

THE ORDER OF
ETERNAL SLEEP

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Dedicated to the Work of LVX
And the family and friends who walked with me through the
forest.

“I will love the light for it shows me the way, yet I will endure the darkness for it shows me the stars.”

—Og Mandino

PROLOGUE

“WELCOME, MAX.” Valbas stood next to an oblong stone. It appeared hollow and its sides reached the Mara’s chest. “I’ve been looking forward to this moment.”

Despite the smug tone, Max appreciated hearing his voice. No one had spoken to him since he’d traded his life for Ming’s. After that, he was placed in a cell with a daily bowl of gruel and cup of water. The strange creatures who brought the food never addressed him. Like today, the two diminutive guards who had escorted Max from his cell to this chamber—now twenty feet from Valbas—had spoken no words. They had directed him with spears only, tying Max’s wrists together in front of him, and leading him down a long hallway that sloped deeper into the pyramid temple of Gehanna.

“Me, too,” Max said, mustering what little strength his body had left to meet the adversary head on. “One minute, you’re off to get Charlie. The next . . . I hear nothing for weeks.”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Willis. That was a pleasant surprise. However, his usefulness waned.” The Mara’s scaly lips spread in an unnatural smile. “Soon his parts will be *recycled*.”

Instead of responding, Max focused on the stone box in the middle of the room. Recognition finally clicked. “What’s with the coffin?”

“More correctly, a *sarcophagus*. But so much more.” Valbas drew his talon across the stone. “It’s an ancient tool that can be used in many ways to achieve many outcomes. But a coffin is not among them.”

“Thanks for the history lesson—”

“You know nothing of history,” Valbas snarled. “You stare at pictures in a book while reading the words of pompous men who tout ridiculous theories on the artifacts they have uncovered.

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Interpreting ancient cultures through your modern paradigms can reveal only half-truths.”

Max kept silent. So far, no physical pain had been inflicted upon him. But weeks of isolation in the dank cell had taken its toll in ways that physical torture could not.

Valbas glanced behind Max and commanded the two guards in his ancient tongue, the words only registering as guttural syllables to Max. He jumped as the spears nudged into his back, urging him forward again. Max didn't spare a look to the creatures whose faces resembled an amalgamation of stitched-together parts from different bodies—maybe that's what 'recycling' a skin puppet meant. Instead, he obeyed, moving forward slowly, always keeping his eyes on Valbas.

Halting five feet from the Mara and sarcophagus, Max could now see words and symbols intricately etched into its smooth stone sides. One creature stepped from Max into a shadowy corner of the chamber and began cranking a pulley system. Gears groaned, and it sounded like a castle drawbridge opening somewhere inside the thick masonry of the temple. The rush of water followed, echoing off the walls, joining the occasional crack and pop of the torches.

Almost instantly, Max felt an increase of mental alertness, tingles up his spine. It was minor. But compared to the lethargic haze induced by the mind-numbing silence of his cell, the change was noticeable.

“You feel it.” Valbas grinned, watching Max. “When water runs over quartz, it creates electricity. There are giant aquifers and ducts underneath The City.”

It explained the obelisks' artificial daylight, but Max wasn't sure what it had to do with him or its connection to the sarcophagus. A horrible thought clenched Max's jaw. Asylums used electric-shock therapy on patients—a dangerous treatment that was being exposed for resulting in more harm than good. Was that his future? Encased in a Pharaoh's tomb, receiving electroshock torture . . .

“Let's get down to brass tacks,” Max said. “I've been in this cell for weeks—”

“Forty days, to be precise.” Valbas closed the last few feet between them. “All part of the preparation.”

“Preparation for what? You gonna turn me into a skin puppet?”

Cut me up and recycle me into something like these mutants?” Max gestured over his shoulder at the spear-toting guard. “Or just bury me alive.”

“I already informed you this is not a coffin. To fill such a powerful creation with a corpse would be tantamount to you burying your revolver in the desert sands. Worthless.” Valbas’s breath was hot and bestial. “The abyss showed me the seed of something special in you, Max. I have decided to nurture it by introducing you to the darkness. I will be your guide into the lowest dimensions of reality. And like a nightshade, that seed will grow and flourish in the absence of light.”

Max eyed the sarcophagus. Its lid was off, revealing a hungry black chasm.

“No thanks. I already know the dark—”

“So you think. However, you’ve only just scratched the surface.” The familiar wolf rictus spread across his reptilian features. “Humankind is so far removed from its intended grandeur it surely sickens the gods who molded you. But, man’s failure will secure our victory. We will use your species as the worms you are. Feeding you to a Black Sun. And when a new dawn breaks, earth’s rightful rulers shall return.”

Max spat at the Mara’s feet.

Valbas snatched him by the throat and lifted Max off the ground. Rather than resist, Max hung limp in the vise-like grip. His face burned from lack of oxygen, but Max kept his eyes drilled into Valbas’s. That’s how he wanted to die. Locked in battle, passing every ounce of hate through the windows to their souls.

Turning Max’s skull left and right, Valbas inhaled. “It fascinates me how eager you are to die. And yet how frightened you are of it.”

“Comes with being a failed species, I guess,” Max wheezed, spittle dripping from his purpled lips.

Valbas chuckled and dropped Max inside the sarcophagus. Max sucked in air, hating that his body was forced to show its weakness.

“The planet was different when my ancestors first walked the surface. Before the deluge forced us underground. I know only stories of the former splendor and their near achievement of the Black Dawn. The cosmos are aligning once again though, and the supreme council will see to our rise.”

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“Mara . . . on the surface . . .” Max panted, the crushing pressure lingered on his trachea. “You’re crazy . . . Never. Not possible.”

“The human brain has no concept of what is possible in this universe.”

Valbas looked away, commanding the stitched-up guards again. Max could hear them moving around the high walls of the stone.

“In Wisdom, the light was divided from the darkness.” Valbas smiled, looking back down at Max. “The light was called Day and the dark Night.”

Hearing scripture from the reptilian tongue was as disturbing as seeing the Mara smile.

“Didn’t take you for the religious type,” Max said, trying to buy time and not sure why. There was nowhere for him to run. Nothing that could be done to fight back. Whatever was going to happen to him was unavoidable, and it was better to accept.

“On the contrary, I’m quite the advocate for religion. Most humans cannot possibly comprehend what those ancient words allude to—similar to the misinterpretation of the sarcophagus. That confusion helps us immensely.”

“I don’t understand—”

The mutants’ hands shot into his space and Max was grabbed again. One holding him still, the other slipping a tight-fitting mask over his face. His vision was obscured behind a smudged glass. Neurons in his brain sparked, connecting with others before disappearing. In that flash was the memory of a bloody boxing ring and a gas mask of drugs. Something called a ‘feeder’ and a British gambler.

Max didn’t bother to struggle as the smoke filled the mask, pouring into his lungs. After a time, Max wasn’t sure if the mutant hands were still holding him. Eventually, he felt the cool air on his skin again but couldn’t remember the mask coming off. The burn in his lungs reminded him of *sí fén*. But in an apothecary such as The City, who knew what he’d been dosed with. Max welcomed its unknown effects which would surely be better than whatever torture Valbas had planned for him.

“Don’t worry, Max. This is only the beginning. The beginning is always unclear. Fear not. The dark has a way of illuminating things.”

Above him, somewhere lost in time and space, Max could hear the heavy lid sliding closed. But his consciousness was already far away from the sarcophagus and sinking fast into an abyss that had no end.

PART ONE

April 7th, 1913

“SURE AM GLAD they sent you, Detective. This is a strange one.”

Officer O’Neil stood in front of a stick-style home on the corner of Grant Street, the spring humidity trapping the stench of burnt wood and paint in the air.

“I’m guessing this wasn’t an accidental fire.” McCloud surveyed the house exterior, surprised by its unblemished appearance.

“Doesn’t seem so, sir.” O’Neil led them up a short flight of stairs to the front door. “We got a call a little after midnight, unidentified male claiming a fire at this address. Then he hung up.”

They entered the residence, and still, the only sign of a fire was the burnt odor and wet floorboards. The fire department must have acted quickly to keep the flames contained. Past the foyer though, the walls transitioned to long black fingers burned into the wallpaper, peeling it away and beckoning the officers into the heart of destruction.

McCloud followed O’Neil down the hallway into what was once a study. Another street cop and someone from the San Francisco Fire Department were writing reports, cloth bandanas over their mouths and noses. The room was a mix of charred, soggy chairs, collapsed shelving, and husks of books, the pages reduced to ash. Mounds of burnt, gnarled human features were scattered about the floor.

“We can’t tell if the victims are adolescents, but I enjoy working with you, sir. So like I said: glad they called you.”

McCloud did not share the sentiment. He stopped next to a charred body. Burnt flesh and bone were foreign and indescribable

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smells to him. Singed hair was the closest comparison, and this stench was magnitudes worse than catching some knuckle fur when lighting a pipe. A hot wave of nausea pushed up McCloud's esophagus, but he kept the discomfort from his face.

O'Neil gestured to the man writing in his ledger. "Fire chief thinks these people were killed *before* the fire started."

"Agreed." McCloud counted the piles. "I can't imagine six people laying down on the floor and burning to death unless something incapacitated them."

"Correct." The chief looked up from his paperwork, disgust and anger in his eyes. "It appears that while incapacitated, whether alive or dead at the time, the people themselves were lit on fire first. Not curtains or furniture. I'm guessing lamp oil was the accelerant."

McCloud moved to the next charred mound. No organic material remained. The cranium had shrunk and cracked from extreme dehydration and heat. The lower jaw detached entirely. "Find any identification in the house?"

"Not yet." O'Neil joined him, looking down with a strange sense of fascination. "Did you know that teeth are the most resilient part of the body? Usually the last to survive a fire depending on how hot it gets."

"Well, unless you think taking a fistful of teeth down to the local dentist is going to get us a name, it doesn't help the situation."

"I guess not . . . Sir."

McCloud was rarely interested in O'Neil's random insights, and today, he was in no mood at all. With none of the bodies appearing to be adolescent, he wondered why Lieutenant Harris sent him. McCloud paused to center himself. "Sorry. It's been a long morning. Do we at least know who owns the house?"

"My cousin Steve—been selling real estate for years all over this area—he says Hisao Osoto owns about half the block."

"Including this building?"

"Well, no, actually. I called the station and Tina is working on finding the owner. So far it looks like the home is registered to a business, rather than an individual. That's the first strange thing—besides the suspected murder, well, mass murder. Like I said, this is a strange one indeed."

"And . . ." McCloud closed his eyes, suppressing the frustration

of working with officer William O'Neil. "What's the *second* strange thing?"

"Oh, we started a search of the house, trying to piece together what might have happened, but we didn't get far because we found this . . ." O'Neil waved and led him into the kitchen. "Officer Petersen came this way first, opened the pantry—odd thing to open, I suppose, but, leave no stone unturned and all—"

O'Neil opened the plain pantry door to reveal a shelf-less space. Inside, there were two nicely finished door panels slanted downward from the top of the wall to the ground. It reminded McCloud of tornado shelters in the Midwest. Handles on each panel were secured with large chains running through them and a padlock. The doors within the pantry had a large symbol painted onto the wood.

"I never seen anything like it," O'Neil said.

McCloud's eyes traced the intricate painting of a snake, its body wrapping around and travelling down a pointed column. A memory of Ming's scarred palm sprung to the forefront of his mind. The images were different but something about the artistic style between both snakes was eerily similar. The story behind her trauma was never discussed between them, but he'd snuck peeks at her faded branding whenever he could.

"Is the fire chief still here?"

"I think."

"Get his axe."



It took three strikes before the padlock broke. The chains clattered to the floor, and the serpent seemed to shimmer and beckon on the wood as if ready to reveal its secret.

"With the doors being locked from the outside, it's doubtful they'll be any kind of ambush." McCloud put the axe down. "But still, if anyone *was* down there, they heard the axe."

McCloud took hold of the handle and opened the right-side door. It swung outward revealing a black void waiting to swallow them. McCloud remained at the side, listening. The fire chief and Petersen were with them now, and along with O'Neil, all stayed from view of the entrance.

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No sounds of alarm registered, so McCloud exposed his head and peered into the darkness. Only three steps were visible. The rest of the staircase disappeared into the blackness. Although the padlock on the outside signified it was less likely someone would attack them, it also meant someone wanted to keep intruders out. It was possible a boobytrap was set for anyone who made it past the locked doors.

“What do you think?” O’Neil whispered.

“I think we don’t have a lot of choices.” McCloud pulled out his revolver. “Stay five steps back. If something happens, I’m not dragging anyone down with me.”

The fire chief handed McCloud a ferrocerium lighter. He accepted it with a nod but didn’t strike the flammable alloy, praying that on the off-chance anyone was down there, they were just as blind as he was.

As they descended the steps, McCloud knew that if anything happened, he would be unable to recall the details later. Already, stress was distorting his perception. It was the dirty secret never discussed. He’d experienced it during the Madison shootout last year. The crack of gunfire, the flood of adrenaline. In the face of mortality, the human brain drops into survival mode and often can’t recall what was said or even how many times a trigger was pulled. Everything becomes a blurring rush to survive, and the only sounds are the deafening gunshots and indecipherable screams.

Screams that sometimes never stop.

Inch by inch, McCloud’s eyes attuned to the dark just enough to expose the next step before he placed his foot down. An eternity stretched between the wooden treads.

Finally, the toe of his shoe touched the ground, and McCloud moved with his back against the wall of the near pitch-black room. He slid across the cold stone until his shoulder struck a metal holder. Only then did he ignite the chief’s lighter, bringing the flame to the torch inside the holder. It took a moment, but the tiny light grew, and a quarter of the room illuminated.

“Peterson. O’Neil.”

The two officers had listened and were about five paces behind him.

“I think it’s empty.” McCloud pointed to the torch holder. “Light this place up.”

McCloud stayed put as the room came to life around him. It was circular and not as barren as he initially assumed. The center of the room held a black oblong box. McCloud estimated it was three by three by four foot. Red banners were draped over the edges, and cryptic designs adorned the fabric.

“My God.” O’Neil made the sign of the cross. “A black altar.”

“Black altar?” McCloud moved closer. There was a thick piece of parchment on the cube and burnt candles surrounded it.

“For magic. Evil spells. Blasphemous curses . . .” O’Neil’s voice trailed off into a whisper. “I don’t like the look of this—hey—under our feet. Another painting?”

Until it’d been pointed out, McCloud didn’t notice the thick red lines forming a large pattern on the black stone floor. A design so big, it couldn’t be fully appreciated without a higher overhead perspective.

“It’s not a snake . . .” O’Neil stood on his tiptoes as if that would raise him high enough.

McCloud walked along the circular perimeter of the geometrical design painted on the floor. He didn’t believe in voodoo spells and nonsense like witches, but the hidden basement was unsettling.

“We’ll probably need something like a Rosetta stone to decipher it,” O’Neil said. “Did you know that the Rosetta Stone is actually a—”

“Detective McCloud.” Petersen was pointing across the room to a second black altar. This one looked different though. It was more square than rectangular, and even in the flickering torchlight, it was clear the outer material was not stone. More like a heavy tarp covering. Stranger still, a burnt material, like soot, was sprinkled on the ground in a circle around the square.

McCloud moved toward this second ‘altar,’ walking the circumference of the burnt boundary, then stepping inside the circle. He placed his hand on the rough canvas top and a cool breeze wafted over him. The chill clenched his fist around the cloth, but when McCloud looked around the room, the flames were motionless as if there were no draft. Before turning back to the tarp, he glimpsed O’Neil standing over the altar, one hand clutching something to his chest, the other reaching for the parchment on top of the red draping.

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“O’Neil, wait!”

“There’s some kind of document up here.”

“Don’t touch anything. I want sketches and photography first.”

O’Neil paused, his eyes still mesmerized, his hand trembling above the paper. Everyone seemed transfixed in silence, yet a low buzzing noise blossomed in McCloud’s ear. Finally, O’Neil stepped back, letting go of the crucifix he’d pulled from under his dress shirt. McCloud sucked in cold air, relieved but unsure why. The unexplained buzzing subsided. O’Neil didn’t tuck the necklace away as he joined Petersen and approached McCloud.

“What’s under the tarp?”

McCloud gripped the tarp. The increased heartbeat did nothing to warm him against the chill of the basement. He yanked it back and let go. His gun extended before the heavy covering even settled on the floor. In an instant, the fear of the unknown was gone, a new horror taking its place.

“Shit . . .”

The cage was akin to something found at a zoo but much smaller. There were no animals inside this cage though. Between the iron bars was a small human body. Its naked chest, frail and motionless.



“EVERY MAN BELIEVES he will be the exception to the rule of life. As if somehow the march of time will miraculously forget him.” Rockford’s arthritic hand flipped the ornate hourglass on his desk. “I’ve learned there is no escaping the hand of doom though.”

“Is this why you called upon me?” Marley asked. “To reflect on mortality?”

“Hardly.” Rockford eyed the ring on Marley’s pinky. “Ten years ago, I agreed to the terms set forth by your *employer*. Today, I am requesting a single alteration.”

“My employer does not renegotiate.” Marley smirked. “You know that. If the agreement is no longer amenable, we can terminate the—”

“One question. Please.”

Marley steeped his fingers. “Our arrangement states the only questions permitted must pertain to the construction equipment we lease from you or—”

“That emblem on your ring . . .” Rockford’s old heart fluttered, knowing that one wrong word and his chance was gone forever. “I’ve been told its history is ancient and the knowledge of those who bear it unfathomable.”

“I’m impressed. Thirty years I’ve worn this seal and you’re the first to have an inkling as to the power.”

Confirmation chills rocked his aging spine. “You’re not the only one with secret and powerful friends. There have been whisperings recently involving that seal. Fantastic rumors about magick, escaping death . . .” Rockford had practiced these words day and night for a week since realizing the connection, yet his mouth was gummy and now the words felt foolish. The whole idea suddenly

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felt foolish. But Sir Edith's face was dead serious in the flickering fire when he recounted his discoveries to Rockford and Ackman.

"Am I to understand you told someone of our arrangement?"

"No, of course, not. A confidante discovered something on holiday. He's still something of an explorer even at sixty-five. He brought back tales from the orient. Rituals—showed us pictures; I recognized the emblem on your ring. But I said nothing. I listened to him, biting my tongue, waiting for when you and I could speak in person."

Marley stood, taking hold of his cane. "I think we've reached the end of my ability to answer—"

"Please." Rockford's tone embarrassed him. He had not experienced such a lack of control and confidence since his first major land grab just after the war in 1865. "I will never violate our agreement. Nor will I utter a word to my inner circle of who you are or your secrets. All I care about is if the rumors are true."

Marley remained silent, his eyes calculating. A parent deciding to crush or lift a begging child.

When no further vocal resistance came, Rockford dared repeating the name he'd been given, "Passing of the Void. All I want to know is if it's real."

"Passing of the Void?" Marley's smile was sly and annoying. "Sounds like a bad parlor game. You haven't gone and wrapped yourself up in talking boards and psychic nonsense, have you?"

"Ten years I've helped you erect structures across the country—"

"And we've made you rich in return."

"Please," Rockford said, humbling himself further. "I came to terms with death long ago, but when my confidantes spoke of such mysteries, how could I not be curious? I need a truthful answer."

Marley narrowed his eyes, but the aging mogul did not waver, returning the gaze with a fiery passion. Finally, Marley said, "The ritual is real. In theory."

A dam that Rockford did not know was inside him broke, releasing a flood of emotions into his decrepit body. Fear, excitement, curiosity, everything that had punctuated the beginning of his career but had since hardened in the monotony of business returned to him.

"Please," Rockford repeated the word so foreign to him. Men like him spent their whole lives taking, not asking. "Can you perform it on me? Whatever the price."

“The sacrifice for such obtainment is more than just money.”

“Anything.”

“*Anything?* The hand of doom is a strong tyrant indeed. It never fails to impress me how quickly men of science and reason turn to the metaphysical world of magick in the face of death.” Marley’s grin, more sardonic than humorous, returned. “Can you imagine coming to me with such a question even a few years ago?”

“Name your terms. Money is no object. My resources are limitless.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Rockford. You do not understand the implications of what you pursue. I know of two surviving copies of the ritual. I say ‘surviving’ as both are missing text. To my knowledge, no one has attempted the Passing of the Void in over a thousand years.”

“But it has been successful in the past?”

“According to tradition, yes. It will take me time to obtain a copy though and verify it could effectively be completed.”

“Time, unfortunately, is not something I have much of.”

“Are you ill?”

“I’ll be eighty-years-old next week. What do you think?”

“You previously mentioned coming to terms with death. Perhaps you should—”

“A logical man can easily accept his demise. However, if the end of my life is no longer a certainty, then I’m less accepting of the grim reaper.”

“I suppose if you have nothing to lose . . . Do you know what the ritual entails?”

“My associate knew nothing except for the effect. Or so he claimed. You can brief me when you have secured one of the surviving texts.”

“Speaking of this associate . . .” Marley’s eyes were no longer cold and calculating. They were alive with a fiery excitement. “I’d like to meet him.”

“I told him nothing about you.”

“So you said. Are my terms not agreeable to you?”

Rockford’s liver-spotted throat waddle bobbed. He hesitated but a moment, then pulled out his address book and wrote down Sir Edith’s information. He held it out to Marley and the man gripped his hand in a painful embrace.

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“It appears we have made another deal, Mr. Rockford. I shall call upon you when I have more information.” Marley turned to leave. “Oh, one more matter of business. Hisao Osoto. A reminder that your people are to stay away from his offers.”

“Of course. No one in the company will deal with him on any properties. But he has become quite the nuisance.”

“We’re working on a solution now.” Marley headed to the doors.

“The ritual . . . If—when—it works, will I . . . I’ll still be me, correct?”

Marley paused at the exit to Rockford’s office and turned around. “In theory, yes. A man is not his body. He’s something else. Something akin to a flame. The tricky part is properly directing your flame into a new vessel without extinguishing it. I’ll do my best though. Rest until I bring news.”

Rockford’s eyes drifted to the dwindling sand of the hourglass. “Thank you.”

After Marley left, Rockford’s thoughts shifted through time to that day in the chilly winter of 1903 when the strange man with the limp and a business card from ES Holdings knocked on his door with a blank check and an offer. Rockford had assumed the man was involved with a tong, the mafia, or some other crime organization. They wanted land and properties and construction equipment that was untraceable to them. As long as the money flowed into his pockets, Rockford didn’t ask questions.

Now, his mind was alive with possibilities, and he wondered just what the hell those structures Marley’s crew designed were really for.

They’re designed for just such occasions as the Passing . . .



JU-LONG CHANG took calming breaths as he watched the two girls maneuver around the banquet table. This was the main course, and everything had run smoothly so far. However, that was not enough to alleviate Chang's anxiety. He was excited for the opportunity to host Osoto's meeting and get into the wealthy entrepreneur's good graces. But the sooner the two businessmen and bodyguards left, the happier Chang would be.

The scent of tea blossoms drifted to him as his wife Hu came to stand beside him near the swinging door to the restaurant's kitchen.

"Who is that wine girl? Where is Fan?" Ju-long kept his voice low, maintaining a wide smile for his guests.

"Fan is sick."

"Sick!" Ju-long caught himself and returned the smile to his face, giving a quick nod to the table of businessmen in case any looked over. There was, after all, no one else in the entire diner.

Ju-long led his wife back into the kitchen. "She should be here anyway—"

"We can't afford customers getting ill because of her," Hu said. "Especially *these* men."

"Fine." Ju-long clenched his jaw. "But we can't afford another employee either."

"She is a beggar. I saw her looking for scraps this morning in the alley. With Fan ill, we powdered her up good and she is our wine girl for today." His wife smiled. "Free."

"Free?"

"Well . . . I am giving her a meal. Said this job was a trial to see if she can do well. I tell her if she do good, maybe we hire her."

Ju-long peeked out of the kitchen. He watched the replacement

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wine girl move gracefully to each of the men and top off their wine and waters. When she had finished, the young woman returned to her post a few feet from the foot of the table and stood at attention.

Ju-long turned back to his wife. "She cleans up nicely for a beggar."

"Indeed."



"I love their eyes." Calhoun's voice oozed with suggestive intent, not caring what Osoto thought about him. Osoto needed *Calhoun*, not the other way around. Plus, it was entertaining to see if the little girl with the wine squirmed.

He glanced over to her post, but she didn't budge. Nothing he'd said this evening seemed to rattle her. She was as rigid as a Buckingham Palace guard.

"Surely, Mr. Calhoun, there is some way we can reach an amenable price for the property on Parson's Street."

Caulhon drained the rest of his wine. After placing the empty glass back on the table, he raised his hand and snapped his fingers at the girl. "What I don't get, is why you want this strip. Parson ain't nothing to write home about. It's a decent investment. But you're a San Francisco man. Why cross over those tracks?"

"A man cannot put all his eggs in one basket," Osoto said. "I must be diversified."

The wine girl was beside Calhoun. Soap and powder filled his nose as she filled his glass. He leaned toward her. "How's about after this meeting, you and I get out of here together?"

A bright red seemed to burn beneath the heavy makeup on her cheeks. She swallowed hard, then hurried back to her post.

"Ain't gonna be that easy to get away," he said in a sing-song voice.

"Mr. Calhoun." It was Osoto. "As I was saying. The Parson's borough *does* have a future. And I would like a piece of the action."

"And pieces in Imperial, Shasta, and Inyo counties." Calhoun grinned. "Don't think I didn't do my research. You're looking to buy a whole lot of pieces of real estate that don't make sense for your organization. What do you know that I don't? And even if I sell, what makes you think someone like Mortimer Rockford is going to sell to you in the other areas?"

“Don’t worry about Rockford,” Osoto said, folding his hands on the table. “I can assure you that I am *very* generous when I want to be.”

Calhoun glanced at the man’s gloved hands—rumor was a bad burn had disfigured them—then he studied Osoto’s pockmarked face. “How generous?”



“Do you know who these people are?” Ju-long was at the beggar’s ear, making sure that his tone was clear enough to convey the message his ever-smiling face could not.

The girl shook her head.

“Hisao Osoto. Very powerful. Connected to tongs. Make sure not to upset any of them for any reason. Make me look bad, and I make sure no restaurant hire you, *or feed you*. Understand?”

She gasped and nodded her head. “Aye.”

For the next hour, Ju-long and his two waitresses served the men without encroaching on their business. Chang was pleased that despite the snide advances and sloppy, groping fingers of the Irishman, the replacement wine girl did not lose her temper. Perhaps if Fan missed any more days, he would fire her and make the switch. Ju-long doubted Fan was even sick. More likely she had become too comfortable at the restaurant. A beggar was more grateful and worked harder for less pay.

Back in the kitchen, Ju-long checked his watch, praying that the men would soon depart. They had finished two carafes of wine and the dishes had been cleared—except for the Irishman who requested more Mongolian beef about twenty minutes ago.

Thunk!

Ju-long’s head snapped up as the kitchen door swung open, bouncing off the wall with violent force. The beggar girl strolled in and plunked the empty wine pitcher down by the hot skillet, then walked past Ju-long without so much as a glance.

“Hey!” he yelled. “No glass by stove. Where are you going?”

The girl untied the apron as she walked toward the rear exit and dropped it to the grimy kitchen floor. With her back toward Ju-long, she raised her right hand and extended her middle finger.

“Hey!”

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Then she was gone.

“Ju!”

His wife burst into the kitchen and gripped Ju-long in a fearful embrace. Behind her, two men staggered into the kitchen. Osoto’s arm draped about his bodyguard, both faces flushed.

“Phone . . .”

The bodyguard tried to produce words, but a bubbling white froth issued from his mouth instead.

“Why . . . Poison . . . Fuck you . . .”

The men collapsed to the ground. Hu buried her screaming face into Ju-long’s chest. He pushed her aside and ran to the human heap, checking for signs of life. A numbing detachment of fear bit into him as he crouched over the body of one of the richest and most dangerous men in the neighborhood.

Ju-long then stood on shaky legs and poked his head out the kitchen door. Ting, his waitress of two years, was on the floor crying. The rest of the diner was empty—closed to the public per Osoto’s instructions, as was customary whenever Osoto asked a local restaurant to host one of his ‘business’ meetings.

Ju-long left the kitchen and moved to the table where Calhoun was face down in his plate of Mongolian beef. Bloody vomit seeped into the meat’s juices, overflowing a watery, yellowish-brown mix that stained the pristine tablecloth.

The other man was across the room in a heap. Apparently heading for the front exit, he was now stone dead, blood and froth on split lips, forever frozen in a plea for help.

Ju-long sniffed the remnants of the wine glass on the table but could detect no foreign odor. The plates were already in the large kitchen sinks soaking.

That was no beggar girl. And Ju-long was going to have a lot of explaining to do.

IV

April 8th, 1913

VALBAS SAT ON his throne overseeing the work of the four scribes; not that they needed guidance, but it was safer should any unintended consequences occur while transcribing the Rites of Eternal Sleep.

His page entered the room and bowed.

“My lord. News from the surface. Master of the Hollywood temple visited the hall of records, requesting the Passing of the Void text.”

“Fascinating,” Valbas said. “Research or do they intend to perform the ritual?”

“We do not know. But they are being watched, of course. Should I send for an intervention?”

Valbas shook his head. “Marley was elected for good reason. I’m curious though. Keep me posted.”

The page bowed again but did not depart.

“That’s not all, is it?”

“Nursery #3 has been destroyed. Arson. All four sandmen are dead. Yet six bodies were found. Identification is not possible.”

Valbas looked over the scribes, thinking. “And the vessel?”

“Taken by the police.”

“Strange. If Engineers were behind the arson, why would they not save the child and take him for rehabilitation?”

“Perhaps they didn’t know.”

Valbas frowned at the page.

“They knew. Something must have went wrong in their attack.”

“The other two bodies?”

“Precisely. Call the chiefs. I shall meet with the council, and we

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will send a communication on how to proceed.” Valbas looked to the scribes continuing their pen strokes, undeterred by the discussion. “This is the sign we have been waiting for. The war has begun.”

V

“ANOTHER BIZARRE MORNING, huh, detective?”

At the risk of being blindsided by something crucial to the fire/homicide, McCloud stopped on his way to Harris’s office and faced O’Neil, noticing his gold crucifix was visible again today.

“How’s that?”

“Remember I mentioned Osoto yesterday? He was assassinated last night in a restaurant along with Danny Calhoun.”

“Shit.” McCloud had never been fooled by the ‘legitimacy’ of Osoto’s businesses, and a hit of that caliber *would* be retaliated. “Who’s Danny Calhoun?”

“Shady investor from the east coast—former member of the White Hand Gang out of New York.”

“I hope to hell we’re not looking at a gang war.”

“I think Osoto is connected to the arson. One of the only buildings on Grant he *doesn’t* own burns down. And the next day he’s assassinated. Too coincidental. We’re on to something big here.”

“Lucky us,” McCloud said, disappointed that sarcasm was all he seemed to manage nowadays and annoyed that O’Neil was acting as if they were running the case together. McCloud was already on his way to tell Harris he wanted no part of the investigation. He was two months from resignation, and this was not going to be his final case.

“I don’t think it’s a gang war.” O’Neil fingered his crucifix absently. “Did you read my report yesterday?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think of it?”

The brief write-up and conclusions O’Neil drew were a large reason why McCloud wanted nothing to do with this mess. Unlike

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O'Neil, McCloud didn't believe this crime was anymore unholy or evil than other instances of child abuse. But he did agree the few clues and coincidences pointed to something big. Something that would consume his final days with the police department, and ultimately be left unsolved. Not a pleasant way to end his career.

Why not? After all, you started with an unsolved case, too.

"Harris is waiting for me," McCloud said. "Then I need to leave for the hospital to check on the boy. Can we catch up later?"

"Sorry, of course." O'Neil dropped the cross, and a weak smile overcame the concern on his face. "I hope the kid is okay."

"Thanks." A momentary rise of guilt and McCloud paused, searching for something positive to part on. There was nothing though, and so he returned an equally weak smile and walked away.



"I'm glad you're on this one," Lieutenant Harris said, looking over the files.

"Everyone keeps saying that." McCloud adjusted in his chair. "But with all due respect, sir, I'd rather not be. Last month we discussed my resignation. I'm supposed to be transitioning away, not jumping into a mess of this size."

"I know, I know." Harris put down the folder of files, reproductions, and tintypes of the crime scene. "That's why I sent you in the first place. Arson. Figured it was open and shut. Still, this can be a way to train O'Neil for homicide."

"O'Neil on homicide? This is your decision?"

"His." Harris held up the report from O'Neil. "He delivered this yesterday and said he wanted to be of service in any capacity possible. I figured *you* can focus on getting that kid help, and just guide O'Neil for the heavy lifting."

"Maybe that's not such a good idea. He seems too personally attached to the religious aspects for this to be his first big case."

Personally attached. Interesting choice of words. You mean passionate?"

McCloud read the unspoken words between them.

Passionate. Like you use to be.

"Remember Officer Denton, two years ago?" McCloud said.

“He was pretty passionate when he belted that teen for vandalizing the church.”

“Die-hard catholic.” Harris shrugged. “Couple slaps. Kid was fine. Small price for writing dirty words on the virgin mother.”

“Working off the repairs was the price the kid paid. He wasn’t supposed to be beat, too. Whenever religion is involved, rationality seems to go out the window.”

“We don’t even know if there is a religious motivation for this crime yet—”

“I don’t agree with everything O’Neil wrote, but that was an altar. And the true motive doesn’t matter. O’Neil’s already made up his mind as to the culprit.”

“Give the guy some credit. I’m more worried about piecing together what the hell happened than O’Neil attacking the perps when we find them. He’s young and spooked. Can you blame him? Offer some counsel on how to be open-minded and test hunches. I bet he’ll surprise you,” Harris said. “I just want your focus on the kid, like we agreed. Isn’t that what you asked for?”

“Very well,” McCloud said, knowing there was no point in clarifying their agreement from last year. “But win or lose, I’m still resigning this summer.”

“Then I guess we better get down to business.” Harris pursed his lips and picked up the tintype of the child wrapped up in a blanket. “What do we know about the kid?”

“Not much. He’s with Dr. Cushing at County Hospital. He isn’t talking. Can’t be more than seven years old. It’s a miracle he’s even alive.”

“Can’t talk or won’t talk?”

“Does it matter?” McCloud pointed to the reproduction of the thick parchment that had been on the stone altar’s surface. The facsimile had four words written in foreign characters. Under each word was a partial design. Additional lines and curves were added to the design, building to an ornate, circular pattern under the final word. “This design was painted on the floor and carved into the kid. He’s probably traumatized for life.”

“Don’t worry; we’re going to find out who’s responsible and justice will be served.”

“I doubt it.”

“Dammit, John,” Harris said, firm but quiet. “You’ve been this

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way since Madison. You can't let one accident deter you. I understand how you feel. I've made mistakes too. They've cost lives. But we do the best we can, and we keep moving forward. Think of solving this case as an opportunity to right past wrongs."

McCloud almost laughed. He'd never told anyone his assumptions on the files he'd found three years ago regarding The Digger case. Harris shooting a serial killer was not the same as shooting a teenage delinquent. Then he remembered the innocent graves that were never found due to The Digger dying with those locations hidden. To push through that incident and obtain lieutenant status meant Harris was stronger than McCloud. If 'strength' was the correct word for it.

"I'm doing all I can to see it that way, sir." Then, removing as much emotion from his voice as possible, McCloud continued. "The house on Grant is owned by a corporation and identifying a representative from the board has not been easy. Tina and Mary are digging through legal records. Sending letters to lawyers. The house itself was unusual, to say the least. It's of no help in identifying the victims, which are burned beyond recognition. There's no photos, no family records, no décor, it's just a shell, a front for . . . whatever we found in the basement."

Harris slid out a tintype of the serpent-and-column painted storm doors. "Reminds me of a gang symbol."

The hairs rose on McCloud's arm. He imagined a knife descending on the child, carving. He took a deep breath and spoke over the faint buzzing in his ears. "We spent yesterday polling random civilians in the area. Checked with the officers who patrol there. Nothing. No one has ever seen the symbol before."

"You heard about Hisao Osoto?"

"O'Neil told me. Think it's connected?"

"I don't know. Someone wanted those bodies in Grant to be unidentifiable. Osoto is heavily invested in the area. Burning humans sends a message, doesn't it?"

"Someone sent a message back? You think it's the start of a gang war?"

"I don't think anything yet. I'm asking questions to see if something sticks. Is a potential war what's got you spooked? Or is it the religious angle O'Neil is pursuing."

Gangsters were animals, and McCloud would be willing to put

in two months of building a case against such scum. But gangs ran profitable endeavors. They prostituted women and ran gambling rackets and drugs. Even child labor made sense. However, gangs did not have secret altars or keep kids in cages. What they found at Grant was beyond ruthless greed and gang warfare.

It's unholy, O'Neil had said. He wrote about anti-religious zealots, but his words in the basement were *witchcraft* and *black mass*.

"I just don't like it, sir. Feels like . . ."

"Like what?"

Trying to articulate the sensation rattled his thoughts further. "Nevermind, sir."

"No nevermind. Why do you want out so bad?"

"All I keep thinking about is the Chinatown Surgeon." The statement bubbled to the surface, surprising McCloud. There was sudden relief, then anxiety in finally understanding the nagging dread that had followed him since entering the basement. It wasn't O'Neil's fears of evil mumbo jumbo infecting him. Stepping into that basement was the same feeling of finding the skins and—

McCloud pushed away recollections of that unfortunate phase in his life. Looking back, that case and promotion had not gone as expected. Tom Proctor had passed away during the time McCloud was negotiating his resignation from the force and transition to child services. With the loss of the man who'd been a mentor to him, McCloud also lost the drive to change. He took the 'special arrangement' to only work youth cases from Harris in exchange for staying on the force. The agreement didn't stop him from growing more disconnected each day though. And after the Madison shootout, McCloud no longer felt like himself at all.

"Just because this case carries tones of the Surgeon, it doesn't have to end the same way." Harris pointed to the 'altar paper.' Four words. Four patterns. "Understanding these words and reaching the kid is what's going to crack this one. Once we have those answers, we can reassess. O'Neil theorized the language is from biblical times. Possibly Hebrew. What do you think?"

"I haven't been able to find a multi-lingual officer to confirm that yet."

"That's your objective then. This is a transition, remember." Harris smiled. "Find a language expert to decipher this and work

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on identifying our Johnny Doe at the hospital. Let O'Neil do the heavy lifting and theorizing. He's young and hungry. Just steer him a little. I think getting him grounded will help you, too."

"Yes, sir."

McCloud took back the folder of evidence and left.



"He's still catatonic, Detective." Dr. Cushing held the door to Johnny Doe's room open so McCloud could see the kid's unmoving form, then shut it.

"When will he come out of it?"

"Impossible to say. He could snap awake today. He could also spend the next year staring at the ceiling."

"He's been in your care for two days. Is there anything you *are* certain about?"

"I'm certain that someone hurt that boy fierce." Dr. Cushing pulled a few papers from his clipboard. "These were drawn on him. Mostly in blood. I can't be sure, but I assume it's the boy's own. The nurses sketched everything. Then bathed him. This one was actually . . . carved into his chest. It's unholy what's been done to his body. Those symbols . . . God help him."

Unholy.

Rache?

McCloud went to question the doctor, then realized the strange word was his own thought.

He took the drawings. Despite the morbidity behind the sketches, McCloud admired the attention to detail and the classification of the markings and body correspondences the hospital's nurse had provided. At the time, he hadn't realized the boy was covered in geometrical designs similar to the one on the floor and altar paper.

"Have you ever seen symbols like these before?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Can I keep these for evidence?"

"Of course," Dr. Cushing said.

"One more thing." McCloud handed the doctor the replication of the foreign words. "We found this at the crime scene. Do you know what language it is?"

The doctor studied it, then shrugged. “Looks Eastern maybe. But I’m not sure which country. We learn some Latin in medical school, Detective, that’s about it.”

“Thanks, Doc. Please phone if our Johnny Doe makes any improvements.”



The nurse’s sketches had given McCloud a few more symbols to pursue with his gang contacts before calling it a day. But as he stood on the hospital street corner, he knew nothing would come to fruition. These were not gang markings. They were bizarre intricate pieces of art.

He considered Native American etchings he’d seen, but that art and culture didn’t quite resonate with the sketches in his hand. There was something more European about them. Even the snake reminded him of a coat of arms rather than Native American animal worship. The memory of Ming’s hand resurfaced, along with an urge to contact her.

The desire was followed by a pulling undertow of hypocrisy. The way he acted last time they spoke—yelled—he doubted Ming would ever want to see him again. She’d sent him her new address in the mail, but it felt more like a kind formality than an invitation to visit.

I don’t know what you’re cleaning for Shin Sho, but it sure as hell isn’t the floorboards. Maids don’t make enough money to live on their own.

He cringed remembering his accusing words. Her apartment was in a ghetto section of town—though he had implied that she was making plenty of cash—and what exactly were his words implying about her ‘services’ for the known crime lord.

She was another failure on his lengthy resume.

Embarrassed, McCloud decided he would exhaust every other possibility before reaching out to Ming.

That moved Ciaran Donovan up on his list. McCloud had met the eccentric curator of the Herd Museum during his search for Max Elliot. The museum had been stomping grounds for the wayward detective when he was sober.

An image of Max tied to the table in Brittny Willis’s apartment

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wormed its way to the top of his memories. Saving Max's butt had been one of the most pivotal moments in his life and career, and yet it seemed like ancient history.

Where are you, Max?

Checkmark another failure.

McCloud shook off the memories, but like a bad penny, he knew they would return.

You're going to end up just like Max—

He decided to make Donovan his first stop after clocking in at the station tomorrow. The southwest *had* seen its fair share of religious cults over the last fifty years. McCloud didn't believe in magic or witchcraft, but that didn't mean he wasn't dealing with an extreme cult who did believe. Donovan was an academic, he'd be able to speak rationally on the art, whether local or European. Perhaps he had knowledge of the language. Anything to calm McCloud's imagination.

Despite his rejection of religion, the early days of Mass and seeing Janice's funeral in the church had made a deep impression on McCloud's mind. And as he walked home, he was painfully aware, that despite what he said, each new thought of the snake—*serpent*—gave form to fears O'Neil had planted. They lured him toward a dark place. Ancient and unholy.

The snake, abuse, and altars all tapped into a primordial part of his being, an age before reason. Savage ritualistic murders to appease evil gods, something unheard of in today's society.

Rache.

The word intruded again. A faceless voice calling to him. Drawing closer . . .

"Enough," McCloud said, stopping abruptly on the sidewalk. He became aware of a few gawkers, then adjusted his jacket and headed down the street.

He hoped speaking with Donovan tomorrow would ground him in reality and give him something more logical to pursue. But a dull ache reminded him there was no one to hear his hopes. He'd need whiskey tonight to tame that knot and fall asleep.

VI

MARLEY RETURNED TO the Hollywood Temple with the ancient text safely in his attaché case. He stepped into the study, eager to share the news of Rockford's request, but before he looked up from hanging his coat, he could sense something amiss.

"I had news to share . . ." Marley looked from his high priest Scarpino to priestess Elsa. "But clearly, so do you."

"Master, word has come from the Supreme Council." Scarpino opened a letter and read. "Nursery #3 was attacked. It is believed all sandmen stationed there have perished in the fire. Until our next communication, continue prepping but be vigilant. Eyes are upon you. Decisions are being made soon. Remain steadfast. This is the sign we've been waiting for. It is nearly time for sleep to commence."

Marley allowed the words to penetrate him. He felt anger and confusion at the destruction of a Nursery. Yet elation for the start of the long night.

"*Believed* to have perished . . ." Marley finally said. "If the police are guarding this one tight enough to prevent the council from knowing all the details, then they must have found something damning."

"A vessel?" Scarpino asked.

"Yes." Marley nodded. "At this stage, we must assume the Grant vessel is indeed gone. Either perished in the fire. Taken by the arsonist. Or found by the police."

"Grant was one of our twelve liaisons. If the long night is nearly here, how do we move forward?"

"I motion that we secure a new vessel ourselves. This way we do not expose another nursery to an attack."

"Why would we risk *ourselves* for such an endeavor?" Scarpino

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asked. “There are plenty of nurseries and that’s why we have them. Let them do the leg work. We will refine the materials they harvest in the temple. Besides, we don’t need a vessel until the final communication is sent, and who knows when that will be.”

“Soon. The council called this a sign,” Elsa said.

“The dawn is *always* approaching.”

“I sense doubt, brother.”

“Frustration, not doubt,” Scarpino said. “There are Nurseries across the state ready in the event of issues such as this. You know that. Vessels will be ready *if* we ever need them.”

“Valid,” Marley said. “Allow me to explain. My abrupt visit to the Hall of Records is what calls for a new vessel. Not for the Rites of Eternal Sleep, though.” He walked past his brother and sister, sitting at the fireplace, and toward the large conference table, setting his attaché case down and popping its locks. Unwrapping the protective cloth, he removed the papyrus scrolls. “Passing of the Void. I want to first copy it for modern storage and then, perform it.”

“Perform it?” Scarpino’s eyes widened. “On who?”

Marley took a seat beside them, rolling the cane head about his palm. “Rockford. That was my surprise news. He asked if the ritual was real. If it was something my *organization* could accomplish.”

Elsa’s eyes narrowed. “How did he possibly come to ask you about such a thing?”

“The Seal of the Order.” Marley held up his pinky finger. “Apparently, his network of decrepit magnates has used their money, like all kings and queens before them, to search out any means necessary to cling to life. One of his cronies discovered vague information about The Order and whisperings of said ritual. A weak connection to draw, but I’m impressed Rockford took the gamble and asked. You should have heard him begging me. Pathetic.”

“You spoke with him about The Order?”

“No. Not even our name. I alluded to the ritual *only*, and that it was true—our *employer* is esoteric and ancient enough to have access to such methods.” He pulled out Sir Edith’s address. “A sandman can pay his acquaintance a visit and nothing else will really change between us and Rockford.”

“Might as well silence them both,” Elsa said. “The old fool has no clue what he’s asking.”

“This must be a joke.” Scarpino rose from his chair. “You want to risk ourselves and waste a new vessel to experiment with the Passing of the Void, in the middle of a communication to stay vigilant?”

“Brother, sister, please. I understand the recent frustrations. That is why I agreed to Rockford’s request. The ritual will be as much for us as for the old man.”

“For us? The work involved—assuming we can pull this off despite the missing text—”

“Is practice,” Marley finished Scarpino’s sentence with his own words. “Brother, you are correct. We have waited far too long on the final communication from the council. And that rest has weakened us. Passing of the Void will allow us a fresh opportunity to sharpen the blade. Especially now that we’ve received a sign.” Marley pointed to the letter still in Scarpino’s hand.

“I trust you are making this decision on what is best for The Order’s mission and not a warped sense of loyalty to some aging man.”

“I always do what is best for The Order. As for Rockford, we are already in control of his assets whether he lives or dies. The man has been extremely useful in providing a veil for our real estate transactions and construction, but if he dies, that is no concern to me. Nor should it be to either of you. He has little time left in this world anyway.”

“What about us? Surely the copy is missing text. What if the missing elements are for *our* protection, not his?”

“Do we not have exemplary control and protection practices?” Marley countered. “Again, I understand your hesitation, but until that final communication—or direct order prohibiting—this temple is for the development of our personal powers. I for one am excited at the opportunity to attempt something new.”

“You know it will fail if we rush—”

“We know not when Rockford’s death will arrive,” Marley said. “We won’t rush, but if we start preparing now, we will have a chance at success when the hour is upon us.”

“And if his time runs out before we’re ready?”

“Then we do the best we can,” Marley said matter-of-factly. Speaking of Rockford reminded him of other problems. “More importantly, I am much more concerned about Osoto. Somehow,

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he seems to be aware of properties which have already been allocated for future sites. I want to know who is feeding him these addresses. Perhaps it is him behind the Nursey arson.”

“Osoto won’t be a problem anymore.” Elsa smirked. “News came earlier today. The lawyers are already aware and working.”

“Excellent.” Marley had never met the assassin and knew her only by the moniker Serpent Girl. She was a slave of The City and a sandman had arranged the deal weeks ago, but Marley had about given up hope. “That is one weight lifted, and another reason to give Rockford and ourselves this chance. The destruction of #3 is a sign. We shall put the vessels into eternal sleep soon. I believe the message. And I believe the more practice we have in *all* aspects of the dark arts, the better. There is no reason we should waste this opportunity with a willing test subject.”

“Is this about practice?” Elsa asked. “Or pleasure?”

“The two need not be mutually exclusive.” Marley grinned, his eyes moving between his two temple officers. This was a defining moment; he must not buckle. “Remember the power that comes with rituals of fire?”

Elsa’s face softened, but her eyes remained fiery. They were hungry eyes, like they were a year ago. She knew he was correct.

Scarpino looked concerned still, but he complied. “Very well. Let us procure a vessel. Hopefully the old man has a month left in him while we prepare it.”

VII

“**WISH TO** withdraw the money I have saved with you, sensi.”
Shin Sho puffed from the hand-carved pipe, then released a thick cloud before speaking. “Has this to do with the murder of Hisao Osoto?”

“No.” Ming knew he would see through the lie before she even said it.

“Do you know who hired you?”

“I never do.”

Shin Sho’s head shook with disappointment. “Certain men are best not to be involved with, Ming. No more like this. Promise me you will ask before accepting next job.”

She almost questioned why. Osoto seemed no different than the other pieces of garbage she had disposed of. But asking for clarification didn’t matter anymore. Ming was done with this life. “No more jobs, sensi. That’s why I need my savings. I’m leaving.”

The slightest confusion broke across his brow, then vanished back into calm mastery. “Where you plan to go?”

“East.”

“Will be no different there. Running will not change your problems.”

“Staying in San Francisco for the last three years hasn’t helped either.” Ming paused, trying to ease the irritation from her voice. “I’ve saved enough money to make a fresh start.”

“Mmm. I’m sure your last job paid very well,” Shin said, and Ming could feel his stare intensify. “I’m happy to hear you are leaving the life. But I ask you to reconsider leaving Chinatown.”

“I want to be far away from this place.” Ming could feel the heat of the fires licking through the floorboards of The City she knew was deep below.

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“Now is not the time to leave. War is brewing. It’s in the winds. A war within a war. Best to move back in with us, people you trust. Room and board on me again.”

Ming shook her head. She could no longer be indebted to Shin. It’s why she’d left his compound a few months earlier. Why she’d left John McCloud’s before that. The minute someone helped you out, you owed them; even if they didn’t say it out loud. And when you were in debt to others, freedom was impossible.

“I’m sorry. I have to leave.”

“I never wanted this for you.” He sighed. “It was the only way I could help.”

Rebuttals ran through her head, but there was no point in voicing those either. In the end, she was not forced into the life. Ming had accepted the way of the sword because when the targets were so wicked, the task of executioner was easy. The secrecy involved had hurt her though. Constant vigilance against discovery, watching over her shoulder day and night for revenge attacks, it was beyond exhausting. “Can I make the withdrawal or not?”

“So stubborn.” He took another puff. “Someone will visit your apartment tomorrow night; you’ll receive full amount.”

“Thank you.” Ming headed to the beaded curtain, then stopped. “I know you didn’t want this life for me. You helped how you could, and I did what I was capable of. Now it’s done and I’m ready to move on. I really do appreciate everything.”

“Be careful. Come to me if change your mind about another job. Now is not a time when you can trust the usual network of associates.”

Ming doubted there was ever a time to trust the people that hired her, but she nodded her thanks anyway.



Ming had scrubbed the bowl for several minutes before realizing she was lost in thought, calculating numbers in her head. Cab fare. Board. Food—

Knock, knock, knock.

The bowl tumbled from her hands. Ming spun around and dropped into a crouch, listening. Keeping low, she crept soundlessly across the deteriorating carpet. Reaching the front

door, she drew a dagger. Breathe held, Ming placed her ear to the thin wood.

Nothing.

In one motion, she opened the door and leapt back, ready to strike. Still nothing. She rolled to the other side of the door for a new angle.

Nothing except . . .

Hesitant, she leaned forward and picked up a folded square of card stock. She closed and locked the door, then opened the card.

Your services come highly recommended.

Meet Tomorrow at Noon

Kytler's Tavern on Height and 7th

The bounty will be worth your time.

As soon as Shin's men delivered her money, she was purchasing a train ticket to Mason City, Iowa. The Midwest seemed a good place to get lost and find herself. But the amount she was waiting on, suddenly felt too small.

How long would the money last?

A war is brewing. Stay with people you can trust.

Did she have enough for emergencies?

Come to me before taking another job.

Ming couldn't risk heeding to Shin's cryptic advice anymore. In the end, he wanted power over everyone in his network.

Her heart ached. Would one more payday be worth postponing her departure? Killing was never meant to be her business. Now it seemed her inescapable destiny. It would cost nothing to listen to an offer though. Kytler's was a public establishment. And if it was a bogus offer, the train station was less than twenty minutes away.

One more job, she thought. Then I'm done for good.

VIII

April 9th

“GIARAN DONOVAN.” McCloud showed his badge to the ticket booth receptionist.

“Police? Is everything okay?” The receptionist’s head looked as if it might explode.

“Everything is quite fine, ma’am.” McCloud tucked his brass away. “I’m hoping Mr. Donovan’s expertise might assist in a case I’m working. Is he available?”

“Of, course. I’ll take you to his office.”



“My word.” Donovan stuck a monocle in his right eye, looking over the nurse’s sketches and altar paper. “You found this at a crime scene?”

“A homicide/kidnapping. They’ve got more than one cop a little spooked. Any idea what they are?”

“Misdirection, I assume.” Donovan removed the monocle and looked at McCloud. “The language, I’ve no idea. Perhaps Phoenician. The rest are sigils.”

“What’s a sigil? And why do you think it’s misdirection?”

“It’s a seal believed to contain magical powers and intent.” He handed back the papers. “Sigils were a practice in pagan and medieval times more so than now. These even resemble something out of the *Lemegeton*.”

Unholy magick.

“Lemewhat?”

Donovan chuckled.

“The Lesser Key of Solomon in English. It’s a grimoire of five books spuriously attributed to the *mighty* king. Though they were compiled in the mid-17th century, mostly from materials written two centuries earlier.” Donovan headed to his wall of books, scanning the middle shelf. “In medieval ceremonial magick, sigils were thought to be the pictorial equivalent of an angel or demon’s true name, thus granting the magician a certain level of control over the entity. Ah, here we are.”

McCloud felt lightheaded. The buzzing and chill of the basement crept up on him as Donovan returned with a thick leather-bound book.

“Surely, you’re not one of the spooked officers.”

That horrible word sounded off in his head again—*Rache*—and this time the speaker’s voice was louder, gravelly like roots ripped from ancient soil and tossed into a witch’s brew.

“Let’s back up,” McCloud said, practically shouting over the anxiety threatening to cripple him. “You’re telling me I’m looking for some evil magician?”

“I’m telling you what a sigil is.” Donovan held the open book to a page of geometrical designs, all within circles. None were exactly the same as on the boy, but they were eerily similar. Foreign words covered the pages. He placed the open book on his desk. “I’m also telling you it’s misdirection.”

“There were six dead bodies in the house. It doesn’t feel like misdirection. It feels evil.” McCloud rubbed his temples, angry he’d let sensitive information slip. Angry he succumbed to the word ‘evil.’ He lowered his voice. “Is it possible there’s a cult involved here? An anti-religious group?”

“I think it’s much more likely that you’re dealing with a clever criminal. Someone wise enough to use a red herring to throw law enforcement off his tracks. Phoenician was a Semitic language, more precisely belonging to the group of Canaanite languages which are all but dead now. Just because the four words resemble it, it could very well be a complete fabrication. A hybrid combination of Phoenician, Moabite, and a whole lot of nonsense.”

“How much time would you need to find out?”

“Few days perhaps.”

“And the sigils. Are they real? They certainly look like what’s in that book.”

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Donovan looked him up and down.

“What?” McCloud barked.

“Sit,” Donovan said, gesturing to his desk. “I didn’t mean to upset you so. Can I get you a glass of water?”

“No thanks,” McCloud said. “Just . . . give me something more tangible. I was counting on you to keep this case grounded.”

“I am. These books are hundreds of years old, dear chap. If this is a murder and the killer left these clues, you can be sure their mission was to confuse the police. And by the color of your face, I’d say they’ve done a damn fine job. I’ll decipher the language, but if it’s nonsense, promise me you’ll relax and let this pursuit go.”

“Thanks.” McCloud nodded. He wrote down the department’s telephone number. “Clues are slim on this one. If you think of anything, please let me know.”

“Of course, Detective. It was good to see you again. Sorry I don’t have the answers you’re looking for.”

“One more thing,” McCloud said standing. “You ever hear of a *Rache*?”

“*Rache*? Where’d you hear that?”

“Around.”

“Your family’s been in this country too long.” Donovan’s sly smile returned. “Scenthound. A limer. Hunting dogs used in a pack to run down and kill game or bring it to bay. Funny. More of a medieval thing, too. Obsolete now. Sure there isn’t more to the query?”

“Never mind.” McCloud waved it off, but a sense of dread followed—stalked—him as he left Donovan’s study.

Leaving the museum, McCloud’s thoughts returned to Ming and Osoto. He should have contacted her. Even if the snake had no connection. Tomorrow, he promised himself. He was in no shape to visit Ming today anyway. He’d counted on an academic to give him a logical theory, and even though that’s what Donovan’s words had intended to do, seeing the ancient book had sucked him back into O’Neil’s reality.

McCloud hailed a cabbie and headed to the hospital for his daily check-in with the boy.



“What a pleasant surprise, Detective. The young man is up and moving. I was just about to contact the department.”

“Oh, that’s great.” The smile stretched involuntarily across McCloud’s face. “I definitely needed to hear some good news today.”

“You do look a bit worn out. Are you feeling okay?”

“Just a bit overworked and tired. Can I speak with him?”

“No, he’s not verbal yet.”

Cushing led McCloud to a different room than the boy had been in last. This room had a glass window in the door. They peered inside and saw the boy sitting on the floor in hospital pajamas. A nurse was across from him and they were rolling a ball back and forth.

“Let me try talking with him.” McCloud turned the knob slowly. “He may remember me.”

Cushing frowned but followed him inside. Despite their quiet entrance, the boy’s head whipped to the side. He ignored the rolled ball as it bounced off his knees, keeping his wary eyes on McCloud’s progress.

John stopped several feet from the child and sat on the ground, cross-legged.

“Hello. How are you?”

The boy stared. Then picked up the ball and gestured to McCloud.

McCloud nodded, opening his hands, and Johnny Doe rolled the ball.

“Good one.” McCloud rolled it back. “My name is John. What’s yours?”

The kid pushed the ball back, ignoring the question.

McCloud caught. “You’re good at this game. You must be about seven to be so good. Is that how old you are?”

Pass. Catch. Return.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything.”

Pass. Catch. Return. The eyes always watching McCloud.

“I just want you to know I’m here to help.” McCloud put the ball to the side and showed his badge. “I’m a police officer. We’re the good guys. Dr. Cushing and his hospital staff. They’re good people too. We all want to help you. When you’re ready, just ask.”

He rolled the ball a final time and stood up, suppressing a

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groan. He needed to stop drinking before bed. It put him to sleep, but he never woke rested.

“Thanks, Doc.”

“It’ll take time. But he’ll get there.”

“Sure. In the meantime—” McCloud looked down, startled. The boy was hugging his hip.

“It would appear he *does* remember you from the rescue.”

McCloud smiled and gently ruffled the kid’s hair. Then, quietly to Cushing, he said: “Now we just need him to remember how to talk.”

IX

Miguel,

With the loss of my counterparts, I am unable to handle the remaining nurseries. After much consideration, I have taken drastic measures to ensure a disruption in the delivery chain from Altadena. She is known as the Serpent Girl. We must meet and adjust our plans moving forward to attack the others. I fear there is little time. I'm packing up life at Lourdes. I will arrive in Los Angeles on April 12th. Find reinforcements.

That was the intent of the letter, only it's not what Damian Wells wrote on the stationary. He wrote a code of letters and numbers that few could decipher. Checking the accuracy twice against the key, he sealed the envelope. Wells would drop it in the post on his way to Kytler's.

A timid knock at the door and Wells pocketed the letter.

"Come in."

"Sorry, Father." Sister Alice Brahms gave a slight bow. "I know you asked not to be disturbed. But a police officer—he's also a parishioner, he was adamant about that—stopped in the rectory, asking for you. I told him you weren't taking callers at the moment but would respond when you could. I have his contact info."

"Did he give any indication what it's about?"

"The department is looking for someone with knowledge of biblical languages. A clue in a case."

"What was his name?"

"O'Neil."

"Mmm. Pasty fellow? About five-ten?" Wells put his hand in reference to his own six-foot frame. "Moustache?"

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“Yes. You know him from Mass then.”

“This old memory surprises me sometimes.” He winked. “I’m on my way out to meet someone for coffee and counsel. I’ll collect officer O’Neil’s contact information when I return.”

“Of course, Father.”

Wells was not known for being a personable priest. Nor for his memory. He had identified O’Neil from previously watching the flow of traffic at the Grant house following the disaster. The second officer he’d noted was John McCloud. There was not the time or manpower to pursue either man. But perhaps, once he could reunite with Miguel and other Engineers, they could approach the officers together.

Sister Brahms helped him into his coat and handed him the bowler hat from the rack. She would be one of the few people he’d miss when he vacated Lourdes. There was the brief experience of guilt, shame at knowing he would sneak off into the night, causing all manner of confusion in the small church. But that was to be their test. It was much easier than the trials that awaited him.

Once he was out of sight of the church, Wells pulled the white collar from his neck and undid the top button of his garment.



They met in the tiny diner five miles outside of Chinatown. The man had been easy to spot at a back table sipping coffee. His bowler hat was still on and pulled low. When Ming sat, the man slid a large manilla envelope to her. She dropped it into her lap and, underneath the table, opened the flap, her fingers feeling the contents as she listened to him talk.

“Four men. There’s a photograph of each inside. The job is *all* four. Upon confirmation, you’ll get the other half of the money. If even one is left alive—”

“The rest?” Ming’s fingertips brushed across an already thick stack of bills. How much were they paying her in total?

“We promised the rewards would be great.”

“We?” Excitement and danger heightened her senses. “You and the mouse in your pocket?”

“We can’t tell you. But the success of the mission is of utmost importance. As I was saying, all four men—”

“Or I don’t get the rest of the money. Understood.” Ming closed the envelope. “What else can you tell me?”

“There may be more people in the house beyond the four.”

“How many more?”

“Maybe they’re having a dinner party when you arrive. Who can say? The point is, anyone who gets in your way is expendable.”

“I prefer to keep the body count to the targets only.”

“As do I. But, should it come to that, it won’t impact your pay.”

“How comforting,” Ming sneered.

The man seemed to mull something over in his mind, but whatever he was thinking, he didn’t share. Instead, he returned to the details. “Time is of the essence. The estate they reside at is in Altadena and the job must be completed by the 13th.”

“That’s only four days. I need travel time, and two weeks to chart their routines. This way I don’t accidentally stumble into a *dinner party*.”

“Two weeks is unacceptable for this price.”

“What’s the longest you can wait?”

“16th.”

“Seven days is—?”

“Well worth two hundred dollars. However, if you can make the Friday deadline, I’ll add an extra ten percent—two hundred twenty dollars total.”

Her body trembled at the siren call of the impressive amount. Deviating from her normal practices had always landed her in trouble though. Painful memories of a damp cell in the bowels of Gehanna tightened the scars on her back.

How could she walk away from that type of money though?

“If it can be done, I’ll do it. How do I contact you to deliver confirmation and receive the remaining payment?”

“In the envelope, you’ll find an address to a store. Tell the clerk you’re looking for Damian. Then wait for me to arrive.”

Ming went to stand, but the man lifted his finger, pausing her.

“One more thing. You won’t need seven days to figure this out, but these men are dangerous and—”

“I deal with dangerous people all the time,” Ming said, hoping her newest employer caught the irony.

“Not like this. Be prepared for the unexpected. I can’t say for

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sure what you'll find in that residence. But the sooner those men have left this planet, the better."

"Nothing surprises me anymore."

Ming rubbed the leather palm of her glove. Underneath, the faded Ouroboros of her youth still itched.

X

THE CLICK OF a key slipped between the steady drip of water off the wet rock walls, followed by the familiar creak of the cell door.

Max Elliot turned on the rickety cot to see one of the deformed creatures enter, its arms carrying a pile of clothing. Dull eyes inside the stitched-up face locked with Max's for a moment. It reminded him of Charlie. By now, Charlie's body had been *recycled*. Any usable parts, stitched together to form one of these shrunken Frankenstein-esque servants. Injected with a kind of life; not the kind of life that spoke or seemed capable of intelligent thought. Just of following short orders. Except for that brief moment when their eyes locked . . . Then the creature shuffled back out of the room.

Max set his feet on the floor, leaned down carefully, and examined the pile. Something stirred inside, but the words to describe such a feeling escaped him. The crumpled clothing was his suit, shoes, and trench coat. On top of the pile was his revolver. Max's hand trembled as he reached out, hovering over the ancient memories.

"Surprised?"

Max snapped upright.

Valbas filled the open doorway.

"Very." Max's voice cracked a little as it so often did now that he rarely spoke with Valbas. "What's the occasion?"

"A parting gift."

"You going somewhere?"

"We both are."

The Mara stepped inside Max's cell. He turned his back on Max to lock the door from the inside, and that's when Max swiped the

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gun from the pile. When Valbas faced Max again, he was smiling. Reaching inside his heavy robe, Valbas extended a scaly palm full of bullets.

Max popped out the revolver's barrel to confirm. Spinning the empty chamber, he dropped the gun back onto his coat.

"What would you do with freedom, Max?"

"I don't know."

Much like the feeling from seeing his clothes had eluded Max, the word 'freedom' and any meaning it held was foreign to him now. All there was in his life was Valbas, the darkness, and his anger. Even his verbal quips, no longer meant anything. They were programmed banter whenever Valbas engaged him in something other than an experiment. That's what Max had come to call their sessions together.

"Perhaps you should start thinking about it. Pretty soon, you're going to be a free man."

"Bullshit."

"Your disbelief is well founded. Perhaps a token of good faith to prove my sincerity . . ."

Valbas held up his jailer's ring, removed a single key from the many, and unlocked the cell door he had just relocked. Then he tossed the key to Max.

Despite years of pain, Max's reflexes still worked. His fingers caught and wrapped around the metal, then sprung open just as quickly. Max stared at the symbol of freedom in his palm, then back to Valbas knowing it was a farce.

"Looks like the last session scrambled my brain more than I thought. Where are you going? And why would I be free?"

"Because all things come to an end." Valbas crossed the stone floor and took a seat on the rock-carved chair in the center of the cell a foot from Max's cot. "We've traveled far together, Max. And now, we both have a mission. The Mara are leaving to hibernate before the Black Dawn. And you are returning to the surface . . . If you choose."

"Traveled is not the word I'd use for what we did together."

"A rose by any other name . . ."

Behind his calm sarcasm, Max's brain was a chaotic flow of questions, trying to unravel the nature of this new torture tactic. There was no way he was being allowed to return home.

“Tell you what, keep the freedom.” Max tossed the key back, but Valbas made no attempt to catch it. The key bounced off the Mara’s chest and landed on the floor by the coat and gun. “I don’t want to go back to the surface.”

“Once the Mara leave, there will be no further food or maintenance here. You will be entirely on your own.”

“My mission in life is done. A week-long death of starvation in Gehanna sounds better than returning to a world I barely remember.”

“Death is not exactly an option for you.” The fiendish smile returned. “Your body is so saturated with dumplings, very little short of decapitation will usher in your demise.”

The gruel he’d been fed since his first day *did* have a familiar taste. Max knew he was tough, but to always recover from the torture

Fuck. He’d been healing himself all along and not realizing it until now. A rage boiled and Max ground his teeth. He wanted this to be over with. Not just today’s new mental chess game but everything.

“Decapitation? I’m sure I can pay someone for that down here, especially if the Mara are leaving me to my own devices.”

“You say that now, but you’ll love what longevity brings. You will be witness to the next chapter in earth’s history,” Valbas said. “Next year, 1914 according to the Gregorian calendar, your species will shift into the final phase of its conscious evolution. However, rather than humans slowly moving into a golden age, we will ensure man tumbles off the path into an age of darkness that will make the medieval age look like child’s play. The night will be long and when it finally breaks, the Mara will emerge from brumation to bask in the glow of a Black Dawn, reclaiming our kingship as rulers of this planet and all who dwell here.”

“The surface?” Max laughed, but his humor was short-lived as he recalled a distant memory. Tucked deep in folds of gray matter—the same folds that recognized his coat and gun—Max remembered Valbas telling him once of a return. It reminded him of time in that sarcophagus and the indescribable sensations it filled him with. The sarcasm evaporated leaving behind a hateful fervor. “America fought off the British Empire, I think they can stop a few hundred lizards.”

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“America?” Valbas laughed. “*All* humanity will become so occupied embracing their lower nature, there will be no fight left in any country on this planet. Humans will welcome us with open arms and not even realize it. We already assist with innovation on the surface; all that will really change is the removal of one barrier.” He sniffed and Max knew what the creature would taste wafting off his clammy skin. “Then another barrier will fall. One by one. Until we rule you wholly.”

“There is no amount of turmoil or infighting that will make humans overlook talking alligators.”

Valbas chuckled again. “How often do you meet the kings who create your laws? Do you know who really sits at the seat of power in your country? Your enemy’s? Or do you only know what you read in the newspapers?”

The Mara waited, the slits of his eyes unblinking. There was no point in answering. Conversations with Valbas were always a chess match, but this was unexpected, and no move could counter it.

“Never,” Valbas answered for him. “You always meet one person higher on the food chain. But regardless of how far one climbs, never will they *see* the prime mover. Nor will the world see us, only our human veil. But you, Max Elliot, you and those with eyes to see will know the truth of who pulls the strings. A future is coming that I can’t wait for you to see.”

“Lucky me,” Max sneered.

“The fulfillment of centuries old prophecies. Rome never really fell. The Caesars simply changed their uniforms. In fact, the flag of the empire flown never matters. It’s the energy *behind* its waving fabric—the force the flag represents—that commands the control. That force is ours. It has always been ours.”

“What happens to The City?”

“Who can say. Nor does it matter. In the grand plan, many years after the dawn, the surface and The City shall unite as one empire. Under us. The only difference between those who remain below and above, will be the ones who know the truth of our existence. But by then, even the truth will mean nothing. Black will be white, and evil will be good. And The City will exist in all corners of the earth. Eventually, no one will remember us, but we will be watching all.” Valbas inhaled and his reptilian features calmed into repulsive satisfaction. “When the entire world shakes again and

again under each new weapon of war, you'll know. Even after a hundred years, when things will appear to have grown better and man more civilized, you will know it is all a farce—that our face hovers just below the calm surface. And when human civilization appears to have reached a pinnacle of glory, you will know then that the darkness is at its strongest. Hate. Sex. Greed. Wholesale. You and I will both be alive to see it. I'd say, you have at least a hundred fifty years left in you. And in the end, you're going to help us spread that darkness better than the dreaming vessels. I see a lot of promise in you, Max. I always have."

"Fuck you."

"That's the spirit," Valbas said, standing.

Max rolled on the cot, facing away from Valbas and the door.

"Your little friend will help us, too. We haven't forgotten about her."

At the mention of Ming, Max clenched his teeth against the fury entering his heart. She was one of the few things he did remember from his former life.

Behind him the cell door closed. For the first time since his arrival, there was no click when Valbas left.

The iron key sat beside his old uniform and the possibilities both excited and terrified Max.

XI

April 10th

THE ALLEY BEHIND Madison Street stretched before McCloud. The footsteps echoed off the brick walls and McCloud gave chase. He didn't want to. He knew what was waiting for him. The pans were smashed by the young lookout to signal the bastards around the corner to flee, but that's not what McCloud would hear. He'd hear gunshots. And he would return fire.

The form would fall to the ground, but because he'd opened fire, some of the bastards around the corner would stay back. There would be a firefight. Two cops wounded. Three dead criminals. But the teen lookout didn't have to be one of them. Didn't have to be the one McCloud had blasted through the back as he ran, clanging pans. Pans that lay on the ground, filling with the dead kid's blood as his chest leaked.

Unable to stop the dream's sequence of events, McCloud chased the lookout. The kid disappeared through the rectangle of light at the end of the alley, but . . .

No clanging. No gunshots. McCloud raced as the rectangle of light began to shrink. Not only was the exit closing, the alley walls were caving in, too. Total darkness engulfed him, and McCloud slammed into solid black, no longer certain if he was dreaming still.

Greenish yellow eyes in a black form separated from the rest of the darkness. McCloud felt a pressure on his chest as the entity took hold of his body. There was a sensation of falling and yet being crushed at the same time. Worse than seeing the boy bleeding out, McCloud felt his own body dying. The vivid eyes sucked and crushed and fell with him.

As a detective, nightmares were frequent. Waking up

screaming was not. When the fear passed, McCloud rolled from bed, and stumbled into the restroom. Waiting until the tap water ran clear, he drank to purge the sticky mess from his mouth and calm his shaking body. Despite the positive news regarding Johnny Doe, McCloud had still polished off three shots of bourbon before heading to bed. He regretted it now. Though, looking into the mirror with blood-shot eyes, he considered more alcohol a reasonable solution to the hangover. He checked the clock. There weren't enough hours before work, and he wasn't ready to come to the station under the influence. An honorable resignation he could handle—

You still failed.

—A dishonorable discharge with only two months until his departure date was unacceptable. McCloud would rather be dead. He shivered remembering the crushing feeling of the dream.

The demon Rache is hunting me.

“No such thing,” he told the empty room. No angels or demons. No heaven or hell. If he were dead, he'd be just like Janice. Erased from existence except for memories. And when the memories were gone . . .

McCloud flopped back into bed and spent an hour fighting voices in his head. Then he prepared for work.



O'Neil was waiting beside McCloud's desk when he arrived at the station. The hangover still ached in McCloud's head, and seeing the man's presence, added a level of emotional anxiety to the physical pain.

“Think we could catch up on the case?” O'Neil asked.

“It's gonna be a quick conversation. I'm still waiting on a lot of pieces to drop into place—”

“Not here,” O'Neil said quietly. “How about coffee at Ted's? My treat.”

McCloud closed his eyes to cool the burn of exhaustion. All he wanted to do was let this case percolate until a tangible lead came their way. Or until June arrived. But when he opened his eyes, it was clear that O'Neil had a rough night as well. His pale complexion was reddish, and his youthful skin had sagged into dark semi-circles under his eyes.

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“You found something?”

O’Neil looked around them. “I think so, but . . . I’d like more privacy.”

McCloud eyed O’Neil’s crucifix. The religious emblem he’d pulled from under his shirt at the sight of the black altar was now always visible.

“Sure,” McCloud said, forcing a tight-lipped smile.

The walk to the corner café was silent save for the few niceties they could exchange. More banal than nice. O’Neil bought a paper from a newsie shouting about Osoto’s death, giving the front-page picture of the man a quick glance before stuffing it under his arm.

“Still think there’s a connection?” McCloud asked.

O’Neil nodded grimly. “I think Osoto’s people are kidnapping children.”

McCloud sighed as they took their seats. “I want to believe you, but what’s the end game?” He pointed at the newspaper. “The guy’s a local celebrity. Piece of garbage. Gangster for sure. But why the hell would he kidnap children to torture them? It doesn’t make—”

He paused when the waiter arrived to take their order.

“I know you think I’m crazy,” O’Neil started after the waiter left. “But I spend an awful lot of time in libraries. Have since I was a kid. I know everything I’m talking about.”

“I believe you about the libraries.” McCloud chuckled. “I don’t think you’re crazy. Filled with too much useless information perhaps. But not crazy.”

O’Neil didn’t laugh. “I know what those symbols are.”

“Before you say another word. Have you actually interviewed anyone who has seen those symbols in real life?”

O’Neil shook his head.

“I’ve never been great at greasing snitches, but I’m always good enough to scrounge up a lead, even if it’s vague. Between yesterday and today, I’ve tapped every informant, and no one has any inkling as to a gang symbol or affiliation resembling the snake and column. Or the designs on the kid.”

“Doesn’t that concern you?”

“Course it does. But that’s how it goes sometimes,” McCloud said. “We’re on day three and usually, if I don’t find something within seventy-two hours, the case is dead in the water. That’s what you’re experiencing right now, O’Neil. This pressure, this loss, it’s

new to you. So you're grasping at straws. The eyes of the department and the public are on us, and you know we can't help them. All we can do is wait. And no one on the outside can understand our burden. Hell, sometimes other cops can't even sympathize."

"Sigils." O'Neil pulled folded papers from his jacket. "That's what these are. They're not art. They don't represent gangs. They're evil—"

The waiter dropped off their drinks. "Anything else, gentlemen?"

"No." McCloud bit down on his molars in a smile. When the man left, he said, "I don't want to hear it, O'Neil. I know all about sigils from my contact at the museum. None of our snitches know what they hell they are, and no department has ever seen them because it's misdirection."

"Misdirection? McCloud we're in danger. Can't you feel it?"

The crushing eyes, like the jaws of a *rache*, flashed in his mind's eye.

"You're not in danger," McCloud said, grabbing the coffee mug to keep himself from slapping sense into O'Neil. "You're in the suck. And you're snapping."

"The suck?"

"That's what Detective Payne called it. Veteran during my rookie year. Newbie gets his first vision of true evil and snaps. You get sucked into a false reality. Especially if you got no leads. And you start going down wild goose chases and conspiracy theories. I'm not letting you drag me into the suck. I have a lot of cases on my plate. I'm sure you do, too. In homicide, we turn the plate and take another bite from something else until a tangible lead comes our way. Donovan from the museum is going to come through on that language and then—"

"I'm going to Our Lady of Lourdes. I'd like you to come with me."

"For Christ's sake, William. There are no such things as demons." McCloud pounded the table, though he could see the eyes floating in the hallways of his dreams. Waiting for him. The haunting buzz was back and sweat beaded on his brow.

O'Neil grabbed his coffee to keep it from tipping. "I've felt different ever since Grant house. Seems like you have, too."

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“I’ve felt different for a long time now. Grant was just the icing on the cake.”

“I have nightmares. Horrible things chasing me. Telling myself it’s a dream doesn’t help. I still feel . . . trapped during the day. Angry. Confusing thoughts.” O’Neil’s feral eyes searched. “If you truly know what a sigil is, how can you think all this is a coincidence? These symbols are designed to summon entities. Call upon demons.”

McCloud leaned closer. “Do you really think demons hurt that kid and burned six people to death?”

“I think it was done in the name of a demon.”

“I think the sigils were planted to get us riled up and off the true motivation. We just need some time away to clear our heads.” McCloud felt good about repeating Donovan’s theory; it helped him believe it more than he had yesterday.

“You seem to be facing, similar obstacles,” O’Neil said, reading the sleeplessness and dread in McCloud’s eyes. “We need a blessing of protection.”

“Unless God can stop bullets and knives, I don’t need a blessing.”

“When other possibilities have been eliminated, what remains, regardless of how strange, is the—”

“Do not quote fiction to me.”

“Why are you so against this? What did Donovan tell you?”

“He pulled out a four-hundred-year-old book and showed me sigils are nonsense from the dark ages. Mumbo jumbo when the world was flat and demons caused diseases. Someone is messing with us and they’re probably laughing at us right now.”

Again, it felt safe, but incorrect.

“There’s no misdirection. You were there.” O’Neil jabbed at the altar paper. “Carved. Painted in blood. A child. You saw same as I did, yet you refuse to see.”

“Have you checked with Petersen? He seemed fine last I saw him. Wouldn’t he be suffering from these demonic influences, too?”

“He wasn’t touched like us. Didn’t step inside that burned circle like you did. Didn’t bag all the evidence after photographs like I did. We’re marked.”

McCloud swallowed, a phantom bulge of the pain still there.

Ideas to steer O'Neil off this dangerous path raced through his head.

"I'm not going to ask you to stay away from the church. Do me a favor though . . ." His eyes went to Osoto's picture again and a single idea broke from the masses. "He always wear those gloves?"

O'Neil nodded. "It's his trademark in a way. Hisao Osoto began life as a glass blower. Some professions have a steeper learning curve for mistakes."

"They sure do," McCloud muttered. "Look, this may be huge, but it could also be *me* grasping at straws. I'll tell you my theory if you'll keep it between us for now."

"Of course." O'Neil's eyes widened, taking the bait.

"Check his autopsy records to see if Osoto has a snake tattoo on his left palm. Surely they have corpse photos without the gloves."

"Like what's on the door?"

"Any snake tattoo," McCloud said.

"That's pretty specific. I thought you didn't have any leads."

"It's a pretty long shot, is what it is," McCloud said, contemplating his next sentence. He needed to keep O'Neil sane. Even if the case remained unsolved, he didn't want O'Neil snapping further. "You know about Max and I, so you know about the Chinatown Surgeon. That was my first taste of homicide. It was disgusting. It was thrilling, too. I wanted to be a part of taking down the most heinous criminal in San Fran history. But demons didn't skin Max Elliot's family. They didn't punch a hole into a man's chest and steal his heart or keep three girls chained to tiny cots until they were emaciated to the bone." McCloud checked his voice, feeling the edge rise. "I think the Surgeon is responsible for Grant Street. I think snake tattoos have something to do with it, too. I just don't know what yet."

"How did you make these connections?"

McCloud's mind scrambled to fluff up the lie without mentioning Ming.

"While investigating the Surgeon, I interviewed someone with a snake tattoo. It wasn't the same as the Grant door. But the artistic style . . . Like I said, it's a long shot. But we may be dealing with a murderer who kills using bizarre rituals from ancient times. If Osoto has a similar tattoo, maybe it's a cult and he's used his

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network to evade detection. Or maybe it's nothing. Before you get carried away by an invisible world of demons and spiritual boogeymen, I suggest making Osoto your focus. That's what I plan to do after a short break from this one."

"Understood." A spark seemed to come back into O'Neil's eyes, but it came with that look of mania again. "I'm still getting a blessing. But I'll check with Heyward in Evidence and report back."

"Thanks, partner." The smile was easier this time and McCloud hadn't realized until the word was out of his mouth how much his feelings toward O'Neil had changed.

It was as if McCloud's mood was bouncing from day to night and back again. Confused.

After O'Neil left, McCloud remained behind. His coffee went cold as his brain and mood settled closer to equilibrium. With a slightly greater degree of calmness, he considered why Osoto's gloves had impelled the cover story he fed O'Neil. Ming hadn't arrived on his doorstep with gloves, but it was the first thing she asked him for once they became friendly—and she did pay him back for the pair of black cotton gloves. Unless they were eating, Ming always wore them.

Maybe he wanted confirmation on Osoto from O'Neil so he had a reason to talk to Ming other than trying to mend their relationship. He was supposed to be her guardian and he'd been as bad as Max.

He promised himself today was the day, and he wasn't going to prolong the misery. It was time McCloud faced his failure. Then both he and O'Neil could compare notes. And hopefully, he'd find a little peace in the process.

XII

O'NEIL'S HANDS TREMBLED over the autopsy box. The only reason he'd gone straight to the station with McCloud's request rather than Our Lady of Lourdes, was the chance to have another piece of information for Father Wells. McCloud was a good man, and he could be on to something about the connection between Grant and the Surgeon. It made sense for such heinous crimes to be connected even if they didn't appear so on the surface. But the detective was wrong about how they should proceed. An atheist couldn't understand the power of God, or of Satan and his legion. They needed a holy person's guidance and protection.

O'Neil shifted through the contents until he got to the photographs of Osoto's discolored face and body where blood had pooled and coagulated from the poison.

Chest. Feet. Hands—

“Heyward!”

The evidence room officer shuffled up to O'Neil. “Something wrong?”

“What does this look like to you?” He pointed to Osoto's left hand.

“Tattoo, I guess. Maybe a birthmark.” He squinted. “I left my glasses at home again.”

“I think you were right the first time.” O'Neil brought the photo close to his eye. His breath caught. “It's a coiled snake. No. An ouroboros. I've seen this in books.”

“Yeah?”

“I'm sure of it.”

“I believe you. My eyesight's terrible. That's why I'm back here.”

O'Neil dropped the photo into the box. “Where's his body?”

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“Morgue, I suppose.”

O’Neil tapped his chin. There was no need to rush there now. There would be time in the future to examine the body. He could do that with McCloud even. Excitement and pride swelled. Grant would have ended as unsolved, just like the Surgeon. But not anymore. They had a tangible connection. O’Neil bowed his head, whispering a prayer that Father Wells could shed further light on the sigil, language, and snake. Anything that could help he and McCloud expose this sadistic cult and the dark entities helping them.

O’Neil closed the box, returned it to the shelf, and hustled from the room. He turned the narrow corner toward the stairs and clipped another officer.

“God damn, O’Neil. What you running from?” It was John Wax from organized crime. Ray Sloane stood beside him, grinning at the jest.

“Sorry. Lot on my plate. Say, you guys are working the Osoto case, right? I think there is a connection between him and the Grant fire after all.”

Wax frowned and Sloane’s smirk grew wider.

“Hisao Osoto was no saint. But he ain’t in some demon-worshipping cult neither.”

“What do you know about demon cults?”

“Nothing.” Wax laughed. “We read your report.”

Although O’Neill was jovial with most everyone, Wax and Sloane had always rubbed him the wrong way. “I wrote ‘anti-religious zealot’. I never said demon. Besides, that report was intended for Lieutenant Harris and—”

“Once you theorized a connection, your report became evidence in *our* case, too.” Wax smiled.

“Well, there’s some pretty interesting things in Osoto’s autopsy box. Maybe you can take a look and then compare notes with me and McCloud.”

“Oh yeah? Did he have horns under that pompadour?”

They laughed.

“No. But he sure had something interesting under those gloves.” O’Neil reveled in their confused expressions. “We’ll talk when you’re ready.”

O’Neil hustled past the men and up the stairs. Fools, he

thought. In hindsight, McCloud's treatment of his fears was much gentler than Wax and Sloane.



A soft but urgent patter of knocks sounded on Wells's office. He placed the last of his valuable texts into the suitcase and turned from the bookcase. Before reaching the door, it cracked open.

"Just a moment, sir. I must check with Father before visitors—"

"Please. A child's life is a stake."

"Just wait a moment." Sister Brahms peeked in from the hallway. "Father, that officer is here again. He is insistent. Can you see him or . . . ?"

"Of course, yes." Wells waved them in despite being caught off guard. He'd hope to deal with this later, when Miguel was able to assist.

The moment the door opened fully, the man swooped in, like the ocean bubbling up to fill a depression in wet sand. "Thank you, Father. I really need your help."

"Calm down." Wells put out his hand. "Officer O'Neil, is it? William O'Neil?"

"You got my message?"

"Yes. Timing has just been, shall we say, hectic recently."

They shook, and though O'Neil smiled, Wells sensed a tremor about the man, a scream beneath the face of gratitude. The physical contact of his skin chilled Wells, and though he'd never had the power of second sight, he felt a presence. The officer had not come alone.

"Sister Alice, please bring us a hot kettle for tea and two cups."

The nun nodded and left the room.

"That's okay, Father. You don't need to trouble yourself."

"I insist. Now, how may I help you?"

"We've only talked a few times, but I've been coming to this church since Father Russo baptized me. You helped me with my mother's service three years back."

"Oh, yes, I remember now." Wells smiled, but the man was another faceless parishioner. Wells loved all of humanity and he performed the duties of a priest without hesitation as part of his mission. He did not become attached though. Wells knew the trait

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made him appear cold to others, but his devotion lay in a deeper layer of the light. One that most of society could not understand.

“I’m on a case and I’m curious what you know about sigils.”

The detective placed sketches on his desk. Wells scratched his neck, thinking. The cold entity hung in the room, waiting.

“Where did you find these?”

“Crime scene where a child was held hostage and . . . abused. This sigil was carved into him, along with other blasphemous things drawn on his skin.”

“My God.” Wells dropped his head and crossed himself. “Is the child alive?”

“He is. But he’s not communicating. Too traumatized, I think.”

There had been no mention of the boy in the papers and after Wells watched paramedics bring the child out of the house from the onlooking crowds, his fate had weighed on Damian’s conscience. At least he was alive.

“I will pray for him. Please, what is the hospital address? Alice and I will send a card and visitors. That’s what makes a body healthy, you know. Poor boy. All alone.”

“Why would someone put these on him?”

Wells wished Alice would hurry with the kettle.

“I’ll admit. I know more than most priests when it comes to these matters. Though it’s difficult to say what goes on inside the mind of a disturbed individual. Sigils are used, traditionally, in magical ceremonies. The church doesn’t recognize magic squares and seals as much these days. The idea of demons causing disease is waning with new understandings of health and modern ways to interpret the Bible.”

“I can appreciate that priests are not training for battles against witches and demon worshippers the way they use to. But surely there’s something you can do to help—”

There was a knock on the door and Sister Alice entered with a tray. She set the kettle and cups before the men and O’Neil saw her eyes go wide at the drawings.

“Thank you, Sister,” Wells said. “That will be all.”

O’Neil watched her until the door closed behind her again.

“This is excellent tea,” Wells said, taking two herbal pouches from the drawer of his desk. He dropped the bags into the mugs and passed one over to O’Neil. “Let it steep five minutes. Good for the soul.”

"I'm sure it is," O'Neil said. "Looks like Sister recognized these symbols."

"I assure you she didn't. They're unsettling is all."

"With all due respect, you have a terrible poker face, Father. I think they're unsettling because you know they summon demons. I get the sense you're tiptoeing around that fact. Trying to protect me from something."

"Sounds like you know plenty without my help." Wells dunked the teabag, breathing in the steam, praying for guidance on what revelations were appropriate for the man. "What is it you want from me?"

"Do any enemies of the church identify themselves with this snake?" The officer slid the chief's seal of The Order toward Wells. "I assume it's like a gang sign. Marks them. Binds them together. That's what I'm here to investigate."

"Drink your tea."

A strange chuckle erupted from O'Neil. "Kids could be dying and you're worried about tea time?"

"If you don't drink that tea, *you* could die."

O'Neil went rigid. "Are you threatening me?"

"I'm giving you the truth." Wells leaned forward and lowered his voice. "You have stumbled upon something very ancient and very dangerous. You're right. Demons *are* real. And one has attached itself to you."

O'Neil's face both slackened and grimaced. His eyes shifted, scanning the room.

"You won't see it," Wells said. "But you can feel it feeding off you. Yes? Tell me, has life seemed different since the Grant fire?"

"Yes . . ." The man's voice lost its accusing edge. "It's like a tugging. Pulling me downward, then drawing me back up again."

"Very much so. Mood swings of elation to depression. Thoughts that can't possibly originate with you. Dark thoughts. Unsettling dreams. The entity sends you those transmissions to cause you misery. It feeds off your emotional pain."

O'Neil's eyes were frantic, but he didn't fight. As if he had known all along and was waiting for this confirmation.

"Drink." Wells gestured to the cup and raised his own. "It will help loosen the bond."

"What is it?"

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“An herbal blend to aid in healing your physical body. These entities can’t get a foothold in balanced humans. I could sense the turmoil in your aura the minute you entered. Now drink. It will weaken the connection.”

O’Neil took the liquid as fast as the temperature would allow.

“Calm as you drink though. Always calm. The entity feeds off your agitation, fear, and confusion. It wants you in a state of despair.”

“Easier said than done.” O’Neil wiped a hand across his mouth, poised as if waiting to feel the effect.

Wells pulled out six more tea pouches and slid them across the desk. “It will take time to work completely. The influence takes hold quicker than the shedding. You must drink one cup each morning and another at night.”

“Thank you, Father,” the officer’s voice trembled with gratitude. He gathered the herbal pouches and stuffed them into his pocket. The relief drained from his face. “How did you know about the Grant fire?”

Wells had led him too far now to turn back.

“I’ve been watching that house for some time. It has nothing to do with the church. I’m . . . a part of a group working against the darkness spread by the ones belonging to that.” Wells pointed to the insignia of the snake.

“Who are they?”

Wells couldn’t risk going all the way yet.

“That is not a discussion for today. Too much light too quickly can burn. If you are serious about helping, the first thing you must do is drink those blends as I have instructed. It will demonstrate your desire and ability to be trusted.”

“Is that all?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow to see a dear friend about the matter. Do not pursue this case further or share our discussion with anyone else. Although there is truth here, this knowledge is dangerous. Under normal circumstances, we don’t expose anyone to it unless the person is ready to receive it.”

“I promise.”

“Where can I contact you when I return?”

O’Neil tore a paper from his notepad and gave his address as well as the station’s address.

“Before I go, can you bless me, Father?”

“Bow your head. Heavenly Father, please watch over Officer William O’Neil. Give him the light and protection needed to do your work. Amen.”

“Thank you again, Father.”

Wells closed the door with a sigh. It was a sick irony that the investigating officer was also a parishioner. Alice Brahms and everyone at the church was now in danger if the man knew this much. He looked at his partially packed suitcase. Waiting until the 12th was no longer prudent. He had to leave as soon as possible.

Wells penned a new letter to Miguel—coded—and then a short message for Officer McCloud. The next train to Los Angeles would depart tomorrow and if anything happened to him between now and then, at least the die would be cast.

When he finished, Wells called for Alice, instructing her to hand deliver the first envelope to the police station and the second to the post office. After she left, Wells resumed packing with a new fervor.

XIII

THE CAB STOPPED much too soon for McCloud's liking. He would have been happy to travel forever, lost in his thoughts and the gentle rocking of the cab.

If there were such things as demons, he'd been cursed by them the moment he'd walked into Ku's opium den three years ago. McCloud had failed with the responsibilities of the Chinatown Surgeon, and he never let it go. It had unfolded like a magic act with everything disappearing. Max gone. Charlie Willis gone. Chris Barnes dead of an overdose. All that remained was the memory of a girl on his doorstep and a letter from Max.

How was he supposed to ask Ming for help when the last time they spoke had been an argument?

The burn on Ming's palm told McCloud she'd been abused, but he had never insisted on the full story. He knew her entire family was deceased, and she needed help to start again. McCloud had been an unsuccessful mentor though, and when he heard of her employment with Shin Sho, even as one of his maids, it had infuriated him. All he could think about was the disgusting man pimping her out like one of his geisha girls. It'd been easier to scream than ask for clarification. Yelling had been unable to convince her that no matter what work she did for that man—even if it was just a live-in maid—being around someone like Shin Sho was dangerous and was not how to take control of your life.

In hindsight, he never should have taken her decision personally. Ming wasn't his daughter. McCloud had done his best to help, to honor Max's request, and that was that. Ming was an adult, practically had been the minute she arrived on his doorstep. Yet it still felt like losing his sister all over again. And after the promotion which he'd fought so hard for and which had brought

so little joy, it was another devastating failure on the books. The passing of Tom Proctor and, shortly after, the shootout at Madison had solidified his loss of self-worth. Another teenager dead following money and the preaching's of people like Shin Sho. This time, it had been McCloud's trigger finger that sealed the kid's fate.

He had a name, a voice whispered in his mind. Daryll Collins. Armed with only a pan. And you killed him.

McCloud stepped out of the cab wishing he'd had a stiff drink before attempting this conversation. Would she understand that their fight had been one of love, of wanting more for Ming than she wanted for herself? What did teens understand anyway?

His leaden feet took the stairs slow. The apartment door waiting like a hangman's noose. McCloud raised his hand just as it opened. They both jumped, startled, then froze, gazing through the doorframe at each other. Ming slipped something back into a hiding spot but said nothing as she adjusted a canvas satchel and backpack.

"Hi, Ming."

"John . . . ?" She pursed her lips, eyes filling with emotions he couldn't decipher.

"I'm sorry to show up unannounced. Could we talk?"

"Today's not a good day. I'm, uh . . . headed to a new job." She smiled.

"Oh," he said, almost asking about Shin Sho but stopping himself. "Maybe when you're off the clock?"

"I'll be gone for a while, John . . ." She sighed. This time her eyes were sad. "Of all days."

"It's for a case," he stammered, not sure if he was more embarrassed about coming to her for help or that he wasn't offering her an apology first. "A little boy. We found him in a cage. There was something at the crime scene. A snake." McCloud pulled the sketch from inside his jacket, handed it to her, then continued: "That burn on your hand . . . I know someone hurt you as a child. Maybe it was a group of people. Whoever it was. I think it's connected to this snake. Can you spare five minutes to talk?"

The distressed features on Ming's face reminded him of O'Neil. "Five minutes, John."



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“Oi! O’Neil!”

He was only a few feet from the church’s exit when the sound of his name made him jump. He turned to see John Wax leaning against the streetlamp.

“What are you doing here?”

“Some cop you are. Don’t even know when you’re being tailed.”

The brief calm he’d received from Wells’s blessing was already fleeing at the sight of Wax’s mushed face and cocky smile. The detective peeled himself from the pole and met O’Neil.

“Relax. You were right. I took a peek, then hightailed it after you. I don’t know how you stumbled onto that tattoo or what it means. But you know something. Sloane and I want in.”

“In on what?”

“The glory. We’re the big dogs on campus. And high-profile cases keep it that way.” Wax put his arm over O’Neil’s shoulder and led him toward the street corner. “There’s a certain monetary reward to be had at the top, too. Organized crime ain’t like homicide. We have a lot of friends.”

“Speaking of dogs. Where is Sloane?”

Wax grinned from ear to ear. “He’s coming. But . . . I need to know that you’re committed to *us* solving this case together.”

“I’m working with McCloud. If there’s glory to be had, it’s for all of us.” O’Neil removed Wax’s arm. “What are you talking about? Monetary reward?”

“Look, McCloud’s a great guy. But he’s got one foot out the door. I think this needs to be about us and our friend.” Wax turned at the sound of an Hansom cab coming down the street. “Speak of the devil.”

“Your friend?”

A driver sat in front of an elegant black cab, the windows covered in dark curtains. He pulled on the reins, stopping the horse alongside O’Neil and Wax.

“He wants to be your friend, too.” Wax opened the door, but all O’Neil could see inside were shadows. “Come on.”

“I don’t get it . . .” O’Neil paused. Would this be breaking his word to Wells about discussing the case? At the moment, he didn’t care about endangering Wax or Sloane with knowledge. He didn’t want to jeopardize a chance at working with Wells when he returned though.

“Shit, I thought you wanted to work together. Come on. Ain’t got all day, O’Neil.”

O’Neil stepped hesitantly into the cab. Sloane sat at the far end of a bench seat. Across from him was a man in a fine morning suit, legs crossed at the knee, black, gloved hands folded in his lap.

“Officer O’Neil. A pleasure. My name is Amiri.” The smile was there, but no attempt was made to shake hands. “I think I may be of service to you. Please sit.”

O’Neil slid into the center of the bench seat, and Wax climbed in next to him, slamming the door shut. The bench was roomy for two, but O’Neil felt cramped with three. Amiri looked relaxed alone on his side.

“You are the lead investigator on the Grant fire?”

“That’s correct.” O’Neil almost said McCloud was, that they were sharing lead, but some instinct deterred him.

“How did you come to know about Osoto’s tattoo?”

O’Neil turned to Wax, but the detective was staring straight ahead, expressionless.

“Old case,” he lied, adapting McCloud’s story as his own. “Soon after the Chinatown Surgeon struck, I interviewed a hood with a similar mark on his hand.”

“Who?”

O’Neil turned again but still his colleagues in blue offered no assistance.

“Who are you exactly, Mr. Amiri?”

“I’m a special consultant.” There was a condescending air about him. “My associates have had the pleasure of assisting Detectives Wax and Sloane solve a few cases in the past, but this one is of the utmost importance, so I’m seeing to it myself. Your cooperation won’t go unrecognized. You two have always been happy, correct?”

The men nodded silently.

“Our assistance has made them well respected in the department and rewarded in other means as well. Wax and Sloane seem to think you have the potential to be as greatly rewarded as they.”

“Consultant? I’m not sure I understand.”

“Allow me to clarify, I represent a government organization that is offering a bonus of one hundred dollars a month for

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allowing us to handle all the investigations pertaining to Mr. Osoto's death and the fire at Grant house—"

"Handle the investigation? Without—?"

"I'm still speaking, Mr. O'Neil." Amiri's eyes were an icy blue inside his tanned skin. "All discoveries would be given to you as they were made. You could maintain the credit for any arrests. But this case is far too important to let local law enforcement handle it alone. Osoto is an international criminal."

"As my secret consultant, what are you asking me to do?"

"Nothing. Until we hand you the evidence and say make the arrest."

"Your organization does all the work and I get the credit?"

O'Neil looked between them. It was exactly the type of garbage these two would pull. No wonder they had no problem solving cases. They were getting kickbacks.

Something about Amiri made O'Neil leery. He didn't seem like a federal agent. There was another angle. But what?

A chill went through O'Neil at a horrid thought. "Can you take off your gloves?"

The man's bald head tilted inquisitively.

"O'Neil, don't be a jackass," Wax muttered.

"This is a local case. Government agents have no power here."

Amiri smiled. "Which is why we want to compensate you for your cooperation. Your father's care was expensive. So was your mother's funeral. Are you telling me you have no need for a little extra monetary aid?"

How did this man know about his father? O'Neil felt dizzy; it wasn't just Wax and Sloane pressing in on him. The entire cab seemed to be constricting. All peace he'd received from Father Wells and the tea was gone. O'Neil wanted to pull his revolver, but he knew Wax and Sloane would feel the movement and stop him.

"Show me your left palm, please."

"God damn, O'Neil, you really are stupider than I thought," Wax said.

Sloane suppressed a chuckle.

Amiri degloved and held up his palm. A serpent and obelisk tattooed his flesh. "I'm undercover in something bigger than you can imagine. I'm unsure how far you'd go for justice, but I'm all in. It's taken years to infiltrate this cult. I'm not going to let it get

fucked up by some local beat cop who has no idea what he's stumbled into."

Something very ancient and dangerous.

"Who are they?"

"In time," Amiri said. "Secrecy and trust are paramount before we can move forward. I need to know that you are going to work with us and not try to forge ahead like some cowboy."

Conflicted sweat pooled under O'Neil's armpits. The tugging continued. The demon distorting his perception of the truth. None of this made sense.

"I don't feel well. Can you drop me off at the station? I need some time to think—"

"This is a one-time offer." Amiri uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, taking a wad of bank notes from his pocket. "An advance as a token of my sincerity to serve you."

A sour taste filled O'Neil's mouth.

"Take the money, O'Neil." Wax elbowed him in the side.

Amiri held the money a few more moments before pocketing it again. "Pity."

Amiri tapped on the roof and the horses began walking. O'Neil cried over the clapping as steel blades slid into his flank on either side, piercing his lungs. He went limp, allowing the detectives to clamp down on his shoulders, holding him still.

Amiri rose from the bench and leaned in front of O'Neil's face with piercing eyes.

"This is the most beautiful part."

Amiri stroked the sweat from O'Neil's brow. His body trembled, but his mind was blank. The less O'Neil moved the less pain he experienced. Then Amiri gripped either side of his head as the dirty cops twisted their knives. O'Neil screamed louder, but the horses clopped on.

Amiri inhaled. "I'm training to see the moment you leave this body. Already you are detaching. Can you feel it?"

O'Neil's breath was ragged, wheezing like an asthmatic. Pain seized his muscles. There was a watery distortion around him. A primal part of his brain recalled salvation in the pouches of his pocket. He clawed briefly for them—not that the tea bags could help him now—but the watery embrace was interrupted when he did so by searing pain.

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Amiri finished the task for him, pulling from his pocket the herbal blends. He sniffed one.

“Ah, a banishing tincture. Too little, too late. The question is, where did you get these? Someone in the church?”

O’Neil coughed and blood dribbled down his chin. The watery distortion took hold again and he welcomed the loss of sensation of the men and the cab and then of everything.



“It would appear you were correct about him,” Amiri said, tapping the cab roof again. The driver responded with the reins and Amiri slid his glove back on.

“What is that?” Wax pointed to the teabag.

“Proof that someone is—*was*—helping him.”

“Someone at the church?”

“Perhaps the local priest is not who he claims to be. Let’s pick up my associate, then you can drop us off at the church. I’ll figure out exactly what is going on. You two can dispose of him and make sure the cab is cleaned when you return to pick us up.”

“Yes, sir.” Wax held the expectant eyes of a puppy.

“You’ve done well.” Amiri removed the bribe money again and passed it to the pathetic worms. Unlike his sandmen, these men had no potential. A sandman could be molded if the right desires were present. But these men might as well have been slaves. They knew close to nothing of the truth. Money was their prime motive and that was their doom.

“What do you want us to do about McCloud?”

“He’s the one leaving the force?” Amiri stroked his chin with a gloved finger. “Nothing for now. Watch him and make a note of everywhere he goes and everyone he talks to.”

“Consider it done,” Wax said. “Will you be needing our services at the church . . . later?”

“Yes.” Only an Engineer would be passing out banishing tea and such a man would not go quietly. There would be blood. “How about the evidence?”

“We’ll nab it tonight. And deliver it as you instructed.”

Guilty of breach, the slave rat known as Osoto would soon be a distant memory among men, and all his connections to The City

would be erased. Amiri would deliver the offerings to Lord Valbas. A fake priest, Osoto, and perhaps coordinates.

“Remember, don’t impede McCloud. You are to let him move freely until ordered otherwise.”



Ming’s apartment was bare, so they sat on the floor. McCloud felt ridiculous and embarrassed for a variety of reasons as she stumbled through an explanation on how she would buy a couch with her first paycheck.

“It’s okay,” he said for the third time. “I’m sorry to bother you it’s just—”

“I know.” Ming handed the sketch back. “Tell me what you found.”

“We got called to a fire. Six people were burned to death. The child was found in a cage in a hidden basement. He was painted and carved with sick symbols. I never pry, but . . .” McCloud took a deep breathe. “I think it’s important to talk about what happened to you.”

Ming looked down and removed her left glove.

“It’s an Ouroboros. Beyond that . . . I don’t know how it happened.”

“How could you forget something like that?”

Ming shrugged. “Whatever happened to me, I was so young—or it was so painful—I just blocked it out. I’ve tried to remember, but there’s nothing.”

It made sense, but it left him back where he started and reminded him that Ming was the victim. It was understandable she’d sought out people like Shin Sho. Pain was all Ming had ever known. Damn. He had really failed her.

“We’ll have to get you on that psychoanalysis couch one of these days,” he jested, trying to lighten the mood. “They say hypnosis can unlock those memories.”

“Yeah. So they say.” She smirked. There was a pregnant pause before she spoke again. “I wish things had gone differently, John. Maybe . . . maybe we can talk more next week. I’ll be settled at my new job and things will be looking up.”

His first impulse was to grill her about the position. But there was no point.

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“That would be great,” McCloud said, struggling to his feet. He needed more exercise and less alcohol. “We can talk about something more uplifting then. No more of this garbage. I’m leaving the force, did you know?”

“Really?” She gathered her satchel and backpack again. “What will you do?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing. Can’t keep going on like this though.”

He smiled and opened the door. They walked down to the street together. Exchanging niceties. John lied about his positive split with the department and excitement at new careers. He assumed Ming was lying, too. It didn’t matter though. For the moment, they could pretend they were happy.

When the cabbie stopped, McCloud said, “I’m glad you’re doing well and have this new job. I do miss dinners with you. My treat when you are ready. No hard feelings?”

He stuck out his hand.

“Life’s too short.” She hugged him and got into the cab with a final wave.

He waved back as the horse trotted out of sight. That hadn’t been too painful. Though he hadn’t actually apologized. Alone now, there was a brooding concern he would never see her again.

This doesn’t have to end like the Surgeon.

No, but the similarities were staggering, and his thoughts were leaping to string together the two bizarre murders. He had to turn the plate. There was nothing left to bite.

XIV

“O’NEIL BEEN BACK since this morning?” McCloud asked Tina when he got to the station.

“I haven’t seen him. But I’ve got good news for both of you.” She handed him an address. “We know the owner of the Grant house. Sort of. ES Holdings. They are a corporation with controlling interest of the property. They’re managed by another business entity—still working on that one. The real kicker, the entity is registered in Wyoming but does business here in California. That’s why it’s been taking so long to get answers.”

“Wyoming?” McCloud looked at the paper; ES Holdings was located in the neighborhood of Hollywood.

“Whoever is involved in this business, does not want a public profile. I’m not sure what you’ll find there, but it’s a start.”

“Thanks.” McCloud stared at the ink, mesmerized. The first tangible lead was in his hands. For as much excitement was welling up inside him, there was also a countering concern. He saw O’Neil’s feral eyes. Ming’s lack of memory. Was he really going to trek to Hollywood for this ghost shell company? It felt like another dead end.

“Could you share that with O’Neil?”

“Yeah . . . Of course.” McCloud smiled, breaking his daze. “Thank you, Tina, really. I’m just a little scattered this morning. And this secrecy . . . I’ve never seen companies veiled like that.”

“My brother-in-law is a business attorney and let me tell you; the stuff he says some of these large companies get involved in . . . Legal criminals if you ask me.”

“I’d definitely believe it.”

McCloud sat down at his desk and pulled out a map of Los Angeles. The trek was at least five hours by train. Could require a

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night's stay in town. The plus was no belief in demons was required. Maybe it'd be a good idea to take O'Neil for that very reason.

A few minutes later, he made up his mind and was knocking on Harris's door.

"Lieutenant, I was hoping I could leave two hours before my shift ends? Tina found an address of the company that owns the Grant house. ES Holdings. Their office is in Hollywood. I want to prepare tonight and leave first thing in the morning."

"Approved. Will you be taking O'Neil?"

"I'd like to, yes," he said. Then, "Have you spoken with him recently?"

"O'Neil? Briefly here and there. I'm sure he'll be in eventually if you want to talk with him—"

"I have. We had coffee this morning." McCloud shut the office door. "Did he seem strained to you?"

Harris put down his pen. "Now that you mention it. You both have been looking worse for the wear."

"I know my limitations, sir. That's why I'm resigning in June. This is O'Neil's first major case though. He doesn't know his limitations yet. If interviewing the folks at ES Holdings tomorrow doesn't bring satisfying answers, I suggest taking him off the case."

"On what grounds?"

"He's starting to snap. He thinks . . ." McCloud hesitated, but this was too important to worry about O'Neil's feelings or reputation. "He thinks those symbols are to summon demons. Believes dark entities are following him. *And me*. That we've been marked since the fire."

"Okay, okay," Harris said. "Keep your voice down. It wasn't that long ago you sat right in this room and told me how unsettled this case was making you. Let's respect his decision to feel—"

"You didn't see him this morning. I did." McCloud related the discussion over coffee. "It wasn't just what he said as much as how he said it. It was like talking to a different person."

"I know that experience."

The tidal wave of frustration mounted. It came with a stuffy, hot grip around his collar. McCloud swallowed the urge to tell Harris to just close the whole fucking case.

"Let's pretend O'Neil is correct. There is a cult. A group of

deranged psychos, mimicking ancient rituals to invoke demons. Demons who love to see children tortured—”

“McCloud—”

“What? This unknown vigilante finds out about the crimes. Decides prison is too good for these kinds of scumbags. And burns the cult members. All six of them. End of story. This is a one and done vigilante situation. We’ll never know who the captors were, and we’ll never know the arsonist.”

Harris said nothing, but McCloud felt his eyes judging. Finally, in a voice surprisingly calm, he said, “Maybe *both* of you could use a break from this one. I’ll send O’Neil home when he arrives. Why don’t you rest today, too? Be all ready for tomorrow’s trip to Hollywood.”

For once it was McCloud’s heavy breathing instead of Harris’s that punctuated the silence. McCloud knew the lieutenant was not going to close the case. If the boy’s desecration ever reached the papers—or more likely: *when* it made the papers—Harris couldn’t have loose cannons in front of the press. *It would be* the Chinatown Surgeon all over again.

“Fine.” McCloud ground his teeth. “I’ll write up my report and take the day off.”

“It’s not a punishment. I know what stress can do to good men, and I don’t want to see either of you going down this dangerous path. Let’s meet on the 12th to discuss what you find in Hollywood. We’ll look at the situation with fresh eyes. Together. And make a decision. O’Neil, too.”

Harris looked like he had a lot more to say, however, he stopped after that. McCloud was thankful. The more concern Harris expressed in his face, the more McCloud realized he must look like O’Neil. Feral.

McCloud nodded and left, hoping he could survive until June.

As he headed home, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was indeed being followed. And by the time he reached his house, he felt drained and exhausted.

XV

FATHER WELLS WAS in the basement of the church gathering the last of his belongings, cash, and clothes. His meeting with O'Neil exposed the error in timing his departure, but at least the seed had been planted for both he and McCloud. The letter to Miguel would apprise him of the sudden changes, just in case something happened to Wells.

If only I had taken the detective's call yesterday.

It would have afforded him more time, but he couldn't think like that. An Engineer was trained never to dwell long on matters that cannot be altered. It was crucial to meet with Miguel and regroup, then they could approach the detectives together.

Wells shut his eyes and prayed for himself and the officers—
Footsteps echoed down the stone steps into the basement.

Wells froze. A shadow floated across the wall, shrinking as a man stepped into view.

"I'm sorry, my son. This part of the church is not open to visitors," Wells said.

"Going on a trip, Father?" A tall bald man stepped onto the landing, eyeing the suitcase.

An overwhelming sense of dread enveloped Wells at his presence.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Amiri." He wagged a finger. "You did not report your absence correctly to the diocese. Luckily, I'm here to help."

Wells felt death in the man's smile.

More footsteps and a larger shadow appeared on the stairwell wall. It was followed by a figure, most likely a sandman, holding Sister Brahms. His one arm wrapped around her body, hand muzzling her mouth. His other held a knife to her throat.

“Goodbye, Father,” Amiri said softly, then lashed out, striking Wells in the nose with his fist.

The pain was blinding, and Wells crumpled to the ground. The man drove a wingtip into his ribs and Wells heard bone crack. He cried out from the ground, and behind Amiri, Brahms screamed against the sandman’s hand.

Amiri went to grab Wells, and all the fake priest could do was slap in vain at the man’s gloved hands.

Amiri pulled back and punched Wells’s face, driving his head into the concrete floor with a sickening crunch. The visage of the bald man doubled, shaking. Sister Brahms buckled at the knees, and the sandman readjusted his grip against her slick tears.

Amiri propped Wells against the wall. “Rope.”

The sandman took the coiled bundle from his belt and tossed it over. Even when his hand left Sister Brahms’s body, the terrified nun did not take advantage of the split-second of freedom.

“I am the mouth of the Mara.” Amiri bound Wells. “Do you understand?”

Wells shook his head. Snot and blood bubbled from his swollen nostril.

Amiri tore the priest’s collar down, ripping his shirt and exposing part of his chest. Three tattooed dots formed an equilateral triangle above his heart. Brahms slipped from the sandman’s grasp, and this time, she screamed for help before he muzzled her mouth again.

“Let her go,” Wells sputtered. “She has nothing to do with this.”

“Nothing to do *with this*?” Amiri slid a knife from inside his jacket and pressed the point into the center of the tattoo. “Oh, you mean she’s not an *Engineer*. I’m impressed. Hiding in plain sight. And your parishioners have no idea? This nun has no idea?”

Wells remained silent. A succession of questions ticked through his head that would remain unanswered once he passed through the veil of forgetting. Would the Serpent Girl come through? Would Miguel be able to contact McCloud and O’Neil? Would the dawn be black in his next incarnation?

“It doesn’t have to end like this. I can let you both go. I just need one thing from you.”

Wells trembled. It was one thing when brother and sister

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Engineers fell. They knew the danger of the oath they swore. Brahms was ignorant of who he really was though.

“Give me the lodge coordinates.”

The stinging blur of tears helped obscure Sister Brahms’s face. But it didn’t make his silence less painful. The muffled cries from the nun intensified. A motion from Amiri and the sandman removed his hand, letting her pleas for mercy fill the basement.

“That is up to our dear Father, here—oh, I mean—Who are you exactly?”

“Foul abomination,” Wells spat. “Leave this church.”

“He’s been lying to you, Sister. He’s no priest.” Amiri placed the point of the thin blade against the tender flesh of Wells’s jaw. “Give me the coordinates.”

The longer Wells remained silent, the harder Amiri pushed the blade.

“This tissue cannot withstand more than five pounds of pressure.”

Wells could feel the skin beginning to puncture. He whimpered in pain.

“Give me the coordinates.”

“*Aaahhh!*” Wells lost control as the first inch and a half of the blade slid through the underbelly of his jaw, piercing into a spot near where his tongue connected to the floor of his mouth. Hot blood bubbled, spilling over his lip and back into his throat. His tongue wiggled around the metal like a worm on a hook.

Amiri drew eye to eye with Wells.

“Impressive. But let’s see how selfless you really are.”

Amiri removed the blade. Blood leaked from the wound, covering Wells’s neck and chest. The coppery taste was nauseating.

Amiri stepped to the sandman and grabbed Brahms. She squirmed and kicked his leg. Amiri drove his fist into her tiny solar plexus. The nun went limp, hanging like a ragdoll, gasping for oxygen.

“Please.” Blood dripped from Wells’s mouth. “I told the officer nothing about you.”

“Nothing?” Amiri laughed.

“He believes in demons. I gave him a banishing tea blend to ease his mind—that’s all. I’ll tell you every detail. Please let her be.”

“No bother. That detective is no longer of importance to me. I

only want one thing. Where do the Engineers of Light meet?” Amiri threw Brahms to the ground and straddled her chest. “Tell me and she lives.”

Wells sobbed against the wall.

Amiri grabbed at her jaw. Brahms whipped her head side to side in resistance. She turned rabid for survival, biting at his fingers. Amiri smashed her in the face as he had with Wells. Her lips split and her front teeth loosened. She whimpered into submission.

“Hold her,” Amiri commanded.

The sandman wrapped the nun’s head in his massive hands and Amiri pried open her jaw.

Wells cried, but it didn’t drown out Sister Brahms’s screams. The knife did though. Wells stopped sobbing to vomit when Amiri held up her severed tongue. He stood and dropped the bloody organ into the priest’s lap.

“You bastard!”

Amiri reached into his pocket and removed a flask. Unscrewing the top, he took a shallow swig. “One last chance to let her die easily.”

Wells hung his head.

“So be it.”

Amiri poured the alcohol over the woman writhing in pain on the ground. He struck her twice in the ribs and the sandman shuffled away.

“Being burned alive will take at least a thousand years for her to have a chance at rebirth.” Amiri struck a match and dropped it on Sister Brahms.

The tongueless squeal sounded inhuman. The smell was worse than Grant. Wells screamed over it, slamming his head against the stone wall. The heat assaulted his face and he vomited.

“Time to take you to my home,” Amiri said.



McCloud woke, his night shirt wet and cold from perspiration. The sweat stunk like vodka. He could hear Max’s words warning him how easy it would be to drink. Only the voice speaking in his head was not Max’s. It was the ancient, vile one that warned him of the demon hound snapping at his heels. Following him. Hunting.

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The room was dark, but McCloud didn't feel alone. A creaking noise focused his eyes. The shadows sharpened. Across from his bed, someone was sitting at the writing desk.

The dark figure rotated in the chair, and eyes gleamed in the shroud of darkness. A new word buzzed in his head.

Adonack.

It was Phoenician, Hebrew, and a whole lot of nonsense, as Donovan had said. It also sent his heartbeat into spasms and paralyzed him with fear.

There was another creak, followed by the lid of the footlocker opening. McCloud's eyes stared down his body at the open chest at the foot of the bed. He flinched as more foreign words grated against his ears.

Maltuck.

McCloud looked back to the chair. The faintest outline of a mouth opened and closed below the gleaming eyes, whispering in fast speech, echoing, buzzing through the room, drilling into his head. Its tone reminded him of crackling fire and crinkling paper. The words heightened his dread but were unintelligible. He only thought he knew what they sounded like.

Gabrache.

A claw reached up from the footlocker and slammed onto the bed, inches from his feet. McCloud remained frozen. The chanting continued—the vocal resonance of the words from the altar paper perhaps. A second claw rose from the chest and a beast of shadow dragged itself onto the mattress. Cold pressure travelled up McCloud as the creature drew closer. There was no odor, no sensation of skin or fur, just the crushing dread. His lungs hitched as the creature set himself upon McCloud's chest. His breath fled under the weight of the shadow beast.

Clawed hands—paws?—reached into his mouth. McCloud screamed against the animal's grasp as his mandible was ripped from his skull. The crack vibrated his body, and though the pain remained with his flesh, McCloud's consciousness had floated from his unhinged mouth. He was terrified, looking down at his body's demise. The beastly shadow reminded him of a hyena. It roared, pushing its snout into McCloud's ruined maw. McCloud watched his throat distend like a boa constrictor swallowing prey as the hyena forced himself inside.

The fiery thin words commenced again, and McCloud felt his airy essence directed from his tortured body to the figure sitting at the writing desk. From his new vantage point, it was clear she was a woman in a red robe, with black lining. She lifted her hood and McCloud could feel the words like clouds of poison, leaving her mouth and filling his essence. They threatened to suffocate him. His body was already gone. Whatever he was now would soon dissipate, too. He would be nothingness.

Then he woke up screaming.

XVI

April 11th

“HEARD YOU’RE HEADING to Hollywood today.”

McCloud winced at Tourville’s booming voice as he entered the station. “That’s the plan. Did you happen to see O’Neil at all last night when you clocked in?”

“Nah. But the day shift usually leaves before I get here anyway. He going with ya?”

“Hoping so. I left him a note yesterday when I left early.” McCloud signed the ledger. “With any luck I’ll be signing out within the hour.”

McCloud slowed once he could see O’Neil’s empty desk across the room. He checked his pocket watch. Twenty minutes till their shift officially started. Reaching O’Neil’s desk to wait, McCloud found his note on the same stack of folders as yesterday. The pulsing in his head renewed. Nauseous again, he thought of the alcohol trying to get out—the hyena trying to get in. Once the dizzy spell passed, he looked around the office, sparse and quiet as a few night cops packed and shuffled out.

There was no one to ask who might have seen O’Neil yesterday.

He never came back. They have him—the red-robed woman from his dreams laughed—

McCloud gripped his sweaty head. He needed a twenty-minute diversion, so he headed to the Evidence Room. He could take a look at Osoto’s autopsy for himself and check with Heyward if O’Neil had been in yesterday.



“I’m sorry, Detective. I can’t find the photographs.”

Heyward was fatter than Harris, and McCloud felt the urge to reach across the half-wall barrier and smash him in the face. A similar tremor to what he’d experienced during coffee with O’Neil was back. But instead of fear-based, it was anger.

“Just give me all the autopsy files on Hisao Osoto. I’ll sort them myself.”

“That’s the problem, sir. The box has been moved. I’ll have to ask Larry when he comes in—”

“Did O’Neil take them? He was supposed to examine it yesterday and report back.”

“No.” Sweat beaded on Heyward’s slug of an upper lip. “I mean, he was here. I showed him the box, but then I put it back. Maybe—”

“Unlock this.”

McCloud kicked the half-wall door and Heyward fumbled with the keys.

“Yes, sir.”

McCloud stormed into the evidence room with Heyward close behind him. His eyes burned as his finger moved slowly across the shelves of the dead. That was the destiny of victims and criminals. All your years on a planet reduced to a small box of photos and notes, shoved alphabetically into a room and forgotten.

McCloud’s finger stopped on the empty space between Omar and Ottoman. He turned to face Heyward. “Who’s been in here besides you?”

“Larry. I can’t see him moving it unless Harris or the task force asked for it—”

“Where’s the body?”

“Osoto’s body? I . . . the morgue, I guess. O’Neil asked the same thing.”

“Why?”

Heyward shrugged. “Needed a better look at a birthmark.”

“Birthmark? On Osoto?”

“Or a tattoo, he said. It was hard to tell. Looked like a coiled snake.”

“A snake . . .” McCloud’s brain surged like a spiderweb crack in glass. “No one else came to look after O’Neil?”

“Wax and Sloane, but they were just checking something quick.

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Left right away. I did get called to Harris's office, but I locked up for those thirty minutes. I think the box was still here when I turned over keys to Larry at 5 p.m."

"You think?" McCloud gazed at the empty space.

A veiled corporation. Demons and cults. Misdirection. It wasn't unreasonable to think that evidence regarding the assassination of a crime lord was stolen from under the department's nose. This wasn't demons. This was dirty cops, getting greased. He looked at Heyward. The man could barely tie his shoes, and it was hard to believe Larry could be the inside rat. He always seemed like such a good man. But an internal conspiracy was more likely than demons.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure Larry will know what happened."

"Forget it. Sorry I snapped. Don't let this issue go though. I need you to submit this—discrepancy—to Lieutenant Harris *and* the Organized Crime task force." He placed his hand on Heyward's shoulder. "Something dirty is going on and I don't like it. Best you cross those Ts and dot those Is if you don't want to take the fall."

"Yes, sir."

McCloud left. This added a whole new layer to the nightmare. As he returned to the main floor, most of the morning shift looked to be clocked in, and Harris was waiting by his desk. A familiar dread enveloped McCloud like storm clouds.

"Sir?"

Harris's puffy face was a strange mix of emotions. He gestured. "My office."

Once the door was closed, he said, "They found O'Neil about fifteen minutes ago. Alley behind Redwood and Center. Appears he stumbled onto a drug deal early this morning. Surprised them—surprised him, too, probably. Maybe he tried to stop it; we don't know. The dealers are dead. O'Neil was stabbed twice. He died by the time medical help arrived."

The news was like bracing for a punch in the gut and getting a fist to the face instead. When some of the shock wore off, he asked, "What was he doing out there?"

"We don't know. Yet. Maybe he had errands to run before work. You were the last person who talked with him. I was hoping—"

"He went to church yesterday. Our Lady of Lourdes. Well, he

said he was going there. Not sure if that happened. But Heyward did see him in the evidence room . . . Who knows about this?"

"Dispatch. Organized Crime and us. I'm going to call a station meeting, but I wanted you to know first."

"The task force? Why?"

"The drug dealers are probably part of a larger crime family. I sent Wax and Sloane to investigate."

"Wax and Sloane . . . They're handling Osoto aren't they?"

"That's correct."

"Do you have reason to believe there's a connection between O'Neil's murder and Osoto?"

"No. Should I?" Harris asked.

"Did you know Osoto's autopsy box is missing?"

"I'm sure it's not missing."

"O'Neil. Wax and Sloane. Were the last ones to check it out. O'Neil found a connection between Osoto and the fire."

"You seem agitated. Calm down."

"The whole damn box is gone. And now O'Neil is dead. Something dirty is going on. Records don't just go missing. Why doesn't Heyward know where the box is?"

"Jesus, McCloud. Because he's a rookie. Because it happened on Larry's shift. Who knows? But I don't like what you're implying about my men." Harris scanned his face. "Under the circumstances, maybe you should take another day—"

"Did you call Heyward from his post yesterday?"

Harris's eyes flared. "I needed a case file. Dammit, McCloud. You think I don't feel like shit over this, too. I need you to hold it together. Take another day."

"What about ES Holdings?"

"I don't want you travelling under this distress. Take the day."

"Then I'll go tomorrow."

"Let's talk before you go anywhere."

It was like staring at a stranger. McCloud left the office but had no intention of going home.

It's a tattoo of a coiled snake, Heyward said.

It's an Ouroboros. Ming took off her glove. But I don't remember anything beyond that.

It was time to follow up with Donovan, and perhaps a visit to the hospital would cheer him up—

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“Detective.” It was Tina. “I’m sorry. Here. This came for you in the mail.”

McCloud slid open the envelope and removed a slip of paper.

You have stumbled onto something very old and very dangerous.

Contact Detective Whitney—LAPD Precinct 13

Ask him about the Temple of Bones.

McCloud flipped the note over. No address. No name. The envelope also was bare.

“The postman dropped this off?”

Tina shrugged. “It was in the stack of mail. Maybe it was hand-delivered. Need to ask Tourville.”

“I saw him this morning; he didn’t mention anything . . .” McCloud looked to Harris’s closed office door. “Thanks. I was planning to call it a day, but I’m going to make a few phone calls before I turn in.”

“Call it a day? It just started. What happened?”

“I can’t say. Harris wants to call a station meeting.”

“Oh, jeez . . .” Tina looked shocked.

As he returned to his desk, McCloud considered knocking on Harris’s door to share the anonymous message. Thought about reminding Harris that they should check in with Our lady of Lourdes. But why bother. Harris only heard what he wanted to. McCloud was starting to see why Max had been such a loose cannon.

There was a scary thought. Understanding Max Elliot.

McCloud sat at his desk, looked at his options, then placed the first call.

“Ah, McCloud,” Donovan’s voice was bright and cheery. “So glad you phoned.”

“You got something for me?”

“Yes and no.” Donovan’s dry chuckle came over the telephone line. “You’re on a wild goose chase if you follow those words, old chap.”

“Come again?”

“Those four words—the ones with the sigil. They’re nonsense.

An associate of mine, antiques dealer for the most part but accomplished linguistic expert, nonetheless, confirmed my suspicions.”

“But . . . your message?”

“What’s that?” Donovan asked.

“You didn’t send a message to the station for me?”

“Heaven’s no. Last night I was two carafes deep in a tempranillo from *Ribera del Duero*, pouring over the newest additions to my dear friend’s stamp collection—Og Shrewsbury, though I doubt you’d know the man. I was in no state to pen a letter. I had planned on stopping by the station late this afternoon had you not called.”

Scratch Donovan off the list.

“Temple of Bones,” McCloud said, picking up the note. “What does that phrase mean to you?”

“Trying to send me on another wild goose chase, Detective?” His voice was light with jest.

“I’m serious, Donovan. A very ancient and dangerous Temple of Bones.”

“You can’t keep throwing these vague concepts at me, old boy. The term could refer to one of a thousand ossuaries or chapels built or adorned using the bones of the dead. From The Chapel of Bones in Evora to the *Goldene Kammer* built for St. Ursula in Cologne and her eleven thousand virgins—or eleven depending on the source.” His voice even sounded like a smirk over the phone.

“This is a common practice? Chapels constructed of human bones?”

“Indeed—well, it was in ancient times. And when the bones weren’t the building blocks, several sacred temples were consecrated in blood sacrifices, so still quite morbid. Rumor has it the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan was dedicated to the tune of eighty thousand sacrifices—hardly feasible though. More likely ten thousand.” McCloud envisioned the man winking. “But I don’t see how that has anything to do with the evidence you gave me.”

“Are there any of these bone temples in Los Angeles?”

Another light laugh. “Most certainly not. The sites I referred to are hundreds of years old. Mostly in Europe and South America. Are you sure you’re feeling alright, John? You sound dreadful.”

McCloud’s mouth opened, but he stopped himself. Like Harris,

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Donovan had made his stance clear. Instead, McCloud said, “Things have gotten a lot worse since we last spoke. I was really hoping the message was from you about the language. Don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of Detective Whitney from Hollywood Precinct 13?”

The line was quiet, and McCloud worried the call had been disconnected.

“Whitney . . . ?” he finally said. “I knew a James Whitney. Wasn’t a detective. Supper club pal—”

“I highly doubt a detective is rubbing elbows at your Supper Club.”

“Sorry, old chap. If you find out more, do keep me abreast. I’m quite intrigued by how all this is playing out. I feel like I’ve been dropped into a Sherlock Holmes tale.” His voice went a bit lower. “Personally, I still predict this is all subterfuge. While the words and sigils harken back to primitive cultures, I highly doubt there are Californians running around town constructing sanctuaries made of human bones or performing ritualistic blood sacrifices to summon demons.”

If you’d seen that child. The torches, the altar. O’Neil’s wild eyes—

McCloud stopped himself at the thoughts. Did he now believe O’Neil’s theory? He wanted to label O’Neil as crazy, but now he wasn’t accepting Donovan’s out. Why?

“The writing you gave me is not Phoenician,” Donovan continued. “Or Sumerian. Or anything that Shrewsbury has studied. As I suggested, and he confirmed, it’s misdirection. A red herring. Now you’re receiving cryptic messages to the station . . . Have you considered *that* is misdirection, too? Something from the perpetrator. A Jack the Ripper-esque communication to police? It’s hard to say but surely it’s a more probable explanation than bloody-thirsty cults.”

You’ve felt different since Grant, haven’t you?

Demons have been after me a long time.

“Surely,” McCloud said in a flat tone. “Thanks for your help.”

“Of course,” Donovan said, his voice almost patronizing, as if McCloud had lost his marbles and needed tending to. “Keep me posted if you discover anything else that looks antiquated. I will do my best to authenticate the evidence for you.”

After the call ended, Harris's door clicked open and he emerged, grim-faced.

The news struck a deep chord in the department. McCloud already felt numb and detached. He listened with a mechanical impatience. Let everyone else grieve. He needed to act.

When the office started to wind back to life, McCloud pulled out the County Department Directory.



"This is Detective Whitney."

The voice was music to McCloud's ears.

"This is John McCloud. Detective at Precinct 29, San Francisco. Good afternoon, sir. I can't tell you how many transfers it took to reach you. It's important we speak regarding a case of yours that may be connected to a trafficking ring resulting in an officer murder."

"Whoa, slow down. Trafficking? Murder?"

"Yes, sir. Five days ago, there was an arson near Chinatown. After a search of the residence, we discovered a hidden basement with a child being held captive. So far the boy is unable to communicate. Doctor says it's catatonia. While investigating a lead, an officer was stabbed. Pronounced dead on scene."

Silence on the other end.

"Detective Whitney?"

"What did you say your name was?"

"Detective John McCloud."

"Badge number?"

McCloud gave him the information. "Is everything all right?"

"Is now," Whitney said. "I'm sorry to hear that an officer has lost his life, but I got to stick with protocol if I'm divulging information. Need to be able to verify who you say you are."

"I understand." The third-degree still bothered McCloud; however, the detective was correct. Hadn't he just told Heyward the same thing?

Make sure you cross those Ts.

Epecially when there was already a possibility of one dirty cop amongst their ranks.

"What case of mine do you think can help?"

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“A lead recommended asking you directly about—I don’t have a case number or victim name, only what appears to be a media nickname—do you recall a Temple of Bones case?”

“Is this a joke?”

The icy tone surprised McCloud.

“No joke. I’m sure the name is in bad taste. But it’s all I was given.”

“Who’s your lead?”

“We don’t know. Anonymous note left at the station for me—everything all right, detective? You sound bothered.”

“There is no Temple of Bones. It was a disgusting prank, and those wild rumors are a bane on that neighborhood. I suggest you stop your search.”

The line went dead. McCloud was left replaying the bizarre interaction, wondering where he went wrong. Eventually, the operator asked if he needed help to make a call and he hung up without answering.

Very ancient and very dangerous.

McCloud felt the eyes of the department on him, but when he looked up, everyone was absorbed in their monotonous tasks. He could see the struggle in their body language. O’Neil’s death reminded everyone of their own mortality, and the thin line they walked when putting on the badge. He felt equally twisted inside and decided he would head home now. There was a lot to accomplish tomorrow.

XVII

MING HID AMONGST the tree branches just above the first story window. The estate in Altadena was large enough to warrant a small handful of servants to maintain it, but beyond her four targets, Ming had counted only three other individuals coming and going. None appeared to be the help staff.

In the interest of time, she had built a shelter in the nearby woods instead of renting a room closer to town. Sleeping outdoors wasn't the optimal choice, but after captivity in Gehanna, anything was tolerable for the right price. Her canvas pack of money was buried several feet below the soil near a fallen tree trunk.

During her observation of the property and its residents, there had been no discernible routine other than the house was more active at night. There was a garage and delivery entrance in an alcove near the back where she assumed the kitchen was located. Ming liked her chances of gaining entrance there, as well as the first-story window that was slightly below her current post in the tree.

A vehicle had come and gone at least once a day—still though, their arrivals and departures held no patterns she could discern in the limited time she'd been there. Waiting longer to determine if it was a weekly route meant missing her deadline for the bonus cash.

Which also meant it was time for her to get an initial inspection of the interior. Of the two choices, garage or window, Ming decided to let fate chose which was the better form of entry. If the garage opened for a delivery or visit, and she could get in, she wouldn't hesitate to take the opportunity. If not, then she would strike around three in the morning using the window to gain access.

An hour later, metallic clanging gave way to the grumble of an

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engine. The garage opened and a large-grilled vehicle pulled out. It was difficult to see into the automobile to count the passengers or discern more of its make or model due to the glare from the windshield, but Ming doubted all the house's residents were inside. Especially, since the garage was left open as the vehicle pulled away.

How many remained at the house?

Did the open door imply just a short drive and quick return?

There was only one way to find out. As she slipped down the tree trunk and crept across the field to the side of the garage, it was clear what a stranglehold the money had on her. Every step of this job had gone against her normal operations. All to pocket a little extra cash. And this was the moment of truth. There was no turning back now.

Ming hugged the wall as she moved into the large garage. The back wall angled and had two doors. The door on the right looked like the normal entrance to the home, presumably into the kitchen. The door on the left . . .

Ming's hand stiffened under her glove. The scars on her back tingled. Engraved on the door was the serpent and obelisk that John had shown her.

Don't take any more jobs without checking with me.

Ming turned from the doors, looking out the dim garage at the late afternoon sun. It was warm and waiting for her. The long driveway and countryside were empty. It would be so easy to just run away and never look back. Run and not stop until the train arrived in Iowa.

Turning the other direction, back into the dark garage, there was no telling what waited for her. In one moment, the entire job had changed. To what capacity were the Mara involved here?

Who hired you?

I never know.

Again, logic told her to run. But Ming was unable to resist the call. She slipped the leather lock-picking kit from the tight folds of her *shozoku*. Kneeling at key level, every click of the tumblers felt like an unending echo in the silent garage chamber. Sweat soaked into the black *zugin* hood wrapped around her face. Ming exhaled when the lock clicked open. Slipping inside, the kit swapped places with the dagger. It was almost pitch black, but there was enough light to see a narrow hallway.

Keeping her back against the wall, Ming moved slowly. Her eyes adjusted by degrees. The hallway felt sloped downward. After twenty feet, she entered a large circular room. A single torch, that was close to extinguished, gave off the only illumination and warmth to be found. The room seemed to be barren except for a large box covered by a black sheet.

Ming looked back through the hallway to the garage entrance. The rectangle of light was so distant now, the siren calls from the green pastures of the Midwest could not penetrate here.

Ming stepped deeper.

Reaching out, she took hold of the sheet. In one move, she yanked and took a defensive stance as the tarp settled on the ground. Between metal bars, a child looked out at her.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

As the boy stared back silently, Ming again swapped the dagger for the lock tools.

“Hang on. I’m gonna get you out. I’m Ming,” she said, hoping to keep the boy calm and build trust while she worked the lock. “What’s your name?”

“I am no one . . . yet.” His voice was monotone.

“What?”

The lock came free and the door swung open.

“I am no one,” he repeated.

“Never mind. Just come on. Let’s go.”

The boy stared at the open door, bewildered.

“I’m here to free you. What are you waiting for?”

The boy started forward then paused and Ming understood. He was terrified. She could remember all the mind games and traps the Mara and those who worked for them employed. She wondered if it was possible to carry him. He looked frail enough.

“Did Mother Dana send you?”

“Yes, she did,” Ming lied. “And her orders are for you to leave with me now.”

His face was a grimace of despair. “What’s the password?”

“I’ll only tell you if you come with me.”

“They’ll hurt me.”

Ming bit her lip. Maybe grabbing him was not a good idea. She’d only planned on a little reconnaissance when she dropped from the tree. Ten minutes to get a look at the interior layout—not

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engage in a rescue mission. If she got captured, no one would know of the kid's location. They'd both be trapped. Forever.

"Very good," she said, adjusting her tone to praise. "You stayed put when I didn't give you the password. Now, let's see how well you can play the next part of the game. Ready?"

The boy nodded and Ming continued her farce.

"You are *not* to tell Mother Dana about me. If you can keep my visit a secret, I will return next time with the password as your reward to free you. Understand?"

Another nod.

Ming relocked the cage, her hands fumbling, the tight gloves wet with perspiration. Once the tarp was back in place, she moved quick and didn't stop to catch her breath until she was back in the lush safety of her forest lean-to.

There was suddenly a lot more for her to digest than simply assassinating four criminals. These people were involved with The City. How could she leave a child there?

Ming unburied her packs and disassembled the lean-to, removing traces of her stay the best she could. She headed back into town wondering if there was anything she could do to save the boy's life and if it was worth involving John.

PART II

April 12th

MING HAD FOUND a cheap motel on the outskirts of town and purchased a two-night stay. Sleep had been terrible.

She forced down a light breakfast and coffee at a small diner. Upon returning to the room, Ming mapped out her choices the way she'd learned as a guide in The City. Evaluating people, calculating the risks and rewards. Skills she'd further honed under Shin Sho's tutelage—skills and lessons she'd so quickly thrown out the minute a few extra dollars had been waved under her nose.

There was more to it now though. When she saw the serpent, a burning desire to know became more important than money. Or her safety. She was further committed because of the kid. And even though Ming could still bail at this moment—*and* have more than two times her current expenses prepaid by the envelope she'd received—the idea of running made her heart ache.

Running will not change your problems.

She hated that Shin was correct. Although she had no idea how to help. Fear of the Mara's connection to the kidnapping made her indecisive on what was best. Finding someone on the surface to first believe her, and then to stand up to the Mara, would be close to impossible. But she didn't feel she could do this on her own.

McCloud was her first thought. He'd looked desperate enough to believe. If he did, it might mend the rift between them, help him understand.

You can't stop the Mara. Just leave.

No. There would be no more running.



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The front desk clerk allowed Ming to use the phone but kept staring at her as she waited for the operator to connect the call. He munched loudly on an apple and Ming turned away from him as the phone rang.

“Detective McCloud is gone at the moment. Can I take a message?”

“Do you know when he’ll be back? It’s urgent I speak with him.”

“I’m not sure when he’ll return. Can I put you in touch with another detective?”

“No thanks.”

Ming hung up, went back to her room, and took out the envelope from her hire. Amidst the money and photos was the rendezvous address where she was to collect the rest of the money. She hadn’t explored the option of returning and following up with the man who hired her—*we*? Would they know about the child? Surely not or they would have mentioned the possibility.

Everyone is expendable. Won’t affect your pay.

No, he couldn’t have meant a kid.

Contacting him seemed a worthy route, but there was one major problem. The time. If The City was involved, there was no telling how long the boy had left. He could be bound for the underground as early as tomorrow.

The sooner these men leave the planet the better.

Ming’s head pounded. Too many days in the woods. Too little sleep. She needed more rest to discern the most logical path.

Just a few hours, she thought. That would take the edge off and allow her to reassess.

Ming closed her eyes reminding herself that she would be more capable of helping the boy if she got a few hours of sleep rather than rushing ahead now. The more mental alertness she could regain before deciding, the better her chance of rescuing him.

It took only a few minutes before her overworked brain begin shutting itself down to finally rest. The scenarios continued to play out, but slowly, Ming was unable to interpret them any longer. They reduced further to unintelligible images. Then those faded away too.



MCCLOUD FOUND HIMSELF back in the basement of the Grant house. Ming was there, squirming against straps that bound her to the altar. She was naked except for dirty underwear, her breasts covered by the ropes. Torches blazed and dark figures moved around her. Their hissing chants filled the room with a palpable presence. McCloud was powerless. His mind's eye could only watch. His attempts to scream produced no sound.

The robed figures formed a circle around the altar, then they parted, creating an opening. The tall woman in red stepped from the shadows. She passed into the circle and placed her hands on Ming's head and stomach. Bending over, she whispered in Ming's ear, then blew into her mouth.

A dagger slid from the folds of her robe. The woman inserted the point into Ming's navel and her screams more than made up for McCloud's inability to speak. The woman sawed the blade up and down, vivisectioning a circle into Ming's poor body. When the bloody chasm of her abdomen was complete—the sides ragged like the teeth of a giant bear trap—the woman stuck her hands inside and pulled out a glowing ball. She held the illuminated orb, admiring it until the light extinguished and Ming lay motionless on the altar.

Snakes squirmed up from holes in the ground, trying to wrap around McCloud like the obelisk. McCloud split fingernails trying to scale the wall and escape the rising flood of reptiles. The smooth surface of the basement walls prevented him from gaining purchase and McCloud slipped into the slithering mess, sinking down into a slow strangulation that ended in him jarring awake, drenched in sweat.

He sat up and saw O'Neil standing at the foot of his bed. A hole

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in his gut, same as the Madison teen—*his name was Darryl Collins!* Organs leaked out of the cop’s stomach like the snakes in his dream, falling to the ground with rancid-smelling *plops*.

“They’re coming for you, McCloud.”

McCloud screamed and woke again, head pounding, but this time the bedroom was empty.



The lingering memories of Ming’s dismemberment clung to McCloud as he dragged himself through the morning routine. He was over an hour late in rising and too embarrassed to stroll into the office looking the way he felt. Instead, he headed toward the hospital. It would be his cover story for being late and hopefully, would kick some of the depression he felt.

The morning was sunny and cool, and it made him feel sicker. The sun shouldn’t be allowed to rise on days like this. The words ‘Temple of Bones’ rattled in his hungover skull with each step he took toward the hospital, and at this moment, McCloud would not have been surprised if indeed demons were following him, destroying any hope he had. Two steps forward, three steps back. Always. How much longer could he summon strength from the well of his convictions to keep going. Would he make it to June?

You’ll be dead, just like O’Neil.

McCloud stopped and drew a deep breath. The world kept moving around him. Vibrant life bustling to and fro. Citizens oblivious to the wretched underbelly of violence all around them. He closed tired eyes and imagined Janice. He thought about Johnny Doe hugging his leg. Eventually, McCloud settled on the decision that today was not to be the day he faltered. However, he would take a cab to the hospital. The exercise benefits of walking weren’t worth his headache.



“I’ve realized he isn’t sleeping,” Dr. Cushing said. “The minor improvements from his arrival have all receded. He’s actively staying awake. When he does fall asleep from exhaustion, he’s up in a few hours screaming.”

“But he’s not talking still?”

“No.” Dr. Cushing took a folder from his desk and opened it, handing a few papers to McCloud. “The nurse gave him crayons. Sometimes, patients are willing to draw what they feel. What they dream.”

McCloud picked up the top paper. It was a swirling dark mass of black and purple scribbles with two yellow dots. Like eyes in the darkness. A prickling sensation circled the base of McCloud’s skull and he felt hot again.

“That boy is terrified. I can’t find any physical reason why he should not be talking.” Cushing pointed to the scribbles. “Perhaps he fears his captor still has the ability to hurt him, and these eyes are keeping him silent. Conjecture on my part, of course, because there’s more going on in the mind than any of us can possibly know.”

McCloud flipped through the other pictures. One was a small stick figure in a box resembling a coffin. Another was of stick figures holding what looked like weapons.

“Let me talk to him,” McCloud said, putting the papers back on the desk.

“It’s unorthodox. He needs a brain doctor; a psychiatrist.”

“He remembers I got him out of that hell hole. He trusts me enough to speak.”

“I hope so. The board will give him another week, then they need to determine if he’s eligible for foster care or if he must be admitted into a sanitarium.”

“Is that necessary?”

“We are not a long-term childcare facility. Children need homes and people to take care of them. If they can’t have that, they go into state or private-run facilities. I’d rather not see that happen to the boy, but—”

“Just take me to his room.”

Dr. Cushing conceded and brought McCloud to the boy’s room as he was finishing applesauce from a tray on his bed. McCloud placed a chair at a forty-five-degree angle to the bed and sat down.

“Morning. Whatya eating?”

The boy showed the spoonful of sauce to him but didn’t say a word.

“Mmm. Looks good.” McCloud kept his expression soft.

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“Sounds like you’re having a tough time with sleeping. Bad dreams?” McCloud waited. Nothing. “I have bad dreams sometimes. You know what helps? Talking about them with someone you trust. It gets them out of your head, and you feel better.”

The boy swallowed and loaded a final spoonful of sauce.

“What if we start with names. Mine’s John. What’s yours?”

The kid’s eyes strained with burden. As if asking him to contemplate his name was the most painful request ever.

“Tell you what, how about you just pick a name you like and I’ll call you—”

“It comes when I sleep.” His whisper was almost unintelligible, his voice cracking from non-use.

McCloud leaned forward and Cushing stepped inward from the doorway, shocked.

“Who?”

“The shadow. He wants to take me away.”

“It’s just bad dreams. They can’t hurt you.”

“They’re not dreams.” The kid’s eyes searched McCloud’s face. “They want you, too.”

The crushing memory of the beast from his nightmare climbed onto McCloud’s chest, the pressure squeezing his throat. McCloud put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, but it was as much to calm himself as the kid. “No one is going to take us away.”

The boy leaned in, trembling. “They’re here now. Waiting. Please make them leave.”

The hospital room constricted around McCloud, the buzzing that sounded like words returned. “There’s . . . no one here.”

“I think that’s enough,” Dr. Cushing said.

The boy curled in on himself, knocking the tray away. Plastic cracked and sauce splashed across the floor. McCloud put a hand on the child’s back as the nurse scampered forward to clean the mess. By the time she was done, the boy had cried himself to sleep.

“This was a mistake.” Cushing laid the boy back in the bed and took his vitals.

“He’s talking. Isn’t that something?”

“It was something, all right. Confirms what I already said. The boy needs a head doctor.”

“Can you set that up for him? Someone to help pro bono until we figure out what is going on?”

“I’ll see what I can do about finding a psychiatrist.”

“Thanks.”

McCloud checked the time. The visit hadn’t improved his morale. But it did renew his curiosity for ES Holdings. It was early enough for him to make the next train to Hollywood without rushing.



THE SHORT NAP had done Ming well. She'd awakened with a sense of peace over the future, and even a belief that things would be okay between her and McCloud. Killing had never been a business she loved, but after the first assassination, it got easier. She was good at it and convincing herself the targets were evil men made it seem like noble work—a good mission in life.

Over time though, sleep had become more difficult. It wasn't enough to ignore the headlines and police reports the days following a job. Her victims' faces were seared into her brain. Changing her forever. Yet changing very little for her circumstances. Coins of the realm were her only reward for eliminating the criminals of this world.

A fistful of dollars and a lifetime of nightmares.

In the future, when the money ran out, Ming knew she'd pick up the sword again to pay the bills. Unless things finally changed. Unless *she* finally changed and put her skills to better use.

Ming felt confident that if she could save this child, she would be able to crack the mystery of what the Mara were doing on the surface with these children. Even if McCloud left the police, perhaps they could team up and continue a secret crusade. That would be a much better way to honor Arthur and Max's memory.

This time the front desk clerk was eating from a bag of salted peanuts when Ming asked the operator for Precinct 29 again.

"Detective McCloud hasn't been in today. He's out on assignment and his return ETA is unknown. Can I take a message?"

Ming hung up and leaned against the wall, contemplating which was more important: getting the kid immediate help or rescuing him herself, which would take longer.

“Operator, please connect me with the Altadena Police Department.”

Ming didn’t hesitate when the non-emergency dispatch answered.

“There is a young boy, maybe eight-years-old being held hostage on the estate at 5460 E. Fallow St. Please send help.”

“With whom am I speaking?”

“My name is Mary. Please send help right away. I can tell you exactly where the boy is—”

“How do you know about this kidnapping, Mary?”

“I can’t tell you. I’m in danger myself. But it’s the truth; please you have to save him now. In the garage, next to the delivery bay, there will be two doors. One is locked and has a snake painted on it—”

“A snake?”

“Yes, write all this down. I don’t have much time. They’re going to kill him.”

Ming heard rustling on the other end of the line, then: “Go on.”

“There are two doors inside the garage. Go through the one with the snake and obelisk. The child is in a cage at the end of a hallway. Can you do that?”

“Yes. But, Mary, we need you to come into the station—”

“Hurry.” Ming hung up the phone and looked at the desk clerk. He cracked another peanut shell, chewing loudly, watching her. The man made no vocal objection. There was just a bit of surprise on his eyebrows.

Ming walked over, thinking of negotiations in The City.

“If anyone asks, you never saw me.” She placed a dollar on the desk.

“Whatever you say, *Mary*.” The man collected the dollar, smiling, bits of peanut stuck between his grimy teeth.

Ming collected her supplies and headed back to the estate for the fireworks.



By the time Ming arrived back at the estate, it was late afternoon and the scene had changed drastically from yesterday. It took a lot of maneuvering to find a new hiding place, closer to the garage but

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still not detectable to the throng of people who were now gathered there. With new vehicles and a mini-makeshift crane, the delivery bay looked more like a construction site.

An oversized flat-bed truck carrying a large rectangular stone was parked in front of the open garage. The crane-tower had been erected close by and straps from the crane were wrapped around the stone. Ming watched as a man cranked the pulley system. Six others steadied the swaying motion as the stone lifted from the truck into the air. A man dressed in a black cossak stood to the side. He was one of her targets and appeared to be overseeing the entire production. Ming counted ten men in all, including one on top of the crane rotating its direction and assisting in bringing the stone to rest on large rollers.

What the hell is that thing?

From behind the large bush hedge Ming was hiding inside, she heard a motor approaching. Ming couldn't turn enough within the hedge to see the vehicle, but she did see all the men pause from the work. She bit her lip, straining to see through the leaves, letting out a breath of relief when a police-marked automobile pulled into view.

Ming had never been so happy to see law enforcement.

Then her heart sunk. Only one police car? There were ten men. Hopefully at least two officers were—

A single cop stepped from the car, calling to the group of men, who were moving away from the stone they had just set on rollers. Ming pushed against the sharp branches but couldn't hear what was being said. The men seemed to have no apprehension approaching the cop, forming a semi-circle around him and the car. For a split second, Ming feared they'd overpower the cop; lock him up in a cage, too.

Then, they all split up in separate directions. A chunk headed into the woods, east and west, fanning out. A few took paths around the perimeter of the house.

"What the . . . Oh, shit," Ming whispered, realizing the men were searching the premises *with* the officer.

Ming drew her dagger as one of the men approached her hiding spot. The adrenaline injected a plan into her mind, and she had less than three seconds to either accept it or formulate a new one before being discovered.

Smash and grab, she thought. *Everyone had left the garage wide open in order to search the grounds. With any luck, the kid would be light enough to carry.*

Footsteps padded closer. She tensed.

Waiting until the last possible moment, Ming sprang, using the knife and her hand to muffle and eliminate extraneous sound as she yanked the bleeding body into the hedge with her. Tucking the now-dead man behind the row, she crawled out and evaluated the situation for the length of a single breath, then hustled behind the crane. She moved to the stone—which turned out to be a hollow oblong box—looked again, and finally leapt into the empty garage.

Ming took out the picking tools and opened the snake-painted door. *Smash and grab*, she thought as she raced down the hall, knowing her time to pull the kid from the house unnoticed was running low.

Ming entered the room of flickering torch light and skidded to a halt. Two robed figures stood above the cage with their backs to Ming. They were talking quietly at the boy.

Too late to change plans now!

One figure must have heard her footsteps because he was turning from the cage. Ming pounced and drove the knife into his chest, his scream piercing her ears as they fell to the floor together. She pushed off his head, springing to her feet. As she did so, the knife pulled from the man's heart, releasing a fountain arc of hot blood. Ming stood and the second man swung a fist. She was able to duck and delivered an upper cut into the man's crotch. He doubled over and Ming smashed the knife into his face. The blade deflected off bone and he fell to the ground in a quivering heap.

The cage door was open. The boy sat at the edge, eyes wide and stunned. Ming grabbed the frail child in her arms and flung him over her shoulder. Leaving the whimpering men to bleed out, Ming fled back down the hallway. The sunlight up ahead called to her.

She and the child broke into the garage, fresh hope meeting them—followed by three men stepping from the outside to block the exit. Again, Ming skidded to a halt, this time escape lay less than five feet from her.

"Distress!" one of the men shouted.

Ming stood, panting and powerless as the rest of the group

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hustled back from their search—including the police officer—filling in the gaps, trapping her inside the garage.

“Let’s not do anything foolish,” the police officer said, drawing his gun.

Catching her breath, Ming gently put the boy down. The kid maintained just enough strength to sit upright and stoic on the ground beside her feet. She stepped forward, drawing the knife from her belt.

“Who sent you?” The man in the black cossak moved in front of the cop.

If the cop was in on it, there was no more hope. Ming contemplated her choices, considering which was more painful: charging the line and letting the bullets kill her or slicing open her belly and bleeding out. Her hands or theirs? Either way, the resulting trauma on the child would be immense. She’d failed, and he didn’t have a chance now.

Do I deserve the freedom of death, if the kid couldn’t have freedom in life?

The knife dropped to her feet and Ming sat down next to the stoic boy.

IV

THE TRAIN RIDE had been a surreal experience. McCloud's physical body fought against the lethargy and gruesome thoughts that entered his mind at random. His muscles ached as if he was coming down with a flu and after the hospital visit, he could no longer pretend.

O'Neil was correct. Whatever evil was haunting the boy, it had infected McCloud, too.

When Harris learned McCloud was going through with the trip, he'd arranged for a department liaison to meet him at the train station. He was set up with transportation and a map of the city. He arrived at ES Holdings, a skinny three-story brownstone, the one residence, in what otherwise appeared to be an industrial zone of Hollywood, about forty minutes later.

"Wait for me," McCloud told the cabbie, tipping him and then crossing the street.

The original plan had been a "courtesy notice" approach. He was investigating an arson and here to let them know their property in Grant had been destroyed; ask if they were aware. Nothing accusatory. The farce would be a more difficult act now, but still his best option.

About ten feet from the ES Holdings' residence was a large square building. At first glance, it appeared like any other warehouse, but something was strange. The building had no doors or windows, just a few square cut-outs in its masonry, maybe a foot in perimeter, spaced at what he thought were arbitrary locations. An enclosed cement corridor, about ten feet from the ground, connected the two buildings.

McCloud grew more uneasy as he approached the brownstone. There were two buzzers but no names. McCloud pressed the

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bottom button, then stepped back, surveying the area. Construction supplies. Garment factory. Train overpass. He buzzed the top button. His study moved from the brownstone to the strange building connected.

Still no answer, so he started toward the connected building. The square structure was three-stories high, and as McCloud made his way around, he noted the walls were solid except for a missing—or strategically removed—stone in the masonry here and there. Other than that, there were no windows or doors. It took him several minutes to walk the perimeter returning to the front where the cabbie patiently waited.

McCloud held up his finger.

“One more chance,” he whispered to himself.

Taking a deep breath, he tried the handle of the residence. It depressed with ease and the click echoed through the chambers of his heart. He was transported to Charlie Willis’s Apt—when he had walked in on Chris Barnes. That information had proved invaluable, even if the case went unsolved. It was information that McCloud wouldn’t have accessed if he hadn’t illegally entered that apartment.

On that precedence, he pushed the door open. Sparing one last glance back to the cabbie, McCloud peeked his head in first. A square landing led directly to a flight of stairs and a door at the top. Then the stairs flipped and continued upward to the opposite side of the building. McCloud pulled his revolver and started up; each time a step groaned he paused, bracing for the worse.

When he reached the top landing, he looked up the next flight of stairs, then to the door beside him. He went through the slow preparation for opening the door again, and when he finally pushed, it was just as easy as the exterior door. This one swung open to a hallway. It was cold and perception distorted as McCloud tried to see the distance. It stretched like the Madison alley in his dreams.

At the opposite end of the hallway, a rectangle of light split the darkness. Creaking hinges echoed down the corridor as a door opened.

“I’m with the police—”

The feminine figure from his nightmares stood in the doorway. The shadow of a beast sat beside the folds of her red robe. A dark face and eyes flashed in front of McCloud and a hot

roar like a panther's rocked his senses. The sudden blast shocked McCloud backward and he tumbled down the stairs. His bones snapped as he hit the ground.

The wooden landing and exit were gone though and McCloud was in a dim room. Large stone boxes surrounded him. No, not boxes, coffins. A dozen of them. McCloud used one of the stone walls to pull himself from the ground. As he leaned over to peek in, shadowy hands rose from the black chasm of the coffin, grabbing McCloud and dragging him inside, face-first.

"Sir?"

McCloud rolled, startled, hands shielding himself from those of the young cabbie. His eyes darted, processing his surroundings. Eventually, McCloud realized he was on the ground. Outside.

"Are you okay?" The man was hunched over him offering a hand.

"What happened?" McCloud asked as he took the assistance and stood.

"You just fell. Never seen nothing like it."

"Did anyone follow me out of the building?" McCloud said, still breathing heavy.

"Follow ya out? Sir, you walked around the place, then fell over at the front door. When I almost reached ya, you started screaming."

McCloud looked at the closed door to the residence, then down at his body. His revolver was holstered. There were no snapped bones. What the hell was wrong with him?

"Sorry," McCloud mumbled. "I have fainting spells," he lied.

"Can I take you to a doctor?"

The boy needs a psychiatrist.

"No. I'm okay now." But McCloud knew he was in real trouble. Doctors couldn't help him. The station couldn't help him. The church hadn't helped O'Neil. "Is there an inn I can find lodging at for the night. Reasonable rates and access to a phone?"

"Sure. Pinewood Motel."

The whole process of travel and check in dragged. When he finally got access to the phone, he left a message with Tina that he'd missed his return train and gave her the arrival details of the one he planned on tomorrow. When she asked if he wanted to speak with Harris, he said no.

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Once he was in the tiny motel bed, McCloud worried about sleep.

They come when I sleep. To take me away and get inside. Where? he thought. *Where do they want to take us?*

V

“‘END OF THE LINE.” Marley held up a hand to Rockford’s assistant. “I’ll take him from here.”

Things had gone downhill so fast for the real estate magnate since their last conversation, Marley had originally wondered if the frantic phone call was a ruse to test his ability to find the ritual text. However, one look at the man had assured Marley this was no trick.

Did you find the text? it was the first thing Rockford asked when Marley had answered the phone.

I have the most complete text possible. But our vessel is . . . still volatile.

I don’t care. It’s now or never.

The Order had access to a plethora of texts—even if some were damaged—that had been handed down over the ages. Complete in form or not, the bulk of the ancient ritual texts were stored in the various temples and rooms around the world. Except for one. The Rites of Eternal Sleep—the final command they had awaited since the completion of Marley’s temple and the three others around the country.

As for the vessel, the one they procured was only a few days old and nowhere near ready to receive Rockford. On average, it took a month to whittle away the link between a soul and its physical body. Proper preparation ensured that at the moment of the ritual, the bond would sever easily, and a new entity could be inserted before the physical body died.

Scarpino protested, but Marley demanded they move forward.

Rockford’s assistant Wilson—a large hulking man—had honored his boss’s wish to be brought, but now that they were in the corridor of the temple, he would not stand down. Marley could

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understand the man's hesitation. The energy of the structure would unsettle any untrained human. He found it amusing the man was a hundred feet from one of the greatest achievements in modern history with no clue about its power or comprehension of the agreement Rockford had made.

"It's . . . okay, Wilson." Rockford's voice was tissue-paper thin, and his chest barely moved beneath the blanket that covered him in the wheelchair.

"You need a doctor, sir. A real hospital. Let me take you."

"I need a miracle. Now, let me go." Each word was followed by breathy, pregnant pauses to regain his strength.

Wilson stared at Marley, finally peeling his hands from the wheelchair grips one at a time.

"He's right," Marley said. "This is his only hope."

"You've been good to me, Wilson. If anything happens . . . you will be taken care of."

Wilson eventually let two sandmen escort him back outside, and Marley wheeled the frail mogul down the hallway, stopping at the outer door.

"Are you ready to see the fruits of our work together?"

The old man's head bobbed.

The door opened to a stone bridge. Marley pushed the wheelchair through, then closed the door. Icy air hung in the empty space on either side of the bridge. Rockford looked over the edge, tracing the sloping wall of the pyramid until it was swallowed in darkness. The walkway connected to the middle of the pyramid. From there the pyramid walls ascended almost three stories. They descended almost an equal length below ground level.

"My God . . ." Rockford whispered.

"God does not dwell here," Marley said.

The surrounding walls encased the pyramid from the outside. Four long shafts, a foot wide and high, connected near the top of the pyramid.

"Ventilation?" Rockford asked.

"Transmission. But they're not your concern," Marley said, pushing him toward the entrance. "Are you ready for your new life?"

"Yes."

"When it's over, we'll discuss the evolving terms of our arrangement."

“Anything.”

Marley smiled, though he doubted the man would ever step foot outside the pyramid again. That was okay. Marley was going to enjoy himself tonight.



Marley stood over the two bodies laid out on granite altars. Naked except for underwear, their pale bodies were a stark contrast to the black polished surface of the stone, and each other. Rockford's body, wrinkled and sagging, spotted here and there with dark splotches of age. The host vessel's skin was firmer and youthful. Under normal circumstances, captivity under the watchful eyes of the sandmen atrophied the muscles, will, and brain. If the ritual worked, it was easy to rebuild the physical. Flesh was always weak. But a new spark could master it.

Above the bodies hung a dark mirror. Its glass concave and eager. Around them, the circumambulation began, and a hum charged the air. Soft chanting joined the beat of their processional march.

Marley's gaze settled on the old man's throat and he joined in the chant, allowing himself to be swayed by the energy. Unfocusing his eyes, each wrinkle and liver spot became a blur on Rockford's near-dead body. Voices increased in volume. The room thick with incense. Elsa, topless, a silver chalice centered beneath her breasts, appeared beside Marley.

Marley placed his right palm on Rockford's clammy forehead to hold him steady. With his left hand, Marley dragged the knife across the old man's flabby throat waddle. Rockford's eyes went wide and his mouth opened, a bubbling gurgle escaping. Marley let go of the knife and placed his second hand on Rockford's chest. Pushing down on his head and chest restrained Rockford's tremors, and, at the same time, opened the wound wider.

The high priestess slipped the chalice beneath and collected the hot blood spilling from the severed flesh. The mirror above them glowed with red light. As the final death rattles slipped from Rockford's body, Marley shook his limp neck to squeeze out the last few drops of blood.

Elsa stood tall, the chalice outstretched before her. She moved to the young man—the vessel—commanding the energy downward. The glowing mirror above dulled and the vessel's eyes shot open.

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“Drink,” she commanded.

The high priestess cradled the young man’s head, but when she attempted to open the vessel’s mouth, the young man let loose a horrifying scream. Marley cringed at the pitch. The shriek ended only to be picked up again and again in a series of unending cries. Elsa fought to pour the blood down the vessel’s throat, and Marley took a similar position as he had with Rockford to help restrain, though any blood that managed to get into the boy’s mouth was sprayed out as another scream surged forth.

They let him carry on for another minute. When it was clear the ritual was unsalvageable, Marley slit the young man’s throat.



Little was said as they cleansed the temple. After it was done, Marley looked from the center altars to the twelve sarcophagi surrounding them. Such a hauntingly perfect configuration. He wondered when the time would come, and he knew Scarpino had the same thought. Elsa had left earlier to wash the blood from her body properly. It was not safe to have such powerful fluids on something as porous as one’s skin.

Marley led Scarpino from the chambers, locking the doors behind them.

“Are you pleased?” Scarpino asked as they moved through the tunnel to the lower floor of home.

“I am.”

“You knew this wouldn’t work—couldn’t work. The vessel was too rushed—”

“We already discussed this. It was now or never; practice . . .” Marley stopped before opening the outer door. “Are you bothered by his death?”

“No.”

“Did you see the look on Elsa’s face once the blood began to flow? Pure rapture despite the so-called ‘failure’. We’ve lost our edge these last few months. Tonight was a success in that regard. You follow her enthusiasm, and all officers will follow suit.”

“Even if I maintain her level of fervor, we *need* to receive the final instructions.”

“It’s coming. Have faith in the Mara’s wisdom.”

“I’m not so sure. Did you hear the sentry’s report from earlier?”

“No. I was preparing, as you should have been. Perhaps your distractedness is why we failed—”

“A detective was here.”

“What do you mean here?”

“I mean he walked up to the door and rang the bell. We lost the Grant nursery. It’s been six months since the final temple was completed, and we still don’t have the final instructions.”

“Enough. If you knew about the detective, you should have alerted me.”

“Graham is watching him.”

“Have him contact our PD liaisons. I want to know everything about this intruder.”

“Very well.” There were further arguments in Scarpino’s face, but they both bade each other farewell and retired to their respective rooms in the living quarters of the residence.

VI

MIGUEL WAITED FOR the correct pattern of raps, then opened the door to Thomas. He was hours late and looking at his face told Miguel the worst had happened.

Thomas hung his coat with a sigh. “The train came and went. No sign of Damian anywhere.”

Miguel closed his eyes and recited a silent prayer. As soon as Damian’s letter arrived, Miguel knew it was unlikely he would see his friend again. Even though they’d gotten eyes on the detective, taking over where Wells left off, Miguel retained a sliver of hope Wells would have still arrived as planned.

“We have to leave, too. Just in case the shop’s location has been compromised.”

“Not yet,” Miguel said. “Forrester arrives in two days—”

“We’ll leave him a message.”

“If you truly believe The Order is on their way here now, then our warning will never reach him in time while he’s travelling. He’d walk into a trap.”

“What do you propose?”

“McCloud received Damian’s final message. He showed up at their temple today. He did not look well.”

“We can’t help him.”

“Perhaps we can,” Miguel said. “I know where he’s staying and I can leave him another clue. Test his resolve.”

“With what?”

“Send him to Lancaster. See what he does. Two days, that’s all I ask. If contact is possible, great. If not, we’ll retreat.”

“Let’s pack and be ready, just in case we need to flee sooner.”

“Agreed,” Miguel said. “We’ll pack and then I will pay McCloud a visit.”

VII

April 13th

“ANOTHER NURSERY WAS targeted, my lord. The plan was thwarted, however, this marks two attacks in less than two weeks. Why now after years of silence?”

“Because they know their time is short.” Valbas looked at the wooden chest at his feet. “Did you call for the chiefs?”

“Yes, and Amiri returned from the surface bearing good news.”
“Coordinates?”

“Not yet. But the would-be assassin in Altadena was caught,” the page said. “The Engineer that got away from the Grant arson was also captured. He had infiltrated a Catholic church more than a decade ago under the name Damian Wells. From what we can tell, it was he and three other Engineers that struck the Grant nursery. Most Engineers make pathetic soldiers. All but Wells were killed. He must have burned them all and fled, calling the police to save the child. I suppose rather than risk another botched attempt, he hired an assassin for Altadena. A former slave. Perhaps he thought a mercenary was his best bet.”

“A former slave? They are desperate.”

“It gets better,” the page said. “Young Ming received the hit.”

“Ming?” Valbas chuckled. “Oh, this is interesting. Did she survive?”

“Yes. Everything has been arranged through Amiri. Once he leaves again, he will contact Master Marley in Hollywood. Ming will be brought to his temple. The Engineer is in the fires of Gehanna. He will not give us the lodge coordinates, but at least he can suffer.”

“Instruct Amiri to give her a chance to join his network.”

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“Ming? The slave? My lord, Osoto has shown us what can happen when a slave knows too much.”

“She went from a simple guide to an assassin,” Valbas said. “Who knows how far she can go next. Make the offer.”

The page nodded and four knocks sounded in the chamber. Valbas gestured to the door.

The page opened to observe the visitors, then turned back. “Lord Valbas, the four chiefs seek admission.”

“Let them enter.”

The humans, clothed in the suits of businessmen from the surface, entered and bowed. They were the only four allowed to gaze upon the Mara’s home and *not* be slaves. The only four who displayed the Serpent-Obelisk seal upon their flesh.

Amiri carried a box with him. He gave it to the page who in turn presented it to Valbas. The Mara opened the lid to a stack of papers and photographs. On top, like a cherry on a sundae, was Osoto’s severed hand. The tattoo of a slave burned into its palm. Beside the appendage, was a bloody police badge.

“My lord, although it is unclear where he received his information, all links between Osoto and us are gone. We have assumed control of the church from an Engineer—an unexpected bonus. Of the two officers from the Grant arson, only one remains. He is not well.” Amiri smiled. “However, he did locate the Hollywood temple. Nothing came of it. And both the temple and my own sandmen have eyes on him.”

“Has he had contact with the Engineers like his colleague had?”

“We’re unsure at this time.”

“Kill him,” Valbas said. “It’s not worth waiting to see if he leads us to a lodge.”

“Very well.” Amiri bowed and stepped back.

“It is clear they cannot stop us.” Valbas stood and met his human chiefs. “Now begins the long night. The moment we’ve prepared for. Over the coming decades, you four will be our mouthpiece. Our hands. You will be on your own, but you will never be alone.”

Valbas stared deep into the first chief’s eyes, then moved to the second.

“You will deliver the Rites. The vessels are expected to be laid to sleep on the twenty-first of April per the Gregorian calendar.”

He stepped to the third chief. "Remember your obligations. And be sure that every member, in every temple, from sandmen to the high priests and priestesses, remembers theirs."

"Yes, Lord Valbas."

Valbas removed the scrolls from the wooden chest. The scribes had done magnificent work. He handed one to the fourth chief. "You will travel to the north temple." He moved back down the line, distributing all the rest. "You to the south. To the east. And you, Amiri, to our west temple just above in Hollywood. Any questions?"

"No, my Lord."

Valbas took his seat. "When shall we meet again?"

"When the dreamers and the dream become one," they replied together.

"And where will we meet?"

"Under a Black Sun."

"Until then." Valbas saluted the four.

They responded in like and departed.

Once they left, Valbas's page took the autopsy box and burned it.

Valbas called for his guards. Now that the surface was being prepared. It was time to evacuate The City.



The knocks on the door were firm and loud. It was the same knock Max used when he wanted access to a suspect.

"Max . . ." Valbas's voice floated through the airhole cut near the top of the door. "I have one last parting gift."

Max walked like a death row inmate. He still possessed the key which Valbas had given him but had never considered using it after he relocked the door when Valbas last left. Now, he opened the cell door, confident whatever trickery was in the works would reveal itself today.

Max stepped back as it swung open and Valbas entered, towering over him.

"The die has been cast." Valbas looked him up and down. "Did you not want your old clothes?"

Max walked past the pile and sat on the cot. "What's the point?"

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“Perhaps these will change your mind”

Reaching into the robe, Valbas produced a handful of bullets and tossed them to the ground. They scattered like marbles across the cell floor, one rolling against Max’s dirty bare foot. He saw it, felt it, but the shock was too much.

“Don’t waste time, Max. I’m rooting for you.”

Without a further word, Valbas turned and left the cell. Max picked up a bullet, rolling it between his fingers. It was real.

It’s a trap!

Leaping from the cot, Max scrambled to the door and relocked it. He crawled on hands and knees locating all the ammunition he could find. The final count when he sat back down on the cot was twelve. Plenty more than when he walked into Gehanna.

I’m rooting for you.

Valbas wanted him back on the surface. The game between them had indeed changed. Max loaded the chamber of his revolver and laid back down to contemplate.

VIII

“NOT AGAIN . . .” McCloud muttered, staring at the envelope on the motel floor.

At some point during the night at Pinewood Motel, he had managed to fall asleep. He woke furious that it only seemed to last a few minutes. After dressing, he sulked to the door to catch his train home, and the last vestiges of his strength sunk as low as the envelope that had been shoved under the crack.

McCloud slipped on gloves before opening the envelope. This confirmed without a doubt he was being followed. Only Tina and Harris would know he was at Pinewood Motel.

Harris can't be trusted—

Stop it, he chastised himself.

He opened the envelope and removed the contents, consisting of a newspaper clipping from *Hollywood Local News*, Sept. 11, 1911, and a square of paper.

“Ancient Burial Ground or Modern Massacre?”

A horrifying discovery was made last week after an allegation of criminal activity in a Los Angeles home off Lancaster. Unknown individuals were reported to be operating an opium and narcotic den within the home—at this time, the public records were sealed as to the owner of the residence.

—ES Holdings? McCloud wondered. Who knew how many properties they owned in the area—

When the premises were searched, a ‘mass grave of old bones’, according to the lead investigator, was discovered. Bones from

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at least ten different humans were found, with some displaying signs of trauma that indicated foul play.

The big question on everyone's mind is 'ancient burial ground or modern-day massacre'. Well, this reporter has gotten inside, and I can tell you that this is not ancient history. The police have been silent on this truth for almost a week. It's shameful and dangerous to not share the full story and all information with the public. For the safety of our families, we deserve to know what's going on in the Lancaster mass grave. If you feel as strongly as I do, please contact Darby Hock at the Hollywood Local and let's demand action from our police. Together we will sign a petition demanding police come forward to address the true extent of the atrocities committed and bring these veiled individuals to justice for their crimes.

The square of paper had the following handwritten:

*Darby Hock
895 W. Shadowbrook
Hollywood, CA*

McCloud read it over and over. Was this the Temple of Bones? The one that Detective Whitney adamantly declared was a sick prank?

Did McCloud's precinct need to start digging around Grant Street, looking for a mass grave?

I highly doubt Californians are running around committing blood sacrifices.

McCloud thought about a highball of whiskey. Then he heard that familiar voice. It was the same voice that reminded him how effective it could be to work alone . . .

And how dangerous it could be too.

There were two paths McCloud could see before him. One meant involving Lieutenant Harris fully with everything McCloud had received and accepting an investigative team to help. There'd be surveillance of his apartment in case the "messenger" returned a third time. Teams to help with interviews at Our Lady of Lourdes, Darby Hock, the author of this 'Ancient Burial Ground' article, and official trips to precinct 13 to discuss the Temple of Bones case.

Trips that Whitney could not shut down just by hanging up a telephone. And an official hunt for the autopsy box of Osoto.

The other path was keeping it all to himself. Even if the killer was the one sending McCloud these clues. He had probably been the anonymous caller reporting the arson, too.

It's a Jack-the-Ripper-esque communication.

Against all logic, secrecy greatly appealed to him, and McCloud wasn't sure why he wanted to win this one alone. He pocketed the envelope. Looks like he wasn't going home after all.

IX

THE NOISE WAS deafening the first hours following the jail break. Or maybe it wasn't a break at all. The cells had been built with two-way locks. No prison would create that feature. Unless it was always planned to end this way.

Perhaps Max was not special, and all slaves had been visited and granted early freedom. Regardless of the cause, the inmates were loose, like horrors released from Pandora's box.

After being locked away for years in silence except for his own mental voice and the few sessions with Valbas, hearing others was a shock to Max's system. It began with just a few cheers of freedom, trickling down the long corridor. Soon, it grew into a mass of slaves, running up and down, screaming, some in ecstasy, some in pain. Fights and stabbings. Hasty allegiances. Max could hear it all through the airhole in the door. When the commotion eventual dwindled, Max opened his eyes, guessing the whole exodus lasted about four hours.

He slowly walked to the small cut-out in the cell door. It was barely more than a peephole, but it at least let somewhat fresher air into the dank cell. Now though, it didn't smell better outside. Placing his nose to the hole, perspiration and blood, vomit and excrement pushed back. Max cringed. It was the odor of the torture rooms.

Bang!

The wooden door rattled, and Max recoiled from the frame.

"I know you're in there." The deep voice from behind the door conjured up images of a behemoth in an executioner's mask.

Max scooted back to the cot and grabbed the revolver.

"Come out and play."

He knows I have the key, Max thought, keeping quiet. Guess everyone did receive them.

“Be that way,” the voice mocked. “For now . . . Can’t stay inside forever though.”

Max thought he heard the man’s footsteps fade away, but he didn’t want to venture outside just yet. His thoughts still echoed with the agonizing screams of the riot’s victims.

Problem was, he didn’t want to remain caged either.

Max’s grip on the gun’s handle tightened, his entire arm trembling with a sick wave of power and fear. He could leave. Walk out and blast the son of a bitch in the face. Life had been a living hell for longer than he could remember, and all he had to do was get to the surface and he would be free—

The Mara will rule again.

Was Valbas to be believed?

Did it matter?

Only a small part of Max wanted to fight—that dark seed wanted to rip Valbas and everyone in his path to shreds. The rest of Max was tired though. There could be countless fights to escape the temple and make his way back home.

You have no home.

That was true. His apartment would be gone. After all these years, freedom suddenly didn’t seem worth the trouble. If he wanted help from Harris or the precinct, he’d have a lot of explaining to do.

Very little short of decapitation will end it for you.

A bullet through the brain should do the trick.

Max’s hand moved without further thought, placing the cold steel under his chin. The barrel penetrated his facial scruff and made his skin shiver. Ever so gently, he rested his index finger against the trigger.

One squeeze and this is all over.

He cringed at the thought of lead tearing through his brain. Somehow, after all he’d seen and endured, in this moment, Max still viewed death as a grim tyrant rather than a timely messenger. He was exhausted from fighting, but war was all he knew. War was better than the uncertainty of death. Even though war carried the very promise of death in it.

In the end you’ll help us spread the darkness.

Max applied pressure to the trigger, wondering if his suicide would be spreading darkness or ending it from blossoming from

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him on the surface. How hard could he squeeze before the gun's hammer fell?

Your little friend will help, too.

The gun pulled from his chin and Max realized his face was wet. A single trail of tears ran from his right eye and soaked into the stubble near his Adam's apple. Max released the gun and put on his socks and shoes. Then he smoothed out the fabric of his trench coat.

X

THE MORNING HAD turned to afternoon by the time McCloud knocked on the faded door to Darby's house.

He waited.

Slight movement at the curtain.

McCloud knocked again.

"Not interested in what you're selling." A male voice came from behind the door. "Go away."

"I'm not that kind of visitor, Mr. Hock. My name is John McCloud. I'm a detective with the San Fran Police Department, I'd like to discuss one of your articles."

Two distinct clicks, deadbolts being withdrawn. The door opened slightly, still held by a thick chain. A suspicious eye filled the crack—a gray bushy brow above and sagging skin below. "Let's see your badge."

McCloud held up the brass, experiencing the full weight of how disconnected he felt from the responsibility and duty of his office.

He was a lone wolf now.

"I write pulp fiction books. Haven't reported for a paper in over two years."

McCloud slid the newspaper clipping in front of the badge. The man frowned and went to close the door, but McCloud wedged the tip of his shoe between the frame to prevent it from shutting.

"You know something about who's responsible for this mass grave. All I want is a few minutes of your time to compare notes."

"No notes to compare. I was wrong about all that. Ain't no temple of bones. Sick prank by some teenagers. I retracted the article the next day. Now, if you don't mind—"

"I do mind," McCloud said, reading the man's eyes. "I'm tired of dead ends. Tell me what's going on. Now."

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The man's face contorted into a rage. "Get out of here before I call the real police."

"Do it."

The man drove his own foot into McCloud's and the door slammed shut. The deadbolts returned and all was silent except for the rage pulsing inside McCloud.

"I just want to talk!"

McCloud clenched a fist and almost began pounding on the door. There was no way he could return to San Fran with his tail between his legs. No way he could endure another night of sleep paralysis, nightmares, and bent reality. Caged children.

They try to get inside me when I sleep.

McCloud traced around to the back of the house and hopped into the small sliver of backyard. There were a couple stone steps to the porch. The backdoor held a glass windowpane crossed with decorative wood. The man would have more deadbolts, but McCloud didn't care. His head was a barrage of unsure manias. Adrenaline and raging frustration mounted. McCloud took off his suit jacket, wrapping it around his left hand and arm.

Johnny Doe's scared voice rang out in his head: *Don't let them inside.* McCloud placed his other hand on the butt of the revolver in the shoulder holster.

They're a cult that summons demons, O'Neil warned.

Then McCloud would have to treat them as such.

The ensuing actions felt like being controlled from outside his body. Glass shattered easily, and McCloud continued punching until there was enough space to reach through. Pain flared in his hands. It wasn't debilitating though; it was simply there. He shook off the coat and slid his hand up the interior surface grappling to find the deadbolts.

"What the fuck!" Hock roared from inside his home.

The voice was followed by heavy footsteps. McCloud clicked the final lock just in time, and he fell inward with the door. An overweight form came at him, and McCloud removed the pistol from his shoulder holster, cracking Hock with the butt. They tumbled to the ground together. McCloud kned the man in the crotch until the resistance left and Hock was gagging on his own stringy vomit.

He rolled off the former journalist so Hock could turn,

expelling nausea and pain in the form of yellow spit, dry heaves, and moans.

Kicking the shattered door shut, McCloud turned and pointed the revolver at Darby Hock. "You either start talking now or you'll never say another word again."



Once Hock regained some of his senses, McCloud propped him up in a small study away from the back door. The room was a labyrinth of stacked newspapers, books, and unlabeled boxes. Newspaper clippings lined the walls. Random notes on a cork board. A lifetime of history seemed to be hoarded into the small room.

McCloud's forearm had been cut in several places when breaking in, but the bleeding had stopped, and the adrenaline coursing through his veins kept the pain from his awareness.

"What is this stuff?"

"I ain't breaking no promises. I can educate myself. Just no one else."

"I don't know what the hell that means." The volume and violence in McCloud's voice shocked him. It also felt good. "I'm a detective working a case connected to the article you wrote, and everyone keeps dodging me—"

"Real Detectives don't break down doors and assault people."

"Well, this one does." McCloud bent close to the man's face; the revolver trained on his torso. "Who you making promises with, Hock?"

The initial fear morphed the longer Darby looked past the gun and studied McCloud. His saggy features came alive with a giddiness. "You really don't know who, do you?"

McCloud felt the violent urge pulse like a heartbeat within him. He pulled back and walked toward a corkboard with a flow chart of notes to cool off. At the top was a name.

"The Order of Eternal Sleep?" he read, then looked back at Hock. "Who are they?"

"You're just some dumb shit detective with no idea what you've stumbled into."

Crime scene after crime scene projected onto the screen of McCloud's mind. He could see himself squeezing the trigger and

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watching Hock's smug brains explode. It would be so easy to turn this piece of garbage into another mangled stain of human meat. Another rotting carcass for some cop to jot down notes about. His grip tightened on the gun.

"You're right. I have no idea what's going on." McCloud cocked the revolver. "Time to let me in on the secret."

"I can't. They'll kill me."

"If you don't, I'll kill you." McCloud pushed the gun into Hock's mouth, cracking teeth. The man's lips trembled around the steel. McCloud smiled, feeling a powerful rush. "This Order, they the ones who carve up little kids? Summon demons? Kill cops?"

"I don't study them anymore. I write pulp and smut now." His teeth chattered around the barrel. "Pays the bills. I keep my writing dirty and my nose clean."

McCloud pulled the gun back, fearful he would accidentally blow the man's head off. He stood again, hoping to shake the buzzing sound, leaving the hefty man on the floor but keeping him in his periphery as he moved to a board of notes on a map of California's counties. There was also a map of the U.S.

"What's at these locations?" He looked at the legend. "Nurseries? Temples?"

"You're an idiot." Hock wheezed a laugh. "Get out of here before you get us both killed."

"Just tell me what's going on and I'll leave." McCloud covered the man with the revolver again.

"There is nothing you can do to me that will be as bad as what they will do."

"Bullshit." The rage extended his arm, mashing the revolver back into Hock's face.

To his surprise, this time, Darby Hock opened his mouth and placed his lips around the metal barrel willingly.

McCloud almost blacked out from the rise in blood pressure. It was a surprise to him when he yanked the gun from Hock's fat wet lips instead of pulling the trigger. Before the man could speak again, McCloud, clubbed him on the head with the handle, and Hock slumped into unconsciousness.

McCloud found a strong potato sack in the kitchen and began dumping papers into it. After making sure the man was still breathing, McCloud left out the front door.

XI

“HAVE YOU SEEN the dawn of a Black Sun?”

Marley’s spine stiffened. He lowered the newspaper and studied the tall man standing over his small table at the back corner of *Roberto’s* social club. A weathered duster covered his body, but the clothes peeking out were clean and pressed.

More banker than cowboy, the man was clearly someone of importance or he would not have gotten past the hostess. *Roberto’s* was not owned by The Order, however, it was only open to sophisticated gentleman with a sufficient bank roll.

The man waited, his blue-grey eyes expectant.

Cautious with his volume, Marley answered: “No. But I have heard stories of its splendor and work to assure it rises again.”

The stranger took a seat. “So you shall, Marley Provost, Honored Master. You and your temple will bear witness to its reign.”

The man removed a glove. His hand bore the serpent and obelisk.

“Honored chief,” Marley whispered.

He bowed his head, shaking the man’s left hand and covering their grip with his right. There were only four people with that brand, and this was the first time he’d met their personal liaison to the Others. Anonymity between levels was key to safety. Messages passed through chains anonymously. There could only be two reasons why such a high-ranking officer was visiting in person. Either Marley had erred in performing the Passing of the Void ritual for Rockford . . .

Or it was time.

“My name is Amiri, and I bring good news from below. An attack on Nursery #8 was foiled and the unwelcomed guest has

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been apprehended. They call her the Serpent Girl; she's a mercenary and slave of The City. Sandmen are bringing her to your temple. It is possible she can be of service to The Order. Maybe she can lead us to an Engineer's lodge. You are to make an offer."

Marley nodded. He almost mentioned this was the same assassin hired by sandmen to eliminate Osoto. But of course, Amiri must know that already. If he wanted the offer made, then Marley would make it.

"However, if you feel she is becoming a liability—you may experiment with her in any way you see fit—much like our friend Rockford." Amiri winked.

"Thank you for your trust."

"More importantly . . ." Amiri opened his coat pocket and removed a scroll—sealed with red wax and pressed by the sigil of the council. "Assemble your Temple. This message is for all to hear. The twelves vessels will be transported in five days. It is time to put them to sleep for the long night."

"I'll send the call out now. We'll be ready within the hour to receive your message."

The chief tipped his hat and left.

Marley downed the rest of his wine and headed into the night. The hour had arrived. The Rites of Eternal Sleep and their destiny awaited.

XII

MCCLOUD BOUGHT A bottle of Rye whiskey on the way back to the Pinewood Motel. He threw his badge across the room. It left an uncomfortable itch on his hip, and it took four shots before his hands stopped shaking. Then he spread out the contents of the sack on the bed.

The newspaper articles were mostly about missing children. Not just in Los Angeles, but in major cities across the country. A global map had crossing lines and vectors that had been drawn in red and blue pens. Circles had been drawn in unmarked cities in Texas and North Dakota, as well as near Washington D.C. and right here in L.A.

McCloud flipped through a notebook that reminded him of the book Donovan had showed him. Sigils, foreign words, and diagrams of buildings. Hock had sketched out pyramidal shapes and various stone configurations. None of it was helpful. Pages were composed in stream of consciousness and single word flow charts. Police. Church. Newspapers. Universities. Arrows pointing to a single question: WHAT IS THE CITY?

Knock. Knock.

McCloud dropped the journal and pulled his gun. He stepped quietly to the door and listened.

Knock, knock.

“Detective McCloud. We need to talk.”

The voice was male and muffled, but it didn’t sound like Hock. There was no chain or peephole, so McCloud unlocked the door and stood to the side, opening it just a crack.

“Who are you?”

“I’m your penpal. My name is Miguel.”

McCloud toed the door open wider. The moonlight revealed a

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man of medium build, alone. There was something in his right hand.

“What is that?”

“A drink to save your life.” The man held up a cylindrical flask.

“May I come in?”

“Nice and slow.”

McCloud stepped back, keeping the revolver dead center as the man entered the room and closed the door behind him.

“I assure you the gun isn’t necessary.”

“Sit.” McCloud gestured to the small coffee table and chair. The buzzing had returned, and his palm was slick against the gun.

Miguel sat, eyeing the weapon. He unscrewed the flask. “Please. This will help.”

“What’s gonna help me is answers.” McCloud nodded at the mess on the bed. “You sent me after Darby Hock. Why? And what’s the Order of Eternal Sleep?”

“Do you believe in the supernatural, Detective?”

“Last week? No. Today. You have my attention.”

“They are a group that deals in the supernatural, using occult science to gain power. Their actions have influenced the darkest periods of human civilization. Their control has waxed and waned over the centuries, but never once have they been wiped out. Modern technology is affording them a new chance at global control. A stranglehold that is all encompassing. And this time, without end.”

“Centuries old?” A manic laugh bubbled from McCloud. He pulled the crumpled sketches from his coat. “Global reach and I can’t find a single person who recognizes these sigils? Come on!”

“Secrecy is their lifeblood. Only a select few who work with The Order understand who they truly are. Everything is veiled behind another mask. Another cover story. But I assure you, their tentacles reach into every facet of life. Politics. Clergy. Reporters—”

“Cops?”

Miguel nodded. “You’d be surprised how easy it is to bribe someone. And The Order is masterful at exposing weaknesses.”

“They kill my partner, William O’Neil?”

“From what I can tell, yes. I represent a group of men and women who oppose The Order. We selected you because of your involvement with the attack on one of The Order’s strongholds—a

nurse. I'm offering you a chance to test your perseverance and dedication to justice. To possibly join us."

"Nurse? You mean the arson on Grant?"

"Yes."

McCloud ran his hand through his sweaty hair. "This is nuts. None of it makes sense."

"Please." Miguel raised the flask. "Drink and things will become clearer."

"Why should I trust you? That could be poison."

"You've already been poisoned, Detective. That's why you feel the way you do."

McCloud's mouth went dry. His voice lost its volume, but not its anxiousness. "What do you mean?"

"How has your sleep been?"

"Shitty."

"Nightmares?"

"I hunt criminals who abuse kids, I don't exactly have the most pleasant dreams."

"They'll get worse. I assume you are having mood swings, too. Perhaps visual hallucinations. Voices. I can see it in your eyes. Detective McCloud, a dark entity attached itself to you when you entered that nursery and it's feeding off you. If you don't drink this medicinal blend, it's influence will grow stronger. Until you eventually die."

McCloud looked at the mess on the bed. Donovan and O'Neil ran through his head. Johnny Doe carved.

Don't let them inside.

McCloud grabbed the flask before he could talk himself out of it and took a sip. It was bitter and rootish. He waited after swallowing, breathing heavy. Then he took another sip.

"Good. Yes. Drink it all, calmly. Breath deep between. The herbs will lessen the entity's grip over you."

"What's a nurse?" McCloud asked after a few sips.

"A center used by The Order to prepare people—mostly children—to be vessels for dark entities such as the one haunting you. Only magnitudes worse. Rather than a commune and feeding between child and entity, The Order actually invokes demons, spirits—whatever you choose to call them—*into* the body of these children."

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“Possession?”

“In essence. Yes.”

McCloud drained the flask, poised. “Now what?”

“Patience.” Miguel pulled two tea pouches from his pocket. “You should notice a change in your dreams tonight. A reduction in the impulses and desires that pop into your head at random. Take the next serving in the morning and then in early evening. After that, you should have the wherewithal to recognize the changes between your states of being from today. And you’ll know I am telling the truth.”

“Then what?”

“Then, if you’re serious about stopping The Order, the real work begins.” Miguel rose and gave him an address in a low tone of voice. “Meet me there tomorrow at 7 p.m. There will be three of us waiting. We will complete the cleansing and banish the dark entity from you entirely. But you must take the first steps to prove your honest desire. Finish the teas. Recognize the darkness. Only then can you join us.”

“What about my job? The department is expecting me back.”

“I would suggest hiding here until tomorrow. If I found you this easily, it’s entirely possible The Order knows where you are too. You must take every precaution not to be followed tomorrow. Don’t tell anyone what I’ve shared with you. Not just for your safety, but for the safety of everyone you know.”

“That’s why you sent me to Hock and Whitney?”

“Look how quickly a human folds. All it took was an extra paycheck. A promotion. Money makes the mind foggy and the body lazy. This is how The Order moves without detection, burying all stories and propaganda except that which they allow to surface from time to time.”

“I won’t fold.”

“I pray not,” Miguel said. “The Order can easily amass friends in institutions of government, education, and media. I don’t have egoistical rewards to offer for loyalty.”

“But with my help they can be stopped?”

“Anything is possible.”

McCloud listened as Miguel repeated the address, then he left.

Once he was alone, McCloud sat on the bed, exhausted, sweaty, and confused. He pushed all of Hock’s work to the floor, curled up on top of the sheets and passed out.

XIII

MAX STILL SEE—SAWED with his emotions, but he had a desire to see Ming. It would mean a lot to him to know she was okay. Especially after Valbas's vague threat. He'd need rest if he was going to fight his way out of The City and into the light.

To force himself asleep, Max used a trick he'd learned much by accident. In the beginning of his captivity, the overwhelming despair had buried him deep in anxiety attacks. One had been so bad, Max started hyperventilating. Almost like a child who throws a tantrum until he wears himself out, Max's erratic breathing grew so fast and shallow, he became lightheaded. Eventually, a euphoric calm eased him.

Over the following months, Max had tested breathing techniques and discovered he could control his breath in ways that allowed him to better disassociate with the pain inflicted on him, both mental and physical.

It took several rounds of this breath work but sleep finally found him.

So did the nightmares

The gurney sped down the corridor of a dark hospital. Ming was strapped to the metal rails, a figure in a dark-hooded robe pushing her. No facial features were visible within the shadowy hood. Just two yellow eyes.

Max was conscious of floating somewhere above the scene and being dragged along with it. Ming didn't speak nor did the figure pushing; Max could feel sensations from both though. The cold air rushing over her face, the unbelievable terror, the taunting joy of her captor. The overhead lights flickered. The placement between them increased, the hallway increased, too, stretching to impossible lengths.

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They passed through long pools of darkness and only brief moments of light as the gurney rattled faster and faster through the growing hallway. The air temperature dropped, and Max felt the chill on his ethereal form. They passed into a small oval of light and he noticed the walls had morphed. Large stones from the Temples of Gehenna lined the passage, which was now sloped downward. The descent steepened and the gurney gained alarming speed. Finally, there was a break in the dark landscape, a large stone sarcophagus in the distance below, bathed in red light.

It's not a sarcophagus. It was a word Max couldn't remember, but it had been impressed into his subconscious, and a vague understanding stirred in Max.

As they barreled closer, Max realized it was impossible to stop the runaway bed. There was a collision of twisted metal and granite, Ming rocketed up and then fell into the stone coffin, blackness erased Max's vision.

When it returned, *Max* was looking up from the sarcophagus. There was a voice in his head, but it wasn't his, and it wasn't Ming's. It whispered of wonderfully wicked things, perverse pain. The words moved so fast across his perception it was difficult to understand them logically, but the sensations they instilled within him were clear.

Sex. Pain. Burning pleasure. Bloated satisfaction. Rotting life.

Max knew these concepts. Had visited them in the deepest depths of The City. They were vile and yet familiar. That was why he hated himself so much. They were always familiar no matter how hard he tried to forget.

You'll help us spread the darkness . . .

Max's mouth opened and a black plume of thick smoke billowed forth.

The noxious cloud moved up from his tomb and Max's consciousness moved with it. The molecules vibrated with a sense of urgency. Max and the energy floated toward a shaft cut into the stone of the temple. Inside the shaft, a wind picked up and pulled Max's essence along with the smoke into the bright blue sky. The blackness soaked into the fresh air molecules, infecting them. Now overhead a cityscape, Max saw the pyramid he'd issued from, an unending cloud, rising like a smokestack from an industrial sector. Transmitting an illness to all living things.

As the day changed to night, Max rose higher, viewing more swathes of land. Pitiful shanties and rundown streets stretched for miles around the pyramid. In the distance, he could see another polluting mammoth-sized pyramid, and another. The night gave way to day again, but as the night retreated, something was wrong with the rays of dawn peaking over the north horizon.

That's not possible.

The sun, shining as black as the sleek walls of the pyramids, bathed the entire world in its dark glow.

There was screaming. His. Ming's. It sounded like the entire world cried out inside Max's dream.

XIV

April 14th

MCCLLOUD SLEPT LATER than he had in the last year on the force. He also woke more refreshed than he could remember in as long. The overcast sky outside the single motel window did not cloud his mind this morning. There were still concerns and fears. But the thoughts entering were his own. And he could rationalize what to do.

Miguel was right. Which meant McCloud was all alone. The first thing he did was get a table at the closest café and order a kettle of hot water. He steeped the tea for five minutes, reviewing what to do next.

The address Miguel gave him for tonight was in Los Angeles, and he was going to show. He wanted to get a message to Harris, but there was no telling who within the department was compromised, and so he would have to remain quiet about his location.

Ming.

He wished he could warn her, too. Perhaps he'd endangered her with the previous visit. How long had he been followed? And why had they killed O'Neil and not him? Did he learn something at Our Lady of Lourdes?

Paranoia seeped in and he watched the other patrons in the tiny café. Each one had the potential to be a killer for The Order.

Always another mask. Always a cover story.

He checked his pocket watch. Nine hours before their appointed meeting. Staying at the Pinewood Motel did not seem like a good option. He wanted to get Hock's documents to someone in case The Order did capture him. But someone at the station had

taken Osoto's autopsy box. That left Ming as his only choice. If he could send the documents to Ming, maybe it would jar her memory about the ouroboros and warn her to be on the lookout.

He finished the brew and headed for the motel. As he navigated the street, every eye that caught his felt distrustful. On a last second hunch, McCloud circled to the back of the motel and made his way down the alley to the window of the room rather than the door. He peered into the cloudy back-alley window, dropping down immediately at the figure moving across the room.

He peeked again and confirmed the figure was gathering up all of Hock's files. *Shit!* McCloud had his revolver, but his badge was still in the room. Along with the final pouch of tea.

McCloud dropped from the window and started back down the alley. Alone. He was utterly alone. As he zigzagged down the streets, it started to rain. His only thought was to get lost in the crowds of the train station and then circle back, unfollowed, to meet Miguel.

XV

THEY'D TIED MING'S hands and feet and strapped her to a wheelchair. A burlap sack was placed over her head. After several hours, she was transported to a vehicle. It was a long trip, and it was difficult to gauge how much time passed under the perpetual darkness of the sack. No one spoke to her, and Ming fell into short fits of sleep between strategizing multiple scenarios.

They had forced her to soil herself, and the damp embarrassment and stiff muscles reminded her of Gehanna. When the vehicle stopped, Ming was unloaded in the wheelchair and set in a room. She wished she had fought till death back at the estate.

Eventually the numbing silence under the sack was interrupted by the distinct click of a cane and footsteps. The coarse hood scraped her skin as it was lifted, and Ming closed her eyes to the light.

"The ropes, too."

Ming felt the bonds from her wrists and ankles cut. She rotated the joints and slowly opened her eyes. A thin man, but not frail, stood over her. His face was distinguished but not old despite the cane at his right side.

"Who are you?"

"I am one face of a beast with many heads," the man said. "A beast that sees promise in you."

"I don't follow."

Ming forced herself to remain calm as the man took her wrist gently and held it before her face.

"The ouroboros may give you a right to pass between the worlds. But the truth is it is no more than the branding of a slave. Why do you think my hands are untainted?"

Ming noted his unscarred palms. "No one deals with the Others unless they're branded."

“That is what you are led to believe. In truth, only slaves do business with them. Slaves who *think* they’re free. I, in contrast, *assist* their work on the surface. I need not see them. The sacrifice grants me greater rewards than what you know of in The City. You do not know me, but it was my money you enjoyed when cleaning up Osoto. You have promise beyond that of a lowly slave. But as a mercenary, you are too dangerous . . .” He shook his head. “Work with me exclusively, and this whole snafu in Altadena will be forgotten.”

Ming looked around for a weapon. Short of breaking the window, hoping for a shard of glass, the room offered nothing. She needed more time to formulate an escape. Then her eyes fell on the coat rack by the door.

“You are not inspiring confidence in me.” The man followed her gaze over his shoulder. He smiled and walked to the rack, picking up the dirty canvas bag. “Thought you’d be more careful with this.”

Ming’s vision blurred and she felt nauseous at seeing her pack, her lifesavings, in the madman’s hands. She’d been in such a rush, she’d only covered it with a light dusting of dirt rather than burying it again on her return to the estate. A quick escape would not give her time to dig for it. Seemed smart at the moment, but now it had sealed her doom. All her bargaining power was gone, and worse, he knew it too.

“I can see I’ve wasted my time offering you mercy.” The man flipped through the documents in her bag and read the address where she was to deliver confirmation of her kills. “Shall I let them know you’re working for us now?”

“I’d rather be dead than work for the Mara.”

“When we’re finished preparing you, the Serpent Girl you know, will indeed be dead.”

The man snapped his fingers and the room filled with menacing faces. Ming prayed they would kill her. If only there was a weapon she could wield to compel them to use deadly force against her. The room decor was of no help.

Ming stood from the wheelchair and ran at one full force, savoring the painful bash of flesh as she collided with the henchmen. She swung until she couldn’t fight anymore. Her body yielded to their blows, bones crunching under their fists and boots.

XVI

THE CLICK OF the lock bounced off the cave walls, and to Max, seemed to echo far too long. His firearm was unholstered and pointed at the entrance as he opened the cell door. The yellowish gleam of a distant torch revealed only a shadowy pool of blood and a hunk of hairy scalp on the ground outside. There was no movement he could detect.

Max exited, head swiveling left and right. Only a portion of the normal torches were lit, and if it weren't for the mutilated body parts littering the cavern hall, the stretching darkness reminded him of the nightmare leading to the pyramid and sarcophagus.

It was not a sarcophagus. He had sensed a different word when he was trapped in it. Conductor? Conduit? Transmitter?

To his right, waited the torture rooms. It was a direction he had travelled often with Valbas. To his left lay freedom. It was a path he had walked down only once—in the opposite direction—his admission into slavehood. Once they'd locked him up, there had never been a left-hand turn when coming out of his cell.

Until now . . .

Unlike his nightmare, the hallway did not morph in length. Each step brought him closer to the exit into the wider rooms that led to other chambers of the pyramid temple complex. Except for a few feeders, nothing seemed to be alive down here anymore—

Max froze. Something shifted up ahead and it wasn't one of the carnivorous rat-hybrids. The arched exit was twenty feet away, it had a light glow about it. So close, yet still so far.

One step at a time.

Though Max found it difficult to move. He knew something was coming, but—

A hulking shadow filled the frame of the exit.

“Mmmm,” a familiar voice rang out, thirsty, taunting. “Don’t need to be a Mara to smell your fear.”

Max spun to check behind him. No ambush from that direction. Just the bodies of the dead. Max kept the gun close to his side wondering if the man could see it in the dim light.

“I don’t want trouble,” Max said.

“It’ll be no trouble. I’ll even make it quick for ya.” There was a metallic clink and a spark in the darkness.

Max held his ground as the giant man approached, dragging a sword against the rock wall.

“Dali Ofu is paying gold talents for Gehenna prisoners. Alive is preferred . . .” The man swung the blade to the other side of the corridor. More sparks flew. “But he only takes a little off for freshly killed.”

Max squeezed the trigger, the explosion-waves hammering his ears. The bullet sunk into flesh and the man doubled over, his sword falling to the ground. Moaning, the man staggered, attempting to retrieve the fallen weapon. Max fired a second time and the man crumpled.

Max picked up the sword in his left hand. It was larger and heavier than he anticipated, but the raw power of holding it excited him. At his feet, the man was panting, clutching his belly. Even in the low light, Max could see dark blood seeping between the man’s fingers. His face gleamed in sweat.

“Fuck you.” He tried to spit at Max but only managed to dribble blood down his lips.

Now that his eyes had adjusted, Max could see the large man’s features better. A strong desire to mash the gun into his mouth blossomed. To pull the trigger and watch his brains fly from his obliterated skull. He knew how morbid the thought was but that wasn’t what steadied his finger. Saving bullets was important. It was a long road out of hell, and he couldn’t waste the ammo, even if it would make him feel better.

Looking at the power in his left hand, Max smiled. He holstered his gun and gripped the sword with both hands. The man gritted his teeth in pain, still slurring curses. Max barely heard him. The man’s layers of fat and muscle yielded easily to the blade, and he slid it in nice and slow, savoring the release it gave him. The vengeance.

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Between squeals of pain, the giant grabbed Max's throat, but his hands no longer possessed strength, and his feeble attempts were cast aside as Max pushed the sword in, deeper, up to the hilt. The man's torso shook around the blade. Hot blood spilled onto Max's hands. He exhaled feelings of satisfaction.

Max rose and stepped over the corpse. Moving through the passage and into the open bay for receiving new prisoners. He thought of the temple that made *si fěn* and the memory of the drug was sweeter than a first love.

Stay, consume, sleep. Dance with the dead.

Somewhere from the deep recesses of his brain, a technicolor cat was purring to him.

Somewhere else, miles ahead, was an archway. A rocky slope of ascent that led back to the surface. *Dali Ofu is paying gold talents for Gehenna prisoners.* It would be fun to carve him up, too. Max could burn anyone that was left down here.

No.

There would be plenty to kill on the surface. He would find them all. Valbas, too. Even if the Mara rose to power, he would fight them under a black sky, until his last breath.

XVII

MIGUEL AND THOMAS sat in the back office drinking coffee and listening to the rain. Thomas checked the clock.

“How long are we going to give Forrester? He should have arrived by now.”

“He’ll be here,” Miguel said. “His location has not been compromised.”

“Everything has been compromised! Wells had no business contacting an assassin. Just like you had no business telling that detective about us.”

“Please.” Miguel placed a confident hand on his brother’s shoulder. “We need allies.”

“We need to retreat to the home lodge and regroup,” Thomas said, standing and walking toward the shop’s front window. “If he’s not here by sundown, we leave.”

“After we finish cleansing McCloud,” Miguel said, following him.

Thomas stared out the window at the rain. “They’re going to lay those children to sleep before the month is up. If something happens to us—”

A crash came from the back office they just left. The Engineers looked at each other in silent fear. The wind howled and the bang came again. Thomas moved toward the rear of the shop, but Miguel, grabbed his arm. He pointed at the trapdoor under the rug.

“Head home. Don’t look back. I’ll check the noise.”

Thomas nodded and dropped to his knees pulling back the rug. Just then, the electricity went out. The wind and rain were stronger and Miguel hoped the exterior door latch had broken in the rain or a tree took out the window and power lines.

He inched his way toward the office, his eyes slowly adjusting.

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He reached the office; the back door was open. Wind and rain sprayed Miguel around a figure—

“Forrester!”

Miguel ran to his friend as the man toppled forward, sending them both to the ground.

“What the—”

The air was stolen from Miguel’s lungs as Forrester fell on him full force, pinning him to the ground. Another man entered the room, closing the door to the raging storm. In the flash of lightning before the door closed, Miguel saw the gun and prayed Thomas was already in the escape tunnel.

Miguel tried to roll Forrester off him and felt the handle of a knife protruding from his back.

“Ah, ah.” The gunman stepped down on Forrester’s spine.

Heavy steps and protest, then Thomas tumbled to the ground beside Miguel and Forrester. A second assailant followed, and as Thomas scrambled to rise, a foot was driven into his crotch. A punch followed and Thomas was dragged into the corner and a gag stuffed into his mouth.

“No need for lengthy introductions. You know who we represent,” the gunman said, still standing on Forrester, pinning them both to the ground. “We’re looking for Detective McCloud. Where is he?”

“How should I know?”

Blood and saliva drooled from Forrester’s mouth even though his eyes were dead. Miguel turned from their vacant stare, feeling his clothes saturated with rain and bodily fluids from his friend. The man bent down, holding a pouch of banishing tea.

“Who else are you helping from the department?”

“No one.”

The man looked to Thomas.

“I have been in quite the generous mood of late. So I’m willing to spare your lives, so long as we resolve this matter tonight. Just so you know that I have the authority to make such a decision . . .” The man stood and removed his glove, showing Miguel the serpent and obelisk of his office. “If you do not know where Detective McCloud is, I am willing to accept coordinates to an Engineer’s lodge instead.”

“The coordinates are ever changing. For this very reason.”

Miguel panted under the crushing pressure. “We wait for orders same as you.”

“You are not like me. And I don’t believe you.” The chief stood and pointed to Thomas. “Hold him.”

Another fist rocketed into Thomas’s side. His already docile body was secured by the second man. The gun was exchanged for a knife and Thomas’s shirt was cut away, exposing his left side and belly. With his gloveless hand, the chief slid his fingers over the flesh, across the three-pointed tattoo. Miguel was repulsed at the pleasure on the man’s face. His touch was replaced by the blade. Thomas shuddered in the grip of the sandman. When the blade sunk in, Miguel’s yell was louder than his gagged friend’s.

The chief turned and booted Miguel’s temple. His neck snapped and his vision blanked. It returned, blurred with a ringing in his skull. Through the dizziness and tinnitus, it appeared Thomas had stopped screaming into the gag. He rested in the sandman’s grip as black blood spilled over his pants.

“Liver punctures are nasty things.” The chief wiped his blade off on Thomas’s pants. “No coming back from that. Painful, too. Look at his face. I can’t imagine the suffering.”

“I’m sorry.” Miguel’s eyes blurred further from tears.

“I’m willing to slit his throat if you give me the coordinates. End this miserable evening.”

“I don’t have them.”

The chief knelt on Forrester’s back and Miguel felt spots of unconsciousness pushing into his vision. Their eyes locked. Just before he lost sight, the man smiled and searing pain exploded in Miguel’s side. The chief shoved gauze into Miguel’s mouth. Wiped his blade a second time and turned to the sandman.

“Search the place. Then rig it. I have a feeling our detective will show eventually.”

XVIII

McCLOUD LOST HIMSELF in thought as the buggy rocked. The pummeling rain a fitting soundtrack to his concerns. There was no way he had been followed. Not through the crowds and then the rain. He'd bounced himself all over the city, spending the last of his cash on this final ride to meet Miguel. It was true, the tea made him feel better, but wasn't it possible that Miguel was just another farce?

That's a demon's thought. Not mine.

McCloud reinforced the belief by reminding himself that Miguel would understand why he had been unable to finish the final cup of tea. Isn't that what The Order did. They were everywhere. *They* were the Chinatown Surgeon. The Detective Whitneys who *lost* evidence and called mass graves 'pranks'. They were an enormous black widow whose web stretched across the state. The country.

They want global control.

With a twitch of its arachnid leg, the vibration alerted the network and McCloud had almost been killed. More than once the thought made him want to retreat home. To give up. He'd be quiet if they would just leave him alone. He didn't need a paycheck. He just didn't want to be stabbed to death in 'drug deal gone wrong'—*poor O'Neil*. But he knew they would never leave him alone. McCloud had pushed too far. He still had no idea where Max was, but McCloud was willing to bet The Order of Eternal Sleep had something to do with it.

With the rain's assault, he almost didn't notice the cabbie had stopped. If the driver had listened, they were two blocks past the address. Despite the rain, McCloud knew it was still a good idea to be so far away.

McCloud took his time walking even though it soaked his coat and clothes. When he made it to the shopfront, he recited the address twice before stepping under the awning. It looked like a tiny retail shop, but no signage adorned the windows, only dark curtains. The door, too, was void of identification. Just the address in black numbers.

A cursory glance left and right showed the few people in the area hustling down the street, ducking into buildings and establishments to escape the downpour. He knocked two times. Slow and loud. Then waited at a forty-five-degree angle keeping his back to the corner of the building so he could partially see both the door to the left of him and the rainy street to the right.

Time dilated, his ears perked to hear through the door, but all he could hear was the booming voice of nature and the rushing of his heart. He knocked twice more. His nerves doubled down. How long should he wait? Had something happened to Miguel?

McCloud reached out and tried the knob. He felt the click more than he heard it, but to be sure, he let go with just the slightest of pushes. The door creaked inward offering a dark quiet contrast to the storm. Limited moonlight illuminated a walkway and shelves, but no details beyond that were visible.

McCloud slipped inside and quietly shut the door, muffling the rain. A peal of thunder sent his body jumping, but he kept quiet. The shop had a dim blue glow from the streetlamps and what little of the moon could poke through the storm clouds.

“Miguel?” His voice sounded foreign and scared.

The building was new enough to have an electric light switch, so he stepped toward the wall with outstretched arms. McCloud’s knee banged against the cash register stand.

“Dammit,” he muttered. He tried again louder, “Miguel. It’s me. McCloud.”

His hand felt a switch. He turned the knob and the building flickered alive with light. McCloud strained to see to the back of the store. A hissing ignited as he saw what appeared to be two men heaped on the ground.

“Miguel—”

The hiss turned into a brilliant light. McCloud felt the immense force before he heard the sound. The floor disappeared from under McCloud. He was thrown into the door, heat blasting his body. He

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stumbled to his feet despite the dazed lethargy threatening to knock him unconscious. Burning his hand on the knob, McCloud was able to open the door. Flames climbed from the windows, hissing in the rain as he fell to the sidewalk, rolling through puddles to cool his skin.

Extinguished and exhausted, he lay on the concrete, panting, looking up at the dark sky. Splashing came toward him, but he didn't have the strength to turn his head. There was a pause in the drops striking his face as two figures loomed over him. McCloud's brain could not decipher if there were friend or foe, and before he could speak, his eyes rolled back and he passed from consciousness.

PART III

April 15th

“WE HAVE KNOWN each other many years now. You have always been one of my favorite associates.”
Shin Sho bowed his head. “It has been an honor to serve you.”

Amiri smiled, then let it wane. “Your little Serpent Girl. Do you know where she is?”

Shin pursed his lips. Suppressing his emotion. *What had she done now?*

“Heading east, I believe. Where, I know not.”

“You’ve been misinformed then.” Amiri folded his hands on the desk and leaned forward. “She showed up on our doorstep.”

Foolish. Stubborn. “I’m sorry. She promised to tell me of any jobs.”

“She lied,” Amiri said. “There was no love lost between you and Osoto, was there? Any reason why you would not want to see his *retirement*? We’ve always taken care of you, haven’t we?”

“You have.” Sweat beaded on Shin’s brow. “No reason for me to oppose.”

“I assumed as much, but I had this horrible thought that perhaps, just maybe, *you allowed* her to take a job in Altadena. Osoto did seem to have a lot of information about land that we owned or wanted to own. Like he was cutting us off at every turn. Where could he get knowledge like that . . . ? Maybe from someone who *also* wanted to cut us off at every turn, slow our plans . . . ”

“Not me,” Shin said. “Osoto was a slave. He must have learned from someone in The City or a member of The Order.”

“A slave, yes. Something we’ve never done to you . . . ” Amiri

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took Shin's withered but unmarked hands in his with a friendly squeeze. "I'm glad to hear that. You've assuaged my concerns about your loyalty." He let go of the embrace. "Yet I do not believe the breach is within the ranks of my Order. Something else . . ."

Shin kept his exterior calm under Amiri's stare. Under the surface he assessed how much the chief knew. How much of this was a test? There was no point withholding now, even if it was only a rumor. "It is said, Osoto employed a medium for business advice. Perhaps she assisted him?"

"Madame Breaux? Yes, I've heard that rumor as well. You wouldn't happen to know where she is?"

Shin shook his head. "Always just the rumor."

"No worries." Amiri patted the desk and rose. "Won't take long. We've all but cleaned up this little stain on an otherwise unblemished record. I've decided that the entire Osoto organization must be retired. That's going to leave a lot of territory available. I hoped we can trust you to be a good landlord for us."

Shin bowed. "It is an honor to serve."

"Good."

Amiri stepped toward the beads, but Shin stopped him.

"Where is Ming? I can set her straight."

"We're going to reeducate her." Amiri smiled. "That won't be a problem, will it?"

"No."

"Good." Amiri tipped his hat. "We'll be in touch."

In forty years, Shin had not lied to The Order. Amiri was the second chief he had served under. That was how long he had enjoyed his reign in Chinatown. He questioned what he would gain by withholding Breaux's address the way he had. Of course, he knew all about Osoto's big plans with her. Also knew that she would be able to locate Ming for him since she didn't head east. But unfortunately, there was no one he could send to ask Breaux without leaving a trail back to him.

Unless . . .

No, he thought. *Best to let it go.*

He'd already put himself and the compound in danger by withholding as much as he had.

"You should have listened to me, Ming," he whispered to the empty room.



April 16th

“MOTHER OF GOD.”

Harris followed Petersen into McCloud’s apartment. The home was destroyed. The couch cushions had been slashed and thrown to the ground. Same with the chairs. The kitchen floor—Harris felt a dizzying nausea wash over him—was coated in a light sheen of sticky red syrup, that wasn’t syrup. The cleanup crew streaked through the mess with giant mops.

“Neighbors reported nothing. If you hadn’t ordered us to force entry today, who knows how long before we made this discovery.”

“You sure he’s not here?”

“Positive, Lieutenant. We searched the apartment from top to bottom.”

Petersen led him to the bedroom and reading room and a similar scene greeted them. Slashed mattress, all books pulled from the shelf. Desk, papers, clothes, all displaced.

Harris almost asked Petersen to walk him through the timeline again. Not that he would have listened to the words. He’d have let them morph into droning sounds only. But at least it would give him a momentary distraction from the blood and knowledge that he had postponed sending officers to check on McCloud in favor of giving him another day of uninterrupted rest. Even ordering entry today had felt like a violation, and he’d only done it because of O’Neil.

It’s my fault, Harris thought. I should have been here in person to check on him.

“Why would they take his body?” Petersen asked.

Harris thought of their argument over the missing autopsy box.

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So much had happened since then, it, too, was an afterthought. Now it pressed on his mind. All the strange coincidences. O'Neil's report. The church he'd never followed up on.

"You were with O'Neil and McCloud at the Grant fire investigation, correct?"

"Just that first day. Me and the fire chief helped a bit. Why?"

"I want you to come back to the station with me. Let's reach out to the chief, too."

"You don't think this is all related?"

"I don't know what to think." Harris sighed. "O'Neil is dead and McCloud . . . is missing. I hope."

It felt like standing in Max's apartment years ago. Blood and no bodies.

I don't like it. Feels like the Chinatown Surgeon, McCloud had said.

No, it doesn't, Harris thought. This is much worse than the Surgeon.



“MASTER SHO . . . ” The geisha girl stood at the beaded curtain. “You have a strange visitor. He claims it’s urgent. Max Elliot. He doesn’t look well.”

“Max Elliot?”

“That’s what he says.”

“Have Chaun and Feng escort Mr. Elliot to me.”

Several minutes later the two bodyguards returned holding a bent-over mess that looked more like a filthy hobo than the detective Shin Sho remembered. The man’s suit was faded. His shirt, torn and soaked in blood. Between the unkempt facial scruff and shorn scalp, Shin could only recognize the eyes.

“He’s injured, boss. We don’t want him dying here. Say the word and we’ll toss him.”

Shin raised a hand to pause his bodyguard.

“You’re back.”

Max looked up, pain and sweat collecting on his forehead. “Help an old friend?”

“Chaun. Feng. Bring warm brandy.”

There was a moment of hesitation, but the large men let go of his arms and retreated. Max shuffled forward and slumped into the chair, panting heavy.

“What happened to you?”

“You mean this?” Max pointed at his stomach. The blood had stopped, sealed at the first layer of fatty tissue, but the wound was still a raw mess. “Or do you mean the last three years of my life?”

“Such the comedian. Even in death.”

Max coughed, gripping his side. “I need you to help me find someone.”

“Who?” Shin lit his pipe and studied Max’s wounds.

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“It’s a young girl. I rescued her from The City. Sent her to live with another cop. But as you can see, things have gotten . . . complicated.”

“I see.”

Chaun walked in with a tray of two shot glasses and placed them on the table. He eyed Max, then nodded at Shin Sho and slipped through the beads again, his shadow still visible just behind their thin covering.

“Who did this to you?”

Max picked up his shot of brandy with a shaky, blood-slick hand and knocked it back. “I was looking for Ming. So I went to visit the detective I sent her to.”

Last Night

It was depressing how much had changed since he was gone. Although Max’s strip of neighborhood looked the same. He passed through it on his way to McCloud’s, just long enough to wonder who lived there now and what had become of the few belongings he’d left behind when he travelled to The City. Continuing on, Max recalled his life as old sights passed by. Some nice moments. Others hellish.

Standing on the street corner of McCloud’s building, it was fascinating how some years had vanished into the void no matter how hard Max tried to remember. While others sprung to the forefront from a familiar sight or smell. He remembered the night McCloud rescued him from Charlie Willis.

Max rehearsed a story about his mystery disappearance. Getting caught up in the Chinese drug trade was his best cover; railroaded by that rat Charlie Willis and forced to endure years of captivity. Finally, he escaped—

Oh, and where’s Ming? The Mara claim they’re going to use her to—oh, wait, you don’t know who the Mara are . . .

“No problem,” Max said to himself. “Gonna be a breeze.”

He knocked on the door, and when it opened, the attack was so quick Max didn’t have time to speak. The fist swung from the frame and cracked his left temple. He lost equilibrium and crashed to his knees in the apartment hallway. A blow to his stomach stole the remaining oxygen from his body, and his vision

blurred. Hands subdued and transported him inside. Gasping for breath, Max looked up at two figures.

The first knelt down, grabbed Max's collar and stuck the knife under his chin.

"This doesn't look like the guy."

"Who are you?" the second man asked.

"Clearly, I'm in the wrong place . . ." Max regained control of his diaphragm. "At the wrong time. I'll be going now."

The man above him drove the pointed toe of his shoe into Max's side. The breathless pain flared again.

"Get him on that chair."

Max was struck again, and a loud pop went off in his nasal cavity. Warm blood leaked from his nostrils and Max knew he was in trouble. His entire skull was vibrating as he was dragged into the kitchen.

"I'll make this simple," the first said while the other bound him with rope. "You answer my questions, or my brother here puts holes in your gut. Understand?"

Max nodded.

"Why are you at John McCloud's apartment?"

"Old friend," Max said. "Been years since I seen him."

"What's your name?"

"Max."

The man punched him again. Tears filled Max's eyes. His head didn't feel attached anymore. It was a floating, throbbing piece of useless flesh.

"Max who?"

"Elliot," he mumbled.

"Max Elliot," the man repeated. "Write that down."

Max felt them rifle through his pockets. His gun was removed.

"Maybe he's a cop, too?"

"He ain't no cop. I busted him up, but he smelt like a bum on his own. And his clothes are about as dirty."

Max's head flopped and he started to drift until a foot kicked his shin.

"Wake up? You a hitman? Who are you working for?"

Max didn't trust his brain to answer so he let his head sink again. Too many wires had just been scrambled for him to assess what kind of a lie could buy him time to escape.

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“Think you gave him brain damage. Should we bring him back to the temple?”

Max’s head was grabbed and one of the men examined his eyes.

“You’re right. He’s worthless to bring back.”

The man stuffed something into Max’s mouth, the blade pierced him between the bonds of the rope. Max felt his bladder leak. Trying to suppress the cry, Max bit and ground his teeth, not wanting these bastards to have the satisfaction of his tears. The blade released, then drove into his abdomen in a second spot. The man drew near, placing his forehead against Max’s.

“Let it out. You pathetic worm.” The man’s words were hungry as he stabbed Max a third time.

The longer he refused to cry out, the deeper the knife was pushed. Once it was in his intestines up to the hilt, Max screamed. He couldn’t help it. He squealed into the cloth, hot tears leaking from his eyes. The blade was slowly retracted, and the ropes cut from his body. Max fell out of the chair into a heap.

“Take the rope. Do you have all the evidence?”

“Yeah.”

Max’s vision tilted, but it looked like two figures left. Max stretched out, pulling himself a foot forward, then collapsed in a pool of blood.



“Then you know what dumplings are?”

Shin nodded, blowing more smoke.

“Only thing keeping me alive.”

Max remembered the calming effects of the smoke and he leaned forward hoping to catch a whiff to ease his tender, slow-healing belly. “I know I’m out of the loop, but these weren’t regular hoods—may I?” Max gestured to the second shot of Brandy and tossed it back after Shin nodded. “This all has something to do with The Mara. Ming. And McCloud now. They said she was free. But I think they killed both—”

Shin held up his hand. “You should have listened when said let The City go. Perhaps this time you heed my warning. Do not pursue these people.”

“Shin. This is bigger than just my problems. They plan to return to the surface.”

“I can’t have this discussion, Max.”

“You think ignoring this makes you immune. Everyone is in danger under their control.”

“Not everyone.”

“You son of a bitch,” Max whispered. “You’re one of them. Aren’t you?”

“Watch your tongue,” Shin said.

Chaun shifted behind the beads.

“I live by their rules and enjoy harmony. But I do not belong to them.”

Max realized there was no winning this fight. And Shin would know exactly how to kill him so the dumplings wouldn’t revive him. Max had too much darkness in him to want to die without releasing it. He just needed to save his fury for the right targets.

“Please help me find her. She’s—”

“I know who she is.”

“Of course, you do.” Max should have been surprised, but he wasn’t. “Where is she?”

“Taken by Shadows of the Mara. I know not where.” Shin paused, thinking. Then he pulled out a paper from his desk drawer and dipped the quill. Shin wrote out two addresses, a word, and then a brief message in Chinese. “This is all I can give you.”

“Ye-kesi-don?” Max read the word.

“*Yī kē zǐdàn*,” Shin corrected. “At the first address you will find my loyal associate Jian. He understands English but doesn’t speak it. Say *Yī kē zǐdàn* and explain that I have sent you.”

“Great. And once he manages to understand me, what do we do then?”

“At the second address you will find a cabin run by the soon to be extinct Osoto family. Tell them you wish to consult Madame Breaux. Ask her where Ming is.”

“Madame Breaux?” Max suppressed a chuckle and groaned against the pain in his side. “Our rescue mission rests on a physic?”

“When you meet her, you’ll understand.” Shin took a bag of coins from a lower desk drawer and tossed them to Max. “Pay with these and they will not ask questions. Do *not* mention me.”

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“Thanks,” Max said although he was still disgusted by Shin’s protection of the human scum working for the Mara.

“Don’t thank me. It’s a suicide mission—which is exactly what Jian owes me.”

“So be it,” Max said, standing to leave.

“Move fast, Max. Shadows of the Mara are searching for Breaux, too. It’s only a matter of time before they find her.”

“Thanks for the head start.” Sarcasm dripped from his words.

“If you succeed . . .” Shin Sho said, putting the pipe back in his mouth. “Don’t come back here. You will not enjoy your greeting from me next time.”

“So be it. At least Ming will be okay.”

Max showed himself through the compound and out the front door.

IV

WRAPPINGS WERE TAKEN from McCloud's face, the air stinging his burnt skin. He wanted to open his eyes but there was no strength in his lids. He was awake but not. Sounds came in waves. Eventually his body surged with pain from what felt like a thousand ant bites. He ground his teeth until it passed into a dull ache again.

When his eyes opened, he was alone in a cold bare room. Trying to kick from the sheets and rise, revealed that his wrists and ankles were tied to the bedframe. His broken ribs were able to breathe just deep enough to call for 'help.' There was no response though, and time stretched again.

To keep his mind from the agony of the situation, McCloud tried to piece together the events prior to the explosion. Errant thoughts constantly tugged his attention from the timeline. He'd break from one thought-loop only to lose himself in the hypnotizing grasp of another as unknown time ticked by.

These aren't my thoughts! He snapped his attention back to the task.

McCloud looked down at the sheets. Underneath, he could imagine a sigil as one of the pains searing his body. He grunted, arching his back as it spasmed in ant bites again. *Focus! Ignore the pain. Remember what happened!* He'd went to see Miguel. They were going to cleanse his body fully. There was an explosion. He'd been burned, but he got outside. Was it the fire department who arrived? No. It was—

The door opened and a woman stepped inside, pushing a cart. An upside-down glass bottle hung from a rack and tubing was gathered on the cart along with a needle and surgical implements. Her red dress extended to a tight-fitting hood. Inside the hood, a

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black cloth wrapped her face and neck from the nose down, veiling everything but her eyes. Without a word, she lowered the bedsheet and swabbed the crook of his arm with alcohol on a cotton ball.

“What’s going on?” McCloud asked.

The woman removed air from the syringe, unknown fluid jetting into the air. McCloud inhaled against the biting of the needle into his vein. Yellowish liquid pumped into his body. A numbing warmth blossomed near his heart, flushing outward. McCloud’s urethra burned as if he pissed himself. He tried to talk, but his mouth was dry and numb.

“I need you to be very still,” she said.

Fear kept him immobile as the thin tubing was fed into his vein and taped to his skin.

“What is this?” he slurred.

“Intravenous therapy.” She wiped the blood from his arm.

“Where . . . am I?”

His speech slowed, and she left without answering. McCloud eyed the glass container. It was filled with a greenish liquid, but there was a clip cinching the tubing where it connected to the glass, preventing it from flowing down into McCloud’s body yet.

It wasn’t long before McCloud heard the click of a cane and footsteps. A well-dressed man entered and stood over his bed. He held up McCloud’s badge, then dropped it on the tray with a metallic shake of the tools.

“Congratulations, Detective. You found us.”

McCloud dipped into a reserve of strength and pulled against the bonds with his non-IV arm.

“Relax,” the man said, placing his cane on McCloud’s chest and reaching for the intravenous therapy clip. “This is what you wanted. Isn’t that why you called our friend Detective Whitney. Why you visited Darby Hock. You’ve been looking for us.”

McCloud had to focus on his words, beneath the drugged capacities of his physical body, his brain was alive and terrified at the implications of the green liquid.

“What is that?”

“*They* wanted your head on a platter. I wanted to experiment. So, we compromised.” The man smiled, tapping the tubing line to ensure it was free of air obstructions. “No rituals or magick. Just mind-altering substances, visual and auditory stimulation, and repetition.”

The liquid was cold as it entered McCloud's vein. His vision grew fuzzy again. He opened his mouth without sound, thankful his body was shutting down. He hoped death would be a blank void of peaceful sleep.

"I'm going to rewire your brain, Detective. It'll take time, but when I'm finished, you'll be a stranger to yourself."

The man's voice echoed as he left the room, which was now spinning. McCloud thought of Ming. Glad that she had forgotten all this. Hopefully she never remembered. And hopefully The Order never remembered her. He heard Johnny Doe's voice warn not to let them in while he slept. But this was different. The IV forced his body to obey.

It was true. Flesh was so weak.



"I admire you," Marley said when Ming became aware of his presence. They'd kept her tied to a bed without any analgesics since the fight. "Knowing who I am and still resisting. Such a trait is so rarely found in today's man, let alone a female child."

"Must be why you're treating me so well," Ming sneered.

Marley chuckled and approached the bed, his cane clicking on the floorboards of the small room. "If only you knew."

"Just kill me. I'm never living as a slave again."

"A caterpillar must go through immense struggle to emerge from the cocoon. Did you know the struggle fills the wings with a special fluid allowing it to fly when it emerges?" He gazed down at her like a lost object found. "You must have endured unimaginable adversaries to become so hardened. As such, I can't let the biological success of your body go to waste. The Serpent Girl will work for me again."

"Never."

"As you, no. Ming, or whoever you think you are, will be dead. Through the ancient art of dark psychology, I will rebuild you. A brainwashed assassin, a sleeper cell waiting for the snap of my finger to obey."

"If you touch me, I'll kill you."

"That's the beauty of mind manipulation. It can be hands off, and afterward, you won't remember a thing." Marley opened the

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door and a nurse in red, her face covered in black save for her eyes, rolled in a medical cart.

Ming wanted to believe it would be impossible for them to turn her into something she wasn't. But if this man was connected to the Mara, there were methods she'd be powerless against. She couldn't pull away from the injection, and when the liquid entered her body, Ming melted into the bed, wondering when she'd have her last thought. When she would no longer be herself. The thought was almost scarier than being a slave.

V

MAX NAVIGATED THE familiar streets of Chinatown and found the apartment address on the first floor of a dimly lit tenement complex. The hall smelt like wet dog and smoke. He knocked.

“Easy there, Jian?” Max stepped back, hands up, as the door opened revealing a broad-shouldered man in a butcher’s apron, knife in hand. “*Yī kē zǐdàn*. Shin Sho sent me.”

The man grunted, brown eyes taking stock of Max. Then a meaty hand wiped the knife on his leather apron.

There was a glint of recognition in the eyes of the brutish man. “*Jīnrù*,” he said, but the word conveyed no meaning to Max. With a slight wave of the knife, the man retreated back into the apartment, leaving the door open.

Max looked around the deserted hall, then stepped inside. The cramped dwelling was clean and sparse but smelled of blood. Nothing as offensive as Gehanna. More like the outdoor wet markets in Chinatown. He paused at the kitchen. “I’m Max Elliot. You’re Jian?”

Two bone-crunching whacks with the cleaver and the man began to package the bird meat on the counter.

“Ya. Jian.” He spoke another phrase, but the words still meant nothing to Max.

“This should be fun.” Max turned and took a seat on a chair, waiting for Jian to finish cleaning the freshly butchered dinner.



There was something both heroic and idiotic about Jian as he prepared for battle. Once the man finished with his cooking, he washed his hands and joined Max. They had been able to find

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limited success with communication. Shin's handwritten note helped immensely. Jian started packing an arsenal of weapons, and Max figured he got the point. After he added explosives and gunpowder though, Max wondered what else Shin had written in that message.

Since Jian understood English, but couldn't speak more than a few generic two-word phrases, whatever caused him to be in a life-debt to Shin Sho remained a mystery. Max admired the twisted loyalty. Some criminals had honor. Even if it was filtered through a distorted lens.

Together, they packed shotguns, pistols and knives, dynamite, and a bag of black powder into two large canvas bags. Jian walked Max to a locked carport not far away from the apartment. The bags looked inconspicuous enough. In the dark, no one noticed the end of Jian's shotgun from below the long trench coat. In addition to the weaponry, Max had received new clothes from the man. They were baggy on him, but it felt good to get out of the tattered rags he'd been stabbed in. While changing, Max had examined the wounds to find scabs hardening.

Once inside the locked carport, Jian opened the doors of a clean Cadillac coup. It stuck out like a sore thumb in the poverty of the apartment building. Jian had to be the richest poor man Max had ever met. Jian strapped two cans of gas in the back seat and Max wondered if it was because of the length of the drive or for more firepower.

VI

JIAN KILLED THE motor about twenty yards from the location. Recent rains made the terrain along the forest community paths muddy. After Shin's warning of Shadows of the Mara, the inconvenience felt safer than driving right up to the front door. Max didn't need to know Chinese to see that Jian understood their visit could lead to trouble. When they got out of the automobile, the sawed-off shotgun returned to inside Jian's trench coat. He handed Max a revolver.

They turned onto the pathway leading to the two-story cabin. Walking casually, Max studied the tree-line for sentinels. As they neared the front door, two dark formations Max had mistaken for decorative rocks became clear. Jian slowed his pace.

Two guards lay dead at the entrance. Their throats were punctured. Jian placed his fingers in a pool of blood and looked at Max.

“Wēnnuǎn.”

“Whatever you say.” Max looked at the door, cracked open an inch. “I'm going in.”

Jian stood and pulled the shotgun from his shoulder. Using the barrel, he pushed the door open and walked inside before Max could object.

There was a crack of gun fire followed by the blast of the shotgun. Lead embedded into the doorframe next to Max. He entered, gun drawn, to see Jian walking up the staircase. A dead man was at the landing near Max's feet. Buckshot peppered his chest.

Max edged along the wall checking the downstairs to make sure it was clear. Then he backed up the stairs to cover Jian from below. A door opened on the second landing. Max turned as Jian

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fired. The spray of bullets coated a man being held as a human shield by a second. The ‘shield’ screamed out, then was tossed over the railing. The man, standing vulnerable, fired at Jian as he loaded more shells. Max fired twice from the bottom of the staircase. Jian grunted, then the shotgun rocked the wooden walls.

The man fell backward, and Max hustled up the steps to meet Jian at the top. The big man’s jacket was torn just above his bicep and blood coated the fabric. Max turned behind, pointing the gun. Still no ambush from below.

Jian led them forward to the room. Back-to-back they moved as one. As they stepped inside, Max felt Jian’s body go rigid, but the blast never came.

“Zhèlǐ.”

Max moved from Jian’s back to survey the room. An elderly woman was bound to a chair with steel clamps. An IV bottle ran to her elbow. Max knew the health benefits of the technology but had never seen one in person except for reviving slaves in The City.

“Madame Breaux?”

“At your service.” The old woman gave a raspy sigh. “Though I despise the human moniker.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Max said. “I count five dead men. Is anyone else here?”

Breaux closed her baggy eyes. She seemed unrattled by the violence.

“No.”

“My name is Max and those men were enemies of Osoto sent here to kill you—”

“If only that were true.” Breaux had the phlegmy laugh of his grandma. “The Order isn’t very happy with me. My guess is they feel death would be too kind. Be a doll, Max, and let me out. Surely, one of the lads you shot has the key on him.”

Jian looked at Max hesitant. “Bù.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Max said, even though he was clueless. “The Order? Are they the same as the Shadows of the Mara?”

“Indeed. Humans working for the Others as you may call them. Now be a good dear and fetch that key.”

“Not so fast . . .” Max evaluated the scene. “If you’re working for Osoto, why are you chained?”

“I don’t *work* for Osoto. Five years ago, he summoned and

bound me inside this vessel known as Madame Breaux. As long as her physical body is alive, I'm stuck here." Breaux looked at the IV. "And they've made sure to keep me alive. I provide Osoto with answers because complying makes my physical existence here more tolerable."

"So you want to check out of this place . . . one way or another." Max smirked.

"One way or another . . ." Breaux surrendered. "Preferably painless."

Jian peeked out the door, guarding it with the shotgun.

"I think we can help each other," Max said. "This Order has taken my friend Ming. I need to know where she is."

"Very well. Sit. This requires your help," she said. "Relax and close your eyes. Think of this woman. I will endeavor to read your thoughts."

Max hesitated a moment, then he sat down on the floor and closed his lids, listening to Breaux's voice, allowing the memories to consume him.

"See the color of her hair. Eyes. Smell her. Feel the touch of her. What she means to you."

The woman's voice became less grating and more hypnotic. A hum grew from beneath the waddle of her flabby neck.

"Interesting," the woman said, and Max blinked from his vision, unsure of how long he'd been unconscious. "You and I are not so different."

"How's that?" Max asked as his eyes adjusted to the room again.

"Your body. The dumplings. You almost know what it's like to be a separate awareness from the dense chemical matter of your body. Yes?"

Max nodded. He remembered being stabbed. The feeling of leaving into death. No pain, and yet, his body clung to life due to the dumplings, and he felt gravity pull him back.

"Where's Ming?"

"Los Angeles. The Order has imprisoned her in their temple."

"Temple?" Max thought of his dream. "Why do they need her? Is this part of their plan to return to the surface?"

"Of course. All humans are part of their plan—if they allow themselves to be. Even you." Breaux smiled.

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“The Mara have left The City. Will they be waiting at the temple?”

Breaux shook her head. “You will find only a handful of The Order there. The Mara’s return to the surface will not be as you imagine. America was chosen for the next cosmic alignment. The conditions here are receptive. But during the transition, they could be waiting in any of the *many* cities and mazes deep beneath the earth.”

“What conditions?” Max asked, only one of the many questions threatening to delay him. Whatever mindreading Breaux had engaged him in, had zapped the adrenaline of the gunfight and more from Max’s body. Understanding took precedent over the time crunch.

“I cannot teach you the mysteries of the cosmos in one sitting, boy. Ming is what matters. If you hurry, you can save her.”

“How?” Max said. “I had a dream. Pyramids covered the earth. Spewing nasty air. A pollution that . . . infected people somehow. As far as the eye could see. Is it true? Is that the future the Mara want?”

“You’re intuitive, Max.” Her old eyes scanned him again. “But I would not waste time understanding what the Mara are and the true extent of their plan.”

That furious darkness swelled in Max again.

“I’ve been through hell and back. So has Ming. I want to know why. Otherwise . . .” Max stood up and checked the IV. “I’m gonna make sure you’re alive when The Order returns here. Like you said. I doubt they’re going to be kind enough to kill you.”

“Very well.”

Max smiled as the old bag of flesh crinkled its face in disgust.

“There is an unseen world of spirit all around us. Even you have a soul tethered to the body you call Max Elliot. I’m currently tethered to Madame Breax. We are not our bodies. The difference is, I’m aware of the fact. You have an inkling. Ninety-eight percent of humanity has no clue.

“*The Mara* are not the physical reptilian species that kept you in The City as a slave. They are dark souls. Fourth density beings that can only exist on earth if they are entwined with the physical. They have chosen to continue incarnating into this physical plane in the bodies of the last remaining kings of old. Every culture has

their version of dragons and serpents. These bi-pedal creatures existed hundreds of thousands of years ago, and before they died out, the Mara entered them, saving and perpetuating the species, altering the DNA through sexual mutations and dark spiritual influence.

“Spiritual bodies enjoy much more freedom than their physical counterparts. However, even spirits must eat to survive. If the Mara shed their physical forms, they need to be assured that a healthy supply of spiritual food can be consumed on earth.”

“What’s spiritual food?” Max asked.

“Emotions.” Breaux’s withered lips peeled back in a smile. “The Mara can only feed on the darkest of harvests. Confusion. Anger. Hatred. Fear . . . That is what sustains the Mara. They wish to create a world with so much fear, that they can shed their physical forms but be able to remain on this planet due to the abundance of negative energy vibrating in its spiritual atmosphere. They would be visibly undetectable to us as fourth density beings. A dark, invisible matter feeding off humans.”

“Shed their physical form? Feed?”

“I told you these were things you couldn’t understand.” Breaux looked around the room. “We’re surrounded by invisible entities at all times. Some are benevolent. Others are not. The dark ones feed on negative emotions. They can inject you with thoughts that are not your own to fuel a spiral of depression that then further feeds them. Different entities savor different emotions. But it’s all driven by fear. These entities cannot exist for long in happy people and societies with strong virtues and morals. Now do you see?”

“How do the pyramids transmit . . . ?”

“Children will be the primary catalyst for the mass devolution of human consciousness. They will be placed in stone transmitters. Dark magic will separate their souls from bodies and infuse a dark entity into the physical child. A ritual will put the child into a sleep-like trance. The darkness then tells the child’s brain how to think. The geometry of the pyramid’s structure and furnishings amplify the low electromagnetic waves of the brain and transmit it like an invisible blanket over the population. Little by little, it erodes society away. Mental illness, war, poverty and greed become the everyday norm for all, and then the Mara can survive in their 4th density forms, more powerful than any physical ruler.”

THE ORDER OF ETERNAL SLEEP

Black will become white and good will become evil.

“Why would The Order help in their own enslavement?”

“The Order of Eternal Sleep are farmers for the Mara. They are placed in favorable conditions of physical life in return for maintaining the network of fear, creating empires that ensure a spiritual food supply of human misery for centuries to come.”

“Where’s the Hollywood temple?”

“I have your word, you’ll set me free?”

“I promise.”

Breaux told him where a ledger and quill were so he could write it down.

“No point in getting that key, is there?” Breaux said afterward.

“I was thinking the same thing. You’re in the woods. No transportation. No food . . . But I did promise.”

She read his eyes. “Don’t enjoy it too much, Max. The darkness loves that.”

Max smiled, unable to suppress the bloodlust that blossomed in his chest. He raised the gun and blew her face apart. Jian jumped and turned. Whatever entity was trapped in Madame Breaux, it was now released.

There was plenty of flammable material in the house, allowing them to save the gasoline and explosives. Max had a feeling they would need all the firepower they could at the temple.

As they walked away from the burning structure, Max thought of Shin. Did Jian just overprepare? Or had Shin alluded to destroying a temple in his brief message? Did it vindicate Shin or was he still a coward?

In matters of The City, it was difficult to discern good and evil. Truth from lies.

Max handed Jian the address Breaux dictated. “*Yī kē zǐdàn.*”

VIII

April 17th

THEY HAD TO stop at a small roadway inn for food and rest. Max spent more time awake than asleep, and he waited until mid-morning before finally dragging himself from bed. He knocked on Jian's door and found the man up and inspecting the arsenal.

"This is a rescue mission first. Then demolition."

Jian nodded.

"When do you want to do this?" Max asked, not intending to understand the man's response.

"Sundown," Jian said, surprising him.

Max nodded, but he wished they had more time. More people. He went back to his room and mapped out the drive. They were only about half an hour away from the temple. Then he laid on the bed and looked at his scars, thinking about Madame Breaux. She was right. He couldn't make much sense of her confession. The Mara creating misery to feed off, though, that much he understood. Now that he thought of it, they always breathed in his sins. What was The City except a manufactured illusion of freedom? Depravity was allowed to thrive as long as it was directed by the masters.

He couldn't image that hell making its way onto the surface.

You'll help us spread the darkness, Max.

As the sun began to fade, Jian knocked.

They travelled in silence. Max was marveled by the vehicle's performance, but he said nothing. Access to personal automobiles was likely another perk bestowed on Shin and Jian for "living in harmony" with the Mara. For a moment, he wondered what it would be like to join them.

He replaced the thought with daydreams of rescuing Ming. If

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he was going to feed the negative entities that surrounded him, he'd only do it through Mara blood from now on.



They drove past the brownstone connected to a warehouse twice in the span of three hours. The address was correct, and Max felt foolish now, believing he was going to see a giant pyramid. Jian parked far enough away that they could just make out the sentinel who made a pass around the building complex every hour. If it wasn't for the guard, Max would have assumed Breaux lied. Nothing about the structure indicated it was a temple, although when The City was involved, Max knew looks were deceiving.

After the eight o'clock rotation, Jian grabbed the shotgun. "Time."

Max led the way. The large Asian didn't move fast, especially with all the explosives, but they were able to wire the perimeter of the warehouse with powder and dynamite thirty minutes before the next sentry rotation commenced. They caught their breath near the door of the brownstone. Max had a knife ready. Jian had the shotgun cocked. A much smaller black powder bag was strapped across his chest and the larger duffel of explosives was strapped to his back.

A wave of discomfort washed over Max as they waited. It was difficult to notice when they were focused on the mission. At rest however, there was a familiar feeling of dread that accompanied the sarcophagi. The darkness, as Valbas called it, was very much like a gentle vibration you could feel near this building.

Max looked at Jian. The man was cold steel. He was ready and showed no signs of the strange feelings Max was experiencing. Movement sounded on the other side of the door and Max watched the handle.

A key clicked. The door opened, closed—

"Don't move." Max stuck the tip of the knife into the tall man's back right as he went to relock the door, his left hand clamping around the sentry's thin neck. "My friend and I really want a tour of this place."

"Easy there, chap. You're making a big mistake," the man said without attempting to break free.

“Open the door.”

“You don’t understand. I’m a cop—”

Max applied more pressure to the knife and the man pushed the door open. Still holding him by the neck, Max shoved the sentry inside with such force the man stumbled against the wall and fell to the floor. Jian followed, covering the man with the shotgun. Max closed the door.

“How many of you are there?” Max’s voice was low but firm.

“There’s no money here,” the man said. “I was hired to prevent vandalism to the building. The warehouse is full of construction supplies; ain’t something you can just pilfer on foot, but—”

“How many?”

Max crouched next to the man on the ground. He looked from Max to the shotgun-wielding Jian. Understanding passed over his eyes, and he folded his arms across his chest. The defiance lit the fuse of Max’s rage. This Order was an extension of the Mara. They weren’t going to squeal like some two-bit criminal. Expecting anything useful from this man was illogical. Instead, the questioning would simply be a vehicle to unleash his fury.

Max lunged and struck the man in the mouth while his folded arms were unable to shield the blow. Before the cry could alert occupants upstairs, Max jammed a pre-torn cloth from his pocket into the man’s mouth. Stuffing it further, the man’s face turned red.

“You can start talking the easy way or the hard way.” Max pushed the man’s forehead down, pinning him against the floor, and placed the knife tip just inside the man’s left nostril. “This is the hard way.”

Max yanked and the small flap of outer nostril cartilage separated from the man’s face. He choked against the gag, eyes watering. Max repeated the tiny incision on the other nostril. Then he waited for the man to calm down.

“That was nothing compared to what comes next. Answer the easy way—the quiet way—and you can still live through this. Understood?”

Max removed the bunched cloth but kept his hand close. The man sucked in oxygen. Jian’s eyes glanced at Max, he felt them admonishing his decision.

“How many of you are here?”

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The blood-smearred lips of the man spread into a smile. “Neither one of you is getting out alive.”

“I guess we have something in common then.”

Max stuffed the cloth back into the man’s mouth and palmed his forehead, pinning him to the ground again. Then he jammed five holes into the man’s stomach, each time burying the knife up to the hilt, lingering just long enough to enjoy the warm flush of blood. It felt good. Felt like payback.

Like he had pleased more than just his own desire . . .

The muffled screams were barely audible. The man’s body seized and bucked as he vomited into the gag. Yellow chunks oozed from his bloody nose. Max held him still, watching unfazed as the man choked, fluids spilling out over Max’s hand.

Jian put his boot on the man’s windpipe and crushed it, silencing the spectacle. He took a ring of keys from the dead man and, without much change in expression, crept up the stairs.

It took Max an extra beat before he shook the pulsating rhythm from his head and followed.

Jian moved faster now that most of the explosives were around the building rather than on his back. Max joined him at the top landing a few paces behind. Another set of stairs led to the third floor. They exchanged a quick glance, and Max pointed to the door they stood next to. He had a feeling it led to the corridor that spanned between the buildings.

Jian slide the key into the lock. Someone on the other side must have heard them. As Jian pulled the door open, it was kicked wide. Jian’s hand cracked against the wall and a long sword thrust outward, catching him in the side.

Grunting against the pain, Jian swung the shot gun around his body. The butt knocked the sword away, then Jian spun the weapon upward and blasted the guard. The man’s black cossak shredded with red holes. Buckshot, acrid smoke, and deafening ears.

Jian stepped over the bleeding man and into a hall.

Max followed. Placing a hand on the man’s shoulder, he noted the dark red staining Jian’s left side.

“Keep moving,” Jian said, staring down the hall.

And fast, Max thought. They had just rung the welcome bell. He pulled the revolver and followed.

A doorframe and room were coming up on the right side but focusing was difficult. Max's mind was already racing ahead to an exit strategy. If Jian bled to death, how was he to accomplish the mission alone?

They reached the door. Max opened it and then stepped back, breath held. No shots. Max stuck his head in, giving the room a quick scan, then Jian led with the shotgun.

There was a hospital bed and—

So much like the day he found her in Gehanna, loose undergarments and grime were all that covered Ming's body.

"That's Ming." Max looked to Jian. "You have to get her to safety."

Jian grunted.

Ming's eyelids flittered opened.

"She's more important. I'll destroy this place." Max held out his hand for the bags.

Jian hesitated.

"*Yī kē zǐdàn*," Max said.

Jian sighed. Then, accepting he wasn't going to complete both aspects of the mission, he handed over the duffel bag and shotgun.

"Is this a dream?" Ming's voice was faint.

"Yeah. I think so," Max said, cutting her bed restraints. He wrapped the bed sheet around her torso, covering her. "Isn't everything?"

"Max?"

Jian hoisted her from the bed and into his arms, a fresh gout of blood splashing from his gut to the floor. The big man grunted away the pain and stood as straight as he could.

"Give me twenty minutes," Max said, using his fingers to illustrate the numbers. "If I'm not back on time, blow the place."

Ming's head lolled from side to side. "Max, what's going on?"

"You're going home. And . . ." It was too difficult to convey all the things he needed her to know and there was no time to say them anyway.

"I have no home . . ." Her words were swallowed up in whatever drugs swam through her veins.

A splattering of blood followed them out of the room, and Max hoped Ming would sober up soon. If Jian didn't last long, Ming would be on her own. He didn't even know where she was being taken to. A safe house? Secretly back to Shin?

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“Come.” Jian nodded as he headed back to the stairs.

“I need to see the other building.” Max also wondered if there were more prisoners. Kids as Breaux had indicated.

Jian sulked away without protest and Max adjusted the bags and gun. His frame was not as suited as Jian’s to carry such firepower. Luckily, no one had shown up since the gunshot. Max wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or not. There was a single exit at the other end of the hall, but another bedroom was nearing on his left before said exit.

Max tested the doorknob and again, it opened. It was more difficult to clear the room with the bags around his chest, but once he did, the room was identical to Ming’s. Empty save for a bed, nightstand, and IV drip. This time the victim on the mattress was male.

“Shit . . .” Max whispered. “McCloud, wake up.”

McCloud’s head rolled.

“It’s me, Max.”

“Max . . . ?” McCloud’s eyes widened and a momentary flash of alertness seemed to return.

“Yes. It’s me. Do you remember how many of them are here—”

Cloudy waters seeped back into McCloud’s pupils, and he began whispering to himself.

“Dammit, John. Wake up.”

Max looked over his shoulder. *Yī kē zǐdàn*, echoed in his mind. He cut the straps, then yanked out the IV catheter.

John cried aloud and clarity returned to his eyes with the pain. Max grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Listen to me. You need to get out of here.” Max threw off the thin sheet and tried to pull him up from the bed.

“Ming . . .” John stammered. “She’s not safe. We need to warn her.”

“She’s safe now.”

“Thank God . . .” McCloud’s head sunk back to the mattress. “I tried . . .”

“You did great. Thanks for taking care of her. But now it’s time to get you out. Wake up.” Max slapped his cheek. “I can’t carry you. I need to destroy this place.”

You can’t beat them. Better to play the game.

Max shut out the voice of Shin Sho. His patience was fleeing.

“For your own good, buddy.” He grabbed McCloud in a bear hug and heaved him from the bed to the floor, dragging the drugged detective on hands and knees to the door. Max peeked out first, then turned McCloud’s head. “You hightail it out that door and down the stairs. Don’t look back.”

McCloud slumped from his grasp to the floor, and Max stepped into the corridor heading for the opposite exit, which he assumed lead into the entrance to the warehouse. He’d done all he could for McCloud. His debt was paid, and Max refused to look back.

Upon reaching the door, he found its wood carved and stained by an obelisk and serpent. Above its pointed top was a circular seal with geometrical designs inside, similar to what he saw in the pyramids of Gehenna. As with the others, the door handle yielded to him.

Stepping through the door was like stepping under The City’s arch. Max entered upon a concrete slab that stretched in a thin perimeter around the ‘warehouse’, like a sidewalk. Inside the sidewalk border was a massive opening in the foundation. Rising up from underground was half of a pyramid, its gleaming stone cap almost touching the ceiling of the warehouse-shell around it. Under the sidewalk, the pyramid’s base extended out of sight into the subterranean chambers of Hollywood. Stone shafts ran from the sides of the pyramid to the walls of the building. Max recalled his dream. The black smog pouring over the world. Emanating from a stone sarcophagus. Emanating from him . . .

A disease of the mind will spread throughout the masses.

Breaux had told him the truth.

A single bridge extended from the sidewalk to an entrance cut into the pyramid’s side. Max crossed over the abyss, looking down once to wonder how deep the structure went. Temperature dropped as he passed inside the pyramid. The pulsating vibrations felt different inside. Torches lit a path. The only path. Downward.

Max considered cutting a hole into the black powder bag and leaving a trail so that he could return and light it in safety. But after seeing McCloud and Ming’s torture, Jian stabbed, Max knew he wasn’t coming back.

Nothing short of decapitation.

Or several pounds of explosives, he thought.

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Dumplings couldn't overcome his body being blown into a million pieces.

It's a suicide mission.

"I hope so." Max adjusted the weapons and started down the steps.



Once the descent leveled off, Max considered setting up explosives. There was enough firepower outside that even with a smaller blast inside, all would be ignited, and the pyramid should be rendered unfunctional. Max wasn't ready to risk it though. Valbas spoke as if it were a machine of sorts—ancient generator using the mathematics of consciousness. There would be an engine somewhere, a heart, and Max wanted to mount his strike there.

The sound of running water followed Max as he pushed onward. He rounded a corner and encountered a robed figure beside a chamber door affixed to the stone—like his cell in Gehanna. Max didn't hesitate. The shotgun blast shook dust and dirt from the small ceiling and echoed through the passageways, overwhelming the sound of water. This time, he had to assume that someone had heard the shotgun.

Max kicked the corpse away from the door and dropped a stick of dynamite by the entrance. If this door was being guarded, then hopefully something important was inside. Taking the gamble, Max poked a small hole into the black powder bag releasing a trail. Max pushed open the door and stepped into a large chamber.

A dozen sarcophagi were arranged in a circle. In the center of the circle was a black altar. Max entered, spilling the powder as he moved toward the configuration. His head swiveled taking in all he could, trying to assess the multiple threats. Outside of the sarcophagi circle, five robed figures turned their attention to Max. Above them hung a naked, bloody man. Beyond the hanging sacrifice, was a topless woman sitting on a red plush throne. Her platform raised by four steps.

The members of the order, except for the woman, moved to the walls of the chamber, arming themselves with spears, knives, or swords. Thankfully he didn't notice any guns.

"Here's something you don't see every day." Max stepped past

the tombs, pausing. The altar was surrounded by an empty moat of space. The gap ran around the altar space and the arrangement of the sarcophagi. Cooler air and the sound of water emanated from the space. Max hopped over the moat approaching the figures head on, powder still pouring even though he knew he wouldn't be able to light it from outside anymore. They had him.

"You fool." The woman said, stepping from her exalted throne and walking to join the rest of The Order.

"Uh, uh." Max held up the shotgun and dropped the bag of explosives to the ground on the other side of the moat, ten feet from them. "You move, and I blow this place sky high."

The woman laughed. "This temple was not constructed by slaves. These blocks are precise, true. They won't fall from a few sticks of dynamite."

Max wondered how close Jian was to lighting the fuse outside.

Footsteps behind him, and Max glanced to see the chamber door he'd entered through now filled with more robed figures. They advanced on him from all sides. Max pulled the bag of black power from his chest and threw it at the surging Order and the bag of dynamite. If he heard the explosion, his mind forgot it the moment the shock wave hit him.



Ming was dazed, but she understood she was in an automobile. She wasn't sure if she had hallucinated Max, but she was positive of the explosion. She'd watched the large man pour a trail of something flammable and light it. Now, he was driving them, and a great rumble, a fireball of destruction consumed the building they escaped from. Within her haze, Ming wished she'd been left at the building.

Her gaze went to the driver's blood-smearred belly. She could smell death taking hold of him. Ming's eyes closed after that thought to stop the dizziness. Although her sight was black, she heard the rain start, felt the rocking car, and smelt the sweat and blood that filled its interior. Ming kept her eyes closed and soon the sounds morphed into the twisting of metal and the impact of heavy bodies moving through space, then suddenly stopping.

EPILOGUE

MING WOKE WITH a deep inhalation. She was in a bed, shivering under a thin sheet and gown.

“Morning sleeping beauty.” A nurse was writing on a chart. “What glorious timing.”

“Where am I?”

“East ward of St. John’s Hospital. You were rescued from a car crash—” The nurse bit her lip. “Let me get the doctor, actually. He’ll want to talk with you right away.”

The nurse hustled out of the curtain-partitioned room before Ming could respond. It was difficult to remember the events that led her here. Nothing seemed real. Except the pain that was awakening in her body.

On either side of the curtains, she saw the shadows of patients. Heard them cough and shift. Ming settled back onto the bed, closed her eyes and tried to recall. At some point, the curtain pulled back again, and a doctor entered. He put on his spectacles, took the chart from the nurse who returned with him, then looked at Ming.

“You’re a very fortunate young lady. I’m sorry to inform you the driver has passed away.”

“Driver . . .” The word triggered her brain to light up like a trail of kerosene back to Altadena. She had been rescued by someone; perhaps sent by Shin Sho. And someone else . . .

Max? Impossible.

“Do you know your name?”

Ming looked at the medical staff before her. Ideas were still sluggish, but she was coherent enough to realize she was alone, with no money, no clothes, no one to know where she was. This was either her death or rebirth.

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“What is the last thing you remember?” The doctor watched her like a monkey in a zoo.

“I was kidnapped.”

“My God. Then this man . . .”

Ming could still feel all the cuts beneath her hospital gown and sheet.

“He tortured me,” she lied

“Did you . . . I mean . . . His injury didn’t appear to be caused by the crash. Do you know how the wounds happened?”

Ming shook her head. “He injected me and that’s why I’m sick and woozy.”

Behind the doctor the nurse put a mortified hand over her mouth.

“I’m so sorry.” The doctor turned to the nurse and waved her along.

“I . . . I just need to get to San Fran. Please. He took all my money . . .” Ming broke into sobs and she wasn’t sure if this was still part of the act.

“Of course. The sheriff will be come by for a statement. Afterward, I’ll take you personally to the train station.”

Ming smiled through the tears. If destiny had kept her alive this long, then she was going to change. She could find John. They could work together.

“What’s in San Francisco?” the doctor asked.

“Home. And a chance to make things right.”



“When was the last time you saw Detective McCloud?”

Harris paused to think. They were standing on rickety scaffolding the fire department had erected over the collapsed sections of the buildings, and Harris was in so much shock still, he couldn’t even recall the name of the detective escorting him.

“Almost a week ago. He left for this address and never returned.” Harris steeled himself as always, but he wasn’t sure he could come back from this one. John McCloud had been a special guy. “When we checked his house, it was trashed. The kitchen was covered in blood. But McCloud was gone. I sent officers to retrace his steps at this address. These buildings were standing but no one

answered, and they found no clues through the liaison between our departments.”

They continued on the makeshift plank flooring and reached the landing. The Hollywood Detective led him into a smoke-damaged room. There was a bed and a small table. The walls were blackened, however, Harris recognized symbols from the Grant fire painted beneath the soot.

Hollywood pointed to a charred nightstand and handed him an evidence bag with McCloud’s belongings. “There is where we found his badge and wallet, various other personal effects.”

“His body?” Lieutenant Harris asked.

“Not in this building. He’s definitely not one of the two bodies we found outside. Unfortunately, we can’t get into the other building just yet. It’s a hazardous rescue mission clearing that . . . rubble.”

Harris had the same mental pause. *That . . . ? What was it?* The burnt structure remaining after the explosion did not look like any of the other warehouses or buildings in the area. There had been walls of stone masonry *within* the outer building. It was the craziest damn thing Harris had ever seen. Because of the rubble, there was no way of knowing how deep the stone walls went or what they could possibly be.

“Once this is excavated, we’ll get some answers hopefully. Until then, I’m afraid we know as little as you.”

“I understand,” Harris said, suppressing the hot flare of emotion.

“What was detective McCloud working on?”

“Hard to explain.” Harris handed over the folder of evidence from Grant Street. “McCloud thought he was dealing with some kind of cult. I brushed him off . . . but seeing all this—whatever this is . . . Well, there’s too much at risk for me not to investigate every angle now and employ every helping hand possible.”

“Of course. Can I take these back to the station and have them reproduced?” Hollywood asked, looking through the files.

“Sure. Careful. After McCloud’s house was burglarized, these are the last copies.”

“Will do.” Hollywood smiled and led Harris back down the scaffolding.

Harris looked at the small package of McCloud’s belongings.

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It was more than he had of Max. Neither of them had deserved unknown deaths.

“Cult or gang, I have an organized crime agent working on an official report regarding McCloud’s movements since the Grant fire. In the meantime, Detective . . . I’m sorry. This whole thing has my head spinning. What was your name again?”

“Understandable, sir. It’s Whitney. Dell Whitney.”

“Course. Thank you. Please familiarize yourself with this Grant case and when Agent Wax has finished his report, I will get the two of you together to discuss. Hopefully, by then we’ll have an answer as to what’s buried under this rubble. I think if our departments work together, we can find out what’s happened to a good man and solve a much larger problem.”

“Agreed.” Detective Whitney stuck out his hand, smiling. “Thank you, Lieutenant Harris.”

Harris remained for a while, watching the cleanup, thinking about how life had spiraled out of control ever since the Digger shooting. If he could go back to that night . . .

I’m sorry, he thought, not sure if he was speaking to Max, McCloud, or O’Neil. *I didn’t know things would turn out this way.*

The first thing McCloud had told him was that it felt like the Chinatown Surgeon. In hindsight, the comparison was chilling. Was this religious cult connected to the skin suits, the powdery drug, and Max’s disappearance, too?

Harris began walking, waving off the cabbie who was waiting to take him back to the train station. There was no rush and he needed the exercise. All he had was time now.



“I was hoping Detective McCloud would have come in person,” Dr. Cushing told Harris as they waited outside the hospital room for George Wellington to fold the few clothes that had been donated to him.

The child had remembered his name two days ago.

“Me too,” Harris said, keeping his voice low. “Unfortunately . . . Well, I’ll just be transparent. McCloud went missing while investigating the case.”

“Dear God. I can’t believe it. He . . . He did a lot to help this

boy.” Cushing paused as George walked out of the room. Looking down, Cushing said, “Pleasant dreams this time, I assume?”

“No dreams.” The boy smiled. “Just sleep.”

“Even better. This is Lieutenant Harris he is a special type of police officer. He will be looking for your parents.”

“That’s right. I’m also going to personally take you to a nice foster home where you can stay for a few days while I locate your mom and dad.”

George nodded. “What happened to the other man with the badge?”

“He’s uh . . . out rescuing another young boy,” Cushing said, his demeanor softer than it had been in years.

“That’s right,” Harris said without missing a beat. “Detective McCloud wants you to know that he’s proud of you and advises you to stay strong. Now that we know your name, this will all work out soon.”

Harris extended his hand and the boy took it.



Valbas hissed in an ancient tongue, the harsh words of his ancestors.

Having retreated from The City, it’d taken several weeks for word to reach him.

“Survivors?” he asked the page.

“None have been found. Teams have excavated down to the inner chamber. The fight happened there. An explosion broke out the altar floor. Between that and the fire, it’s difficult to identify who is dead and who is missing. The chiefs took it upon themselves to halt the execution of the rites at the three remaining temples.”

“Fools.” Valbas struck the arm rest of his throne, hissing again. Three operational temples across the country were better than none. “Were the hits against Osoto’s organization completed? Where’s this Breaux Amiri spoke of?”

“All were successful but one. The raid for Breaux was discovered after the temple explosion. Both sandmen were dead. So was Breaux. That solidified the chiefs’ decision to halt.”

Valbas stroked his chin in thought. Every chain connecting the police to the Engineers had been severed. Who could have intercepted the sandmen sent to kill Breaux?

THE ORDER OF ETERNAL SLEEP

One thought would not abate. As impossible as it was.

He crafted Max well. And even if one selfless spark remained in the man's pit of darkness, how could he have located Breaux or their temple so quickly. Impossible. Unless he had help . . .

"The remaining three chiefs await your order."

"I will meet with the council to discuss reconstruction in the west and a new timeline for the other temples. Until there is an answer, I have one mission for them: find Max Elliot."

"The slave?"

"Dead or alive, I want him."

"You don't think—"

"Just find him."

"Yes, my Lord." The page bowed and retreated from the room.

Valbas retired to his ritual room, unable to shake the feeling. He was not looking forward to standing before the council without an answer as to how this happened. With Amiri, Marley, and the members of the west temple gone, it would take time to regroup and investigate where the leak occurred. But like the temple's reconstruction, Valbas would get what he wanted. It was only a matter of time.

"Well played, if it was you, Max," he spoke to the empty room. "I did not expect that move. But you have merely prolonged the inevitable."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.C. Mendes is the co-host of Horror Business—a podcast dedicated to helping authors make a career of their writing. He is also the co-owner of Blood Bound Books—an independent publisher whose mission is spreading hope through dark fiction.

Mendes has been publishing dark fiction under various names since 2009. His collaborations with Nikki Noir can be found in Godless.com's *Petite Mort* series.

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