

SUNSET

Prologue

Smokey tendrils wrapped themselves tauntingly around the man who was not a man as he stumbled through the tall glass doors into the downtown café. The thing, whose name had once been Nour, stood there dressed in a stained galabeya looking around, not feeling the slight caress from the chess player's smoke to his left.

Mustafa stared at the man from across the room nursing a bottle of Stella. Taking the cigarette out of his mouth and accidentally ashing on his designer jeans, he gazed at the man with his dark brown eyes. He watched the man's jaw working frantically. The high ceilings of the café were great for reducing heat, but the rectangular columns placed throughout and the odd angles of the room made it horrible for acoustics. Moreover, he could not hear what the thing was saying, if anything intelligible at all, above the growing din of the Thursday afternoon crowd.

The chess players ignored him too intent on their games, and everyone else was too interested in their company or their drinks. Only the waiter kept an eye on the man, but he did not get up from his seat.

“He has been standing there for too long,” thought Mustafa taking another sip of beer.

The light almost, fizzy concoction was heavenly. To a first time drinker, it may have been stale, but for Mustafa, who worked long hours at the nearby stock exchange, it was respite from the shambles his life had become. He regretted turning to drink as a solution, but he would never leave it. Resting his beer on his small but developing beer gut, head sinking into his chest and stubble tickling his neck, Mustafa continued to stare the man, seeing but not really seeing him. He pondered how difficult it was being an alcoholic in a society where drinking is prohibited by Islam. Granted, it was freer than some Muslim countries, but it was still hard facing his coworkers some of them who were devout Muslims.

“It would matter for much longer though,” he thought, picturing the hot roof of the stock exchange at midday, “Just one quick leap.”

The man who was not a man who stank of sweat and desperation began to moan.

“Uhhhhh...”

It would start of strong and end in little more than a whisper. It seemed to come from the very pit of his stomach voicing the oppression, the suffering, and the hunger he had had in his life. This man's life, as with many of the poor, lived in a constant state of hunger; it was their curse. His curse. Except the curse was different now. He did not see it as a curse; he did not see it as anything. Just a need—a need for flesh.

With that first moan and the two more after it, the café fell silent. Mustafa's eyes flicked to the waiter who had stood up and started walking towards the man. In that instant, the slight tension

that Mustafa had felt while watching the odd man turned into fear. Coincidentally, it was also the start of the carnage.

The nearest chess player's table was within arm's reach of anyone entering, and it didn't take long for the creature to step, bend down, and sink his teeth into the bulging fat of the closest player's neck. The fat prevented him from reaching the vein which it sought. Blood gushing down the brown coat of the rotund man, the thing bit again. The man struggled with the wound sending blood soaked chess pieces flying. He collapsed to the floor still grasping the rook he had been about to move as if it would be enough to get him across the Acheron. He had not made a sound.

The waiter now just a few feet away from the man put his hand up to subdue the creature. The creature took this opportunity, clearing the five feet that separated them, to bite off his fingers. As the waiter recoiled in shock, the monster spit the fingers, moved in, and tore out his throat as well. Within the space of a few seconds, two Egyptian men lay dying silently pooling in their own blood.

Then it seemed everything happened at once. People moved; rickety chairs were overturned and drinks were left forgotten or knocked off the table. Living human beings tried to get away from the savage murderer. They rushed to the large windows kicking out the loose fitting wooden boards which had been erected for privacy. The creature blocked the only actual entrance by its sheer presence, but it quickly evacuated that space in search of more sustenance. Moving to the right, it headed towards Mustafa's side, a now chaotic and dysfunctional mass of static furniture and frantic human beings.

Mustafa sat calmly as people scrambled around him. He watched an obviously foreign woman, dressed in tight jeans and a black shirt with white polka dots push aside an old man in a crumpled business suit who had been trying to climb out the window. He lost his balance on the sill, and his head hit the ground with an ugly smack. He didn't get back up.

"Perhaps, if I stay still enough, it won't see me, or perhaps, I should go," his beer fuddled mind told him, following a logic that only makes sense after too much alcohol, "Perhaps, I don't want to leave."

His decision was made for him as the creature knocked the bottle from its perch and ripped open his stomach with its teeth tearing through clothing with an ecstatic abandon. Mustafa didn't as much as move not really feeling the pain through his alcohol desensitized nerves. His last thoughts were of the roof and how the sun had shone so brightly on that yellow paint.

By this time, the café had emptied. Mustafa's cigarette lay on the ground still smoking as the creature began to feast, regenerating itself.

Chapter 1

Jason Storch and Baybars Saleh were excited. They were two young men beginning their adventure at the ancient city of Luxor far down in Upper Egypt. They had slept well on the

overnight train, as well as one can—even in first class, and were ready to go. Sunrise promised to make it a hot but ultimately rewarding day.

Five ‘o clock prayer woke Nour who was feeling sore, tired, and angry. The rugs in the small worn mosque in Islamic Cairo provided only minimal comfort and protection from the unforgiving and cold-sapping stone floors. It was a quiet and safe place as well as his home, at least for now, but that did not make his bed any softer. All throughout prayer his head was filled with dark thoughts; mostly they were just complaints about the hardness of life and the struggle mounted by him and so many others like him to survive in this cruel world. It did not make for a great beginning to the day. Stomach rumbling, he gathered his things and left the mosque heading towards Talaat Harb Street.

He left for work dreading the exhaustion of running tea back and forth on the street for his boss, whom he secretly called Al Malik [the king]. His boss, Biyushi, never gave him a moments rest and barely fed him. The pay got him by—just barely—but he couldn’t leave. If he did, he would go back to being as poor as he had been, and more importantly, he would never have a chance to marry his boss’ daughter. Nour, as an orphan, had no family to turn to, and he was estranged from his extended family for reasons that had existed before he was born. He considered it an act of Allah that he had received this job, but it didn’t make life perfect.

“Man, I love fuul so much,” said a satisfied Jason after chowing down on three sandwiches.

“Mmm-hmm,” Baybars agreed through mouthfuls of beans.

They had spent the morning wandering around the Karnack Temples. The two twenty year olds, one American and one Egyptian, were overawed by the huge complex and struggled to take it all in. The enormous blocks of stone stacked on top of one another spoke of another age, something old, forgotten, and not fully understood. It recalled another set of gods, alien to their experiences. In reality, these structures had existed in the space of time equal to the beginning of a blink in the cosmic eye.

“Okay, so the painting in the Hypostyle Hall is how old?” asked Baybars sitting in the dirty ful and tamiya shop.

“The guidebook says it was started by Ramses I which would be around 1294 BC,” replied Jason.

“Wow, what’s next on the list of things to do? Definitely not a carriage,” said Baybars, “I don’t like horses.”

“Yea, yea, yea sure,” Jason grinned, “Let’s try out a felucca ride. The water will be great after the hot sun.”

The sun beat down on them just two and one half hours past its zenith; the flaming orb turning Jason dark and Baybars darker. Jason was tall with cropped brown hair and green eyes. At twenty he was the spitting image of his grandfather, a robust man who never said no to

nature. This trait had passed down to Jason who had already hiked the complete Appalachian trail. As a native of upper New York, there was no shortage of nature; so coming to Cairo had been a drastic change. Passing by Luxor temple as they crossed the street, they sought out a boat captain who eagerly roped in this pair of tourists.

Nour stood on the street fuming. He hadn't been spit on since he started working this job two years ago. He had twenty-two years under his belt but had very little work throughout his life—not because he was lazy but because he was marginalized and was cursed with a short temper. This work was important to him because it gave him something. He felt deep in his bones a conviction against disrespect which took away one of the precious few things that he owned: his dignity. Today, however, he had been spit on—twice! It was almost too much. In general, Nour had a short fuse and very active temper which resulted in him moving from mosque to mosque unable to avoid altercations with the other homeless. He refused to get angrier, though, because Biyushi, the big shot, had asked him to come to his home after work in three short hours.

“Oh my love!” he muttered fiercely.

As soon as Biyushi said this, Nour knew it had to be about Haifa. It just had to. His whole being depended on it. She was the sun to his moon, and not to mention aptly named. Recreating the picture of the last time he had seen her with her well built but alluring feminine figure, and he was able to push his flaring anger back into the dark recess of his body. He wiped the spit from his chest and with a sigh went back to get more tea.

Baybars stepped off the boat; Jason followed nearly losing his balance. They had gone to Banana Island, a nice three hour detour.

“Okay, let's go to Luxor temple. I can tell you about it because we just covered it in my Egyptology class,” Baybars said.

Baybars had a likeable personality. In shape from playing football, he looked every bit of Egyptian as the blood that flowed in his veins. He was dark eyed, dark haired, and dark skinned. In those eyes danced a mirthful spark for life which was always ready with a joke. Their captain had been nice enough to drop them back near the temple. It loomed over them western side lit up brilliantly by the slowly sinking sun.

“Sure thing,” whispered Jason once again stunned into reverent silence at something so incredibly old.

The reached the ticket booth and went through the metal detectors. Since Jason had arrived in Egypt, he had found that the guards never stopped you, even if it went off. Jason made to pull out his guidebook, but Baybars stopped him with the clicking of his tongue. Passing a group of what looked like German tourists, he began a recitation of facts and figures to which Jason half listened, as they wandered dapper into, albeit smaller, old stone complex.

Nour raced up the stairs traveling up the third floor to get to Biyushi's apartment. It was situated above the Cafeteria Hurreya, an old establishment from the early 1900s. He didn't take much interest in it though because he served tea and they served tea. They also served beer and as a Muslim, he abstained; therefore, he had no interest in this place. Reaching the door, he knocked.

"Come in," said a male voice, distinctly recognizable as Biyushi's gravelly tone.

His heart fell a little as he had hoped it would have been Haifa.

Opening the door he stepped into the cramped apartment. Shabbily decorated but clean, Haifa's doing no doubt; it looked like home even if a poor one. This surprised Nour, as he had always expected Biyushi who ruled like a king, to live like one. Nour looked for Haifa but didn't see her, and his heart sank even further.

"Maybe she is in the kitchen preparing tea," he thought, "Yes, she will walk in with tea. Then, having already discussed the marriage with her father, she will come out and agree to the proposition."

The next words out of Biyushi's mouth stung his heart.

"I'm sorry son. These are some hard times; I have to let you go. I've got one tea runner too many. Goodbye."

"That's what he had to tell me. He made me come here to tell me!"

He opened his mouth, thoughts running in frantic circles as if his mind was a bee-hive hit by a stone.

"Don't speak. Just go," the brusque Biyushi ordered.

"It wasn't fair, just not fair! He shouldn't fire me! Biyushi knew I would react this way, which is why he wanted this meeting in private. But why shouldn't I be mad? I worked as his slave! I gave two years of my life for him!"

Nour's thoughts were reaching that dangerous place he had only visited once before and that had ended with him in jail. His anger pushed him beyond the pale of sanity; the hours, the days, the weeks of frustration building upon the years of marginalization and rejection. It was the straw that brought the camels back.

He looked around hoping to break the spell by seeing something of Haifa's. Instead he saw an umbrella and an evil, truly evil, thought entered his head: murder. He grabbed it as Biyushi shouted, "What are yo-?"

He didn't finish the sentence. Nour took the umbrella and smacked him across the face. After the first blow, Biyushi tried to stand up but was hit over the head causing him to trip. He fell down and Nour rained blows upon him, bloodlust engulfing his being. When the umbrella bent,

he grabbed a vase, a cheap alabaster one from Luxor by the looks of it, and beat Biyushi's head in until the vase broke. Still not finished and with his mind locked into a rage so deep it went straight to his core, he grabbed a chair and raised it above his head and

Somewhere and nowhere and everywhere, sometime and no time and all time—evil smiled.

The mummy locked in the sarcophagus in the basement of the Egyptian Museum twitched. At first it was nothing, just a mere rustling of the old fabric and dried skin; then, it became everything. It became frantic—bones moving, skin flaking, ancient claws scratching at the lid until the body rent in two. In the confines of the coffin, the dust swirled violently for a second; then it settled, drifting down calmly on its own around the disturbed remains.

then Nour felt a change come over him. He felt what seemed to be a million fire ants crawling under his skin. A deep burning, and strangely enough red sensation, enclosed around his heart like a candle being smothered by a hand. He dropped the chair; it landed with a clatter behind him. Nour fell to the ground sideways convulsing, his soul consumed while he was still alive. In Luxor, 721 kilometers away, gunfire erupted in the ancient temple.

What Jason had thought were German tourists had pulled mean looking and sleek black Glock 18s from under their plaid button down shirts and began shooting the men. There were four of them lined up in a row each firing the 33 round magazine into the courtyard in order to deal as much death as possible. Jason and Baybars were between the gunmen and the row of columns behind them just a mere 2 meters away.

“Oh?” was all Jason could get out as people screamed around him.

He and Baybars moved behind a pillar bullets digging into people and zinging off pillars. The shooting stopped. Frightened, Baybars turned and peered around the side only to find himself looking into a black shiny and very foul smelling tube. He whimpered and turned back around until he was again sitting shoulder to shoulder with Jason.

The terrorists had merely stopped to reload.

The two young men grabbed each other out of fear neither ready to face death. Jason and Baybars had bonded so well, feeling a friendship and camaraderie much closer than anything with their other friends either in America or Egypt. The silence of the reloading guns was replaced by more chaos as the Egyptian soldiers fired back. The terrorist who had circled around to face Baybars and Jason was temporarily out of sight of the Egyptian military and quickly brought the weapon up to bear.

Pale eyes blazing, he said, “Vandaag heeft u sterven als leider mijn commando. Hij wil het bloed van de mannen te zuiveren ons en laat ons klaar voor de vrouwen.”

The pressed back into the pillar willing themselves to disappear, and then, they did. As the sun touched the horizon, Jason and Baybars saw and felt a blinding light engulf them just as a much panicked terrorist pulled the trigger.

They fell backwards, and the bullets dug harmlessly into the stone. The terrorist fell, finally cut down by the Egyptian soldiers.

Back in the flat, Nour opened his eyes and smiled. Not a happy smile, not a sad smile—a malignant smile. Something had passed through the ether. And something else, not him, had told him that. He had a mission it said. This was not communicated through words, images, and not even feelings. It was if it was just there, and Nour had forgotten it. If he hadn't thought hard enough, he would've have thought it to be his own idea.

He stood up and wavered. His smile faltered because he was weak. Nour fell right onto the groaning Biyushi who had not died...yet. The smile came back.

“Food,” Nour thought, not with happiness but with a single-minded purposefulness that bordered on frenzied insanity and led him down dark hallways of nothingness.

Pushing aside Biyushi's feeble hands he dug in ravenously. Nour finished and stood up; he could stand and walk, but he still didn't feel right. Wiping the blood and gristle from his mouth and chin he looked around and slowly but steadily walked towards the kitchen where he heard whimpering.

Entering the rundown kitchen with its fading fake marble, he saw Haifa cowering behind the refrigerator. Looking into her eyes, if Nour could have seen, he would have realized that she had never loved him. He was too fierce of a person, his anger to near his soul. That didn't matter now as he reached toward her.

Nour was still hungry, though he had much more strength and coordination. What was left of Haifa's body lay crumpled on the ground pooling in the little bit of blood left within her shattered frame. Her face gazed up, one glassy eye, unseeing at the ceiling fan. He plucked it out, sucking on it as one would a candy, before crunching down. Nour made his way to the door of the apartment.

He didn't have his full strength yet, but then a light went on in Nour's head.

“He had to stop thinking of himself as Nour. Nour was dead, gone forever. No hope even of going to heaven, his soul had been corrupted and consumed in its rebirth,” it thought.

The man who was not a man remembered Nour seeing the wide open doors of the cafe on the ground level. No locked doors and lots of people. Dinnertime...

Chapter 2

Freed from the orgiastic feeding frenzy, it was able to think again. The process of switching hosts was exhausting and draining; therefore, the only solution was to gorge itself until it had replenished the energy of the body and soul.

“My, what a mess we have made. The saddest part of any meal is the end when the plate is empty.” it said to itself.

It surveyed its ‘plate.’ What had not been consumed lay in disfigured heaps on the ground, blood pooling in the depressions in the floor. Standing up from the crouch over Mustafa’s disemboweled body, it kicked aside a hand, momentarily feeling the diluted alcohol that had been in Mustafa’s bloodstream.

“They are always different; everything has a story to tell. And I get to read them all,” it smiled happily to itself gnawing on a hand as it looked out the window.

Blood tells the story of the individual to those able to read it. The old man’s had been thin and watery tasting, while the chess player’s had been rich, thick, and filling. Mustafa’s had reeked of self poison and doubt.

“How many people had it been?” it ruminated, “Many more are sure to come now that we have left that pharaoh’s soul to rest...for now. They had always wanted to survive to the afterlife; it’s too bad for them that afterlife meant seeing us.”

As the monster digested its victims, it aggregated their existence unto itself adding more to the thousands upon thousands of beings, human and otherwise, which made up its collective being.

Then an unbidden thought came into its head. It had come from the back of its brain.

“Had it always been there?” it asked itself, “NO, it was not ours. We don’t understand; where is it coming from?”

The previous thoughts had told him that he was to serve a purpose. These told him to kill and terrorize someone specific; someone it had seen only once and forever regretted it.

“But how and where-” it asked because it knew not where the creature was and considered it too powerful to try and punish it. The thoughts came again, and it was told circumstances had changed. It was time for revenge.

Its short introspection was cut off by the screaming outside, which it had listened to as background music as one would to violins at a fancy restaurant. Now, however, there were men shouting and lining up—police officers from the nearby street corners. They were waiting for ammunition for their guns which was held solely by the sergeants. The monster knew that in its present form, as a human being, it could not stand up to their attack if or when they got over the intimidation and sheer brutality of its nature.

“We must go.”

The creature in occupying a being, as it was forced to do since being banished from this reality, had to be content to live through others. In doing so it experienced limitations but also brought some of its power to the pitiful beings it inhabited and amplified many of their existing characteristics.

The wind blew their scent into the café. It smelled their fear and for a second watched their disgusted faces. As they didn't move, the monster showed its gruesome smile, teeth with bits of flesh and gristle hanging from it, and stared down the men. They faltered and took a step back.

Leaving a trail of bloody footprints, it walked by the windows where a wide semicircle had formed by the officers well away from the building and left through the back. Reaching the street, it removed its shoes wiped its face with Nour's galabaya to remove the blood and then disappeared into the crowded streets. News of the massacre had traveled fast and people, with their morbid curiosity piqued, were flooding the streets to get a look. This added to the crush of the already crowded Thursday evening streets.

With one quick furtive glance it headed off to a darker place to rest, weaving through small streets, crowded avenues, and tiny alleys losing itself in the maze of Cairo. Its stained galabeya, in the dwindling light, would not draw attention, as it would only look to be another poor soul in Cairo who had no other clothes.

The creature found a box in an alley in the heart of Shubra and sat down for a few minutes to enjoy the suffering of the starving but sleeping children behind him.

As the wisps of the beings of the victims mixed and mingled with the cacophony of torment, misery, and darkness that was its soul, it thought to earlier today when it had reentered reality. Every time the monster entered the human world it needed to take a body, and through it, occupy the soul. As the soul was consumed in this world from the still living body, the space it created, no matter how infinitesimal, created a vacuum allowing some ether to enter the world from where it existed in the unworld. Tied to the creature's entrance, it assumed a basic essence of evil.

This universe, powered by its laws, invariably corrected this invasion by an outside substance through acts committed by creatures on Earth. It reflected on this and wondered what had taken place today.

Thinking back across the ages, it reminisced about the evil it had caused.

"Children" the monster said waking them from their slumber, "I wish to tell you what we have done today."

He grabbed them by the arms, two young boys aged six and eight, before they could run away and began to speak.

"Are you hungry?"

“Yes, my brother and I did not eat today,” replied the older one.

“Ahh. Good, good.”

“Why is that good?” asked the younger one, “We are hungry and now grumpy. I had just fallen asleep. Why don’t you leave us alone, or better yet, give us some money.”

The petulance of the child sparked the creature’s temper.

“Child,” it hissed, “Do you know who we are? We are the stuff of nightmares, dark tunnels, and foggy nights. Your biggest most secret fear is small talk at our afternoon tea. Do you know Jack the Ripper, September 11th, the Black Death, or the Armenian genocide?”

A slight pause.

“No? Well those are daises I have planted; show us some respect.”

Still holding the boys firmly by their arms, it chuckled to itself, a slow, evil, and mirthless laugh, recalling what the humans called the Black Death. That had been an unforeseen result of the ether. It didn’t really have any control over where the ether went, as that was beyond its ability, but it knew that the ether would either directly cause an event or be the tipping point in a gradual decline towards a horrible act someday.

“We don’t respect you. We respect no one,” the younger more brazen one of the two replied, his fear causing him to say things he didn’t mean.

In reality both children were terrified, seconds away from wetting their pants, as they stared into the evil slightly inhuman countenance of the man before them.

“That is too bad,” it said grinning, “because that will be last thing you do having met...having met...”

It could not remember its name; there was a blank—a wall it could not get past.

“How could we forget? Did we become too focused on petty cruelty and pure suffering that we forgot who we are?” it asked itself.

With a rage it had not felt in centuries, it broke through that wall, its grip tightening on the arms of the children until they cried out in pain.

“We are Algharoob,” it stated fiercely.

Saying its name, though not in its true form, but in the tongue of Nour’s language, lifted a veil. The meaning of its name gave it the mandate to exist and with it the monster finally remembered the reason for its banishment. All of its memories from before this event had been missing, and

now they were back. Its lips curled into a sneer recalling who had banished it, and now it hated them even more as it finally remembered why.

Throughout history it had been called many things, none of them its true name. Tales were told about this monster from the beginning of time, each one never getting the full picture. Though there were different depictions, versions, and faces of this creature, all roads led back to this one being.

Knowing its name had restored its direction and purpose. It was the original vampire, and it was ready to set out to claim what should rightfully be under its heel.

So focused, however, on its rediscovery, Algharob did not notice that it had not remembered its name on its own. The creature missed that the rage had not been entirely fueled by its own being and that it had been helped by another to find which should have been lost forever. It was not solely its name anymore, and unwittingly, had become a pawn for something else in a much larger game.

The older child, out of desperation to escape the crushing pain, bent over and bit Algharob on the forearm and the other kicked it in the left foreleg. More out of surprise than pain, the monster grunted. Quickly, it transferred its grip to both their throats and lifted them off the ground. It waited patiently as the gagging, kicking, and futile fist pounding on Algharob's borrowed body slowly ceased. It drank in the light of from their fading eyes, and when there was no more, it dropped the bodies and walked away.

The monster left the alley and hailed a passing cab. One pulled over and the driver stopped to pick up his fare.

Not looking directly at the cab driver it said, "Airport."

After an affirmative nod, Algharob said indicating to a dumpster three meters away, "Good, my bags are just past the dumpster. Can you help me with them?"

"Yes," said the cab driver, who was mostly looking forward to getting out of his run down cab and going home to his wife.

Algharob jogged up to the dumpster and stopped. As the cab driver pulled up and when he didn't see any bags looked confusedly at the creature. Seeing that he was about to leave the monster reached in through the window with both hands and grabbed the driver's head. Muffled cries came from the cabbie, his foot unable to find purchase on the gas pedal as the monster pulled him inexorably out of his seat by his skull.

When he had removed the skinny and haggard looking man from the vehicle, it looked into its eyes and covered his mouth with one hand. Algharob had no power to mesmerize through his stare, but the cab driver was frightened into silence nonetheless.

It leaned down to his neck but did not strike right away. The monster's lips brushed the neck of the man, his acrid sweat sweet perfume to the creature. Whispering words only the man could hear, whose pupils dilated in fear as he did, he struggled like a cow trapped in the slaughter house. Only this time there would be no club to knock the meal mercifully unconscious before death.

It slowly licked the jaw line of the cab driver, tantalizingly lifting the sweat from his skin and inhaling the smell the body releases in response to fear. Then Algharob sunk its teeth into the bulging artery on the neck. Blood spurted, coating both their faces. It relished in the hot liquid until the explosive fountain became a sputtering trickle, and then it dropped the dying man. The monster's appetite slack, it had no interest in feeding again. It had merely wanted to enjoy the crescendo of destruction.

Algharob dropped into the still running cab and headed towards the airport. Reaching the sprawling complex far from the official entrance, it ditched the cab far enough from the outermost fence and made its way on foot. It watched planes take off for a minute from the shadows of another building, soaking in the raw power of the jet engine, feeling the whine and thrust in its being.

There was a building inside the complex close by the perimeter which shrouded the fence in darkness. Running from cover, Algharob scaled the fence nimbly avoiding the barbed wire. Then it forced a window in the building open and climbed in as silently as a cat. As a puppet, Nour's body padded through the building and repeated this, structure to structure, until it reached the shadow of one of the terminals. The monster then moved from silky shadow to silky shadow nothing more than a rustle of coarse fabric and a current of swirling air.

It passed by several throwers, fuel technicians, and even security guards, but the noise of the airport coupled with the monotony of their tasks dulled their senses; they took no notice of anything not related to their jobs.

As it passed by them, the monster wanted to reach out and grab them—to terrorize and befoul their living spirits. It wanted to take what they had, their life and spark of light, because it could; now that it had fed, it just wanted to play with its food.

Algharob restrained itself though, as it had another objective. Picking a plane, the man who was not a man, scampered up into the cargo hold when no one was looking and found a dark corner next to a crate holding a cat, which immediately urinated in fear.

It had not made a sound since whispering to the cab driver. The creature did not know where this plane was going, nor did it care; it would get where it needed to go. Its breathing light, Algharob settled in for a long ride.

This was the epitome of patience, stealth, and practice of a hunter after its prey.

Chapter 3

When the bullets did not come piercing and burning their flesh, Baybars and Jason opened their eyes. Then closed and opened their eyes again. It was pitch black.

“What happened?” asked Baybars, “Are we in heaven?”

“If we are, I didn’t think heaven would be so dark. I have no idea what happened,” replied a worried Jason.

“What do you think happened!?” Baybars blurted out again, suddenly frustrated by the little amount of information that he had about his surroundings.

He was not used to feeling helpless. As a person who got along well with others, he had many connections. Baybars knew many and could depend on many for help and information in any and all situations. Except this one. He only had the company from Jason Storch, who was equally clueless as to what was going on as well.

“We let’s analyze what we have,” said Jason taking stock of the situation, “We are lying on our backs on solid ground...I can stand. The temperature is neither hot nor cold, and there is no wind. Neither of us seems to have been shot, and lastly, we can’t see a damn thing.”

This calm assessment soothed Baybars who was having trouble adjusting from near death. Jason was too, but he was keeping it together because if he cracked, Baybars would go and both of them would go no further.

“Do you feel different?” asked Jason.

“Yea, I do, and these aren’t my clothes that I am wearing.”

“What?!”

Though they couldn’t see anything, the two began a groping investigation of themselves. They noticed the fabric and lay of their clothes were different. Moving from their clothes they began to explore their faces and the rest of their body.

“Dude! My clothes feel like... grass, but it won’t rip. My pants are rough like bark but are segmented so I can walk, and my shoes are gone. My hair is in dreds. I have never had dreds in my life.”

“What are dreds?” asked Baybars.

“Feel.”

“My clothes are silky smooth. The shirt is wrapped around my body like a robe and my pants only come down to my shins. I have sandals so supplely crafted that it doesn’t even feel like I am wearing any.”

“Woah, what happened to us?” asked Jason.

“I don’t know but my hands are smooth and yours are really rough.”

“Hey...you’re right,” Jason said rubbing his hands feeling the calluses and ridges that he never had before, “Everything’s changed...”

Their blind exploration completed, the two friends stood in silence for a while their thoughts racing down avenues that led nowhere.

Abruptly breaking it, Jason said, “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“Who knows, who cares. We need to do something.”

With that, he began to walk, his footsteps making little sound on the dry ground, and Baybars reached out blindly for him.

“Don’t leave me, dude.”

Bumping into him, he grabbed his hand and they began to walk into the seemingly empty vastness of nothing together.

After hours had passed their eyes finally began to adjust. They started to differentiate black from less black but not by much. Baybars stumbled as his foot caught inexplicably on something in the way.

“Wha...?” he mumbled as he tripped, “Uhh-”

He landed on something hard and angular. It was almost beyond belief that something should be in the way. They had been walking for hours feeling nothing, hearing nothing, seeing nothing on this dry quiet plain. Jason reached out cautiously and felt the surprisingly warm object. His hand found the end, a tapered point, which steadily got larger and larger until it was the size of a small table. At the point of greatest mass, the object split off into several more branches which ended in stumps. Jason didn’t explore the opposite end, and he missed the sickled protrusions sharp as an executioner’s blade resting on the ground on the other side.

“Hey c’mon man get up,” Jason whispered getting a bad feeling, “Why did we find this?”

“I’m okay, okay,” he replied, “What is this? Haven’t we had enough problems? Now we can’t even see what we’ve run into.”

“Let’s just move around it and keep going. It’s big and warm and unknown. I don’t like mysteries, so let’s get away from it.”

“Where?!” Baybars demanded standing back up and putting his hand on his hips, “We’ve been walking for hours and are no better off than we were before. Now we have hit something and you want to move on?”

“I don’t have any answers, man. I just have a bad feeling about this. It doesn’t make sense that this should be here. I am just as lost as you are!” Jason replied his temper rising, the inability to see creating a jagged frustration within both of them.

“Well then, think of something!”

Jason did not reply. He was staring just past Baybars’ left leg.

“What do you suggest we DO?!” he shouted not seeing that Jason was not paying attention to him.

“We run,” said Jason in a whisper.

Jason had been staring at a crack of small red light which Baybars had not noticed. This needle thin line appeared a meter and a half away at the opposite end of where they had been arguing. It slowly grew to grapefruit size. Then it winked out of sight and came back. The glare from the orb burned into Jason’s eyes. It was a pure hatred—nothing but. Baybars noticing the glow distinct from the pitch black turned around and stepped back driven by the baleful stare from the red disc.

“Y-yes, yes,” Baybars stammered, “Good idea.”

They began to run at a right angle from which they had been walking and did not look back. Unbeknownst to them, the orb had once gain blinked out of existence returning to its timeless slumber.

As they ran they found that they did not get tired, and they were able to run fast too. Their hands held and pumping furiously in unison, they sped across the empty timeless nothingness once again encountering nothing. The two figures finally found a horizon. It appeared only after light, which had been hidden by the curve of the land, came into view. Finally, there was one less mystery. There were boundaries again; anything to restore some organization to the world, even if just a line, was a blessing.

“Let’s go to that,” said Jason running effortlessly.

They had accepted this new fact much easier than anything else, their brains warped enough by the strange changes that they had already experienced and questing for some normalcy. The red light though faint was degree by degree growing stronger. The light looked like the glow of a fire that a traveler sees just over the next hill—always over the next hill. Jason and Baybars ran, the light still growing stronger, but still so faint. What had begun as something new, something better than darkness, took on a different feel.

Its aura began to feel like burning homes, murder, diseased children and livestock, and decay. This negative feeling seeped into the lightness of the beings of Jason and Baybars imperceptibly, until all they wanted was the red light. Their teeth bared, they ran faster; the red glare reflected in their once calm eyes.

Their equilibrium was broken by a noise. It was as earth shattering in the quiet, drowning out the silent screams emanating from the glow of the red light. This noise caused them to stop, as it did not come from the malevolent glow.

“What were we doing?” asked Jordan.

Baybars could not hear him above the din; he cocked his head turning his body trying to pinpoint the direction of the sound. If one listened right, it sounded like someone signing.

“Whoever it must be must be monstrous with a voice that loud,” he thought.

A pinprick of light appeared so small that Baybars would have not noticed if it he had not been looking where it appeared. Instinctively, he knew that this is where the sound originated. Jason seemed less enthralled; he was still drawn by the power and rage of the red. They stood slackly facing opposite directions, both looking at something different than darkness. Baybars reached for and grabbed Jason’s hand. It felt cold. Pulling him to get moving, they set off for the pinprick of light; at first Jason resisted.

Baybars whispered urgently, “C’mon, need more speed!”

They started running again; this time towards the pinprick. It was further away than the red glow, and they had a long way to go. Jason and Baybars ran and ran. And then ran some more. Eventually, the land ended. The two young men did not even think to stop when the land turned into water on Earth. Feet skimming the surface, they just kept running, flying over the water like a pair of geese; then, after an innumerable amount of time, they reached land again.

The light behind them, itself now a pinprick, briefly faded up. Jason slowed and began to turn.

“No!” Baybars shouted.

But it was too late, Jason’s feet tangled up and he crashed to the ground, his concentration broken. He tumbled violently almost knocking into Baybars. As he slowed his tumble, he disappeared in a flash of light similar to that which had brought them to this place, wherever and whenever here was.

Baybars gasped and shielded his face from the blinding hot light. The invasion of light left Jason’s figure burnt into the after image of his retinas. Baybars could never have imagined Jason gone in this strange place. He felt that he couldn’t go on.

“Nooooo!!” he yelled, but he was cut short by a creature which swooped down and passed through his neck. It did not cut the skin, but slipped in between; as it did, he felt his voice box

tugged, a brief pain, and then nothing as it left his skin. Baybars became silent both out of force and choice. He grabbed the fluttering creature, the size of a large dragonfly with spikier limbs, but it evaded the prison Baybars made with his hands, slipping out much like it did from his throat. Falling silent, he began to be aware of other creatures above him. After this thief, none promised good.

Tottering, Baybars put his hands to his numbed throat and then began to run. The white glow was so close, but it did not illuminate very far from its source. He ran to the light and stood not a meter from it. He was still in complete darkness only able to see the shades of dark as before. Then Baybars heard something else nearby...something big. Rather than face the darkness, he chose light.

“Jason!” he yelled, but the only one who heard was the echo in his mind.

A roar and a rush filled his ears. An intense heat enveloped him, which marked the passage from the ether to this reality—only this time the heat did not dissipate. The last thing Baybars saw was a large door opening in the sky. It was twilight past the door, and the light diffused gently on the featureless landscape. Apparently, there was more to see.

Then he passed out of that unworld and appeared in fire as hot as if in hell.

Baybars began screaming as he fell, hitting his head on a dresser and going unconscious before knocking into Harvey who grunted in surprise. The picture of a group of little girls resting atop the dresser curled in on itself and burned merrily as the fire claimed another token.

Chapter 4

Harvey was on full alert, his senses tuned to the noise and change in the dangerous environment around him. It was always the case when he was on the job. He kind of had to be or he would end up dead. The inferno raged around him the flames tickling the curtains, the walls blackening, and the bed burning.

“Where was the girl?” he wondered.

Harvey was scanning the room and was caught unawares as a shape fell from the ceiling. Instinctively reaching out to catch what he saw was a person, Harvey watched in amazement as the boy fell through his arms. As the boy did, he felt a drag and hitch in his arms as he passed through them. Grunting he started to reach for his radio. Harvey took a step towards the boy when the floor started to groan. With a shriek, the boards gave way.

“Damn these old rotting houses!” he yelled as he fell.

The floor gave way and amid the sparks and embers, Baybars and Harvey fell down through the gaping wound to the living room. Harvey momentarily lost himself; he came to on top of a pile of rubble covering the remains of the coffee table. Rolling over, he groaned. Despite the heavy

protective gear, he was amazed that he was not severely hurt. Incredibly sore and with probably a few bruised ribs, he pushed himself into action.

“Hey, hey you kid!” he yelled through his facemask to the form in the corner, “I’m with the fire department. I’m going to get you out of here!”

Harvey radioed for help and then stabilized the unconscious and naked Baybars. Harvey didn’t have time to think about why; he picked him up and turned to the exit in the hallway where George, a fellow firefighter, had entered.

“Get him out of here!” said Harvey.

George took him giving the thumbs up.

Harvey turned back around and looked around the room. He listened for just a second. As deadly as the fire was, he enjoyed the sound a dying house makes, the popping of wood, the whoosh of flame, and the singing of paint as it melted.

“Singing?” he said.

And then he heard it again, the faintest sound of a girl’s voice. Harvey crouched down and scanned under the two remaining tables in the living room. The one in the corner closest to the hallway had his prize—a little girl. He ran over, crouched down, and put out a hand yelling the same thing he had to Baybars. She stared at him continuing to sing her hands wrapped around her knees. Then she stopped and stared at him with her soot stained face, tear streaks leaving two lines on her cheeks, and crawled out to him.

Taking her in his arms he said to her, “You are going to be okay.”

“I know,” she replied.

Harvey carried her out of the house by the way of the front door, as the fire raged behind him consuming with unconstrained need.

--

The machines beeped around him waking him from his slumber. The sterile smell of a hospital with its odor of cold hands, alcohol swabs, and death greeted his nostrils. His eyes had trouble focusing, and he stared long and hard at his arms until he saw them clearly. There were tubes snaking out of his body to what purpose he did not know. He followed them around painfully moving his neck to the machines behind him and found the source of the beeping. It was his heart monitor.

“Where am I?” he asked, but no sound escaped his lips.

He looked passed his hospital gown and bandaged feet to the door of his room and could see on the wall through the glass of the door “York Downtown Hospital.”

“York?” he thought, “Where’s that?”

His brain too tired to do any more thinking, he laid back his head. He didn’t know where he was, who he was, or what had happened to him. As he laid his head back on the pillow, he felt and then saw his dreadlocked stringy hair fall over his shoulder. Then he remembered his name.

“I am Storch.”

--

Baybars woke up with a similar experience. He gained consciousness long enough to see that he was also in a hospital room. Bleary eyed, he felt rather than saw the thick bandage on his head and the plastic oxygen mask covering his nose and mouth. He saw that there were two occupants in the room: a little girl with skin darker than his on a bed next to his and a large pale man with a red beard and short hair sitting in the corners staring at him intensely.

When he saw that Baybars was awake he said to him, “My name is Harvey. Who are you and where did you come from? What were you doing in that house? Why were you naked?”

Baybars gestured feebly with his hands and made to answer but no words came. His eyes made out Harvey’s shirt, which carried an emblem of the Baltimore City fire department on it. Because Baybars either could not or would not answer, Harvey sighed and left the room to get the nurse, but Baybars slipped mercifully back into unconsciousness before they returned. He had not noticed the old woman with gray hair sitting between his and the girl’s bed. Both of whom were staring intently at Baybars.

Baybars woke up again to the sound of bacon frying. The abrupt change from the hospital environment momentarily disoriented him. The food smelled delicious, but then he realized that it was pork and could not eat it. Distractedly, he sat up painfully and startled. A girl was staring at him. She looked to be about eleven or twelve. She was thin with dark brown skin and equally dark brown eyes. Her black, curly, and fuzzy hair was braided tightly to her scalp. She sat knees up against her chest, in an overstuffed and ancient but comfortable looking chair in the corner. The thing Baybars noticed most was her curiosity, her searching eyes. He didn’t realize he was a stranger in her house with an unknown identity.

As Baybars moved his attention off the girl, he took in his surroundings. He was in an old but well-to-do home by the looks of it. The room had walls with floral design wallpaper, high ceilings, and large windows. Aside from his bed, on the same side of the wall as the door, there was the chair with the girl and a dresser flanking the window on the opposite wall. The windows offered a nice view of a manicured and large backyard.

The little girl broke his concentration saying, “My name is Aisha. This is my daddy’s house. He is a doctor. Who are you?”

Baybars opened his mouth to reply and the words stopped short in his throat. He stopped because his throat wouldn’t form words, and he couldn’t remember who he was; Baybars just shook his head.

“Where are you from?”

Another shake.

“Do you talk?”

Again a third, this time with a shrug.

She left the chair, pushed open the big door and went out into the hallway. The floor creaked in protest. Minutes later Aisha returned with an old woman dressed in sweats with matronly glasses perched on her wrinkled face. Her eyes belied a kind personality.

“Good morning!” she said rather enthusiastically, “It’s so good to see you awake. Little Aisha tells me that you don’t talk. That’s ok, soon enough you will feel like talking again. My name is Rose Brokman., short for Rosalyn before you ask. I’m Aisha’s grandmother.”

Rose prattled on, “When we saw you at the hospital and learned that you had come from the same house that Aisha and her friends had been in, we knew we had to do something. As you appeared with no clothes, and even stranger, no fingerprints, we knew you had no one.”

No one. The words resonated inside Baybars. Those words faintly brought back a wisp of a memory of a person, possibly himself, but when he pictured this person he thought of running stream and the memory would flow away like so much water in that stream.

“No fingerprints?” he thought and then looked at his fingers.

She was right, his hands were completely smooth and a pale tan. Rose’s voice drew Baybars back the very one sided conversation.

“...his hospital in Baltimore. He is an important doctor and has some sway with the mayor which is why you are here and not in some stuffy hospital. We are too worried about why you were in the house, mostly because no one can figure out how you got there, though you may have some explaining to do to the police and others when you feel better. Oh, and to that bear of a firefighter; he can be so grumpy and persistent. But that is for later, I’ve made you some bacon and eggs.”

As if on cue, Aisha walked in with a steaming plate of delicious looking food. Baybars stomach rumbled he was so hungry. The bacon was still sizzling. He gobbled down the eggs but didn’t touch the bacon despite the protests from his stomach. It was strange; though he only remembered one thing about himself, it was that he didn’t eat pork, but he didn’t know why. However, as this was his only memory, he held onto it with an iron grasp.

“What so little appetite. You’ve been asleep for two days. Eat, eat!”

When he didn’t touch the bacon and didn’t try to explain why, she said slightly miffed, “Okay, don’t worry. You just rest now. Dr. Brokman, I love calling him that, will be home soon along

with his wife Lisa and Aisha's three brothers from school. Lewis is about your age, I reckon, so you two might get along. Rest up now dear."

With that, she took his plate and left and shuffled out of the room; Aisha stayed behind. Taking his hand, she helped him get out of bed and said, "Let me show you where the bathroom is."

--

Planes land all over the world. One which happened to be carrying very, very evil cargo landed in New York at John F. Kennedy International. It was dark out and as the baggage doors opened, and Algharob pushed past the unsuspecting workers and raced off the runway. It ran to the fence of the runway, cleared the barrier and disappeared before the police could respond. None of the airport employees could accurately describe the figure. The best description was that of a man in a dark and dirty dress with a grinning skull-like visage who left behind a strong stench of decay.

Algharob walked and walked and finally picked another alley on the other side of the world. The smells were the same; the trash the same; only the language floating down from the open windows of the adjoining run down apartments was different. It just sat and listened for a minute, its skin flaking off in some places. Absent mindedly it reached under the galabeya and pulled a strip of rotting flesh from its chest. The skin around the heart had turned a sickly brown and yellow and was slowly becoming black. The heart had already rotted out and the decay was slowly spreading.

"It is time to find a new body," it thought, "This one hadn't lasted as long as we had hoped."

It grabbed onto a dirty drainpipe and scaled it easily, the strength of the creature still improving that of the feeble decrepit body. Reaching a window, it flipped open one of the cracked panes and slipped into a bathroom. The door was closed and it listened; Algharob heard two voices coming from the next room both speaking the language that Nour would have understood. They were both female.

It threw open the flimsy door with a small bang, startling the occupants, one older woman, a teacher, and a younger woman, a student. They were bent over an Arabic textbook; the two jumped and stared too disgusted to scream. The vampire stared back from Nour's body. Its eyes glowed with malice, drool spilled from its decayed lips, and the skin hung slack from its yellowing face. Algharob grinned because it particularly enjoyed what would happen next.

"You'd better call the police K-" said the old woman, but she was cut off as Algharob moved.

It ran over to the table in the middle of the kitchen and backhanded the younger girl out of the chair on to the floor. It then reached for the older woman who had grabbed a knife from the nearby countertop and held it out defensively. Algharob didn't care. Rushing in, it grabbed the teacher, and she plunged the knife into its stomach. The vampire grabbed her hand and held it there preventing her from doing any more damage to the borrowed body. Then it leaned in took a hold of her left ear with its teeth while clamping another hand over her mouth. Its body had pinned hers against the counter. The ear came away easily, and Algharob swallowed it in one big gulp. The older woman's muffled screams sounded faintly pitiful underneath its hand.

Then it stepped back and let go; the woman's hands went to her ear which was bleeding profusely. It pulled the knife from its body and slashed her throat, before she could scream, opening a jagged line. Blood spurted everywhere making the sink look like a butcher's floor and painting the table a violent bright red. It dropped the knife and moved to the young girl.

She lay on the floor moaning quietly. Her head had collided with a cabinet and then the floor on the way down. It crouched and straddled the girl. Looking away she tried to squirm out from underneath it, but Algharob held her to the ground.

It began to say words, very old words.

Kelly began to scream as the tube of darkness emerged from Nour's heart and slowly extended to touch Kelly's chest. It burned her, though not visibly. Writhing in pain she was held even tighter by the vampire's inhuman grip. The shaft of darkness was Algharob's spirit leaving Nour's body and entering hers. The cylinder had bits of primal yellow energy flecking off in miniscule amounts which quickly dissipated into the air. Though they became invisible, they were not gone, and it was the ether which would roam as an invisible mass until it settled on something or someone.

The shaft cored its way to Kelly's heart. Algharob felt and devoured her being starting with her thoughts and feelings, love for Richard and banana splits, and the feel of the wind on her skin while watching the perfect sunset on the beach. Her soul was consumed by darkness to be extinguished as finally as the being called Kelly Matherson.

Though it was much easier to travel solely in the ether from person to person, this more direct method was infinitely more pleasurable—for it at least. It allowed Algharob to consume bit by bit each piece of the soul rather than to invade all at once, occupy, and consume in a massive overload. Its invasion allowed Algharob to partake in his favorite delicacies of the soul, such as the ability to love and the memories associated with it, the ability to create and express oneself, and the part which tells you who one is. Algharob never had this and never would; it was an amalgam of souls coupled with the characteristics it inspires: hate, anger, and fear. It corrupted what it took from creatures by force and took simple pleasure in this.

Kelly's screams, at the same time blood curdling and heart wrenching, grew fainter and fainter, and Nour's grip grew weaker and weaker. With a final exhalation, more a sigh of thankful release, Nour's shell of a body fell on top of Kelly. At the same time, Kelly pushed the light husk of the former man off her, pushed herself up to her elbows, smiled, and then stood up. It grabbed the knife on the floor and went to kill Kelly's neighbor Frankie who was banging worriedly on the door.

It needed to eat again.

Chapter 5

“They are the most gruesome murders in New York in recent times. Four brutally murdered in a downtown apartment: a teacher at New York University, the couple next door, and an unidentified man who police would only describe as being in an advanced state of decay. The worst news is that all of them except for the decayed man had been mostly or partially dismembered and what authorities speculate, consumed.”

Cassius Wovenstock’s head snapped up as the newscaster moved onto other unimportant matters. He dropped both his lexicon of werewolves and copy of *Frostbite* and stared hard at the television screen.

“Decayed?” he muttered to himself, as no one else occupied his run down house in the back woods of West Virginia.

Grabbing his sitting pillow, he hurriedly made his way up the stairs to his meditation chamber, his gaunt skinny frame reenergized for the first time in a long while. His silver hair glowed from the rays shining through the stained glass window of the cross with flared ends in his stairwell. Cassius passed by this window everyday, but today it meant much more than any other.

--

Algharoob watched the newscast while in a bar in Hells Kitchen, playing with its new haircut: a buzzed head. It viewed the killings in that building partly as necessity and partly as entertainment. It always had hunger, especially after acquiring a new body which drained it of its energy. Each time it ate, it grew stronger, and the longer a body lasted, the stronger it would get. The catch was that bodies did not last. The younger the person and the more powerful the soul, the more durable the host body was. Nour’s had been weakened by hunger and poverty, but Kelly’s had not been afflicted by desperation.

“If only we were capable of assuming our true form in this measly little reality as we once were. Then our hunger would truly be sated.”

Algharoob felt the familiar anger, like an old and dear friend rising, so instead it played with its drink and watched the television.

“And now on to Jimmy for a special criminal task force update: the man with no identity. Jimmy.”

“Have you ever wished you would never leave tracks? Well police recently discovered one man who could. They don’t know his name, where he came from, and can’t even begin to guess. He was found naked during a house fire in Baltimore and has no identifying papers or fingerprints. Police have been working to figure out how he has no fingerprints as this could be a breakthrough criminals have been waiting for. If you have any information about this man identity, please call...”

Algharoob’s attention drifted away from the words and focused on the picture plastered on the television.

“This was it,” the monster thought to itself, “That is our mission. Besides ourselves, there is only one person we know of who has no fingerprints which would be traipsing around in this when and where.”

It gulped down the remains of its drink, flashed a crazed grin at the bartender and left the building not noticing the man who followed it. As it rounded the corner, the man who had followed what he thought was a woman grabbed at her body. Algharob spun, diverted his hands, and then hit him up against the wall hard enough for him to see stars. Its vampire strength lifted him a foot off the ground.

“Who are you-you lady?”

“Who are you?” it hissed back.

“My name is Earl, I’m so sorry.”

“Too late,” it replied.

“Please don’t kill me,” Earl said his mustache quivering in fright.

Suddenly Algharob got an idea,” Do you know anyone in Baltimore?”

“Sure,” he said the relief evident in his voice, “I’ve plenty of friends in the city, I moved from there about ten years ago.”

“Good,” it said and lowered him to the ground.

Sensing that his chance for escape was nigh, Earl slowly reached his hand towards the knife in his back pocket. Lightning fast, Algharob grabbed his arm and used its elbow to pin his chest to the wall. With the other, it clamped vice-like on his crotch and began to squeeze. Earl squealed in pain as the pressure increased.

“You will take me there and introduce me. If you think of even crossing me, I will kill you. You will not die right away, but I will make it last for days, body part by body part until all that is left is your heart, which I will then eat. And I will start here,” it said giving one final excruciating squeeze.

It released its grip, and Earl sank to the ground.

“Good, let’s go,” and as it turned, it muttered a curse on Earl binding him to it.

The two arrived in Baltimore late the next day and immediately went to Fischer’s in the city. This bar did not carry the name Fischer’s nor did it even have a sign; in fact it was not even a bar. It was merely the basement of a run down building where the toughest, meanest, and cruelest would gather. They were an eclectic mix of characters, mostly men from streets, gangsters or bikers, with an occasional odd businessman thrown into the mix. The basement was

not exactly clean either; someone, Algharob later found out Earl, had bought the place and “decorated.” There was a scuffy looking bar, beat up pool table, and some rickety card tables overlooked by an unfinished ceiling. If anyone wanted to look in through the street level windows high up on the walls, they would have had to peer through layers of grime and yellowing glass. Algharob learned all this as Earl introduced it as “Kelly” to the gang.

The vampire could see that they didn’t take it seriously, so it went up the biggest meathead there, ironically a CEO from a bank in Baltimore, and breaking a pool stick in half jammed the two ends into his belly and swirled it around. Immediately, the other members except Earl circled menacingly around Algharob, as the man clutched his stomach, the stain from the blood seeping through his clothing.

“Don’t,” said Earl.

Earl had produced a very large pistol and was brandishing it with authority. As a former leader of the band of criminals, he still had some respect. Algharob targeted the newest leader in order to make the coup easier and it was working.

“She told me everything that’s going to go down and what and who she is. If you ain’t convinced by this, then I’ll shoot you. She’ll give us power beyond what we could ever hope for.”

“Who’s she?” asked Barry, a big black biker.

“She is the devil incarnate,” replied Earl, “and we’ll become more than just Fischer’s club. We started this to cause trouble, now let’s cause some real chaos.”

Sensing that they agreed except for Barry, Algharob pointed an accusing finger at Barry and said, “Kill him.”

And Earl did just that, in the bang of the gun, just before the thunder died away, the vampire muttered two words which in the groups’ acquiescence allowed it to bind them in its service.

“Tee’anee.”

With that, Algharob recreated his acolytes of old.

--

Baybars woke up suddenly. It was the middle of the day.

“Was it the door’s bang that woke me?” he asked himself as he dozed on the couch waiting for Keith to come home from university, “My dream ended with a bang.”

His dream was quickly fading, and he could only remember the last bit of it which had been repeating all throughout his sleep.

Kana wah-da fil maadee

Inqata' 'ala yud arajel atabe' aee
Alann ashatheat fil tarb
Qull ismuhu liatithakar
Epluri, epluri, epluri

Keith walked into the room from the kitchen with a big sandwich in hand. He was tall and good looking built like his broad shouldered father but quiet. As the middle child, he had learned to exist in a state of in-between-ness in the family. He wasn't the oldest, having two older brothers, nor was he the youngest, having Aisha as a little sister. The one area in life in which he excelled was school at University of Baltimore.

"Hey man, what's happening?" asked Keith through a mouthful of food.

"Not much...dude," Baybars scratched out, as he still did not have his voice yet.

Keith had been teaching him some American slang. What Baybars didn't realize was that he was relearning what Jason had taught him.

"What did you do today?"

"Nothing, except lay here. I am still too tired to do anything except watch soap operas, which I now really like, especially Days of our Lives."

Keith choked on his sandwich bit in a snort of laughter.

"That's for old women and housewives who don't have anything else to do," he replied.

"No, it's okay. I like watching the emotions people have. It helps me see my emotions because I see how others are."

"Okay, relax with the emotions stuff. We're guys. We are supposed to be tough and not show emotions."

"But I do," replied Baybars, not realizing that in these past few days his personality and individuality was trickling back, "Why would you hide it? It shows who you are by what you feel and can make others feel."

"Yeah sure."

"Why do you like me? I mean, I really don't remember anything about me, so anything I do or say is new. You've said I am a cool guy, so why? What you tell me could help me remember me."

Caught off guard by the question, Keith thought for second, "I think it is that I don't fit in easily at school. I have trouble making friends; I can be too impersonal. Take you, for instance. At first when we met, I approached you as a problem to be solved, but once we started hanging out,

I saw how interesting you were as a blank slate waiting to be filled. And after that, here we are. Do you want to come out and walk with me to the next block where we can watch my brother play basketball?"

Sensing that he had made Keith uncomfortable, he went along with the change in subject even though he was not fully satisfied, "Do you play?"

"Nope, never will. I'm no good. But I'm glad I figured that out early, let's go."

Baybars had become very attached to Keith in the two days he had known him despite Keith's impersonality and shyness filling a gulf that he didn't know existed.

"But why did *epluri, epluri, epluri* keep running through his head?" he asked himself as they walked out the door.

--

Algharob hissed. The pain was burning in its forehead as if a doctor was preparing to rummage around up top but was not using anesthesia to get inside. It became impatient and frustrated through the red haze of pain.

"Why are we not killing this boy?! Why are we not acting?!"

Slamming down the half consumed hobo's leg which it had been eating by itself in the back room of Fischer's that had been set up for its rituals, it suddenly realized it had been sent a message.

Chapter 6

Harvey sat at his antique dining room table and stared at his hands. Then he felt his elbows and stared at his hands once more. Taking a sip of tea from his worn and chipped mug, he put the again down and ran his hands over his knuckles again worry lines forming on his forehead.

"What's happening to me?" he thought, "Why am I getting more-what's the word-angular?"

With a worry born of frustration, he ran his hands up his arms, over his black and white Celtic cross on bicep, and up to his shoulders. Now his shoulders had a slight bulge of hardness. It was as if there was a casing forming around his bones in these areas.

"When did this happen? Must have been early this morning? Why didn't I feel anything?" he asked himself, "Maybe I could sand them off...No, that'd be glorious but unnecessary pain. I wonder..."

Harvey had an idea; he ran into his backyard to the six foot high wooden privacy fence that surrounded his small and unkempt lawn. Standing in the weeds he cocked his arm, said a quick prayer, and hit the fence as hard as possible. Normally a blow like that would have done severe damage to anyone's hand, destroying the tiny delicate bones ordered so perfectly in the hand, but Harvey was not normal—not anymore. His fist went right through the old and tough weathered

wood. Pulling back his hand into his chest and cradling it, he yelled in pain. Despite the fact that his hand was on fire and the skin had been torn away exposing what turned out to be a dark grey casing around his knuckles, he was happy.

“Well then,” he said with a smile.

--

Aisha was standing in the attic of her house. It was big enough that her dad could have stood up at the apex, but old and musty enough smelling that the last time he was probably here was when he was a little kid. She began walking slow measured steps to the small window at one end leaving little footprints in the in the previously undisturbed dust it as swirled around her feet. Pushing open the window she watched as the night streamed in moonrays tickling her bare legs, and then without thinking, she stepped out.

It was almost as this was her idea, stepping out into nothingness, but somewhere back in her brain she felt that something had put it there in her unconscious, and it almost became hers...almost.

Amazingly she did not fall; she stood there on open air looking down between her toes at the grass blades below silver in the moonlight. Then she looked at the moon and began to rise towards it.

“Grab the ledge, Aisha! Grab the window! Grab anything!” she told herself.

She was already out of reach though and Aisha rose rapidly higher and higher. It was getting colder, but she wasn't feeling it, in fact she felt fine, more than fine—ebullient!

She was flying.

Trying to figure out how this bit of magic worked she said to herself, “Okay Aisha, where to?”

“I'll go to New York, I've always wanted to go there,” replied this new part of herself.

“Why?” asked as the insecure little Aisha who wanted to return back to house and snuggle between the warm sheets of her parents bed.

“Why not?” she replied.

Too preoccupied with the fact that she was flying, she failed to notice that this thought also was not hers—not one single bit.

Maneuvering perfectly she faced the direction of New York and shot off fast as a bullet nightshirt streaming behind her. She found the joy of soaring was beyond anything else she had ever experienced. The rush of the wind past her face buffeting her around, the caress of the dew soaked clouds while passing through them, and the ability, like a bird, to not be hindered by gravity in truly experiencing the third axis.

“I’m flying!” she yelled over and over, each time she discovered something new that she could do such as barrel rolls, tag with the birds, or skim the water of a river.

Aisha arrived in no time, heart full of warmth, and knew immediately what she was looking for a hospital. She found the New York Downtown Hospital, serene in the darkness, and alighted on the roof. The late night traffic buzzed gently below her, and she peered curious over the edge. Turning around she scanned the rooftop and saw someone or something in the shadows of the walls at the other edge of the building. She made her way over to it cautiously as it gave off an attitude of a cornered wounded animal.

“Hello?” Aisha asked voice quavering joy now replaced by trepidation.

It rustled and turned its head and replied in a harsh rasping voice, “Child.”

“Who are you?” she asked and with a child’s blunt curiosity, “and what’s wrong with your voice?”

It answered her question with its own question, “Why do you not know who you are? Even the beetle knows its purpose.”

“I know who I am,” she replied a little curtly, “My name is Aisha Octavia Brokman.”

“You still do not know,” it shook its head sadly slowly closing its bright yellow eyes long dreds rustling in the darkness, “I am weak and cannot help you. You must help me. Only then can you realize yourself. This is of the utmost importance: to know yourself. A bird knows why it sings; therefore, you should know yourself.”

Confused and a little frustrated she said again, “Who are you?!”

It shook its head again and said, “You are more helpless than a bird and even it knows why it sings. Why?”

And it began to stand up revealing what had been hidden in the shadow of the short wall. She took a step back breath caught in her throat as the creature slowly and painfully moved itself, clacking wood the only accompaniment to its grunting. She then saw the creature for what it was with the help of the moonlight. It was about seven and one half feet tall, with plated bark pants and a grassy looking shirt. The creature had bright yellow eyes, no nose to speak of, and a lipless hole filled with sharp but blackened teeth. Its most noticeable feature besides its long thick dreds of ropey looking material was its skin. Even in the moonlight Aisha could see it was green and mottled sparsely with what looked like buds of small flowers. She gasped and took a step back.

As it finally straightened began to raise its head to look at her with its entrancing yellow eyes a scream began. It came fast and quick, and as it overtook them, it reached a crescendo, the souls of thousands expressing their torment to Aisha. The image of teeth, bloody, red, and jagged with

a forked tongue overpowered her brain, and then it was over and the creature was gone, a single dandelion the only evidence of its presence.

Panting Aisha sat up in bed sweaty and tangled in the sheets from what had become a nightmare. As she lay back down she thought of those yellow eyes glowing in the shadows. Hundreds of miles away Jason's eyes stopped moving as he left a dream cycle of REM.

When Aisha woke in the morning, she recalled very little and only paid the slightest attention to the bird singing outside her window.

--

That same night Cassius sat in his second story in the only room on the floor. It was sparsely decorated with himself and his pillow. He sat very still and stared into the bright yellow flame of a slowly melting candle. However, not visible to a person of this world was his feverish activity. It was the complete opposite of the utter calm he displayed in this room.

He was rummaging—rummaging maniacally in a dusty old library with shelves twelve feet high containing books, maps, loose papers, binders, and whatever else that had ever been recorded. It was chaotic.

“Decayed, decayed...Where is that paper?” he muttered to himself, “I remember it from when I was an apprentice.”

Cassius did not know what he was looking for just yet, but the nagging feeling that he had encountered this sort of situation—decayed body and mutilated remains—would not leave him alone. He had lived a long enough life and seen enough horrors that this thing would not have jumped out at him which is why it bothered him.

A seemingly disorganized pile of books and papers lay on a shoddy wooden desk, but Cassius had a system even if indescribable to a normal mortal. Leafing through a file of gruesome renderings of the walking dead, he hmmped and tossed it on the table.

“Ah yes. I remember you. What jolly fun, plundering and wenching and all that. Bad evil demon,” his hand moving away from an old looking book graced with the skull and crossbones inlaid over the name ‘Teach.’

“I must keep searching. I know it's here somewhere,” he said knowing that unless he was lucky, this would be the first of many long nights in his library.

Chapter 7

The investigation into Baybars' identity continued but was slowly becoming less important because the police and government had nothing to follow. He had no discernable identity, no fingerprints, no memory, and no voice. Aside from the oddity about the fingerprints, to the government Baybars' was just turning into another John Doe.

As in the past four nights Dr. Brokman began once gain questioning Baybars for about an hour trying to find a way to joggle Baybars' memory.

“Son, “he said as they sat in the study, Dr. Ronald Brokman the picture of any wealthy again doctor, “let’s start again.”

Baybars sat back and sighed knowing that he would once again disappoint. Baybars was a little thrown off that Aisha was here as it was the first time that she was present. It had become their routine for the doctor to ask questions and Baybars to sit there in negative silence.

“What is your name?...Where do you live? A house? An apartment?...Who is your father? How old are you?”

Instead of continuing to ask the questions that he had queried before which had always proved fruitless, he turned to Aisha and said, “Go ahead.”

Startled Baybars turned to her. She smiled and then began to sing. It was the same small song she had been singing during the fire when Baybars had appeared at her friend’s house. Baybars stared enraptured.

He said aloud,

*“Kana wah-da fil maadee
Inqata’ ‘ala yud arajel atabe’ aee
Alann ashatheat fil tarb
Qull ismuhu liatithakar
Epluri, epluri, epluri”*

The other two stared back as he spoke. A dam cracked, large enough to let the liquid information come through and for his voice to return.

He said, “I remember...I remember falling, singing, a bright light, and a door. A door in the sky; it opened...It opened, and I saw night. The twilight from this door showed that I was in a dead place...and, and there was nothing there. I felt like I should have gone up into the light. At least then I would have been able to see, but instead I fell down here. I remember someone else with me. He was tall with dreds.”

Aisha stiffened her dream finally coming back to her.

“His name was Jason Storch,” Baybars finished.

Further questioning proved ineffective and later when Dr. Brokman talked to his colleague at the psychological institute, a small nervous man who chain smoked and talked fast, he got a professional opinion.

“Yep, you’re looking at a case of amnesia. What he’s telling you could be a sign of disassociation of reality as well. If I were you, I would keep an eye on him, but he should be pretty harmless.”

Right after hanging up the phone with the psych doctor, Dr. Brokman picked it back up and dialed the number the detective had given him.

A phone rang somewhere in the bowels of a sweaty building in the city. It was humid in the dank office of Detective Trach.

“Yes?”

“This is Ron. I think I’ve got some information for you.”

Sighing, the detective put his feet up on the desk and said, “Go ahead.”

“A name,” Brokman continued, “Jason Storch. We were doing a psych session, something triggered it and he blurted out a name: Jason Storch.”

“What did the doc think?”

“Well...he said that it was just a figment of his imagination and that he is possibly delusional.”

“That’s probably what it is then Ron,” Trach’s green eyes looking to the ceiling as if looking for deliverance but getting distracted by the mold in the corner.

“Please, please just check it out.”

“I don’t know. If he is delusional...My resources were never all that large to begin with,” he said rubbing his hand over his grizzled jaw.”

“Lazarus, please. I don’t want to play it, but you owe me a favor for your wife.”

“Ron, c’mon,” he continued with another audible sigh, “Okay, I’ll look into it.”

“Thanks,” said a much relieved Brokman.

“Why do you want it?”

“Want what?”

“Want this,” the detective said gesturing to himself wincing as his old scar up his back twinged, “Why the name. Why the kid in your house. He is probably just some homeless kid with some problems, obviously mentally troubled, and you are keeping him at your house.”

“I sleep better knowing someone’s taking care-”

“Christ,” Lazarus exploded, “he was naked with your daughter!”

Replying calmly, “You let me worry about him. I can read people. This kid has a good heart.”

Sighing again, Lazarus replied, “Okay your call. See you Thursday next month at Riley’s?”

“See you then.”

--

They sat watching the young black kid leave the convenience store.

“Let’s do him,” said Bugsby.

“Why?” ask a gruff and furry man know as Duboleski.

“Why not?”

“Shouldn’t it take a little more planning?” he asked as he readjusted his bulk behind the steering wheel, “What if he’s got connections? You know, one of the rich kids.”

“The more money, the merrier. The girlfriend always says ‘No work, no money. No money, no honey.’ This is rich work which means I get money AND honey.”

“Yea, but does she know what you do for a living?”

“Shut it and drive. Let’s just do it.”

Lewis ambled down the street from the convenience store back to his house. Although there were nicer stores in his neighborhood, he preferred this one a few blocks over in the projects because he had gone to grade school with the owner. Guy, a college dropout and actively involved in “fixing the community,” had watched out for him with the gangs that existed even in the prep school, and Lewis had helped him get through school. It was a mutually beneficial relationship that had become something more, though no one in his family knew of it.

Bugsby and Duboleski’s car rolled into motion cruising silently like a shark after its prey. Detective Trach picked up the phone.

“Wait until he gets to the alley. Just like all the others, take him away from family, put him in a hole, and let him rot,” muttered Bugsby somewhat maniacally.

“Yes, its Detective Trach...well she’s fine...The family is happy to have her back.”

“What do you think his name is?”

“Hey Bud, got a name for you.”

“Why the hell do you care? What’s wrong Duboleski, you going soft?”

“Yea, yea, Jason Storch...Five minutes, no prob.”

“Hell no, it’s just this is the third one this week.”

“Don’t worry. Kelly’s got it under control.” replied Bugsby.

Trach lit up a cigarette and puffed lazily away sweat pooling on his back.

“Ease over man, here comes an alley.”

Duboleski’s sweaty hand eased the car over to the closer lane as Lewis continued on unawares listening to the newest rap on his Ipod.

“Go! Go! Go!” yelled Bugsby.

The nondescript sedan pulled up to the alley just as Lewis was crossing it. Bugsby jumped out and stepped in front of him.

“Hey kid, guess who’s going to a party.”

“What?” Lewis replied pulling out his ear buds.

“Get in the car,” Bugsby said flashing the gun in his waistband.

“I don’t think that is such a good idea.”

“Get. In. The. Car.” he said again emphasizing each word in the sentence.

Gulping Lewis did as he was told. Bugsby got in after him, removed the gun from his waistband and clocked him across the temple. Lewis slumped without a sound a small trickle of blood weeping from his temple.

The phone rang. Trach reached over his rubeen sandwich and picked it up.

After listening for a few minutes he said, “You don’t say. Good kid studying abroad in Egypt, and he hasn’t checked in. Hmm, the date matches the other. Huh, What?...Uh nothing, just talking to myself about a case. Yep, thanks.”

Hanging up, he picked up the phone again and while dialing Brokman, he said to himself, “Another kid, another family, gone to pieces.”

“Hi, Ron, got some news for you...”

--

“Garrgheh.”

The poker was jabbed into flesh and withdrawn with a wet sticky sound. The woman’s arms were held by two male guards. Algharob moved in to suck the artery of the dying woman.

One of the guards turned on by the violence and girl and girl action, as gruesome as it was, made an almost indistinct lewd comment to his partner. Without even stopping what it was doing Algharob took the same poker and put it in the man’s throat thrusting in and out fiercely. He fell down dead, one of the relatively new converts who was just being initiated into the feeding.

Algharob with gooey blood lips pulled away for a second and asked the other man, “Do you have anything to say?”

The man took a few steps back and stood there in silence clearly uncomfortable.

“Good,” it replied through a mouthful of blood and flesh.

Lewis woke up from a splatter of liquid across his face. It was warm and sticky. He rubbed his eyes, felt his throbbing temple, and then looked at his hands. They were red. Frantically checking himself over, he patted down his body. Then he noticed he was not alone. A man lay in front of him staring listlessly at him with dead eyes. Dead. Baybars saw what looked like two people, two women, making out, but something was not right with the picture.

Instead of kissing her neck as he thought, the one was holding up a limp rag doll of another who was not moaning, mouth open with pleasure. She was dead, her slack face glaring at him accusingly. Lewis met the other woman’s eyes—the one feeding.

She smirked and said, “You’re next.”

With that evil stare pushing him back, Lewis scooted crab-like until he bumped into something: a human leg.

“Oh thank God,” he said craning his head back, but then he was staring into the muzzle of a gun.

Lewis just gave up then and wet his pants. It was a nightmare.

“Relax little one, you won’t feel a thing,” cooed Algharob dropping the carcass.

“Ah! Ah! Ahhh!” yelled Lewis scooting away from her on all fours around the small room.

Algharob took a few steps, grabbed him by the leg, and pulled him back until he was hanging upside down in front of her.

“Ready?” it asked.

Please, please don't hurt me,” Lewis begged, “I don't want to get eaten. You, you, you...vampire!”

“Oh really?” it replied, “What do you think everyone else said? Me next? Join the party!”

“I don't know anything about him, I swear. He just showed up.”

“Who?” asked Algharoob intrigued.

“Baybars. He spoke his first words last night, some really weird stuff too. Stuff that didn't make sense, and he also talked about a door in the sky to a twilight place,” yelled Lewis sweating.

“And who are you?”

“My name is Lewis Brokman,” he replied immediately regretting it.

“Well, looks like your sentence has been commuted,” Algharoob said dropping him to the ground.

“Oh thanks,” he sighed sitting up.

“Knock him out.”

“What?” asked Lewis turning to the only other living human being in the room.

In response Lewis only saw the butt of a gun moving toward his head, and then with a thud Lewis was out for a second time that day.

One half hour after a leisurely feeding and cleaning up of itself, Algharoob met with the group. As there were more initiated with after every meal, with Algharoob feeding several times a day, the operation was finally coming together.

“Look boss,” said Jerry an aging lawyer from a reputable firm in Baltimore, “I think I speak for a couple of members here when we say that we are happy working for you, but we aren't comfortable with the number of kidnappings so close to one another in time.”

“Yea,” broke in one of the other few businessmen, “It's too much. You've got nothing. We've got reputations to worry about. With this many people being snatched, someone could talk.”

“Yes, talk,” Algharoob sighed, “We have too many people.”

Both businessmen showed visible signs of relief. They had been nervous about confronting their leader. These two were the remaining uninitiated. Everyone had quickly learned not to ask

questions, so they did not know the purpose for all the kidnappings. Their money oriented brains immediately assumed extortion.

“Stop,” it said as they were sitting down, “Come here.”

Gulping and paling the two came forward. They were both taller and heavier than Algharoob in its current body, but they knew looks were deceiving. Sweat began to form on Jerry’s bald dome.

“You are two simple minded fools. You do not understand anything. Why we kidnap, why this group exists. Ejits! Everyone knows but you,” it continued its small frame going rigid, “We have started this group to feed me.”

“Huh?” asked Jerry.

“To feed me,” it repeated and to emphasize its point it grabbed him and bit a chunk out of his forearm.

Jerry screamed in pain and cradled the wound with the other hand. Duboleski sitting in the back of the room shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“I want a store of bodies ready to feed when we take on the good doctor. Things will get hairy with the police.”

“Woah, woah, woah. Police? And who is this good doctor?” asked Earl stepping from the side of the room.

“I mean to take what Dr. Ronald Brokman has.”

“But why will you need a ready supply of bodies?” Jerry unwisely asked, “What are you planning on doing and when?”

Sighing Algharoob dismissed them with a nod, “No more questions now.”

Algharoob turned around as they sat down and said to the group, “Kill them both.”

When there was a silence for a second, it looked over its shoulder at Earl and said, “Now.”

“You heard the good lady, kill them,” Earl said.

After a brief scuffle the 9-2 odds not in their favor, the two men were dead.

“Make it look like an accident somewhere,” Algharoob commanded, “and quickly. When you get back we move to the business of child snatching.”

--

Harvey lay swathed in the glory of sleep, his face serene. The new lines on Harvey's face as a result of the past few days worry were smoothed blissfully away. Even in the moon light though, Harvey's skin appeared darker. The growth had spread from his knuckles and shoulders. It was now mushrooming from his knees, elbows, and even chin. It was a dramatic change but seemed to have slowed and only after much tossing and turning each night was he able to get to sleep.

Two days had passed since he first broke through his fence. In that time he had grown stronger, not only on his body but within his body. His plating did something to his muscles which made them bigger as well.

Suddenly the bliss disappeared, and Harvey frowned still sleeping. The worry lines crept back like creepers in the night.

"Harvey. Harvey, wake up," said a disembodied voice.

"What? Who's there?" he grunted.

"Wake up Hamee."

Harvey did, except his solid body was still sleeping. He stared sitting up at the person in his room. The man was old, so old. He had stringy white hair to his shoulders and was dressed in a wraparound robe. Sunken eyes stared out at him containing horrible secrets that only come from having access to the depth of knowledge contained within the library of collective human unconsciousness. The only thing out of place about him was the green pencil tucked behind his fuzzy ears. He carried a sheaf of papers with him bound in a faded oil skin several hundred pages thick which was tied with a bright red rope.

"Who are you?" Harvey asked, "Why do you call me Hamee?"

"It is who you have become, look in the mirror. My name is Kaatib," replied the patient old man.

Harvey turned and faced his mirror. He stood slack jawed which looked quite comical as a plated face of black bone with burning red eyes designed to inspire fear in his enemies looked surprised. Bang, bang. Harvey, now Hamee, hit himself on his chest. The black plating which had grown under his skin in small places now covered his entire body head to toe. There was no flesh on the outside and it was very much like a bug's exoskeleton. He looked like a knight made of living black armor plating.

"This is who you are. Come with me," said Kaatib gesturing to a dark corner which flared with bright light in the shape of a swirling portal.

Without hesitation Hamee stepped into the portal after Kaatib, and they entered a white room

"Where are we?" gasped Hamee.

“In the library,” replied Kaatib.

“But there is nothing here!”

“Yes there is,” the old man replied chuckling at Hamee’s race’s renowned temper, “Picture it and step into your identity. Remember.”

Hamee blinked and found himself in the Enoch Pratt Free Library except there were no walls because the shelves of books went on forever. A small reading desk sat patiently in front of Hamee waiting for him.

“Good enough. We all choose something familiar which lets us organize what we want to see. As you do not remember your history from before the last time you were killed, you choose something that Harvey knows.”

“Wait, the last time I was killed? What do you mean?”

“It was the Uprising. You won’t remember, I think. It was a pretty horrible death. Thankfully, I wasn’t there to witness any of it, but I know you were protecting the one from many.”

“Why?”

“It’s your job.”

“Why don’t I remember?”

“Well you’ve obviously forgotten, and it was a long time ago. Your soul passed from one being here on Earth to another waiting to be awakened. Each time it didn’t, it just moved to another when that mortal passed away.”

“How come I didn’t die?”

“Because,” said Kaatib, “you’re immortal, just like the rest of them. You can be killed, but you will be reborn eventually. If you are consumed or annihilated, however, then that is it.”

“How does that happen?”

“Very powerful violence to destroy a soul... Now you must read about your enemy. Sit.”

“Throwing a dusty tome onto the desk Kaatib opened it to a section towards the back.

“Hmmp,” said Hamee after a few minutes of looking at pictures, “So this is it?”

“Well, no. This is the beginning, just look at the shelves. You have this to cover,” he said as he snapped his fingers.

Two shelves full appeared on topics about ether and vampires.”

“Oh.”

“Tomorrow, we will cover more.”

Several hundred hours later in the library, Hamee flickered out of sight, and Harvey woke up to dawns’ morning rays.

Kaatib looked up, “Here we go.”

Chapter 8

For the second time Harvey, or as he known here Hamee, met with the strange old name named Kaatib.

“Okay now we really get to the meat of the subject,” said Kaatib.

“Uh, what do you mean? What did I read last time?” asked a confused Hamee sitting on top of his desk.

As a school teacher to his pupil the old man explained, “That was just the preliminary in order to give you a background for tonight. You probably won’t even meet the vampire. I just wanted you to read about it in case you ran into it in your travels. So let’s review before you start.”

Harvey groaned red eyes flaming.

“Who is Algharoorb?” asked Kaatib.

“Well, he is a demon personified by various creatures and ideas throughout human history. He is most popularly known and most likes the idea of being a vampire.”

“Yes, it does fit the mortal’s idea of a vampire well, “consented Kaatib, “Continue.”

“He-”

“It,” corrected the teacher.

“It settled in this reality for reasons unknown and picked Earth as his-its favorite hunting ground despite being a veteran of many other realities,” Hamee stopped and looked questionly at Kaatib inquiring, “Why is there so little on the Uprising, and why did Algharoorb settle here?”

Kaatib looked helpless. As a scribe, he was supposed to have all the information, but he just wasn’t that old.

“The Uprising was so long ago. What the mortals of this reality got was passed down. Filtered down you could say, the information being so old. As you know time passes differently here than in Harvey and his species’ reality. It is more fluid, sometimes faster or slower. Anyway, what the mortals got, they made up into their stories making it their own however skewed it may be. There is little record of that event here in the human collective unconscious because they being so young.”

“So there are other libraries?” asked Hamee.

“Of course! But I wouldn’t necessarily call them libraries, more repositories of information. It doesn’t necessarily mean a building with books,” said Kaatib now reclining on a chair that had appeared.

“Well, can’t you go to them?”

“I wish,” he said ashamed, “it’s only...it’s only, I am confined here.”

“Why?”

“As to your second question,” Kaatib replied ignoring the most recent one, “Why he settled here. I don’t know that either. The information is gone, and before you interrupt me, trust me when I say, it’s gone. Its disappearance had dirty fingerprints, big dirty fingerprints. That’s enough for now. We’re off topic—to the ether. Tell me what you know.”

“It was hard to understand,” Hamee said.

“Oh! But you must, how else do you expect to get out of here?” Kaatib exclaimed and then noticing the shocked look on his face, “What you thought you were staying on Harvey’s Earth? He is not there.”

“It, not he,” said Hamee smugly.

“Wrong again. I said he and meant he. Why do you think we are still talking about Algharob? I said we were finished discussing it,” replied Kaatib.

Hamee clenched the table splintering wood and recited, “The ether is the substance of life itself. It can’t be consumed by us. It makes up every and all realities, and they sit upon themselves sometimes fitting together sometimes not. It is like a jigsaw puzzle in multiple dimensions. If you have the strength and training, and apparently permission, you can travel through them at will. All the rules are different for each, but the books describing these realities don’t exist here, at least not in the ones you gave me.”

“Excellent, a few more questions,” said Kaatib, “So why when you come here does your body remain in its reality in a resting state?”

“Because if I were to enter the either completely, I might not make it back out. I mean Harvey wouldn’t, and if he did, then it would not be without significant changes which...” Hamee trailed off puzzle pieces clicking together, “Well I’ll be damned.”

“Let’s hope not,” Kaatib said in all seriousness, “Hell is not fun.”

Shooting him a look Hamee continued, “No, the kid in the fire. He passed right through me, and I’ve been changing.”

“What?!! Why didn’t you tell me?” screamed Kaatib veins bulging on his pale forehead.

“Tell you what?” Hamee said temper rising.

“About the boy? Don’t you realized what-I mean who that was? That is who you’re supposed to protect! At least that is what you’ve done all the years before! Until it gets passed to some human oaf like you!”

“Hey!” yelled Hamee his hackles up, “I wasn’t asked about this job and a lot seems to be riding on your ability to educate me, so the blame is yours!”

Hamee stood up.

“Where are you going?” asked Kaatib.

“To get the boy,” he replied.

“No, you can’t. Your training is not finished. You’ll be useless.”

When Hamee hesitated, Kaatib said icily, “Sit down.”

Hamee bowing to the authority of knowledge obeyed.

“Good let’s talk about some bigger fish than a runty old vampire demon.”

--

Algharob stood up and felt the breeze flutter its garments. The niqab tickled his face as it moved resting on the bridge of his nose and held by sting tied around the back of his head. It sighed. Home never felt so good. Kelly’s body lay motionless in a closet back in the reality where her particular Earth existed. It strode away from the portal to its domain, a large paneled oak door embossed with circular metal designs, supported by a large stone rampart with twin flanking towers. The mortals he terrorized had at least given it a nice idea for a home. However, the rest of the castle didn’t play along with that reality’s rules. It bent at funny angles, some didn’t even look like a castle, and parts would appear and disappear as different areas synced in and out of time.

The creature was a sight to behold finally existing in its true state since leaving the pharaoh so many days ago. Its talon feet dug into the ether as it strode up through the sky leaving the ground

behind. The breeze here buffeted its loose shirt held tightly at the waist with a thick belt made of human skin, followed by loose gray pants cinched at the calf. Its long spindly fingers readjusted its black silky niqab. The monster's face was obstructed by the cloth hiding everything except its black eyes. The eyes were old and deep, pools of pain and agony. Its snake back hair glistened and ruffled as it stopped on a cloud and faced the wind.

Algharoorb lets it figure go a little fuzzy spreading its arms and just absorbed. It felt a glow coming from above and behind its left ear and one just past its fingertips.

"That's odd," it thought, "We didn't expect two."

As it reached out to touch the one at its fingertips, it stopped. Its ears quivered upon hearing its name. Adjusting its head, it listened to the whisper of breath from whence it came. Then it smiled, its true teeth masked behind the graceful curtain of its silk niqab.

--

The lights flickered in the library, both Kaatib and Hamee looked up noticing nothing but the swirling dust under the high ceiling lights until there was a bang in a far away row.

"There should be no one else here," said Kaatib worriedly.

"I'll check it out," Hamee replied.

"No, we go together. You won't know what it is."

In grudging acknowledgement again, Hamee waited for the old man. They slowly made their way down the numerous rows. The shelves seemed to lean into them, the breath of dust, knowledge, and time all of the sudden oppressive.

"It is best to stay together," Kaatib advised, "I've read too many horror stories, in fact, seen too many things like them too, to know that to separate is to admit defeat."

A book to their left in the row they were just passing fell to the ground falling open. It did nothing more than just lay their waiting to be picked up, but nothing had ever seemed so sinister. Hamee's eyes picked out four spindly fingers curling around the upper edge of the bookshelf.

"Hamee don't." Kaatib muttered seeing the fingers as well.

Reluctantly Hamee relented, his eyes flaming enough for the fire to escape his eye sockets and burn harmlessly on his plated forehead.

"Wait for it. Whatever it is, it will come to us," whispered Kaatib.

The old man was right. From three rows up, a clawed foot snaked out followed by a lithe body and veiled face.

“Hamee run. This is not your fight, nor mine either. Save your strength for him. That is your duty: protect the one from many,” whispered Kaatib.

“Like hell, this isn’t my fight.”

“Trust me, this shaetan has more tricks up its sleeve than you are prepared to handle. Go. Quest.”

With that Hamee turned and ran, plated feet banging down the hall, but the old man who had gripped his hand until that moment let go. Hamee slowed to turn.

“Go,” Kaatib commanded, “it is my time and my duty. I know my role.”

Hamee ran and did not turn to see Kaatib lifted by his shoulders and brought within inches of Algharoob’s face.

Kaatib, with his last ounce of bravery stated, “Go tell your master. It is too late. He knows.”

Algharoob his and leaned in closer the lips of both men barely separated by the thin layer of cloth and lied through his black teeth, “I serve no master.”

Kaatib’s eyes widened and he violently jerked back and turned his head yelling at the retreating figure, “Hamee! You’re after the wrong creature! Search for Iago! Iaagoo!”

Anything else, Kaatib planned on saying was cut off Algharoob’s mutterings. Twisting words coiled within it into a sentence of death. The words left its mouth and wrapped themselves as poisonous snakes around Kaatib’s body ready to strike. Kaatib merely stared transfixed in Algharoob’s grip fascinated to be seeing the destruction of his soul, until he saw nothing more. His body slumped in Algharoob’s hands as the ghost of a vapor, his soul, whispered out of his mouth.

As he ran, Hamee looked for an exit chest heaving, “Where is it? Where is it?!!”

He was beginning to panic. If Kaatib said he couldn’t handle it, then he couldn’t handle it. He passed row after row of endless dead trees but none of them helped him now. Hamee passed one row, skidded to a halt, and backtracked. It was déjà vu. Singing again! He followed it at a jog and then at a run as titles flashed past him. He saw out of the corner of his eye a figure flying next to him on the other shelf matching his pace and knew it was the creature. It was waiting, mocking him.

“I need a wall,” Hamee thought.

One appeared and he crashed right through his arms crossed just as the singing reached a crescendo, and he woke up from his meditation safe for now, but he never heard Kaatib’s last words.

Some hundred miles away Cassius's body slumped off the cushion and thudded to the floor. It was the loudest sound in that room since Cassius had talked to the previous owner in it when buying the house from him many years previous. No one would find his body.

--

The men crept up to the large house in silence just after midnight. They were all dressed in black with stockings over their head obscuring their faces. Signaling with his hand Earl motioned two of the six go around to the right and another two to the left. Okay came the silent reply from the men who used the corresponding hand signals. They approached the house while four cars sat at the end of the long driveway. Three were empty but the fourth held Algharob, a driver, and Lewis flanked by two beefy men.

The radio in the driver's hand crackled with a whisper, "Boss we're in position."

Algharob nodded and the driver replied, "She's coming now."

"Leave us with the boy for a minute," said Algharob.

The three men got out as Lewis cowered in the backseat. It turned around to look beadily at him.

"This is what we are going to do. We are going to go knock at your door. We will kill whoever answers it, and then our men will storm the house and kill all inside," it said with a cool smile.

"No!" gasped Lewis lunging forward.

"Oh? Is this the me next we talked about earlier?" it said easily grabbing him and pulling his body awkwardly so that it wedged in between the two front seats.

"Tell me, have you ever been kissed?" it asked gripping his head tightly and turning it so Lewis was forced to look up into its eyes.

As Algharob bent down, Lewis began screaming. The three men outside turned away from the car not wanting to look. Then the windshield spattered with blood from inside.

"Glad I'm not driving this car home," said Tyrone.

"Dammit," Henry grunted kicking at some pebbles on the road because it was his car.

The door opened and the small figure made its way up the long driveway. The knock on the door woke Rose whose room was on the first floor.

"What in the cat hair?" she grumbled, "Who's calling this late?"

Rose achingly made her way to the door shuffling along in her slippers. She opened the door and stared openmouthed at the woman who stood before her. She was covered in what looked like blood. It dripped off her chin and stained the front of her grey t-shirt. When she waved her hands blood flicked onto Rose's face and glasses.

“Hey Gran!” it said heartily revealing blood stained teeth, “Guess what I just did. I ate your grandson.”

Rose’s tear stained eyes, from worry about the disappearance of her grandson, widened, but before she could respond she fell down dead with a cavity where her heart used to be.

Algharoob stood over her gripping her heart and said without remorse, “Sorry.”

It whistled, and the men entered the house by some violent form or another, breaking windows or shooting off locks. The sounds awakened the rest of the family upstairs.

Aisha who had been dreaming again was the first to act running to Baybars’ room saying, “They are here for you I know it. C’mon.”

She led a groggy Baybars to her room and opened a window. They crawled out onto the roof that held up the screen porch. Baybars followed her lead as she dangled off the roof and fell rolling to the ground. None of the men in the house noticed the two fugitives escaping. They ran to the edge of the property, pushed through the bushes and kept running down the street.

As they ran, blood pooled in the Brokman house on the stairs, in beds, and in the bathroom as all its occupants lay dead or dying. Algharoob stood fuming as it realized the one it wanted wasn’t there.

Bright lights blinded the two fleeing figures as a car rounded the corner. It was moving quickly towards them.

“Oh no,” said Baybars.

The car screeched to a halt and stopped in front of the two.

A head poked out the window and a very confused Harvey asked in surprise, “Aisha? Baybars? What are you two doing out here at this time of night?”

The two stood in shock.

“Get in!” he commanded.

In New York, Jason opened his eyes regaining consciousness. As Baybars opened the door of the car, he fell down clutching his head. The words ‘Baybars? Is that you? Can you hear me? I’m in New York. Come rescue me’ echoed madly bouncing around in Baybars’ skull.

Chapter 9

Earl woke up with a pounding headache, blood spilling from a cut above his forehead. He was being dragged across the grass of the Brokman lawn by his left arm. It was Algharoob. The pain

from the stress on the shoulder joint and from his cut forehead kept him conscious and made him want to hurt someone...just not it. The dew from the early morning grass chilled him but not as much as the sight of the small woman who was pulling him.

He looked at it. It was filthy. Swathed in red, from head to toe, dripping the life giving blood that it had violently stolen from somebody or more likely somebodies. Earl noticed it was limping and saw through its blood soaked jeans a hole that leaked brighter: fresh blood.

“What’s going on?” mumbled Earl.

No answer from Algharob, just a tightening grip on his wrist. The monster didn’t even slow down after he had regained consciousness, and every time he tried to stand up, it pulled him off balance and kept dragging him.

“Algharob. Hey wait. Let me up!” he whispered trying to be conspiratory.

It ignored him and kept walking, aiming for just past the bushes at the front of lawn where the cars were parked. Pulling the remote starter out of its stained pocket, it started up the black Ford Explorer which sat behind the white Cadillac containing Lewis’ mutilated body. Opening the passenger door of the black car, it manhandled Earl into the seat and put a hand over his mouth.

“We are leaving and unless you are with us, we will kill you now. Clear?” it hissed.

Earl nodded uncomprehendingly, and Algharob made its way to the other door easing the damaged left leg in after it. Turning on the car, it turned on the lights. The lights reminded Earl of other lights he had just seen. Lights that someone had turned out for him. The memory came back to him; his face had collided with someone’s small fist. That someone’s fist was connected to Kelly’s small body. The last thing Earl had seen after the easy massacre was a mask of rage on its face looking like it was going to shout at the men standing before it in the hallway. Then there was a flurry of motion and then nothingness.

“Hey!” he shouted, “What happened? Why did you-”

He was cut off by a look of rage similar to the one earlier from Algharob. Not wanting to trifle with the monster, he merely turned on the radio until he found a classic rock station. It was playing Credence Clearwater Revival’s “Bad Moon Rising.”

“Huh,” he thought to himself shooting a sidelong look at the creature next to him, “this is appropriate. Even staying in didn’t help these folks. Nor my men either I guess.”

As the car pulled away and headed back to their base of operations, Fischer’s Club, now eleven men shorter, the original nine plus two hired for the breaking and entering, police lights finally showed in the distance approaching the house awash on the inside with blood.

--

After pulling Baybars into the car, Harvey drove off heading away from Aisha’s house towards his own. He pulled into an almost empty Dunkin Donuts parking lot, save for the employee’s

cars and sat in the empty glow of the parking lot lights. He looked back at Aisha and Baybars noticing how the two clung to each other. She had tucked herself under his arms and was crying softly while Baybars rested with his head back and eyes closed.

“What happened?” asked Harvey calmly, immediately getting a feeling that it had something to do with his earlier encounter in the library.

Baybars sat up and opened his eyes, the left one filled with blood. He shrugged, blood also dripping from his left ear, as he tried to collect himself after the violent invasion of a human being’s most sanctified area: his mind. He hadn’t spoken about this yet, and Harvey had assumed he had experienced some sort of seizure. Baybars opened his mouth to speak when he was interrupted by Aisha’s small voice.

“They’re-they’re all dead,” she sniffed quietly.

“Who?” asked Harvey scratching at the growth under the skin of his jaw.

“The hefflelumps and woozles and pooh bear and-and everyone.” she bust out reverting back to her childhood stories, “They’re all dead!”

“Who is this Aisha?” asked Harvey unable to deal with a crying child.

“I think she means all of her family,” cut in Baybars speaking for the first time, “We were attacked by some people. There was a lot of loud noise and shooting, but we escaped. Is that right Aisha?”

Aisha nodded again nestled under Baybar’s arm adding, “And the woozles.”

“Woozles? Do you mean the bad guys?” he asked her gently.

Another nod. Harvey sat back for a second taking this all in from the chaos and fear of his escape from the library to this new set of problems created after a murderous act against a little girl’s family.

“Well let’s go back then,” said Harvey reaching for the ignition with his keys.

“No!” said Aisha shooting out from her cocoon of safety, tear stained eyes wide and scared.

“But the police will be there by now,” gestured Harvey to the road.

“We can’t go back,” she said quickly, “it was in my dream. The snake was there looking for Baybars and then everyone fell down dead—woozles included.

Harvey glanced at Baybars who shrugged, “Okay, I’ll take you to my place for now.”

“Wait!” she said again, and then continued a little more shyly while staring at the neon glow of the twenty four hour Dunkin Donuts sign, “I’m hungry.”

They sat in Dunkin Donuts all munching on donuts and sipping hot coffee. After his first sip, Baybars remembered something else about his life before Aisha and the fire: Nescafe. Since breaking the dam of silence in Dr. Brokman’s office, bits and pieces occasionally came back to him. Baybars had finally figured out why he didn’t eat pork; it was because he was Muslim. He stared at an advertisement of someone, the picture labeled her as Rachel Ray, with a scarf that looked faintly like a kuffeya when it clicked. He had never had coffee this good before, and he had seen something like that scarf before, in fact even owned one. He remembered sitting in a café with...Jason both sipping Nescafe. The last puzzle pieces finally fell into place. He had lived in Egypt.

“Whooh!” he yelled standing up getting strange looks by Aisha, Harvey, and the cashier.

Harvey pulling him down said, “I don’t think this is the time to be celebrating.”

“I know,” Baybars said somber again, “but I finally remembered where I come from. I am Egyptian!”

“Egypt?” asked Harvey.

“Hey, if you don’t believe me-”

“No, no. I believe you,” interrupted Harvey who had seen and experienced weirder things.

“Oh, okay then.”

Baybars once again serious looked at both of them, seeming somewhat off kilter as he stared at them with one clear eye and one red one.

“I fell down when you picked us up because Jason spoke to me. In my head. I know that sounds weird but that is what happened. It was so loud and painful. I think it did this,” he said pointing to his eye and ear and then continued, “He said he needed help and to come and rescue him. I personally think that he is over exaggerating. He always does that, but he would enjoy our company. He is in New York and we need to go to him as soon as possible.”

“How?” asked Harvey.

“You’ll take us,” chimed in Aisha immediately accepting his story, and Baybars nodded.

“But my job,” Harvey protested.

“It’s Friday morning. Call in sick and then you have the weekend to help us.” suggested Aisha.

The other two stared at her as if such a suggestion could never come from such a small innocent girl.

Harvey thought for a moment and then said, “You’re in luck. This Friday I have off and won’t be going back to the station until Tuesday. You have me for a couple of days.”

Baybars and Aisha smiled.

--

Detective Trach and several other officers in two marked cars rolled up the driveway to the Brokman house. A phone call from a worried but geographically distant neighbor had brought them all here. The houses in this neighborhood had larger than usual acreage found in the city, so the sounds of violence had woken the neighbors but just barely. Trach had left two officers to check out the three empty cars especially the one with the massive amount of blood that could be seen on the inside while he and four other officers went up to the house. It was eerily quiet.

“Trach this is Tennitus.”

“Go ahead,” Trach replied back over the radio.

“Sir, the body is male and is missing his head...Uh, it looks like it was hacked off with a dull blade, but Roberts thinks it was...uh chewed off, sir.”

Trach’s stomach clenched, “Okay keep searching and call for back up. We’re probably going to need more men with the amount of empty cars that we have.”

He increased his speed up the winding driveway until he got to the garage. Getting out and drawing his revolver from his holster, he motioned for two officers, Linda Asher and Demetoid Bones to circle around back. The other two were to stay with him. The three approached the door with Trach in the lead completely unaware of what waited for them behind Dr. Brokman’s front door.

Saying a small prayer he tried the handle and found it unlocked. Looking back at his two other officers, Leroy Burnes and Chelsea Anderson, he nodded and they returned the gesture. Trach was an aging man, but not so old that he wasn’t able to move when he needed to. Throwing open the door he stepped in fast and low, gun and eyes scanning the room, and he slipped and fell on his back with a loud crash and grunt.

Burnes immediately crouched down and helped him up saying, “Sir are you okay? He-kul...ughh!”

Anderson who had been covering the other two also dropped her gun and guard after scanning the room. She stood slack jawed. Trach sat up rubbing his salt and pepper hair, and then feeling the sticky wetness on his fingers, scrambled to his feet. His stereotypical detective’s jacket was soaked with coppery smelling blood.

“Check out the upstairs. Make sure there is no one around,” he ordered trying to regain his dignity while grabbing his radio and continuing to the others, “Asher, Bones come on through and sweep the first floor. HQ, this is Detective Trach.”

“Go ahead.”

“Our location is the Brokman house. We are going to need two ambulances and a large forensics team. Now.”

As his two officers moved upstairs, Trach stared around the hall, living room, and what was visible of the kitchen and his stomach clenched further. All around him were bodies, radiating from where he stood. It looked as if some had tried to run, hence the blood in the kitchen, but of these eleven, none had made it. Their mutilated bodies lay in a radial pattern as if a bomb had gone off, but there was no sign of any sort of explosion whatsoever. Limbs lay separated from bodies as if they had participated in a mad celebratory dance of death with the only goal of physical destruction. Their blood was everywhere, and it lapped at the tops of his shoes in some places as he walked around on the slightly warped old floors.

“Doesn’t seem right,” he said looking at the dead men, “Why are the ones who did the breaking and entering all brutally dead? Why?”

He closed the door and startled from shock. There on the back of the door hung the lifeless body of Rose Brokman. She was held up by a machete which pinned her body to the door seeming to be the end result of a twisted and macabre game of pin the tail on the donkey. He didn’t stare at her lifeless eyes, though they were creepy enough, but at the hole where her heart should have been.

Blood dripped every few seconds off his coat into the pool below sending out small ripples, and Lazarus Trach began to have a very, very strong hunch that his friend Ronald Brokman was dead.

Chapter 10

“Jason? Jason? Are you there? Hello?”

Baybars sat up on Harvey’s couch frustrated by his inability to communicate with Jason. He had received nothing since Jason had painfully flooded his mind with his words, confusion, and fear. Aisha lay curled up in a ball under some blankets in an orange loveseat across the room.

“Harvey’s apartment is odd,” thought Baybars.

He lay back down to try and reach Jason again.

--

Hamee sat in the library again. This time it wasn’t a fun filled adventure but an urgent quest for information while avoiding detection by whatever malicious entities inhabited this particular section of nowhere. His nerves stood on full alert listening for any sign of books dropping

heralding someone or something else's presence. Their Dunkin Donuts session had turned into more than just a cup of coffee and a donut; it had become three cups of joe and a dozen donuts. Hamee went back to their conversation over the chocolate glaze before beginning his search.

"So Jason was with you?" Harvey asked Baybars.

"Yes, we ran together in the darkness, or ether as you call it."

"Why were you two together?"

"I don't know. It just happened that way, but since we went in together, it must mean we are somehow connected in what you say you need to protect."

"Maybe," Harvey mused.

"All the more reason for us to get to New York as soon as possible."

"I know, but I want to do some more research first." Harvey said taking a sip of hot black coffee.

"Where?" asked Baybars.

"He was in my dream," interrupted a forgotten Aisha.

They turned to her.

"I call him leaf man. He looked like the park come to life with yellow eyes, bright yellow eyes," she continued, "He said I needed to help him."

"This is Jason you are talking about?" asked Baybars, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, you said you saw him. Don't you remember?" she replied, "He said I needed to help him to help myself."

"It was so dark, and we were scared." said Baybars, "The trip was all so confusing."

"Well, I'll see what I can do to help him," Harvey said turning backed to Baybars.

She sulked into her coffee Boston Crème in hand.

"Little Aisha," Hamee thought as he sat at a computer which he had, for lack of a better word, conjured in the library, "She is a burden, but she has nowhere else to go."

Hamee activated the search function on his computer, a handy option that allowed him to avoid aimless wandering in the endless mazelike rows of the never ending library. He searched for 'nature' and got way to many entries. He added his name, 'Hamee,' and about half the entries disappeared.

“Ho, ho, ho. I am popular,” he said to himself.

Hamee added another word to the search: ‘vampire.’ Much fewer results but still not enough to make it possible in the short amount of time he guessed he had. Sighing he added ‘good vs. evil’ to the search box and blinked in surprise as five results glowed on the screen. After memorizing the call numbers, he set out, but twenty minutes later he returned empty handed and fuming.

“Why the hell are all of them missing?” he wondered aloud, “It figures. What I need and it isn’t there.”

He brought his plated hands down on his desk in a fit of violence and smashed through the top revealing a secret compartment that, if not for his violence, he never would have found. Covered in splinters lay a yellowed skinned cloth holding several old documents bound with a red rope. Pulling out the packet reverently, as it was his Kaatib’s last known item, he untied the rope and began to shuffle through the papers an article at a time trying to make sense of what he was reading. The first one he looked at talked about the Uprising and speculated that the champion of good may have actually been defeated and gone into hiding.

“Well, we know that much is true,” muttered Hamee.

Pawing through more of the documents, he found one discussing how the champion may have gone into hiding. Hamee realized this was what he really needed to know.

“Why didn’t Kaatib share this with me? This makes me to handle everything with Baybars differently.”

He stopped when he got to a section on dual/split identities realizing that--

His thoughts stopped as he watched the papers slide through his fingers. Harvey blinked his eyes to see a worried Babyars staring at him.

“Harvey. It is twelve noon. We need to go.”

“Right, yea,” he replied unsure how to tell Baybars what he had pieced together, but Baybars stode off gathering Aisha and some supplies before he could open his mouth again.

Harvey tried to ignore the last image of Kaatib that would not leave his brain or conscience alone. It was the lifeless shell, almost transparent in its disintegration on the floor of the library, of his shortest and most mysterious friend that he knew would haunt him for the rest of his life. Harvey was strong. His body had become even stronger in the recent past, yet he had not saved Kaatib. Guilt, strong enough to cause pain, welled up in his body gripping him in a torturous embrace starting in his stomach and moving up and down his body.

He screamed at himself, “I am a firefighter! I save people! There hadn’t even been a fire, and I let an old man die! Did my oath I took as a rescuer even mean anything anymore?”

Another feeling blossomed in his gut. Not new, but this time it had a target, or at least what he had seen of it, unlike the dancing inanimate and taunting wraith of a housefire. He felt hate and anger, and he resolved to protect those again under his charge no matter how much of a burden they were.

--

Algharob sat pale and resting in the discolored recliner as Earl stitched her leg up.

“It was the machete,” it said.

One of the guys got you?” Earl asked with trepidation.

“No, no,” she hissed in pain, “You all can’t hurt me. I slipped in the blood—my blood—that I was taking.”

Earl said nothing and just continued to work.

“Damn these frail human bodies,” it said again through gritted teeth, “We are forced to feel everything you feel as if this affected our true soul.”

“Sorry boss,” was all that Earl dared to say.

“We need to go somewhere. When we get back, we will find him, or it will be your life.”

“Yes boss,” Earl gulped.

Algharob fled from consciousness and awoke pain free in the library, “Ahh, that’s better.”

There was no sound in the library. It was quiet as death. The monster strode up the aisles finding an empty desk with a hole in it. Seeing the papers scattered on the floor, it smiled, seated itself gracefully, and began to reading seeking to know what its enemy knew and wondering who would have come to the library with the old man dead.

“Was is the black plated man?” it wondered.

It didn’t recognize the face. Looking down at the first paper its hands touched, it frowned.

“Finally, some information on what we have been missing, especially about the Uprising,” it thought to itself in an internal monologue, “Ever since our soul was destroyed in the physical long before the Uprising, we have roamed the ether searching for information but for naught. None of the others were willing to give out that information no matter how...persuasive we were.”

Algharob contemplated that after a long and fruitless search of trying to figure out what happened in the early dark years after it had been banished, it eventually lost interest, turning instead to the only thing which it enjoyed. It had become dangerously fixated on collecting pain,

even for a creature such as itself. Its mind drifted recalling all those years as its fingers blindly held the papers. Shaking its head, it moved past its inadequacies, brushed off the idea of insanity, and began reading again. A smile began creeping up its thin lips rising higher and higher although obscured by its niqab.

“We understand,” it said through an exhale, “Those two lights we saw in the clouds were really one and the same. Clever, clever, clever.” We will soon have our revenge, Epluribusunum, for what you took from us those eons ago: our physical being.”

Another thought strode violently into its head. It was one of pleasure, one of caution, and one not of its own devising. Algharob immediately grew angry on many levels despite the approval it was receiving.

“We are no one’s lackey! But...” it continued finally realizing that it was long past being independent, “We can make this to our advantage. We use this knowledge... Yes, we use this knowledge and our actions to get a corporeal body back and once again roam the Earth where we are top predator. It will be a grand bargaining chip.”

After reading about the black plated man, Hamee, who protected what it is sought to destroy, it stretched cat-like. Algharob returned to that feeling of caution. It hated its keeper, sent to keep it in check.

“How many times did it foil our plans on Earth since we settled here? We thought we would be all alone again, away from the prying eyes of Epluribusunum and others. Then he showed up! Our blood burns with the fire of hatred that can only be quenched by wrapping our fingers around its throat and wiping out its soul, perhaps even consuming it. For the longest time we have never dreamed this possible. In one bold move, we will destroy all that stands before us. It is time for the hunter to become the hunted.”

Sifting through the rest of the papers, it found one that seemed to have been untouched by whoever had previously been here. Its title was “How to Kill a Lower Order Demon: Signs and Practices (In my host body’s language: the vampire Sunset) by Kaatib Almustasharq.

Algharob smirked after glancing at the paper thinking only, “Lower order demon no more.”

It then promptly ate the single short essay leaving no evidence of its existence.

Algharob left the library and headed to the clouds, its borders going fluid. Energy flowed through it, and it immediately saw the two lights it had been startled to see earlier. It cupped one in its hand and absorbed.

“Ahh. New York.”

Kelly’s body woke up with a start and stared at Earl who was sipping coffee.

“Come, we go to New York.”

Earl wordlessly grabbed his Beretta 92FS semi-automatic pistol with accompanying holster and followed his master out the door, discarded bloody clothes, bits of bandages, and spent bullet casings the only remaining artifacts lingering under the ephemeral acrid smell of sweat and the harsh smell of dried blood in the now empty and discarded Fisher's Club.

--

Baybars opened his eyes as they pulled onto Fulton Street with the Brooklyn Bridge in the distance. They were almost to the hospital. The dull evening sun wrapped around the buildings in a slightly polluted and chemicalized caress as the city's nightlife emerged.

He had finally been able to talk to Jason, and both had spent the trip refining their abilities which seemed limited by distance. It was an odd feeling being able to communicate with his friend without actual speech. There was someone else in his head now, which he thought would feel strange, but, in actuality, it felt like some part of him had finally come home to roost. In linking with Jason, their thoughts intermingled. Never enough that they were in danger of losing themselves in each other; telepathy is only so liberating, but the thoughts danced together in a ballet of color, emotion, smell, and sometimes even specific events. The only time a really specific thought process occurred is when the two focused together on it. It seemed to Baybars, and by extension Jason, that it was a self-contained stream of thought, as if they were having conversations with themselves and to themselves. Baybars would have thought himself crazy with the voice in his head if he told himself about this change two weeks earlier sitting in a café in Egypt on Talaat Harb Street. He knew he would never be alone ever again.

Aisha lay asleep her arms wrapped protectively around herself in the backseat of Harvey's weathered car.

Harvey turned and said to the occupants in the car and said in a steely voice, "We're here. Let's get him."

Chapter 11

"He is on the second floor of the left wing," Baybars said as they stared at the building from the parking lot.

They moved away from Hentry's beat up green Corolla and walked around to the building's edge so they stood just under his window.

"Jason. We're here. Open the window."

After a few minutes the window slid open.

"I'm coming in."

Harvey grabbed Baybars, as Aisha stood by, and then mightily heaved him up. Baybars managed to grab the sill and scrambled inside. Seconds later Baybars poked his head out and gave a thumbs up gesturing to the entrance around the corner.

“Harvey?” asked Aisha.

“Later, let’s get to the car first,” he replied tersely mind concentrating fully on the matter at hand.

Opening a door of the car for Aisha, he drove them up to the entrance and sat waiting.

“Harvey?” she asked again.

“Wait until we’ve finished,” he said, once again his lack of child rearing skills making him more brusque than he should have been.

They sat in silence waiting for the two to emerge from the yawning maw of the hospital. Baybars and Jason came at a run, teeth showing. Harvey’s heart sank; he was going to have to deal with police. Then Baybars who was pushing Jason in a wheelchair skipped, and he saw they were happy not scared. As Baybars opened the door, their conversation drifted in.

“A perfect ruse!”

“We fooled them!”

To Harvey they seemed like brothers, and then he remembered what he had read in the library. They were closer than brothers.

“Jason,” Baybars said pointing to the others in the car, “meet your rescuers: Harvey and Aisha.”

Harvey nodded and started driving. Aisha smiled and looked expectantly at Baybars hoping to be included in their conversation. However, Baybars and Jason sat facing each other talking animatedly. Aisha’s smile faltered, hurt just a little. She turned and stared out the window as Harvey drove looking for a cheap motel. They finally pulled into one designated only as Barry’s in the outskirts of the city, gravel sliding under the car’s tires.

“We’re going to stop here for the night. Tomorrow we go back to Baltimore,” Harvey said, “Wait here while I go get us a room.”

The other three sat in the car in what Aisha thought was an uncomfortable silence until she realized they were talking telepathically and leaving her out. Aisha was hurt even further because Jason did not acknowledge that she was the girl in her dream about him, even though she had told Baybars about it.

“Did he even realize who she was? Had Baybars told him?”

She decided she would ask them point blank, but as she opened her mouth, Harvey knocked on the window startling all three occupants and motioning for them to get out of the car. They approached the motel entrance bags in hand making an odd scene: a discolored burly white man with red hair, a dark skinned Egyptian, a skinny white boy, and a little black girl.

“Very interesting and very suspicious,” mused Barry staring out the window from his office as he reached for the phone, “Especially three grown men, none looking even slightly related with a little black girl.”

--

Algharob and Earl finally arrived in New York. The traffic that Harvey had beat had snared them.

“Get us a hotel,” Algharob commanded, “A nice one too.”

Earl did as he was told, and they went up to their room and lay down to rest, each in their own bed.

“So what are we going to do boss,” asked Earl.

“Nothing right now. Sleep. Dream,” it said with a smile.

--

After a heavy dinner of greasy Chinese takeout, the four travelers sat in the dank motel room. Aisha soon fell asleep on one of the beds, taking up the whole thing even with such a small body. Harvey, Baybars, and Jason sat in the chairs provided by the hotel in their room.

“I have something important to tell you,” Harvey said looking unsure how to continue as if he was confessing a mortal sin to a priest.

Baybars and Jason sat alert yet confused.

“It’s about you two,” he said hesitantly, “You see, I read some stuff recently, reliable stuff, and have been learning a lot about how this all works, and-”

“Come on man, just tell us,” interrupted Jason.

Harvey’s anger flared briefly, “Fine. You two are the same person, but you have been split into two for your protection. This means-”

He was cut off again by Jason, “What?! That’s impossible?”

Glancing over at the unconscious Aisha Harvey growled, “Shut up and let me finish. You two together make up one body, one being, and one soul. You have been split ever since the Uprising. As someone explained it to me, if your soul is like mine, then they, your souls, passed from person to person all over the globe for ages never lining up until they got to you two. I would like to think this is happy chance, but after what I have seen I expect that not to be the case. You are not united, not yet, but you have begun some sort of mixing, if the telepathy is any indicator. Now I can help protect you, from what I don’t really know, but I will do my best until something happens.”

“Do your best? Doesn’t sound like much,” said Jason, “What could be out there that would want to harm us?”

Impatiently Harvey retorted, “I don’t think you understand. As a whole, you represent all that is good and stand as, for lack of a better world, the champion of good. If this is actually the case, which I believe it is, then logically there exists some sort of counterpart in evil, and if not, then there have to be at least some evil forces in this world and not who would want to see you destroyed. That is only a guess, but I have a strong hunch it is true.”

“How good are your hunches?” asked Jason.

“Usually right on, they have kept me alive fighting fires and saving lives. All I know for sure is that there exists in these parts a vampire-like creature. I have never met it, only read about it, but it should not be after you, at least that is what I was told. If I had to fight him, I guess I would be some sort of vampire hunter,” Harvey said the last almost as if an afterthought.

“Cool, vampires,” Jason gushed.

“What is our name?” Baybars asked fitting the pieces together and hoping this wouldn’t go where he thought it was going.

“Epluribusunum,” Harvey stated simply.

“Epluri, epluri, epluri,” Baybars whispered more to himself than to the others.

“What?” asked Harvey, for Jason had heard it clear as day, the thought so strong in Baybars mind.

Eerily the two recited the poem in unison to Harvey, despite Jason never having heard it.

“That is me,” said Baybars, “I am Epluri.”

“But what does it mean?” asked Jason.

“I don’t know,” replied Harvey, “but I can find out. In fact, when I go to sleep tonight. Speaking of which, we have a long day of traveling ahead tomorrow back to Baltimore, so we should catch some zzz’s.

“What? Going back already?” asked Jason, “This is New York, and I want to come with you to wherever you are going tonight.”

“And?” asked Harvey.

“I’ve never been,” said Baybars, “nor has Aisha, I’m guessing. And think what she has to go back to.”

“So you want to stay for a day or two?”

“Of course, and I want to come with you tonight too.”

“Not tonight, maybe tomorrow. We can stay, but I’ll need help paying for it. A fire fighter’s salary only goes so far,” he consented pulling off his shirt and lying on the floor.

Jason and Baybars stayed up late and explored the implications of their new relationship, neither sure how to proceed with something as intimate as reconnecting two halves of the same person again and dealing with all those hidden thoughts, feelings, and past activities.

--

Aisha woke up. It was still dark. She sat up in the cold room and tried to recall Harvey turning on the air conditioning. It escaped her.

“It is really cold,” she thought, “must be some strong air conditioning.”

She looked around the room and hugged herself against the cold, the dim light from the parking lot throwing funny mysterious shadows around the room. Jason and Baybars lay on one bed curled away from each other. She could just see Harvey’s feet poking out from behind the other side of their bed on the ground.

“Too many shadows for nasty little beasties to hide in,” she thought.

with meee...

“What was that?” she thought looking frantically around. Cautiously she got out of bed and went to Harvey’s blue duffel bag intending to rummage around for some warmer clothes.

commmmme...

Again the voice; it was the whisper against silk, smooth and almost inaudible, but she heard it and did not know where it was coming from or what it wanted. She reached the bag and unzipped it, putting her hand in and then jerking it back out against the greater cold within. Aisha opened the bag and stared inside at a gun. A big one too. Thought she did not know it, she was staring at a Desert Eagle handgun.

leave themmm...

Aiming for one of Harvey’s shirts she put her hand in the bag and instead came back clutching the heavy piece of death delivering metal. Expertly she checked the magazine, found it full, and then chambered a round, the snicking and clicking of metal not disturbing the three sleeping forms.

yesssssssss...

Walking over to the occupied bed, she stared at Jason who lay closest. Then thinking better of it, she climbed onto the bed between the two. A feeling boiled in her heart, one that she could not put out.

“You took my friend from me,” she whispered placing the cold silent metal against Jason’s temple. He moved slightly away from the cold caress of the death dealer.

She pulled the trigger.

The boom and flash rocked the room and Jason’s head exploded out the back, blood and gristle decorating the unlit lampshade on the nightstand Halloween style. Both Baybars and Harvey sat up at the sound of the noise.

“Wha?” asked Baybars staring at Aisha and the smoking gun.

kiilll...

Recovering her balance after the violent kick of the gun, she dropped to one knee and put the gun against Baybars thin chest.

“You left me,” she said coldly.

Any reply was cut off by the retort of the gun. Baybars jerked and fell against the bed eyes going a dull brown as the life leaked out the fist-sized hole in his back. With a roar Harvey got up from the floor face covered in blood spatter. Jumping on the bed he knocked the little assassin over but not before the right side of his chest lost a chunk of flesh. There was no movement on the bed, but then the gun went off again, and Harvey’s body jerked. Seconds later Aisha squirmed out from under the body, covered in blood and weaponless.

little one commmee...

She began to cry crouching against the bed as a tiny stream of blood dripped down from the side of the bed, becoming a waterfall and pooling on the floor soaking into her sleep clothes.

look...

She looked and screamed. There was a face in the window supported by a tall lithe body. She stared into the eyes which showed nothing. They were completely black sucking in all light, all life. Then the creature smiled causing her to scream again. There was enough light behind it from the parking lot that she could see the horrific orifice below the thin nose. Aisha screamed because she saw its teeth, which were long, some as long as her fingers, and black. Not black like the eyes but a sheeny black. They looked well cared for, and she had to assume well used.

let mee in...

The words resonated in her brain and she watched its hand come to rest on the doorknob and rattle it once indicating that it was locked. To her dismay she felt her feet move on their own accord. As she sat up she was jostled from behind. Aisha turned and was greeted by a blood soaked Harvey eyes flaming red, who knocked her over and hugged her on the floor.

“No!” he shouted looking into the creature’s eyes.

It snarled, a noise Aisha felt at the base of her brain stem, and fled almost as if in a cloud of smoke violently dissipated by the wind.

--

Algharob woke up frustrated the next morning, “We were so close to finding and killing our keeper.”

--

Aisha woke up the next morning as well on the floor twisted in her blankets remembering everything. It came back vividly and equally as violent; so much so, that she was almost sick in her cocoon. Aisha squirmed out of the sheets which were wet with sweat. The first thing she saw was Harvey’s blue duffel bag-open. She sat up peering over the bed as if a kilroy drawing.

Harvey saw here and smiled, in a fresh shirt and offering her a glaze from Dunkin Donuts, “Morning sunshine.”

She watched astonished as Jason and Baybars disentangled themselves from an inadvertent overnight spooning session as a result of the small bed.

“It had only been a dream,” she sighed accepting the donut, “or had it? Did Harvey know?”

She sat on the bed and began to eat, complimenting her donut with sufficient dunks in the steaming cup of coffee now present in her other hand.

Chapter 12

Aisha managed to shake off her feelings of unease; in fact it went away quite easily throughout the day, only to be replaced by a new type of fear: vertigo.

“See Aisha? You’re standing on the top of Empire State Building. I don’t even know how many stories up, but it sure is high,” said a smiling Baybars.

She should have been happy that Baybars was talking to her, but she wasn’t. It was the first time he had spoken to her all morning being completely absorbed with Jason. She knew their situation, but it still didn’t stop her from wanting to yell at Baybars, “NOTICE ME!” Harvey stood back from the edge. Despite climbing ladders, which he did just fine, he didn’t like heights. The ride back down in the elevator was stuffy and claustrophobic, the air heavy with literal unspoken thoughts.

“Okay, next stop, the metro, so we can get to the boats to see the Statue of Liberty,” said Harvey breaking the silence.

Everyone was almost all smiles.

--

Dec was not all smiles. He was angry, had a gun, and was completely willing to use it. And today might be the day. It was delivery day, but Lawrence, or T-bone, as he was known on the street did not have his drugs, coke to be specific. Dec scratched, irritable and jumpy, at his freshly shaven jaw, uniform tickling his neck. He hated waiting. T-bone had gone to the back to see what he could get: a gift for Mr. Dexter Dupree to make up for not having his supply. Nobody called him DD or Double D or any of that nonsense. Anyone who did got decked, hence his nickname.

“What’s taking this loser so long to get me my stash and my fix,” he growled knowing he was on the clock.

As one of New York’s finest, he was supposed to be on patrol, but no one minded if he took a few minutes to swing by his dealer to pick up his week’s supply. No one minded because no one knew.

“Scumbag,” he cursed and walked to the back of the laundry shop, “T-bone! I got no time to be waiting! Woah, hey.”

Dec turned around for a second then decided he didn’t have the time to waste while T-bone finished up his business. He turned back around again ready to give T-bone a new face for messing around with some chic while he was waiting out front except there was another man there now. He had a mustache and mean attitude; at least that is what his bat said.

“What?” said Dec going for his gun.

“Don’t think so pig,” the mustachioed man said swinging hard.

Dec went down and woke up minutes later tied to a chair and blindfolded. The man was splashing water on his face.

“Hey! Do you know who I am? You guys are in a load of trouble. T-bone, if this is over my shipment you’re gonna wish that-”

“T-bone’s dead,” interjected a female voice over his tirade, “Stupid name too.”

Dec smelled blood as she got close and sat on his lap. He felt something forced into his mouth. It was the lip of a cup and a warm fluid poured into his mouth. He tried spitting to breathe because someone strong was holding his nose. The female voice sighed, knocked him on his back while tied to the chair and then put the glass to his lips. It was full again. Dec gave in and started to drink rather than drown.

“Good,” she purred.

Her hands pulled him easily back up as she righted the chair. She removed the blindfold and the first thing Dec saw was her eyes. They were clear.

“It’s the insanity,” she said calmly staring into his own blue eyes, “It forces them this color which it only happens when our bloodlust is highest, and we are ready to take a new host.”

“A new host,” sputtered Dec, “What in the holy hell are you talking about?”

He spit, gagged, and spit again and again. Dec wanted to throw up. She had made him drink blood.

“Whose?” he choked out.

“T-bone,” said the man behind him, the man with the bat.

Dec couldn’t decide who to kill first, bat-man or crazy lady.

“Wait you said something about a new host? What are you? A zombie?”

“Imbecile,” she sighed, “We’re worse. Goodbye.”

Dec’s eyes widened as she picked up a meat cleaver which had come out of nowhere.

“Hey, hey!” he shouted, “HEY!”

He stared in abject horror as she removed her shirt and began to cut out her heart herself with the cleaver. Dec watched her grimace in pain as she cut through meat and bone until she exposed her heart to the open air. Falling to her knees and sagging against a wall, she reached a hand in, screamed, and yanked it out. To Dec, the now dead woman made an odd sight. She lay on the ground arm with the heart aloft at a ninety degree angle.

“Well at least she is dead. One less bogy I got to deal with,” he muttered to himself and then to the man, “Hey, you let me go, I’ll make sure you’re paid for it. She sure was a crazy one.”

The man didn’t reply. He was staring at the hand which held the heart. Dec lifted his head from his chest and gasped out loud.

It was still beating.

“She said to do it,” said the man who sounded resigned.

He walked over to her and grabbed her heart making a sound of disgust.

“Hey, hey! Put that thing down. As an officer of the-”

Dec's words were cut off as a beating muscle was shoved into his mouth. He tried to spit it out, but the man wouldn't let him. Gagging, as with the blood, he was forced to chew and swallow. It was rubbery, tough, and still warm, like meatloaf gone bad, really really bad.

"Eat up," the man grinned.

Finally it was gone digesting in Dec's stomach. He felt sick a combination of T-bone's blood, the heart, and the need for a fix, especially after this. It didn't matter; he was getting out of here. That plan, however, was thwarted by the man with the mustache. He pushed Dec who fell hard onto the floor, head banging off the concrete body still strapped to the chair. Straddling him the man placed his hand over Dec's heart and began to chant strange thing.

"Hey come on. Ease off with this mumbo jumbo."

The man ignored him, brow furrowed mumbling on and on. Dec felt a fire light under him and move upwards until his whole body writhed in pain. Suddenly all of Dec's senses started to go. First his vision disappeared, then his hearing. Now blind and deaf, he next lost his sense of taste and touch. Almost like a new born cat, the last thing he had was smell. He smelled his fear and the stench of blood and then nothing more. He was just a being inside his own body, almost separate from himself. He did not realize it, but the only thing left was his soul.

"What the hell?" he asked himself.

"Not even close," said something else.

Dec screamed and then died with a sudden finality. He then sat up wiping the blood from his lips and chin with a handkerchief kept in his back pocket.

"Well done," Algharoob said, "and you didn't mess the body up too much."

"Thank you, master. That was some feat, carving your own heart out and all."

"Yeah. It was."

Earl helped the monster up which now sported a fully authentic police uniform and body. Armed with bits of Dec's memories, the creature went back on patrol leaving Earl to clean up and get back to the hotel. Algharoob made three arrests, did the necessary paperwork, and then went to the hotel stopping on the way to kill and eat a bum for energy. Dec did not have a wife or many friends, so no one bothered his home that night.

As Algharoob walked into the room that night, it smiled to Earl who looked tired and said, "Happy chance with this one. Now we've got some legitimate, ha, authority."

"Yes boss."

Algharoorb didn't care where the ether went for this one. It was almost free, and soon it would not have to worry about sloppy possessions. There wouldn't be a need.

--

"What a day! What a day," said Jason huffing exhausted onto his bed.

"Yes," replied Harvey finally consenting something to the annoying Jason.

As important as he was, it didn't stop Harvey from thinking that Jason was a pain in the butt.

"It's late. Let's get to bed," he continued ever increasing his role as a parent.

"But we get to come with you tonight right?" asked Jason, "What did you find out about that poem?"

"Uhh, well nothing. I mean I wasn't able to. Something kept me away from the library. It kept slipping from my grasp running out like so much water. I had strange dreams instead."

"Oh," said Aisha as they turned to look at here, "Never mind."

After everyone showered, the lights went out. Jason and Baybars were eager for Harvey to find them much like Cassius did with Harvey that first night.

"Jason. Baybars. Wake up," said a voice.

Baybars sat up looking around. It was light in the room. He was confused as he looked outside and saw the moon. Jason merely grunted and rolled over.

"Wake up!" commanded the voice as a black plated figure appeared.

Baybars eyes got wide, "Harvey?"

Hamee replied, "In a way. My name here is Hamee and yours is Epluri."

Jason still groggy sat up and saw Hamee scooting off the bed falling with a thump and whimpering. Neither of them had noticed their changes just yet.

Jason's voice came over the bed, "Wicked. Where did all this light come from?"

"Not sure," answered Hamee, "I might be creating it or you guys are since we have started sensing our identities; although, it is very weak. Come, don't worry about it. We go to the library."

Gesturing as Kaatib did so many days before; he led the two through a glowing portal. As the three disappeared, a figure on Aisha's bed sat up and looked where the portal had been. The creature closed its eyes and lay back down going back to true unconsciousness with Aisha reappearing and the light fading from the room.

“So this is ether, the architect of existence for everything and not just Earth, but all the Earths that exist and all other worlds and realities,” explained Harvey.

“Wow,” mouthed Baybars as he moved his hand around the air feeling nothing.

Jason merely stood feeling the world. Then they manifested in the library.

“Now be on your toes here. I was attacked once by a creature here,” instructed Hamee.

“Stay on your toes? I don’t understand this expression,” asked Epluri.

Jason, now Bisunum, looked at Epluri, formerly Baybars, and what he had become seeing him clearly for the first time as his true self. He was taller, but not as tall as Bisunum, skinnier, paler, and overall more delicate. His hands epitomized this, long skinny fingers clasping and unclasping gently. In reality the features on his face were set to make him look like a face in the crowd: nobody and everybody.

“It means just be alert,” Bisunum said in his raspy voice.

“Come here,” ordered Hamee as he stared hunched over a ruined desk looking at the computer, “Look. Each of us finds one these books. They will help us decode Bay-Epluri’s poem.”

In his worry he failed to notice that the papers abruptly left the time before had been moved around. They each set out going down a separate aisle. Hamee felt nervous again the books taking on an ominous hue in the industrial lighting as they had the previous times. It would never be just a library to him ever again. Baybars wandered stunned at the knowledge knowing he could use all this in dealing with people of any type that he would ever run into. A wisp of him, a very old part of him, told him that he had done something like this before. Jason set off as a predator with a single-minded focus. The three returned a few minutes later none worse for the wear except for Hamee who had spooked himself unnecessarily.

“Gather round.”

“Write it down.”

“What?!”

“Look. Look there. This word in the book matches these two and this root of that one is similar.”

“Hey, check out this passage too.”

Their conversation drifted up above their heads swirling in a frenzied but progressive mix. After what seemed like of hours of work which could have been any amount of time on their Earth, they finished.

“Okay, this is what we’ve got and all we are going to get,” said Hamee and then he read out their translation of the ancient language:

“It was only the past,
Cut, at the hands of the natural man,
Now scattered in the dust.
Call his name to remember:
Epluri, epluri, epluri.”

“It’s only part, said Hamee after a minute, “and it’s about your split. Where did this come from?”

“I don’t know,” replied Epluri, “It was just part of a dream I had which I barely remember.”

“This must be incredibly old, knowledge passed down from the Uprising.”

“What’s that? You said something about that before.” asked Bisunum.

Hamee explained to them everything he knew which he had gained from Kaatib. Their search for the rest of the poem proved fruitless despite it sitting on one of the shelves deep in the library. The reason they couldn’t find it and the reason it had never been found was that it was filed incorrectly. The person who made this document knew that everything including this would be recorded in the library. Therefore she came to the library personally to hide it deep in the bowels of the building in order to conceal what had actually occurred with Epluribisunum away from prying eyes, good and evil.

--

Aisha woke up all sweaty again. There was the fading taste of blood in her mouth from a bitten tongue, but it could have easily been from her dream. Her psyche had been rocked again by horrible dreams, this time several throughout the night. They hadn’t stopped since she arrived in New York. Little did she know that it had to do with the proximity of Algharob, its activities, and her intertwined fate with the monster.

Chapter 13

“We are close. We know it! They are in this city, but where?” raged Algharob that morning, “We can’t draw out the location from our keeper. That first night we almost had it. Grrrr, so close!”

“Can’t we go looking for them?”

“No! We have no way of knowing where they are. We would need to be in the ether concentrating directly on them and could risk detection, and not just by them. Plus, how would we communicate where we need to go. With the way time flows, by the time we got back they may have already gone somewhere else.”

“Can’t you do it less discretely?”

“No! We can’t. Aren’t you listening? We-” said Algharob who now began grinning at Earl.

“Boss, I don’t like that look. It usually means death.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t like it either if I was you, but in your case it won’t mean death.”

Earl let out a small whimper.

--

“Aisha, you okay?” inquired a worried Harvey, “You were so quiet yesterday.”

She stared at Jason and Baybar’s sleeping figures.

“Harvey, I miss Baybars. We used to be good friends,” she said tearing up, “He was like my brother, especially after, especially...”

“Oh sweetie, come here,” said a Harvey embracing her with the best comforting hug he could manage, “Let’s say you and me go have a day to ourselves, just us two. These guys can get along by themselves for a day. I always wanted to see Central Park.”

“Really?”

“Yea. It looks to be a beautiful Friday morning,” he exhaled as he gazed out at the rising sun over the asphalt parking lot.

“Oh Harvey! You’re the best,” she exclaimed giving him an enthusiastic eight year old hug.

Harvey responded gently but awkwardly with a hug of his own. They left within a half hour, and Jason and Baybars woke up after the sun had climbed two hours higher.

“Out for the day with Aisha. Everyone meets here at the motel at nine p.m. at the latest for the trip home. Have a great but safe day. –Harvey,” read Jason to the groggy Baybars.

“Well what do you want to do today?” asked Baybars blinking against the sunlight streaming in the room.

--

Earl returned midafternoon after retrieving the necessary supplies for later that day. The bag in his hand hung heavy. He had thought about skipping town but he knew Algharob would find him. Earl wasn’t sure how much he believed anymore what Algharob had told him about world domination especially with all of the Fischer’s Club guys dead.

“Just how much am I being played?” Why am I not getting out?” he asked himself as he stood in front of the hotel door shopping bag in hand.

The door opened abruptly and Dec's crisp uniformed body stood on the threshold, "You're not getting out because you know that a gruesome death would follow you wherever you try to hide."

Earl said nothing, eyes on the floor, and Algharob joined him in the hallway, "Let's go."

The two went down to the parking garage for and sat in the black Explorer with dark tinted windows and comfortable seats.

"Now we lay down in the back and then come visiting you. You will be occupied, but you will not be consumed. We do this so we can be in the ether and see their location while maintaining communication with this world in order to have functionality in both. Your body will be our puppet, but you will still be aware and be making decisions."

"What will it feel like?" asked Earl with trepidation.

Algharob ignored the question and lay down, body relaxing and breathing going soft, slow, and steady. Earl's mind flicked to the bag on the passenger's seat. The silence in the car was deafening. To break it, Earl drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and stared out through the windshield into the impersonal garage. The drumming of the fingers stopped and Earl's arms fell limply to his side, and his head lolled to the left. A little bit of drool began to drip from the corner of his mouth. Earl's mustache twitched, and he sat up. His eyes were glassy. Earl became aware again, except this time, he was not alone. It was as if two people were jammed inside his body. It felt crowded.

"Start the car," said his voice oddly resonating with a new alien tone.

The car slowly made its way out of the parking garage and pulled onto the streets of New York City.

--

"I don't see how you can take this so calmly!" yelled Jason.

"Calmly? I'm anything but calm. You of all people should know that I'm scared out of my mind," replied an exasperated Baybars.

Their plans to go out were falling apart as the implications of their new identity flared up into a sudden confrontation. Baybars and Jason had taken the news that they were the same person fairly well. They had been able to keep each comforted, but their minds were still adjusting to never again having a moment of privacy as long as they remained individualized. It was grating on their nerves slowly but surely.

He continued, "We are the same person, are we not?"

"Yes, but we are also two people here with two completely different experiences and souls."

“That’s not true and you know it! We are tied by ages of history, and we share halves of the same soul.”

“It doesn’t make this any easier!” yelled Jason throwing a pillow onto the ground, “I’m going out. I need some time by myself, completely by myself.”

Baybars was about to respond when he felt a wall come down between them. He couldn’t get past it to feel Jason, and didn’t know that Jason, and most likely himself, could do something like this. He wouldn’t know where Jason was or what he was doing and that scared him. Three hours later found Baybars still sulking in the hotel and Jason sitting in _____.

--

“Turn left. Straight ahead into that parking lot. Yes, yes, yessss,” hissed Earl through clenched teeth drawing out the last word like a snake.

His body moved robot-like as information was relayed through two minds in guiding the parking of the car.

Earl shuddered going flaccid for a second, and Algharob sat up in the back looking refreshed, “That worked out fine.”

“Yes,” said an unconvinced Earl.

He felt violated and empty as if Algharob had either done something to him while inside or left with something he shouldn’t have. Earl opened the door and threw up inconspicuously. They were in a clothing store parking lot. Algharob joined him stepping around the vomit and handed him his bag. Earl straightened up and headed for the clothing store.

“No, no, not that way. He is in the pizza parlor,” said Algharob.

Earl about faced, and they crossed the street together entering _____. The door jingled as they opened it. The hum of orders being taken, conversation from families, couples, and friends, and the clatter from the kitchen drifted out into the street past the monster and his sidekick in a raucous din of normalcy. A normalcy which was about to be shattered.

“Earl” was all that he needed from his master to know what to do. He reached into his shopping bag and pulled out three weapons: two Uzis for himself and a Desert Eagle _____ for Algharob. Algharob also drew Dec’s _____ from its holster. People started screaming as they saw the guns. A quick thinking waitress dove for cover dropping hot pizza on some unsuspecting customers. The noise brought the establishment to silence. Then the roar of gunfire filled the restaurant. Earl opened up on full with his Uzis spraying methodically causing blood, pizza, fluff from the booth’s padding to fly into the air. People slumped in their chairs, onto their tables, and down to the floor as they died or were wounded.

It was chaos.

Not a single person escaped unscathed including Jason who sat a table far in the back. A bullet entered his left side collapsing one of his lungs and he collapsed against the chair dropping his Root Beer to floor. The glass exploded spewing the carbonated beverage in all directions which immediately began mixing with the rivulets of blood running down the booth's seat in front of him.

Baybars

Algharob handed the smaller pistol to Earl who dropped the Uzis their ammunition spent, and they began making their way from booth to booth as judge, jury, and executioners asking each person in turn one word: Epluribusunum.

Baybars, I need help!

Jason? What's wrong?!

The pizza place I'm at is getting shot up. Two men. I've...I've been shot.

Oh no! I'm coming.

No, you've got to tell Harvey. He is supposed to protect us.

"Epluribusunum?"

"What?"

Boom. Another life which had just been out for pizza with his new fiancé snuffed out. Algharob tranquilly moved down Jason's side of the restaurant rapidly closing the distance between them. Meanwhile, Earl on the other side of the restaurant kept pace though he was moving more erratic and excitedly as playing executioner got to his head and his cool.

Hurry Baybars!

I'm coming, and I'm sorry for earlier.

Me too.

Algharob now stood over Jason's table staring down at the young man with cheese pizza and a bubbling bloody mouth.

"Epluribusunum?"

Jason's eyes narrowed and he spit out between gobs of blood, "No."

Algharob raised the gun then paused, "Ah but you are. You knew we were asking about a person and that person you are. At least half of him."

Jason! Why are you thinking our name? What's going on?

“You probably don’t realize how long it has taken us to find you or how long we had lived in fear of you. This day has been a long time coming for us and for you. It’s just not going to be the good day it was for you all those years ago that it will be for me today.”

“Who are you and what do you want?” asked Jason with a sneer and grimace of pain trying to act tough.

“A messenger fulfilling our duty.”

“What duty?” asked Jason gripping the table and looking up at Algharob from a hunched over position.

“Does it hurt? It won’t hurt much longer. We can help with that.”

Stop thinking about death Jason! You're not going to die. I am going to get you to a hospital!

“You won’t win whatever it is you’re after.”

“But we have been winning ever since we started. Don’t get so full of yourself. You aren’t the winning stroke; you’re just the opening shot.” Algharob said putting the cold steel of the Desert Eagle up to Jason’s forehead, and he pulled the trigger.

Jason?!!

Jason’s head snapped back, and his body fell out of the chair landing like a discarded rag doll amidst the glass, root beer, and blood on the colorfully tiled floor. Sirens bloomed in the distance.

“Earl, finish everyone. We’ve gotten what we came for. We go out the back.”

The two killed the rest of those out front and exited through the kitchen stopping only to execute two cooks on the way out. The two monsters, one human and one not, disappeared into the alley and then faded into the streets their guns discarded in the closest dumpster.

--

“Jason! Jason! Where are you?!” screamed Baybars staring out into the parking lot with tears streaming down his face.

The worst part of it was not just knowing that Jason was dead, but that he was talking to himself all alone in his head.

Hours later at dusk, Aisha and Harvey returned to the motel pulling calmly into the space in front of their room. The sun cast long shadows of their figures and as they walked, and it looked like their shadows were trying to escape and follow the sun in order to never see the day end. As

they approached the door, however, Harvey saw Baybars pressed up against the glass seeing nothing. His nose was covered in dry snot and his eyes were red. The glass showed the evidence of these sorrow stains and judging by the prodigious amount of dried fluid they must have gone on for hours. Harvey opened the door, and Aisha brushed past him running up to Baybars who turned slowly.

“Baybars what’s wrong?”

He stared at them, his soul almost leaching out the pain through his eyes, when he croaked, “Jason’s dead.”

Chapter 14

Dead.

The word rang hollow in Baybars, raged fire in Harvey, and opened barely closed wounds in Aisha. They were all lost in their own thoughts for a minute, Baybars returning to his torturous solitude of the last few hours against the window.

“So many dead. My family, mother, father, brothers, grandmother, and now him.”

“I am alone, all alone.”

“Again! First Kaatib and now Jason. Who am I protecting?! Myself? Where’s your duty?”

Harvey broke the silence with orders, “Get your bags, we’re leaving.”

“But what about Jason’s body?”

“We can’t claim it. How suspicious would that be? Best to let his parents get him.”

“But-”

“I need to protect you, get you back on familiar ground: Baltimore.”

The two others gave into the voice of authority and started packing their motions halting and artificial as a result of death’s cold embrace of one of their party.

--

Lazarus Trach had been off today, no investigations, no murders, no home invasions; just him, his grill, and his beer. He was having a memorial dinner all by himself for his friend Ronald Brokman. In working with death dealers Lazarus was used to killings and murders, but not since one and a half years ago had death struck so close to home.

“Damn drug dealers. You killed my cousin,” he muttered darkly.

He jumped when his cell phone chirped like a Star Trek communicator disturbing his dark yet focused thoughts.

“Trach here...Hey Bud...Yeah, I remember...Jason Storch, the kid in Egypt...You’re pulling my chain? Dead in New York...How?...Damn...Thanks.”

Closing his phone he said, “At least he lives-lived in New York, and I don’t have to be the one to call his parents.”

He stared at his grill and sighed turning it off.

Lazarus went inside grabbing his coat and keys, “Guess I am working today. It’s Saturday for crying out loud.”

Veteran detective Lazarus Trach sat in his office for several hours Saturday evening and returned frustrated to an empty home unable to put the pieces together in how a boy who showed up from seemingly out of nowhere, in a house fire and naked no less, who then barely survived a massacre at the Brokman household fit with the equally mysterious appearance and death of another boy, Jason Storch, who was supposed to be in Egypt but had been killed in an eleven person pizza parlor massacre in New York. To top it all off, the boy in Baltimore, Baybars, had mentioned the full name of the now deceased Jason Storch. As he lay in bed that night, one he used to share with his wife, but not since she left him after he fell apart from his cousin’s death, he tried to fit the puzzle pieces together. He was missing at least one crucial piece. He knew it, but if he had known what that piece was, he wouldn’t have believed it himself. What Lazarus didn’t realize was that these puzzle pieces did not play by the rules of his Earth.

--

Barry, the motel owner, picked up the phone again. When the group of four, the three males and the little girl, arrived, he had been suspicious; suspicious enough to call his friend on the force to see what he should do. After talking to Dec, who said to wait and watch, he was picking up the phone again.

“Hello,” said a voice, “Dec here.”

“Dec it’s me,” and after a slight pause, “Barry. I called you a couple of days ago about the weird group of people who checked into my motel.”

“Uhh yea. Right, right. Go on.”

“Well, they’ve been acting strange. The one kid stared out the window for hours not moving. Looked like the only thing he was doing was yelling and crying.”

“Umm hmm,” Dec sounded disinterested and like he had a mouthful of food, “What do you want us to do about it?”

“You said I should call again, you know because of the little girl, so that you could make the bust on some child kidnappers or molesters. You know, be good for your career.”

Dec's voice suddenly betrayed interest and a chilling coldness, "Describe them."

"I already did, "Barry said growing impatient, "last time. There is a big burly man with red hair, a dark skinned boy, but he ain't black, a little black girl, and there was a skinny white boy, but I don't see--"

He was cut off by Dec's question, "Are they still there?"

Barry peered out the window, "Yea, but I think they're getting ready to leave. That's why I called. Do they match the guy's you're after?"

"Oh most definitely," Dec replied, "They are definitely the bad guys. Keep them stalled if they try to leave. We are coming right over."

"Uhh okay. What if they're dangerous?" then growing indignant at his situation and that these people would check into his motel, "Look I run a tip-top motel here, high class as they come. I know what I got and how hard I worked to get it. I don't need this big in the papers. You get these guys and get them out of here!"

But he was yelling into a dial tone.

--

They finished gathering their things in the now confining motel room.

"You two stay here. I'll go pay," Harvey said.

He opened the door, scanned the parking lot, and seeing nothing unusual left. Aisha and Baybars sat hugging each other in silence in the now unwelcoming motel room which had at first seemed a sanctuary but now had become a prison.

Ten minutes later, Harvey steamed in fuming, "They won't take my credit card and asked me to return to the room to cool off. He said that he would be by the room to give me my options. Pompous fool!"

The three spent the next twenty minutes with Aisha and Baybars sitting on the bed and Harvey pacing, leaving and returning once after completing another fruitless confrontation with Barry. As he paced, he did not notice the black Explorer pull up fast in the parking lot and two figures get out. Algharoob's boots made slight scuffing noises as the two walked to the office where Barry sat.

"Oh thank God you're here. The big man has been here twice wanting to leave," gushed Barry as the two men entered.

"I wouldn't thank God," Algharoob muttered, "Are they still here?"

"Yes. Dec, why did you say that? Why does your man have a gun pointed at me?"

Algharoob said nothing and just left the room. The boom of the gunshot echoed across the parking reaching Harvey in the room. He glanced out the window and saw a police officer walking towards them hand on his empty holster.

“No, no, no,” he whispered, “You two go hide in the bathroom and don’t come out until I get you. Understand?”

Aisha and Baybars nodded and moved without hesitation. As they disappeared, there was a calm knock on the door and a muffled voice.

“Sir, we would like to have a word.”

Harvey went to the door sweaty palms gripping the doorknob, and he opened it a crack stopping it with his shoe, “Yes officer?”

Harvey flew back as Dec’s already muscled body now enhanced by Algharoob’s demon’s strength slammed against the door. He landed in between the two beds holding his face. Algharoob surveyed the cramped room. In front of it were two beds with the big man in between them; to its extreme right, a table and two chairs; and in between the beds and table in the corner was the bathroom cubby, door closed.

Algharoob stood in the door framed by darkness, “So you’re the burly one.”

He turned on the switch, and Earl strode in smelling of gunpowder from the spare six shot revolver he kept in the Explorer.

“Heh, heh, heh. Not so burly,” he cackled, “My, what a nasty bruise on your chin...Oh, that ain’t a bruise. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” he grunted in reply, “Just peachy.

Standing up he prepared to charge but was stopped by a gunpoint, its black hole ominously waving hello at Harvey’s chest.

“Uh, uh, uh,” crooned Earl.

“Kill him,” said the cold voice from the police officer’s body.

Harvey’s eyes widened as Earl cocked the gun and said, “With pleasure.”

“Without the gun.”

Earl flashed a confused glance at Algharoob which was all Harvey needed. He rushed Earl tackling him to the floor. The gun went off with another boom, the bullet flying into the door of the bathroom blowing a quarter sized hole through it. Harvey knocked the gun from his hand

and which skittered under the table to his left, but before he could throw a punch, Earl coiled his legs and kicked like a horse throwing Harvey against the closest bed with a woof.

“Prove to me you’re my sidekick and worthy of my benevolence,” the monster said indifferently to the crouching and panting Earl.

Against his better judgment Earl dove for the glittering black gun through the forest of wooden chair and table legs. Harvey again tackled him and punched once and then twice bloodying Earl’s nose. He pulled up the dazed and battered man and shook him roughly by the collar.

He screamed, “Did you kill the Brokman family? Jason?”

“I’ve killed a lot of people,” he sneered through the pain, “They might’ve been on the list and so will you.”

Inside the bathroom, Baybars stiffened.

Harvey’s eyes flashed, not fire, but close enough; he wound up and punched. Earl deflected the blow, and Harvey’s fist landed solidly against the wall putting a sizeable dent in it. Earl stared, and Harvey grinned. The grin was cut off, however, by a mean uppercut from Earl knocking his teeth together.

“Freak,” howled Earl shaking his hand while delivering a sucker punch with the other hand to Harvey’s gut.

Harvey stumbled back and Earl quarter-turned, grabbed a chair, and reduced it to kindling over Harvey’s head. He fell to his knees apparently dazed. Earl picked up a chair leg and pulled back to swing baseball style his teeth bared in a snarl. As the swing came, Harvey ducked at the last second. He over swung and went off balance. Harvey tackled his combatant’s knees and crawled on top of him throwing the makeshift bat away from them.

“Here’s a taste of your own medicine. Eat up!” growled Harvey his shiny black jaw glistening with sweat.

They wrapped their hands around each other’s necks trying to choke the life out of each other. Harvey relinquished a hand but only to deliver two more crushing right hands to Earl’s skull, and he felt the man’s grip weaken. Two more blows from the semi-armored fist reduced the left side of Earl’s face to a pulp. Harvey then began to strangle the human monster. Earl’s arms fell away, and the glint of anger faded away from the dying man’s eyes.

Above Harvey’s ragged breathing Algharob heard him muttering incoherent phrases with the words ‘die’ and ‘protect’ repeating throughout. Harvey got off the corpse and slumped in the chair holding a hand to his head and stared at the police officer.

“He wasn’t worthy,” mused a nonplussed Algharob.

“Who are you?” asked Harvey.

“We know who you are. We’ve met.”

“No we haven’t,” Harvey winced.

“Yes we have. We are what you’ve been running from and apparently, running into. We were in the library, Hamee.”

Harvey’s jaw dropped, and he started shaking with rage. An animalistic roar filled Harvey all pain forgotten, and he barreled towards the waiting policeman. Algharoob gave a pitying smile, and then as Harvey quickly closed the distance, took a step forward and directed a crushing overhand hammer fist to the top of Harvey’s head. Algharoob picked up the crumpled Harvey and threw him into the remaining table and chair in front of the bathroom entrance. Algharoob walked over as Harvey picked himself up, rolling awkwardly off the table. He picked up the thin wooden table to use as a shield, but Algharoob punched through it breaking it into two.

Algharoob cursed as the delicate bones in Dec’s hand broke, “Damn frail human bodies.”

Harvey, repeating Earl’s actions, went for the now exposed gun, but Algharoob grabbed him by the pants arms sucking him in and heaving him across the room.

Harvey wearily and unsteadily stood up, “You’re toying with me.”

“Glad you picked that up,” said Algharoob, who using Dec’s body hadn’t even broken a sweat.

“Kaatib,” Harvey said suddenly as if remembering and then to Algharoob, “Go to hell.”

“It doesn’t want us.”

Then four things happened almost at once. Harvey took a step forward, and Algharoob hurled the remaining chair at Harvey which solidly connected creating a loud and wicked thunk. Baybars who was watching through the bullet hole screamed a defiant no, and Harvey collapsed.

Algharoob turned and faced the bathroom brushing his hands, “Glad the preliminaries are over.”

From inside the bathroom, the monster heard Aisha say, “Baybars, don’t go.”

“I have to,” came the reply.

“But it’s so strong.”

“I might have better odds,” and then with steel in his voice, “That man killed Jason.”

“Baybars! Baybars,” the second cry was a whisper.

Algharoorb strode over to the bathroom and opened the door smiling, “Hello darling.”

Its eyes flickered over to the boy lying in the bathroom tub, “Oh goodie!”

“Get away from here, you monster!” Aisha yelled.

Algharoorb looked at her as a human looks at a buzzing fly and then did the equivalent action by swatting her off the toilet seat. She lay on the floor moaning but not moving. Algharoorb delicately picked up Baybars from his repose in the tub, and careful not to disturb him anymore than he had to, carried him to the bed through the wreckage of the motel room.

“Not so respectable now, eh Barry,” said Algharoorb surveying the room.

Dragging the now limp Harvey, it heaved the body into the bathroom as one would a heavy bag of trash assuming that Harvey was dead.

“Goodbye child...for now,” it said closing the outward swinging door and propping the former weapon against the knob.

It closed the front door and then straightened the sheets of the unoccupied bed. Delicately it laid itself down, folded its arms, and interlocked its fingers as a vampire in all the movies did.

Closing its eyes, it smiled thinking, “Now we truly finish it and become free.”

True darkness filtered in through the windows disguising the destroyed room, the two trapped but living occupants in the bathroom, and the two peaceful unconscious figures as still as death each on their individual beds.

Chapter 15

Epluri opened his eyes, “Where am I? It’s so light, like when Harry took me and Jason to the library. Ohh, Jason. I’m so sorry.”

He took a few tentative steps around in the bright light but quickly found its perimeter. Outside was darkness, pure darkness, and the light barely penetrated its shroud.

“Oh no,” he whispered, “I recognize this place. How did I end up here? I must have messed up somehow with the whole going to the ether thing. Harvey told us about this place, the in-between, not full ether but not Earth. Damn! How do I get up to the next level?!”

Epluri stepped out of the light’s circle and tentatively explored the area around him. Nothing was here, not a thing, which was the same as before. Meanwhile, Algharoorb was throwing Harvey’s body around like a rag doll into the bathroom, moving Baybar’s body, and going to the ether proper itself. Epluri sat for hours just outside the white light unable to think of any solution and unwilling to leave the comfort of the light. Then a thin red outline of a rectangle appeared far above him.

“Of course!” he thought, “The door in the sky. How could I have forgotten?”

The door opened like a cellar door and twilight streamed in from above illuminating the desolate landscape below.

“Harvey” Epluri breathed to himself relieved.

There was something wrong, however, with the twilight, it had a reddish tinge to it, similar to just after sunset. A figure appeared looking down. It was too far away to see who or what it was but then it started to descend calmly and majestically. Loose clothing hung off its frame tight to the body but not constrictive. At first Epluri thought he couldn't see the face because it was backlit from the opening, but then he realized that the light was not the issue but that there was cloth covering its face much like a woman from Egypt.

“This is definitely not Harvey,” he thought as he scuttled a few feet away from the light and crouched in the darkness.

The figure landed lightly but audibly on the dry ground; its garments settling around it gracefully.

A voice floated out through the darkness, “Epluri, the game is up. You are all along in a godforsaken place. Come to us, and we will make your death painless.”

There was no reply from Epluri who was slowly circling around in order to put the light in between him and whoever's voice that was.

“You are probably wondering who we are, and it is a shame you do not remember us,” came the voice again now to Epluri's far left.

“How did he or she move so fast?” Epluri thought unable to pin down the sex from the androgynous voice.

“You put us in a place very much like this for a long, long time when you were whole. When we escaped, however, you were gone, split and hidden. We were unable to find out what happened after the Uprising until recently. Good for you too, we guess, otherwise you would have died, truly died, much sooner,” said the voice now from behind Epluri.

“It moves so fast,” he thought frantically but then he calmed, “He is looking for me, doesn't know where I am which gives me the advantage.”

The next time the cool slippery voice spoke, it chilled his blood and made his heart skip a beat because it came from directly behind his left ear, “You don't lock Algharob up ever. We are master here. We have been watching you skirt around. Thinking that we couldn't see you? This is our element: darkness.”

Epluri scrambled to his feet, ran past the light, and bee-lined directly away from the creature. In his panic he ran and stopped about ten meters from the light. Something big and burly, the height of a table, and not the shape of the lithe creature from above obscured the light briefly. There was a predatorial snick snick as it moved.

Algharob's laugh echoed and then was swallowed up by the nothingness of the empty plain, "You are out of your element youngling. Here we control the beasts, some put here by you. If only you remembered. Best watch out for A-shath, his sickled tendrils are quite sharp and designed to cull the soul from the body."

The red eyes from the new monster bloomed open, as it faced him blades gleaming ominously in the malevolent glare.

"Oh no! That's what Jason and I literally stumbled over last time we were here."

"Do you remember it? It has been resting in this place, waiting for its chance for revenge since you put it here ages ago. Thought it would be out of the way, did you?"

The monster charged, scythes swinging wildly making very little noise for a creature of its size. Epluri realizing he needed to act more like Epluri, the hero inside of him, now literally on the outside, in order to survive. He stood stock still and exhaled. Then running towards the creature and praying that his timing was right, he used his skinny body and increased balance to evade the initial attack from the scythes and run up its central trunk past the eyes. The tendrils followed him tracking and swinging after him on his passage across the monster's back. The whipping soul blades followed his progress unwittingly gouging its own body. Epluri dove off the tail feeling the breeze from the weapons' paths. He landed on the ground panting with his head covered. No pain or tug at his soul bothered him, so he looked back. The monster had collapsed its blades cleaving out its own glistening soul. The body was intact but the sickled weapons had pierced deep, shredding the remnants of any soul this creature had. The blades lay uselessly on the ground dripping silver liquid that gleamed translucent and then faded.

"Impressive," said Algharob, "but I am not as easily duped or as blunt with my attack."

Epluri now scanned the area from his prone position, "Where was the voice coming from now?"

--

"Huzzah!" yelled Harvey as the cold water ran over his face.

He shot straight up, an action he immediately regretted as pain flowed like a river and as loud as a full orchestra to his head, "Ohh Baybars...Aisha."

"I'm here," she said holding toilet paper to her lips.

Harvey squinted at her, hair dripping water and sitting flat on his head, "You do that?"

"Yes."

“Thanks,” and then as he looked at her more closely, “Sweetie, you’re hurt. Come here. I’m a fireman, got first aid training and everything.”

She smiled at his attempt at a joke, but her face hurt.

“Just a small cut on both lips on the left side. Nothing to worry about,” he said with a smile, “You’ll be spic and span in no time. Now let’s get out of here. Gotta get back to Baltimore.”

“We can’t,” she said with a small voice, “It’s blocked, and he’s still out there.”

“Who?”

She looked at him confused, “The policemen who beat you up.”

“What?” and then it all came back to him like a rushing train brushing aside the little bit of amnesia he’d had, “Gotta get out. Kill. Baybars?”

“He’s out there,” she said pointing through the door, “with him.”

“*He* ain’t human,” he snarled, “Stand back.”

Harvey rushed the door slamming his bulk against it, but it and the chair just outside held. He fell back wincing.

“I’m so weak,” he gasped, “What happened while I was out?”

Aisha told him how Epluri went to the ether and that Algharob had locked them in the bathroom.

“That fool!” Harvey thundered, voice echoing off the tiled floor and walls, “He’s just a kid and doesn’t know what he is doing. I’ve got to follow.”

“But aren’t you weak?”

Harvey threw her a look and said, “Maybe, but I’ve got to go after him. It’s the right thing. Besides my weakness here may not translate to there. Just sit tight.”

He lay down cramped in the tub and then the lights in Harvey’s head went out.

Aisha curled up against the wall and looking into the tub whispered to herself, “Just like Baybars.”

It was quiet again in the motel, the only sound being Aisha’s quiet breathing.

--

Epluri was paralyzed with fear. He couldn't move away from the dead beast nor towards the light to what he assumed would be safety. His breathing was high and fast, and waited for the end. Algharob's clothing swished, and Epluri now stared at the monster's feet.

"So fast."

Then he was lifted up in the air as easily as a child would lift a feather.

"Time to die boy," it hissed.

Epluri stared up praying for divine intervention and gaped. He was getting the next best thing. A skull shaped outline peered over the edge of rectangular opening. He saw it throw itself over the edge and tumble end over end until it smacked into the ground in the middle of the circle of light.

"Eh?" grunted Algharob as it turned to the sound.

A voice boomed from the light, "Algharob! Leave the boy."

It hissed back snake-like, "No, we want him."

"Kill me, and you can have him."

"We will have him whether you are living or dead. We prefer now."

Hamee emerged from the light, a savior in Epluri's eyes. He could see that Hamee was damaged, his left breastplate or part of his chest was cracked, but if he felt pain, Hamee did not show it.

"The boy lives," he commanded eyes aflame with intensity.

Epluri landed with a thump on dry earth as Algharob tossed him aside, "Nobody! Nobody tells us what to do! And you are supposed to be dead."

"Oh really?" Hamee said, "I believe I just did."

With those words Hamee ran into the darkness only to be met halfway by Algharob. Epluri watched the silhouettes fight backlit as he slowly scooted towards the light but away from the entangled figures. Suddenly Hamee deflected a blow which opened up Algharob's chest to attack. With a yell, he pierced through clothing and flesh using his hand as a spear aiming for Algharob's heart. For a millisecond Epluri saw them captured frozen as if in the flash of a photograph. Harvey was aggressively forward and rooted firmly to the ground and Algharob swayed, body back, arms flailing, and chest exposed. Hamee firmly withdrew his hand clutching a heart. Algharob's fluttering hands went to the cavity. Hamee smiled evilly, and then to his surprise, Algharob laughed. He looked down to the heart which was already crumbling to ash.

"You know so little about this world, Protector."

He reached out and grabbed Hamee by the shoulders and immobilized him making him feel the already healed flesh on its chest. Now he could neither run, nor fight, but just stand there and wait for death.

“Any last words because I have some for you.”

“You are my enemy, no?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t look like anyone, I’ve read about with...with Kaatib,” Hamee said struggling to get the last two words out.

“Truly?”

“Are you not--?”

Epluri could not hear the last word as it was drowned out in a chorus from hell combined with the screech from a ten car pile up and the dying screams of six hundred and sixty-six babies. Algharob stared taken aback for a moment, that anyone would have the audacity to utter the name. Then he laughed.

“Ha, ha! That old fool all bald and bushy eyebrowed. We are actually doing a favor for him by killing the child, for which he will owe us,” Algharob said lying through his teeth about who worked for whom, “We will also kill our hunter, and use the moment to return to our former glory on Earth finally freed from this inconvenient confinement to the ether.”

“Then I shall die then,” Harvey said, resigned.

“Quite,” it said and uttered a whisper in Hamee’s ear which hurt Baybar’s head even though he hadn’t heard it himself.

Hamee’s armor plated body withered away into dust scattered by an unseen and unfelt wind. The only thing left was a glowing orb of light which Epluri could only assume was Hamee’s soul. That too shrunk in on itself and then exploded silently into nothingness.

“Ahh, that’s what they call annihilation, little one,” Algharob said turning to where Epluri had lain.

Epluri was not there finally running to the light and stepping through its perimeter. Algharob caught the flash of his left heel disappearing into the brightness.

“You know this will not stop us,” Algharob now drawled as he strolled over to the circle of light, “Sure it will cause us some pain, but you will still be pulled from it.”

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” whispered Epluri willing himself unsuccessfully to leave this world.

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She had just watched Harvey breathe his last. Aisha felt a chill come over her, but she didn’t think it was from seeing the dead body.

Then the world went fuzzy.

Chapter 16

Aisha stared at Harvey’s body in the tub. She was getting so dizzy. Everything in the bathroom went out of focus lines, Harvey’s body, the tub and the walls all blurring together in a running mess of distorted reality.

“What’s happening?” she said out loud.

Her voice already slight altered by the acoustics of the small room sounded higher and further away. Aisha’s head felt full of cotton and the light faded from the room. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and she slumped gently against the corner where the cool tiles of the wall and porcelain tub met.

--

Algharob let out a half moan half growl it penetrated the perimeter of light. The pain was intense; the light directly attacking the essence of his being, but it was not intense enough for it to let go. Its prize was in their hiding like a sheep, a sheep for the slaughter.

“We are so close, so close,” it growled, “Come out, come out little one. We must end this.”

Its hand had clenched a collar and gave an experimental tug. It could hear Baybars breathing hard as he pulled. At first he wouldn’t budge, but then he began to lift; however, it was not easy like last time.

“What is happening?” the monster asked as it squinted into the light.

Algharob, muscles tight under its loose clothing, pulled harder, and the light began to change. It began to glow brighter and the pain increased ten fold in Algharob’s limbs. They were singing with pain, but the light and pain began to fade in proportion to each other.

“Yes, good. Evil always overcomes good. Always,” it grinned and the creature gave a mighty heave.

Something unexpected happened. Algharob fell as if he had pulled the rug out from under himself. In essence he did. The light flew up into the air from the force of the creature’s pull while dulling and coalescing into a figure. The light revealed Baybars laying flat on the ground. Algharob had never even had a grip on his collar. It had been grabbing someone else’s. Someone else’s, who now stood over it as it lay stunned on the ground.

The tall figure stood over Algharob and in between the monster and Baybars. It stood there saying revealing nothing sleek body poised and alert. Full lips, strong chin, delicate nose, and intense blue eyes graced the new creature's pale face. Its hair matched Algharob's in length but it was white. The grey spandex like clothing revealed an androgynous body, both muscular and shapely. Its most striking feature was that of its skin. Various parts of it were clear revealing intricate machinery in a softly glowing fluid. Its left foot, up the leg, and across the belly glowed mutely even through the spandex. The only other part of the body that glowed was around the right shoulder and most strikingly on the lower left part of its face. Its glow went further than the circle of light had ever penetrated before.

Epluri stared in wonder enraptured at this new creature, "Who or what is it?"

Only a second had passed feeling like an eternity to Epluri, and already Algharob was up and scooting back like a cockroach.

"What Seodd?! Now you appear? You couldn't wait to catch us in the switching between two humans and disrupt our plans?"

"It's scared," thought Baybars staring at the shaking monster.

"Do you think we are scared? This is our element. It is you who are out of place. When you were fashioned I'm pretty sure you were told not to come here. My domain. Now the hunter becomes the hunted," it said voice rattling ferociously.

Epluri now thought the monster was angry, then he realized that it wasn't either. This was just a show. It was stalling for time while doing something with its belt.

"Hey! Watch out!" yelled Epluri.

Before he could say anything else, his world went deaf as Algharob faded from the penetrating glow of the being. The last thing Epluri saw was the rustle of Algharob's niqab before everything. He lay limp on the ground.

Just be.

The silent glowing creature turned and looked at Epluri slightly illuminated by its own glow.

Just be.

A slow laugh started somewhere from the darkness, distance and direction nulled by the blackness.

I can't do it.

Yes you can. Baybars did by adopting his new identity as Epluri. Save Jason.

Jason's dead.

No. He is here in that one. There somewhere small. Just be.

The creature exhaled, and its body settled and relaxed. That is when Algharob leapt from the darkness swinging its belt which crawled and writhed in its hand. Algharob's stalling unintentionally gave Seodd, the vampire hunter, time to acclimate. The forcible and unwilling pull to the in-between had awakened the other part of Aisha's being allowing Seodd to guide Aisha to full awareness of what had been present since her birth. It dodged the cloth which had transformed to letters and words curling around themselves in a tight whiplike coil. The attacking monster snarled fading into the darkness.

Begin.

I don't know how.

Begin. You know how. You always have. It is your self. Help him in order to realize yourself.

Seodd opened its mouth, and the two consciousnesses melted into one finally fusing into its necessary role as the vampire hunter which had been built to keep Algharob in check. It was a mix of machine and organic material only partly alive. Unlike Epluri and Baybars and Bisunum and Jason, which existed as one, Seodd had a tiny part of its own sentience. It was necessary to fuse with each host in order to fully realize its powers.

It opened its mouth and began to sing, singing the same tune that had come unwanted into Aisha's head during the house fire, the same tune that Aisha sang for Baybars in the study of her father's house. Only this time the tune came with words. They flowed out of Seodd, literally flowing out of it, tangible visible to the naked eye. Algharob emerged from the dark like a wraith, its expression hidden by its niqab with a limp whip in its hand.

"Time to end it. We will send whatever soul you have to the corners of this place, if it had an end," it laughed.

Seodd did not reply and merely kept singing the lilting tune almost an Irish dirge as the words flowed from its mouth to its hands. They had coiled into a pulsing glowing ball of constantly changing and flowing script. Algharob frowned as it did not recognize the song.

"A new trick eh? Something you are unable to do in the human world? You are so limited. We hold true power here and in your human world," Algharob sneered raising his hand.

They stared at each other for a second as gunfighter just before the draw, Algharob tense with its whip ready and Seodd holding its sphere chest level. An inhalation by Seodd and a twitch of Algharob's hand sent them both spinning into motion. The demon cracked its whip twice, the first snapping just to the left of Seodd's face, the second landing a hit and burrowing itself in the chest of the hunter. Seodd's ball flew with the puff of breath from its lungs straight at

Algharob's face. It screamed as the ball collided with its face and ate away at the niqab, but it did not let go of the whip.

"Ahh, you burned part of us away! Part of us!" it screamed revealing its exposed long black fangs glinting in the glow of Seodd's subcutaneous machinery.

It used the whip to pull the now silent Seodd to it. They held each other in a stiff embrace, empty black eyes staring into intense blue ones.

The battle now truly began.

They pushed each other away Seodd pulling free from the whip a little bit of fluid leaking from its chest wound, and they began dueling: one singing, one chanting. Seodd's new lilting song clashed with the toneless satanic chanting from Algharob. This was the first time they had encountered each other in the spirit world, a drastic step up in their confrontation where decisions once made could not be unmade. Armies appeared out of the darkness manipulated out of the essence of the in-between. Strange devil creatures with flaming red eye, gaping mouths, and sharp claws fought against equally strange half robot half beast machines glowing a muted white. Just under the surface of their bodies, letters and words in a strange script slithered chaotically. If beaten or hacked to pieces the creatures would disintegrate smoking in puffs of unholy literature. Algharob and Seodd were now also armed with weapons and shields. Seodd held a long sword with ruby red pommel and gold hilt, and Algharob gripped a fearsome demon decorated battle axe. The weapons also swarmed with frantic movement of the creatures concoctions.

The two supernatural authors fought each other and the other's minions of creation. Seodd cut through swaths of ghouls with its blade while Algharob danced a mad jig of death delivering blows. When their paths crossed amidst the chaos, the ongoing singing and chanting swelled in crescendo in their tireless battle and then would soften when they separated. As the battle progressed, the dirge became more prominent, slowly drowning out Algharob's words.

Baybars lay motionless throughout the clash protected by a watchful circle of Seodd's creatures.

The cacophony began to fade, as Algharob outplayed and outsung, slowly lost its army. The last of the loudest sounds ever heard in the in-between disappeared into nothingness swallowed up by the dark. Seodd's remaining compositions melted into a band of glowing light now guided by a whisper of a song and encased the monster. Epluri then stirred and stood up. He stared at the glowing light of Seodd and Algharob's temporary prison.

"Yes," Epluri said, "Kill it. Kill it! It murdered Jason. Part of me!"

Epluri shut up as when Seodd turned to face him.

The confining light began to tremble and the two watched Algharob silently scream. The cage started shrinking and Algharob's thrashings increased. Epluri noticed that he calmed and

stopped screaming as he was squeezed out of the in-between. He shivered as the monster started a silent insane laugh. The last recognizable thing to disappear were its teeth the glow given to them by the prison creating a freakish Cheshire cat after image.

Epluri said, "Its dead, isn't it?"

The figure ignored him and placed a hand on his shoulder. He felt a flash of light and pain. Then nothing but the forsaken were left in the in-between as quiet as it had always been.

--

Baybars sat up in the uncomfortable hotel bed speechless the Sunday morning dawn just trickling into the room. His brain felt wasted, his resilience stripped to the barest slivers, as he tried to process the last few weeks, days, hours, and minutes. Baybars groaned and looked around seeing the wreckage for the first time. He robotically categorized the two dead bodies, the sunlight from outside, and the demolished chair and table. His attention came to the door of the bathroom and the chair against the door. Baybars pushed himself out of bed, stumbled over, and opened the door to find Aisha staring glassy eyed at the entrance.

"Aisha," he cried rushing to her, "Wake up! Please don't be dead."

She blinked and stirred at his embrace, "I'm here."

He signed staring over her small shoulders at Harvey's cold body, "It's finally over."

"No it's not," she said with a firmness pushing him back and looking into his eyes, "It's not over. It will never be over."

Baybars did not like the tinge of blue he saw in her eyes.

"But its dead. We watched it die."

She shook here head, "No. Imprisoned. I cannot kill it. If I had done so in the ether, it would truly be gone."

"What?" he said pulling her to her feet, "That's good right. Isn't that what we wanted?"

"It is not my job or my place. I know what I must do, and by doing that what I keep in balance." she said steel in her voice sprinkled with the barest of a lilt.

"And what must I do? Keep running? What if it gets out?" he asked as they walked to Harvey's car waiting in the empty parking lot and getting in.

She sat in the passenger seat staring into the window of the wrecked motel, "I'm not sure. I know my part because we all have a part in the game. My guess is to survive. Find your other half."

"But he's dead."

“There is still part of him in there,” she said gesturing with her chin in his general direction, “waiting to be discovered. Not something mushy like a piece of his heart, but you two shared part of a consciousness, at least for a short while. He is still here somewhere or will be soon. That is who I helped.”

“How do you know all this?” he asked breaking his glance out the windshield.

She replied not directly answering his question, “Remember how I told you about my dream where Bisunum asked me to help him so that I could help myself and realize my identity. I have. I’m me.”

They left without another word.

--

The two arrived on Lazarus’s front door seven hours later. Aisha remembered him in three roles, friend of her father’s, worried husband with a wife under her father’s knife, and detective. A shocked Lazarus stood before them in his Sunday best: jeans and a stained blue t-shirt.

“Who are you and what-,” he demanded looking at Babyars, “Aisha!”

“Hi,” she said quietly.

“What in the hell are you doing here? We assumed you were kidnapped or dead, kept it out of the papers because it looked gang related.”

“I’m Baybars,” interrupted the quiet but firm Egyptian.

“Yes, I know. I am glad you are safe too,” and then to both, “Come in, come in.”

Lazarus’s place was a mess, not with trash and cobwebs, but it was chaotic and disorderly feeling. The room reflected the personality of its owner, the dark and troubled aging man in front of Aisha and Baybars. The two glanced around the living room. The easy boy recliner in front of the television looked too well worn; the liquor cabinet held an assortment of more than half empty hefty brand names, and the curtains were drawn keeping out most light.

“Are you both safe? Tell me everything. I need the puzzle pieces.”

They told him only what he would believe which was truth, just not all of it: everything from the pursuit by the two men in New York while trying to protect Jason to the chaos left in the hotel room. The two thought it prudent to leave out any mention of their new identities, murderous demons, or places where things didn’t play by this Earth’s rules.

Sitting in the stuffy claustrophobic living room in the middle of Baltimore city with everything said and done Baybars asked, “What happens now?”

Epilogue

The baby's cry ripped through the cool air of the hospital room. A tired silent woman lay on bed sheets damp with sweat, barely seeing the beautiful little girl that she had brought into the world. A girl who's soul was glazed with another's. Though it would take very special circumstances for her to become aware of this greater portion of her being she started her life carrying a gem, a hidden name: Bisunum.

--

Aisha and Baybars stayed in Baltimore living in the same neighborhood as Lazarus. With a few phone calls to friends in the government who owed him favors, he greased the wheels necessary to get Baybars residence in the country. This was a long arduous process made more difficult by the lack of papers from Baybars but was eventually successful. They chose to live together neither being able to return to any family that might be waiting for them; they had changed too much. The two lived together as brother and sister caring for each other both knowing that they protected each other contingent on which reality they existed in. Aisha would not let Baybars enter the ether for fear of discovery, and she had little call to go there herself as Algharoob remained locked up.

Sometimes she would pass by her old house located in the richer neighborhood but she never went in. It held too much death and too many ghosts. Baybars spent the years until his death searching for his soul's counterpoint trying everything he could think of short of going to the ether. The two always went each year without fail to a small cemetery in upper New York called Cherry Hill. They would visit the quiet place of decaying land and withered trees which guarded small eroded stones their writing faded by the inevitability of time's touch to check up on the evil being under her watch. Every time they left the cemetery for home darkness would gather just a little thicker that night as if in anger.

Each year for ten years they made the trip. Lazarus knew they went to New York, but not why and neither had told him. One crisp spring morning he was sitting on his small front porch and his piercing green eyes moved to the beeping cordless phone on the table. The old scar on his back, a relic from his first year on the force, twinged as it had every day as he reached for the phone. No one ever called him Sunday's, so there was a feeling that something was wrong which would not go away, a detective's intuition.

He answered his voice his voice raspy with age and too many cigarettes, "Trach here... Yea...no."

The voice from the station told him that two had been found dead in the cemetery by an older couple paying their respects to the family plot. It was Aisha and Baybars several days decomposed. What was unusual was that the dirt in front of one of the gravestones had been disturbed, and someone had scratched the word *'free'* violently into the weathered almost blank face of a headstone. He slammed down the phone after they told him it would be on the news that night at eleven.

"It was never over," he thought, "Death never stops."

--

Two men sat playing chess. They were two old adversaries playing every day but never speaking to each other.

One was grizzled and wrinkled with skin as dark as night. He sat straight carrying a skinny but solid frame, arms covered in strange tattoos. The other was a bent old man who looked frail but had a strong fiery presence. He was bald, crown gleaming in an unseen but perpetual sun his eyes under the perch of large black busy eyebrows.

They played—sitting, planning, attacking, and defending. The bald white man captured the other's knight, the piece's eyes flaming a fiery red, with his rook its sharp pointy crenellations dangerous putting him in a position to threaten the other's king. After a moments consideration the black man used his own rook composed of tiny whirring machinery to block its counterpart's advance. The bald one's yellow eyes met the dark amber eyes of his opponent. He reached a smooth hairless hand and withdrew the rook back from its open exposed position. Then his hand hovered over his bishop, one of the most powerful creatures on the board, to protect his rook.

As there eyes met, their environment flickered. Not all at once but bits and pieces as if they all didn't fit together perfectly. Disorder and chaos flashed under the flickers revealing the sham that had been created. They were not men, not anywhere close to it; the tattoos on the black man's arms crawled slowly weaving their strange words and scripts around his forearms and biceps.