovant said, "but I agree that if someone went to the trouble to bring me back from what should have been Final Death, there must be a reason. Even if it was just to revive me and have the pleasure of killing me once again."

"No money in this," Efrid growled.

"I wouldn't say that," McAndrew replied. He turned to where Phipps stood off to one side. "Get that truck cleared out. Take one of those dead ghouls and strap them back into the crate. Clean it all up as well as you can."

"What about, them?" Phipps said. He pointed at the two Gangrel, one of whom seemed to be showing signs of consciousness, and the Nossie who'd attacked McAndrew.

"Second thought put them in the crate," McAndrew said. "See if you can seal it as it was before."

"I may have caused some damage," Montrovant said.

McAndrew shrugged. "It's not like whoever receives the package is going to be fooled for long. 'I think, though, that it might be time to shut this place down for a while. I'm going to have the rest of the crew get our own trucks and clear it all out. We can regroup and either set up somewhere else or move on. The Camarilla aren't going to let this go, so we'd better be scarce when they start sweeping the area."

Rainey had already begun packing up his computer gear. He kept dark, slim cases beneath the desk for just such a moment, and the equipment began disappearing swiftly. Efrid had very little to carry and was ready first.

Montrovant stood off to one side, watching the flurry of activity with interest. McAndrew knew it was going to take the elder time to acclimate, but if the stories were even half true, he was in the presence of one of the most dangerous Kindred his clan had ever produced. Rogue most of his undead life, partial founder of the Knights Templar, and accomplished in disciplines that his clan—their clan—rarely mastered. He'd been locked away in a crate to starve, only to be brought back in the 1990s and continue his quest—all the way to final death. Or not, it seemed.

When the warehouse had been stripped and packed, McAndrew turned to Montrovant and raised an eyebrow. "If you like, you may join me. I believe

we would all be better off—anywhere else. Also, if there is any way to find out what this is all about, that one," he pointed at Rainey, who still had a tablet tucked under his arm, "will find it. They were taking you to Raleigh. That would seem to leave two choices. We take a different route entirely and try to distance ourselves, or we track the driver, and the truck, and prepare a surprise of our own."

"Running is not a thing I can stomach," Montrovant said. "And I would very much like to meet my 'savior', though I doubt they will get the pleasure they sought from that encounter."

"And I," McAndrew laughed, "would love to share that moment. How about it?" He turned first to Efrid, and then to Rainey. "Up for another adventure?"

"In for a penny," Efrid said. "I'm still hoping to find a way this pays us for our time."

Rainey only grinned. His homely face turned it into a macabre parody of good humor.

"I confess," Montrovant said, shaking his head, "that I find this odd partnership unsettling. In my time—how long ago?—alliances were uncertain, and treachery was not. When I was brought back, it seemed the same, though the clans had shifted, and the blood had thinned. Now—what year is this?"

"2019," McAndrew said.

"Ten years then. The time I remember best lies centuries in the past. Then, had I stood in a room with a blood witch and a Nosferatu, we would all have been plotting one another's end."

"Don't be too sure we're not," Efrid said. "McAndrew here seems to know who you are, but I'm not much of a history buff. We had a good thing here, and now we're suddenly on the run. It occurs to me that whoever lost you might pay to have you back."

Montrovant smiled, but this time there was no trace of humor.

"I have not fed on Tremere blood in centuries," he said. "But I would be happy to break my fast..."

"Let's just get on the road," McAndrew said, glaring at Efrid. "I think we'll find plenty of others to take out our frustrations on in Raleigh."

The truck rolled out ahead of everyone. Efrid followed along and, walking with the Brujah driver and whispering in his ear, her nails sliding in intricate patterns over his throat, the side of his face, her lips very, very close.

"He will be back on the road shortly," McAndrew said. "He will remember nothing and will only

realize he is slightly late. It will buy us some time—until he delivers the crate. We'll drive in one of the SUVs."

Montrovant raised an eyebrow.

"An enclosed truck that is more like a puffed-up car than a work vehicle. They hold a lot of things a car would not and have plenty of comfortable seats. Efrid will drive, and Rainey can get on with his search. Hopefully by the time we roll into Raleigh we'll know where we're headed."

Montrovant glanced around the warehouse a final time, and then nodded. "For now, our paths are the same, I think," he said. "I will be interested to see how the Nosferatu can search for information while being driven down the road, and in learning what a 'Shreknet' is."

McAndrew laughed, and turned away, heading toward one of three black Cadillac Escalades idling by the far door. He climbed into the back, followed by Montrovant and Rainey. Efrid slid in behind the wheel. Phipps drove one of the others, and another ghoul had the wheel of the third. They pulled out into the darkness, and as they exited the warehouse, Rainey closed the doors behind them, sealing the place off from sight. The wards would remain in place—until they were inevitably broken.

They rolled down the dirt road, turned onto Highway 17, and disappeared into the darkness.

The older sections of Raleigh, NC are filled with grand mansions, painted ladies, and stark, stone-faced edifices with wrought iron fences and tall, slender trees that grew by fighting the walls of the buildings for the sunlight. An entire block of the old homes backs up against the end of an industrial district that stopped expanding miles away and started decaying near the city's heart. That block, both sides of it, was Camarilla. Not many lived there, only the leadership, but the homes surrounding the center were filled with conference rooms, computer networks, armories—it was the center of Kindred power in Raleigh, a castle, and a fortress. In the finest of the old homes, the Ventrue Ambrose, Prince of the city, waited impatiently for an update on his latest treasure.

Ambrose ran a tight ship. The city was mostly in line—they had plenty of Anarchs, but there was a separation—Raleigh just wasn't important enough to fight over. There were bigger prizes, and bigger

battles, so a strong Camarilla presence ruled the majority of the city, and the rest they ignored, leaving enough open space to appease the straggling gangs and underlords who remained.

It was a simple arrangement, but simple arrangements grew boring over time. Ambrose did not like to be bored, so he'd created his own side project. A thing to amuse himself, and to entertain visiting dignitaries from larger cities. It passed the time.

He'd opened a museum, of sorts. It housed relics. There were books so ancient that their pages were accessible only to Ancients. He'd had some translated—others he knew only by their titles. He had Toreador sculpture. He had articles that had belonged to famous Kindred through the ages. It was a work in progress.

Recently, he'd run across a Tremere who claimed to possess an odd bit of history. She'd claimed to have recovered enough of the essence of a famous elder, one devoured body and soul by a true monster, to draw him back to this world. In Torpor...safely silent and easily controlled with the proper safeguards. She had promised Ambrose no less than Montrovant, the Dark One himself, lost to the folly of his endless questing for the Holy Grail.

Ambrose had gone to extra lengths for this. He'd constructed a special coffin, so thick that no force short of a very large bomb could break it. It had a very, very thick lens through which he, and any visitors would be able to view the face. That was the key. Even if Montrovant woke, he would be trapped, and without the vitae, he would lack the strength to free himself. Perhaps there could be a small kiosk next to the coffin with a short history of the hunt for the Grail. It pleased Ambrose to think what some of the Lasombra elders might think of his exhibit—those pompous leftovers from times that should be drying up and flaking away.

A light lit on his phone. There were six incoming lines, but this was the one he'd been waiting for.

He answered immediately.

"What is it?"

"The truck," a sibilant voice replied. "It's nearing the city. Should be here in the next twenty minutes."

Ambrose smiled. "Have them hold it in the warehouse. I will be there personally."

He hung up without waiting for an answer. This was going to be a moment of triumph, and he fully intended to enjoy it in person. He rose and strode

from his office. He startled the young Gangrel guard, who leaped to his feet.

"Brandon, you're with me," Ambrose said. "Get Lisette and Daniel and meet me on the street. Our prize is nearing the warehouse."

"Yes sir!" Brandon replied. He was a tall, blonde-haired Kindred with broad shoulders and wild, hairy eyebrows. He disappeared out the door and Ambrose grabbed his suit coat from the tree near the door, slipped it over his shoulders and buttoned it as he walked. His office was on the third floor of the old home, and he descended the stairs quickly.

By the time he reached the street, a car was already pulling up. Brandon was behind the wheel, and in the rear seats sat Lisette, another Gangrel, dark skinned with bright eyes and as dangerous as a wild animal, and Daniel, a bald, misshapen mess of a Nossie with sunken eyes and a perpetual grimace that sometimes made Ambrose's spine tingle, as if something very dangerous was about to happen. He was a computer prodigy. Ambrose could barely remember the password to make his e-mail work and would never have gone past that if it were not for the need to search the Internet for the items he sought. It was truly remarkable how open a seller could be about things that no one believed in without drawing the slightest attention. Daniel expanded it into Shrek.net and was directly responsible for the acquisition of this latest treasure. This was a true rarity. He had never heard of a museum displaying an infamous Kindred as an artifact. In his mind, he was already planning the invitations to the grand opening of the new exhibit.

It hadn't taken Rainey long to lock onto the GPS in the truck again. After syncing their own navigation system to that signal, he'd gone to work, striking keys with such rapidity that even Montrovant seemed impressed. McAndrew passed the time by filling Montrovant in on changes in the Camarilla, the clans, and the world in general. He was just getting to Facebook when Rainey made an odd, barking sound. It might have been a laugh, or an exclamation of satisfaction.

"He bought you," the Nossie said. "There are places you can buy almost anything. The darker side of the Internet, and of course, Shrek.net, provide outlets for transactions that are...peculiar."

Apparently a Tremere," he glanced at Efrid, then back at the screen, "found a way to recover parts of your essence. I'd have to do a lot more research to find out how, but she had enough that, with small amounts of blood and careful controls, she was able to reconstitute your form. She did not allow enough for you to rise from Torpor. She sold you to a Ventrué in Raleigh, Prince of the city. His name is Ambrose."

"I've heard of that guy," McAndrew cut in. "Doesn't he have some sort of Kindred museum?"

Rainey nodded, not looking up from the screen. "If what I'm reading is correct," he said, "his intent was to display you in a sealed coffin—your face visible to those who might want a glimpse into his-tory."

"A trophy," Montrovant said. "A prize to be gloated over and shown off, like a painting, or some decadent Toreador sculpture... Is he old, this prince? Is he powerful?"

"Not particularly," Efrid said. "He runs that city, but mostly because it's slow—not currently considered much of a prize. He's probably a few hundred years old, maybe a little more. I've never heard anything remarkable about him. I know the Anarchs allow him his territory because it's simpler than doing battle and running him out. Also, as long as he is there, the Camarilla pay no attention, and don't send in anyone stronger."

Montrovant's frown turned to a scowl.

"You can track the truck?" he asked.

"It's just entered the city," Rainey said.

"How far behind are we?"

McAndrew pointed out the window to where the lights of Raleigh illuminated the skyline. "Maybe five minutes."

"We should be there when he opens the truck," Montrovant said. "I should be there. I want to see the last expression on his face..."

"I would kind of like to see that myself," McAndrew said. "In fact, I'd also like to see what else is in the warehouse he thinks he's delivering you to."

"I do not know you," Montrovant said. "Still, when I emerged, you did not attack me, or challenge me. I find myself, for the moment, short on allies. "End this Prince Ambrose with me, and we may find that our roads merge. I have been absent, but I am certain that, once word of my return circulates, there will be those interested in aiding me."

"I'm in," McAndrew said. "What we had back there is blown now, and I don't really have a plan

for the future. We are both Lasombra. I'll come along for the ride, just to see where it ends up."

Rainey glanced up.

"I am not attached to anyone but our group. I am not of your clan..."

"I sense those boundaries differ from those I remember," Montrovant said. "You have proven yourself a worthy ally in a very short time. This new world revolves around technology. You have mastered it."

Rainey didn't reply, he turned back to his tablet and his searches.

"What will you do?" Efrid asked. "Everything you knew is gone. Most of those who opposed you, or assisted you, have met the Final Death."

"I will do what I have always done," Montrovant replied. "I once sought the Grail because I believed it would benefit my clan. That clan abandoned me, called me outcast and rogue. When I died, they were nowhere to be found. So, I am clanless, but I am focused. I will find what I have sought—for so long—and then I will decide what comes next. One thing a very long life, death, and rebirth has taught me. Whatever I find, whatever I discover...I will do it for myself, and for those who stand beside me. I will not build my life around ancient traditions or customs. I will not be ruled by elders in a failing hierarchy. I will carve my own path, and, should I succeed in my quest, at long last, I will laugh as I stride across all their graves."

Efrid laughed. "You talk like a Gothic romance novel, but I get it. I even agree. I think, if you will have a "blood witch" on your side, that I will tag along and see just how interesting this can get."

"All of that is wonderful," McAndrew said, "but we are only a few minutes away from the warehouse where that truck pulled in. Before we pat ourselves on the back and plan the future, we'd better concentrate on the matter at hand."

"Oh, I am looking forward to that," Montrovant said.

Ambrose stood at the back of the truck, and he frowned. He sensed that something was off, but he could not place it. The truck was sealed, and the Brujah driver they'd hired was climbing out of the cab with a lopsided grin splitting his face. Ambrose had received countless deliveries, some in person, like this, and others that had been brought to him at

his office, or at the museum itself, if they were large. Nothing was different. The truck had been a few minutes late, but not a significant delay.

He turned to the others. "Brandon, get over there with that driver and get the doors open. Lisette, stay close."

He didn't bother to instruct Daniel. The Nossie was already parked in a corner, logging onto his laptop. Ambrose thought about saying something, and then stopped. Maybe the sewer rat felt it, too. Maybe he was dialing into his little magic box to figure out what could be wrong.

Ambrose turned back to the truck. The driver had stepped up onto the running board and grabbed the latch that secured the rear doors. Brandon stood beside him, hands on his hips, waiting. He didn't look concerned, and that eased Ambrose's mind a little. Brandon had keen senses. He'd run point on a lot of operations and had never failed. Lisette seemed a little tense.

"What is it?" Ambrose said, turning.

"I don't know," she replied. "But it's not that truck. Brandon would know. Might be nothing. It's like a tingle. I've felt it before, and it meant nothing."

Ambrose frowned. The truck doors opened. He could make out a long, dark object inside, as expected. Brandon hopped up and in, moving forward cautiously. A moment later, he returned to the truck's doors.

"It's strapped down and sealed," he called out, "But...I smell blood."

Ambrose frowned. He wondered if it could be something lingering from whatever the truck had last hauled. He hadn't gone to any special expense. After all, his cargo was not likely to be hijacked. No one knew about it, and it would have been of no value to anyone else. The route had been short and direct. The truck had picked up the cargo, and it was here, but—blood?

"Get over there," he told Lisette. Go up with him, unstrap the crate, and get it out of that truck. I don't know why there would be blood there, but I do know it's the last thing we want anywhere near that..."

He fell silent as something caught his attention off to the left. It had been lightning quick, and subtle, but something in the shadows had moved. Then there was a rustle to the right, and he spun, angry with himself for reacting like a scared child. There was nothing. Nothing but a warehouse with shadow-

lined walls and a bright, central light focused on his prize.

Until the shadows began, very slowly, to move.

"Get out of there," he screamed. "Brandon, Lissette!"

It was too late. Like a black wave the darkness spilled over and around him, closing him off from the truck and stifling sound. He whirled, reaching out with his senses, seeking the source.

He completed a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn, and McAndrew strode from the shadows, smiling. The Lasombra hesitated, just for a moment, offering a nod that might have been a mock bow.

"Good evening, Prince Ambrose," he said. "I am very sorry to disappoint you about your cargo. It seems that there was a detour along the way, hard to avoid, really. There was quite the mess...and the blood."

"Who are you?" Ambrose asked. He stood taller. The Lasombra he faced was no child, but neither was he particularly powerful. Holding the intruder's gaze, Ambrose flexed a little, testing the shadows. He'd faced Lasombra before and he was familiar with their shadowplay.

"I would be happy to explain it to you," McAndrew said, but my identity is really not important."

There were shouts and screams off to the right, where the truck was parked. Sounds of a battle rose and fell away almost immediately.

"What do you want?" Ambrose said. "You know this is my city. I have money, land, power..."

"Being a thief," McAndrew said, "I am a little pained to say, nothing. I admit, we were curious, and we wanted your cargo, but I believe I'll trade that in for a front seat at the show."

The shadows between the two and the truck receded. They pulled to either side like curtains, revealing the empty rear of the truck and its cargo, still strapped in place. Dangling over the end of the trailer, Brandon's body hung broken and bent. Lissette was nowhere to be seen. Ambrose glanced over to where Daniel had been sitting with his laptop. There was nothing but a dark smear on the wall.

Ambrose spun back, but McAndrew was gone. In his place, a taller, darker Kindred stood, regarding him as if he was some sort of circus oddity. The stranger's hair was very long, unfashionably so. He actually wore a robe. His eyes were dark, and Ambrose felt the age, and the power, the way the shadows wrapped around his shoulders like a second cloak.

"Let me introduce myself," the elder said. "My name is Montrovant. I believe you had planned for me to be an... exhibition. I am sorry to say that I will only be here for one performance, and the audience is small."

"I..." Ambrose could find no words. He turned and tried to flee, but found himself wrapped in coils of shadow like huge snakes, squeezing him so tightly he felt his bones tremble.

Montrovant approached him slowly, circling like a wild animal closing on its prey. Those dark eyes never left him as the circles drew tighter. Ambrose summoned every bit of will he possessed and drove at the shadows. For just a moment, he felt a loosening, and he thought he might break free. Then strong hands gripped the side of his head, and wrenched. He felt the bones in his neck snap, and the sharp bite of fangs on his throat.

"You...were supposed to be dead."

There was no answer.

Montrovant sat in the passenger seat of the Escalade as they pulled away from the warehouse. Rainey was tapping away at his keyboard, and Efrid lounged beside him in back. McAndrew drove steadily toward the edge of the city.

"Where to?" he asked.

Montrovant stared out into the darkness at the glittering lights and tall buildings. He shook his head.

"Let us go to a place where we can rest, and plan," he said. "There are things that I must finish, those that I must find and others I believe I would enjoy sending to their final rest. For now? It is good to be...here."

He turned to where Rainey was absorbed in some search and cleared his throat. The Nossie glanced up. "Do you think you could run a search...on the location of the Grail? Old habits die hard. I would dearly love to know if anything new has turned up."

Rainey grinned, nodded, and returned to his keyboard.

McAndrew nodded and turned north. They needed to put miles behind them before anyone discovered that Raleigh was without its prince, and he thought, just maybe, if they could keep their new friend's existence a secret long enough, that things were about to get very, very interesting.

DARKENED STREETS

Vagabond mages and Technocratic minions. Roadhouse kin and Wyrn-tainted Garou. Anarch Archons and Kindred smuggling crews. Plus the return of a beloved Lasombra from times past. They're all here in this Year of the Road exclusive anthology featuring the best the World of Darkness has to offer!

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