



# Hunter

A Story Time Serial Novel  
By Goran Zidar

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## Chapter One

The trees have stood for centuries.

Majestic sentinels beneath an iron grey sky, maintaining their silent vigil over a primal world. A constant world, untouched by civilization, and free from outside influence.

Until today.

The sun hung low on the horizon, and a bitter wind caused the tops of the trees to sway, their branches brushing against each other. The clack of branches and the swish of pine needles moved together in a dance as old as time.

In the canopy of the alpine forest, a hundred feet above the rocky ground, things were as they'd always been, but on the forest floor he ran.

Air gusted from his mouth, leaving small clouds of vapour in his wake, as he picked his way through the ancient trunks. The thick tangle of branches tore at his arms and legs, shredding clothing as he ran headlong through the trees. Each lungful of freezing air chilled his body further. If he didn't find shelter soon he would perish just as surely as if his pursuers caught him.

One arm remained clasped against his side to keep pressure on an injury he couldn't remember sustaining. It was a shallow cut, but in this environment he couldn't afford to lose much blood, or the precious warmth it gave him.

How did he end up running for his life, in the middle of nowhere, pursued by who knows what? It was a mystery, but one he couldn't ponder, for now he simply had to keep moving.

The source of that imperative was now stuffed into the pocket of his jeans. A torn off sheet of newspaper, with a single word written in his own hand.

Run!

# # #

The guardian bent down to check the ground for any sign of the fleeing human. Finding none, it lifted its head and sniffed the air, hoping to catch a scent on the wind to tell him his quarry was close. All that told it was that the other guardians were close by, something it could feel instinctively. It had no need for the mundane assistance of the wind to know that.

It glanced at the overcast sky. It would be night soon, and that would mark the end of the chase for them. The darkness was no obstacle to its kind, but the bitter cold was. At this altitude, even with the sun at its zenith, it was

almost too cold for them, which is why their prey had been able to elude them thus far. Another hour remained before they'd be forced to return. There was no time to waste.

With a shrill cry, the guardian signalled the others and resumed its pursuit. It charged through the trees, and one by one, his three fellows signalled back with their own cries. The piercing notes would tell their prey where they were, but they also inspired fear in humans.

People made mistakes when driven by fear, and the guardians needed every advantage they could in facing this one.

# # #

Four blood curdling howls echoed through the wilderness, almost causing him to trip and fall. He stopped, heart racing, and took a few heaving breaths as he tried to regain focus. The hunters were a few miles distant, upwind of his current position. There was something about the sound that awoke a deep dread in the man. Somewhere at the base of his brain, his primitive mind associated those terrible wails with danger, and a wave of despair washed over him.

How could he survive against such perfect killers? The urge to give up was almost overwhelming. He clenched his fists tightly, knuckles whitening as his nails dug into his palms.

He wasn't ready to die, not here, not like this.

The cries sounded again but this time they awoke something else in him, the stirrings of a memory, bringing with it a name... Kade.

*Kade? Is that my name?*

He couldn't be sure, but it felt right somehow. The gaps in his memory were frustrating, but they were the least of his problems. His past would have to stay a mystery a while longer. He had to keep moving, especially while those things were out there.

Kade cocked his head and listened. The wind blowing through the trees was loud, but below it he could pick up the sound of running water somewhere south of his position. A river could help him elude his pursuers so he decided to head toward it.

With grim determination, he resumed his run. He sprinted down the rocky incline, weaving left and right to avoid obstacles. The trees blurred in his vision as he flew past them. A fallen tree crossed his path. Its massive trunk,

easily six feet thick, disappeared into the thick foliage to the left and right. He leapt over the fallen bole, landed lightly on the other side and kept moving, all without missing a step.

It was exhilarating.

He'd been running for hours but didn't feel tired at all. Where did such reserves of energy come from? The pain in his side reduced to a dull ache, and the bleeding appeared to have stopped. He had no explanation for any of it. For now he was simply grateful it was there.

He needed every advantage to survive.

The roar of a river was just ahead of him, and in moments Kade found himself at the edge of a fast-flowing river. It was too wide to cross here, so he ran downstream, desperately searching for a way across before his pursuers caught him.

The underside of the clouds was painted orange by the setting sun. He didn't have much daylight left. The thought of trying to find a way across in the dark caused him to shiver. He knew that the cold would be terrible.

A branch snapped somewhere in the forest behind him.

Kade tried to pierce the thick veil of pine needles. He couldn't see anything in the twilight gloom, but he didn't need his eyes to tell him there was something very big, very fast, and very dangerous out there. Apart from the rushing of water, the usual sounds of life were absent.

One of *them* was nearby.

Kade's fingers balled into fists, and he consciously forced himself to relax. *Where did that come from?* His involuntary response shocked him. There was no way he could fight one of those things.

The note told him to run. He should heed its warning. Escape was his only chance.

# # #

The guardian watched from the shadows.

The scent of him – of blood mixed with sweat – threatened to overwhelm its senses. It dare not alert its brothers or the human would know just how close his death truly was.

It moved silently through the trees, each delicate step bringing it closer to its prey. It could almost taste the flesh of the human he was hunting, could imagine the brittle bones being crushed in its jaws. The thought of the kill

caused the guardian to salivate in anticipation. But still it hesitated; it knew that this one was not like the others. He should not be taken lightly.

The prey stood at the edge of the river, peering through the foliage at where the guardian stood before, unaware that it had moved. It was the perfect opportunity to strike. With a silent snarl, the guardian bunched its muscles, and attacked.

# # #

The creature burst from the trees to his right.

It came at him with lightning speed. Kade was barely able to avoid the vicious slash of its claws as it leapt towards him.

*How could this one have gotten so close so quickly?* The question flashed through his mind as he ducked and weaved to keep the razor sharp claws and snapping jaws from striking him.

Despite the speed of its relentless attacks, he found that he was easily able to avoid the blows. Once again, his strength and speed amazed him.

*What am I?*

The creature let out a piercing shriek. The blood-curdling sound easily drowned out the sound of the rushing water only a few feet away. Three similar

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calls answered, and they were close. Too close. He was barely keeping one creature at bay. Four would cut him to ribbons. He had to find a way to escape.

Too late.

Behind him, a second creature stepped from the trees. The other two couldn't be far away. His brief taste of freedom was about to come to an agonising end if he didn't think of something fast.

It was time to take a risk.

He ducked below his attacker's flashing claws and hurled himself into the creature's body. It was a solid strike, and amazingly, the creature was flung back hard. It flew through the air and crashed into the trunk of a thick tree over a dozen feet away. Kade didn't waste any time marvelling at this incredible display of strength.

*I hope these things can't swim.* The river was his only chance. He turned, and ran headlong to the water, remembering to protect his head as the shock of the freezing water drove the air from his lungs.

# # #

The guardians watched as their prey leapt into the freezing water of the glacial river. They could do nothing now but watch as the human was washed past them, and then disappear from sight and on to freedom.

For now, at least, their hunt was over.

Frustrated at their inability to follow, they released their howls as one, four voices united in rage.

Their master would not be pleased, this failure would be punished.

# # #

The freezing river carried Kade away from that terrible sound. Even with his inexplicable strength and speed he knew that he was lucky to be alive. His joy was short lived, however, as he soon found himself at the mercy of the water.

With every passing mile, the water leached the warmth from his body, and soon he could no longer feel his arms or legs. Kade's shoes were torn away and he barely managed to keep his head out of the water. He spun in the swirling water, struggling to get his bearing as he fought to avoid the boulders and jagged rocks that pierced the river surface. If he didn't get out soon, he will have exchanged one death for another.

He peered ahead and saw he was approaching a bend in the river.

Knowing that his momentum would help, Kade swam for the bank, legs kicking wildly as he drew upon his last reserves of energy. The river's edge drew closer and he was finally to get his feet under him. He winced as his bare feet touched the rocky ground, the force of the water threatened to pull him down.

Kade slowly neared the edge, each step taking its toll he could almost feel his strength being drawn away. He collapsed with the edge just two feet away and he pulled himself forward to reach land on his hands and knees. Once free of the freezing torrent he rolled onto his back, chilled to his core as he looked up at the sky. The sun had set and the wan light of twilight would soon be over. Night was fast approaching and with it would come a drop in temperature that would certainly be fatal.

Despite everything he'd survived so far, his struggle wasn't over.

A light winked on to his left, soon followed by several more. The lightes formed a line, and burned with a dull orange glow that grew brighter with each passing moment.

*Could they be street lamps?* If they were then perhaps there was a town not far away. Fighting his fatigue, Kade climbed to his feet and staggered toward the row of lights and the possibility of warmth.

He staggered onto a bluff below the tree-line and was rewarded with a view of the town. Judging by the number of lights, the town ahead was a small one. He'd have to stay out of sight. With bare feet and wearing shredded jeans and tee-shirt he knew he'd draw attention, and in a small town it would be impossible to lose himself in a crowd. His best bet was to find somewhere to hole up until morning, and then try to leave this place without meeting anyone.

Kade shuffled into town, shivering uncontrollably, his legs feeling like dead weights. He was so tired, and had to force himself to keep moving, to put one foot in front of the other. The lure of sleep was almost impossible to resist, but he knew that if he fell asleep now he would never wake up.

A darkened building ahead caught his eye. It was a large two storey home close to the edge of town. It looked abandoned. The front yard was overgrown and wooden boards were hammered over the windows and doors. It was the perfect place to spend the night.

A brightly lit diner occupied the site across the road. A colourful neon light buzzed on the awning displaying its name; Stan's. Only the 'a' and the 'n' glowed brightly, the 't' flickered on and off, while both 's's were consigned to darkness.

Its interior was filled with retro decor, from the chunky metal cash register, and the gaudy jukebox that stood against the far wall, to the music selector boxes sitting on the tables, and the checkerboard linoleum floor. It could have been lifted straight out of the 60's.

The place was empty except for a waitress who sat with legs crossed behind the counter, her head buried in a book. She wore a white blouse and black skirt under her apron. A pencil behind one ear held blonde curls away from her face. She was pretty, in that effortless kind of way.

There was something familiar about her. He couldn't place it but he was certain he'd seen the girl before. *Maybe I live around here?* If that were true then perhaps the waitress knew who he was.

Indecision stilled him. He was torn between the desire to remain unseen and the need to uncover his past. A past that was locked to him, but it would be a risk to reveal himself. The one thing he knew for certain was that he gained

nothing by standing here, then his decision made, he took a step toward the future.

## Chapter Two

Every instinct he had told him to stay hidden, cross the street and lay low for the night, but he just couldn't shake the feeling that he knew this woman. He didn't know when, or even if, he'd see her again and he refused to miss this opportunity to talk to her alone.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside the diner. It was warm inside, almost uncomfortably so. The radio was playing a song by the Beach Boys. Despite everything, Kade chuckled. The thought of anyone in this tiny alpine town going surfing struck him as being quite funny.

The waitress looked up as he entered. Her eyes widened slightly when she saw him.

*Was that recognition?* Probably not. It was more likely to be alarm at his appearance.

She placed her book down on the counter beside her and came to her feet. "Hey, this ain't a halfway house, bub."

"I don't want any trouble." He held his hands up, palms facing her.

The waitress didn't seem to be the least bit intimidated by his dishevelled appearance. She just stood there, hands on her hips, looking at me. "Well, what do you want then?"

"I'm lost. I've been walking through the forest for hours."

The change in her demeanour was incredible. Her defiance was immediately replaced with concern and she practically ran across to me.

"My goodness." She put an arm over his shoulder and guided him to a booth by the window. "Let's get you comfy and I'll fix you something hot."

"I... I don't have any money." He said as he took his seat.

She waved a hand past her face as though she was shooing a fly. "Don't you worry about a little thing like that."

She turned on her heel and walked over to a coffee pot stewing behind the counter. The radio started playing Elvis as she poured him a cup, which she carried back and deftly placed on the table in front of him.

Kade cupped his hands around the warm cup of coffee and took a sip. With every mouthful he could feel his strength returning as bitter chill left him. Smart move or not, he really needed this.

"Thank you." He said, extending his right hand. "I'm Kade."



She held his gaze for a moment before shaking his hand firmly. “Trish.”

She smiled. “Now, just sit tight while I whip you up a meal. If you need anything, just holler.”

Trish turned and headed for the kitchen. He was about to call her back, he had come in here to talk to her, but the thought of a warm meal set his mouth watering. There’d still be plenty of time to talk after he’d eaten something.

Kade sat back and breathed deeply, savouring the warmth that spread through him. It was the first chance he’d had to relax and reflect on what had happened.

How did he get there? What were those things chasing him? And how was he able to fend them off?

Try as he might he couldn’t remember a thing before that mad chase through the forest. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the sodden scrap of newspaper, hoping to find some clue as to what was going on.

He unravelled it, taking care to keep from ripping the pulp and smoothed it down with his hands. Once again he stared at the word “Run!” written there. He couldn’t understand how he could identify the handwriting as his own but he knew it with a certainty that defied explanation.

He looked beyond the word and tried to find some clue in the article itself. The water had smudged the ink but the writing was still mostly legible. Unfortunately, it was just an opinion piece espousing the virtues of the latest must have touch screen phone.

No help there.

He folded it back up and shoved it back into his pocket, then sagged against the back of the chair.

The food smelled good. He couldn't remember his last meal, and the sizzle of the hotplate coupled with the tantalising aromas made his stomach grumble loudly. He focussed on the radio to try and distract himself from the hunger pains. The DJ had just completed a news item and had moved on to the weather.

*"... tomorrow with the mercury staying south of twenty-five. We're in for a cold one this year people. Brrr. Looks like it's time for a 'Heat Wave'. Hopefully this new one from Martha and the Vandellas will get you movin'..."*

The music started playing and Kade moved to the counter so that he could watch Trish working in the kitchen.

“Don’t you just love this old music?” he said, his foot tapping in time with the song.

“Mmm hmm.” She swayed a little as she ushered the food around the grill. “But this ain’t old. It only came out last week.”

*What?* Kade’s foot stopped tapping. “Aren’t you streaming this from a sixties retro station?”

“What do you mean, hun?”

“The music. Where did you get it?”

“It’s the radio.” She glanced up from her work and looked at him strangely.

“Radio? ... But...” His hunger was forgotten and he looked around the diner. “Do you have a newspaper?”

“Sure. There’s one down there near the coffee-pot.”

Kade raced around and grabbed the newspaper tucked beneath a tray of napkin wrapped cutlery. He laid it out on the counter and checked the date at the top of the page.

His heart sank. *This isn’t happening.*

His legs felt weak, and a wave of nausea crashed over him. He had to brace himself against the counter to keep from losing his balance.

“Is there a bathroom in here?” he said between clenched teeth.

“Sure. It’s just around the corner.” She pointed at the partition wall behind him, concern evident in her expression. “Are you okay?”

He waved vaguely toward her, not trusting himself to speak. The coffee in his stomach threatened to come back up and he lurched upright, making a bee line for the toilet.

He threw himself through the swinging door and only just managed to reach the basin when he couldn’t keep it down any longer. The meagre contents of his stomach emptied in a series of heaving belches. By the time he was done he lacked the energy to lift his head.

“It’s not possible,” he muttered, slack face hanging over the basin. “This is a joke. THIS ISN’T HAPPENING!” He screamed the last at the top of his lungs.

He was so completely overcome that he almost didn’t hear the bathroom door open. His head whipped around, and he could feel the energy course through him, just as it had when he faced those terrible beasts on the mountain.

Trish was standing there. She must have seen something in his eyes because she took a step back, a hand over her heart.

Kade forced himself to calm down. This woman had been nothing but helpful and she didn't deserve to feel the brunt of his anger. Whatever was going on had nothing to do with her.

"I need you to listen to me, Kade." Her words seemed to cut through his confusion. She held his gaze as she continued. "In the ceiling above the final stall is a platform. I need you to stand on the bowl and climb up there."

The way she spoke seemed to have a calming effect on him. "Why?"

"I don't have time to explain right now, but I need you to do as I ask. Trust me Kade. I have no wish to hurt you."

He looked over his shoulder at the last cubical. What she was asking seemed easy enough but given everything he was reluctant to do as she asked.

"Look at me, Kade. Really look at me." She must have sensed his indecision. "You can see that I want to help you, can't you?"

## Chapter Three

Special Agent Leonard Crane hated flying, and helicopters were worst of all. Especially the way they attracted the attention of anyone who happened to be around. A plane at least had to land at an airport while a helicopter could create a scene anywhere.

He hunched as he exited the hateful contraption, running to the side, with a hand holding his hat in place to keep the downdraft from blowing it from his head. Flying definitely wasn't his thing, but when J. Edgar says jump he was definitely not going to say no.

Once clear of the mechanically induced gale, he strode toward the delegation of local law enforcement who'd come to the town square to greet him. It was cold up here in the highlands and, though it reinforced the "G-Man" stereotype, he was glad of the thick woollen trench coat he'd elected to wear.

"Agent Crane?"

"That's right."

"I'm Sheriff Barton Collins, welcome to Big Sky." The sheriff raised his arm in a gesture that took in the impressive vista. "I expected you to be older."

*And I thought you'd be thinner.* The sheriff was a large man. His uniform did an admirable job of containing his girth but it was clear that it was nearing the end of its useful life.

"I get that a lot." Leonard smiled. "But let's not equate my youthful appearance with a lack of authority."

"Of course." The sheriff cleared his throat. "My officers stand ready to assist you in any way necessary."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Leonard looked across to the eager faces of the deputies. This was likely to be the most excitement these young men had seen in a while. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I expect that this will turn out to be rather unexciting for you and your men." He'd been on calls like this before and they usually came to nothing.

"Let's hope not, eh?" The sheriff gave him a wink, regaining some of his earlier composure. Leonard had to suppress a shudder; he was a truly repulsive man.

"What have you been told?" he asked. In cases like this it was always good to establish just how much the hired help knew.

“Just that we were to provide whatever assistance we could to help you apprehend the fugitive.”

*So, not much then.* “That’s good to hear.” *The less these bumpkins knew the better for everyone.* “Is there somewhere out of the wind I can brief your men?”

# # #

Kade believed that she wasn’t lying. He wasn’t sure how, but he was certain that Trish was telling the truth. Somewhere in the back of his mind he felt that he had to trust her. At any other time he might have questioned that compulsion but after everything he’d been through it was almost a relief to have someone tell him what to do. He unclenched his fists and took a deep breath.

“Okay,” he said. “How do I get up there?”

She closed her eyes and let out a deep breath before answering. “Stand on the toilet and remove the ceiling tile. You’ll see what I mean straight away.”

“Who are you?”

“I promise I’ll answer your questions in a little while.” She looked over her shoulder. “Just do as I say. It’ll be alright.”



He held her gaze for a moment then moved across to the final stall. He moved the tile to find a small platform built into the gap between the roof and the ceiling tiles. Kade easily pulled himself up into the tiny attic and laid down on the platform, while Trish replaced the tile behind him.

It was dark up there, the only light coming through the gaps in the tiles and a small grill on the wall that overlooked the diner. But despite this, Kade found he could see perfectly. Yet another mystery to add to the impressive collection he'd accumulated since awakening in this nightmare.

Because that's what this was. A nightmare.

There can't be a rational explanation for what was happening to him. His mind refused to make sense of the multitude of impossibilities any other way.

This simply wasn't real.

How else could he explain his appearance on the side of a mountain in nineteen sixty three, with no memory of his previous life, being chased by the hounds of hell, one of which he defeated in single combat, only to jump into a freezing river after which he walked several miles, without any shoes, to end up hiding in this diner, his clothes ripped to shreds while he didn't have a scratch on him.

The solution seemed obvious now. He need only close his eyes and fall asleep. That way, when he awoke, this entire experience would be behind him. That had to be the answer. The alternative was just too incredible to consider.

The bell above the door tinkled as he lay there with his eyes closed. It seemed like someone else had entered the diner. Kade tried to let the sound of quiet conversation lull him to sleep, but his curiosity got the better of him. He crawled across to the grill and peered between the narrow slats to see what was happening.

Two men stood by the counter. One extremely fat man, wearing what looked like a county police uniform, stood talking to Trish while a second man, tall and well dressed, stood beside him, his gaze sweeping the diner.

This second man was an imposing figure. He had a substance to him that was palpable. Here was a man who seemed entirely comfortable in his own skin. Relaxed, confident, dangerous. A person who was truly *present*.

# # #

“What can I do for you?” the waitress said, as he entered the diner behind the rotund sheriff. He looked around the small dining area and saw that a table near the window had recently been wiped down.

“Evening, Trish,” Sheriff Collins began, “This is Special Agent Crane, from the F.B.I.”

“Good evening, ma’am.” He said, dipping his hat as he did so.

“The F.B.I?” She let out a low whistle. “What brings him to our neck of the woods?”

“I don’t want to alarm you,” the Sheriff continued. “But I’m assisting Agent Crane in the capture of a dangerous criminal. There’s been a report that he might be headed this way.”

“My lord.” She put a hand to her chest.

Leonard stepped forward, placing his hat on the counter as he pulled up a chair. “Your diner is right on the edge of town, so it’s possible you might have seen something.”

She shook her head. “It’s been quiet. I ain’t seen a soul all day.”

“I see,” he reached into his jacket pocket and removed a pad and pencil, taking note of an unwashed coffee cup behind the counter and the half-cooked eggs and burger cooling on the hotplate. “My information isn’t specific regarding the timing of his arrival. There’s a chance he hasn’t quite reached here yet.”

*Someone has definitely been here, why is she lying to me?* He looked at the waitress directly for the first time since he came in. “You’re certain you haven’t seen anything out of the ordinary?”

She met his gaze, “Not a thing, Agent Crane.”

She continued to stare at him, and he could feel something at the edges of his awareness, like she was somehow groping around inside his mind.

He tore his eyes away and the feeling subsided, but his interest in learning more seemed somehow diminished.

“Thank you for your time, miss.” He smiled and put away his notepad, careful to avoid making eye contact. Something was definitely wrong here, but he couldn’t put his finger on exactly what it was.

“Any time, Hun.”

“Though,” he continued. “I would recommend you close early tonight. If he does show up you could be in danger.”

“I can take care of myself,” she said. “But you make a fine point, Agent Crane. I’ll just tidy up a bit in here and be on my way.”

“Let’s get a move on, Sheriff.” He got to his feet, collected his hat and strode toward the door. Just before he reached the threshold, he stopped and turned around. “You don’t mind if I use your bathroom do you?”

“Not at all,” she stiffened slightly before answering. Her recovery was so fast that he almost missed it. “It’s just ‘round the corner.”

“Thank you.”

He walked behind the wall and entered the tiled bathroom area. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for just trusting to his natural instincts to pick up on anything out of the ordinary.

The bathroom was meticulously clean, that in itself wasn’t out of the place, save for the faint scent of vomit the cut through the antiseptic perfume. He walked across to the wash basin and lowered his head. The smell was stronger here, yet another sign that someone had been here, a man if the bathroom choice was any indication.

For all this strangeness he still wasn’t sure what to make of Trish. Clearly she was hiding something but it might have nothing at all to do with his target. Still he never got anywhere by ignoring potential leads.

She would bear some further observation.

He left the bathroom and glanced up behind him as he returned to the front of the diner, his attention drawn to a ventilation grill on the wall above the door.

*Was there something up there?* He studied the vent for several seconds but was unable to see what had drawn him to look there in the first place. With a shrug, he turned around and headed out the door.

“Come on, Sheriff, let’s go,” he said as he opened the door.

The corpulent man was busy licking his fingers; tell-tale traces of icing sugar dusting his sausage like appendages.

“See you, Trish,” the Sheriff said, as he waddled out the door. “Thanks for the sweet cakes.”

“Any time, Sheriff.” She waved. “And good luck Agent Crane. I hope you find your man.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

He closed the door behind him and followed the sheriff outside into the bitter chill of the Montana night.

“What now?”

“When your men are done searching the place across the road, have them go door-to-door along this street and see if anyone has seen anything.”

“What about us?”

“Take me back to the station. I need to make some phone calls.”

The pair climbed in to the sheriff’s truck. Out here in the wilderness he could understand why such a vehicle would be useful, but he simply couldn’t picture the sheriff ever straying far from his desk.

“How long have you known the waitress?”

“A few months, I guess. She bought this place in July and spent a couple of weeks fitting it out. Why?”

“Don’t you think it odd to have a diner out here on the edge of a town this small?” Leonard watched Trish through the windshield as she made ready to close up. “I wouldn’t expect she’d get much business.”

“I hadn’t thought about it.” The Sheriff started the engine. “Only thing I care about is that she doesn’t cause me any trouble, and Trish is as quiet as they come.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

# # #

Kade's heart all but stopped when the tall F.B.I agent looked up at the grill. There was no way he could have seen him, yet Kade was convinced that he knew he was up there.

He heard the pair exit the diner and then, a minute later, the sound of a car starting up outside.

"Are you okay up there, Hun?" Trish called from down below.

"Yes," Kade said, unsure how loudly to reply. "What's happening?"

He could see that she was busy straightening up. Making sure that the menus were neatly stacked and that the condiments were all in their place.

"The Sheriff and the F.B.I. man think I should close early tonight. Apparently there's some crazy fugitive out there who might try and hurt me."

*Are they talking about me?* "I don't want to hurt anyone."

"I know that, but I need to do what they say or they might start poking around some more."

Kade thought about that. He couldn't discount the possibility that perhaps he really was a violent criminal on the run from the law. Amnesia can be a possible reaction to trauma; maybe he'd done something so terrible that his own mind refused to accept it.



“What if I turn myself in?”

“You don’t want to do that, Hun.”

“I don’t?” He could feel the fogginess returning. There was something in the way she spoke that made it hard to maintain a line of reasoning.

“You just sit tight while I finish up in here.”

“Alright.” *Where was such dependence coming from?* He’d only just met this woman, hadn’t he?

“I won’t be long, Hun. There’s a panel on the far wall that’ll take you to the garage where my car is parked. I’ll meet you there in a few minutes.”

Trish disappeared into the kitchen where, he assumed, she continued cleaning up. Kade manoeuvred himself around and inched his way toward the rear of the building. As he drew closer he was easily able to see the panel she was referring to.

Once again a feeling of unease came over him. There was more going on here than he realised, but his subconscious was telling him to be careful. As if he’d caught a whiff of smoke on the breeze but hadn’t yet seen the fire, and now he had to decide if he was going to stay or run.

## Chapter Four

Kade lay on his side in the trunk of Trish's car. The darkness broken only by the occasional glow of the tail lights whenever she applied the brakes or turned a corner. He pulled his knees to his chest and tried to find a position that, if not comfortable, at least meant that he wasn't knocked around too much whenever the car hit a bump. Those bumps came thick and fast now that they'd turned off the sealed road onto dirt.

*What am I doing in here?* It wasn't the first time he'd thought that. Four hours ago he'd been running for his life in the wilderness, and now he was stuffed into the trunk of a car driven by a woman he'd only just met.

Had he just exchanged one grisly end for another? Why does this woman have such an influence over him? Whenever she was around he couldn't seem to order his thoughts. It wasn't simply that she was attractive, surely that can't be the only reason he was willing to do whatever she asked of him.

The car came to a stop, and the rumble of the engine ceased. A moment later he heard the driver's door open and shut. Wherever she was taking him, it seemed they'd arrived.

The sound of footsteps on crushed rock grew louder, and he heard the jingle of keys before the trunk was opened. Trish loomed over him, blonde curls framing her face and a dazzling smile on her lips.

She held out her hand. “We’re here, Hun.”

Kade could feel the now familiar fogginess cloud his mind as she helped him out of the car.

She’d driven them to a large, two-storey, log cabin surrounded by trees. Its steeply pitched roof was common for homes in an alpine area, as was the large porch that sheltered the front door. Kade looked around, searching for anything that might be familiar to him. He recognised nothing, not even the lights from the town were visible.

“Where are we?” he said, craning his neck to take in his surroundings.

“You’re at my place.” Trish smiled and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, let’s go inside and I’ll fix us a couple o’ drinks.”

Kade hesitated. “I... I shouldn’t be here.”

“Nonsense,” she said her eyes took on an intense, vaguely predatory, aspect. “With that fugitive out there, this is the safest place for you.” She squeezed his shoulder. “Trust me.”

And he did.

# # #

“Shit!” Agent Crane slammed the phone down.

The sheriff looked up from his newspaper, a cloud of cigarette smoke surrounding his chubby features. “Something the matter?”

Leonard thumped the table and stood up. “Can I borrow your car?”

“I can take you wherever you want to go.”

“Not this time, Sheriff.”

“You’re sure? We’re supposed to be in for some bad weather. The roads around here can be dangerous if you’re not used to ‘em.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so.” The rotund man unhooked the keys from his belt and tossed them across the room.

Leonard donned his hat and his coat and walked out the door, exchanging the warm confines of the Sheriff’s office for the bitter chill of the Montana night. He ran to the truck, climbed into the driver’s seat, and turned the ignition. The engine roared to life and he quickly sped away.

Big Sky was a small town, and nowhere was very far from anywhere else. Even so, Leonard drove as fast as he dared to return to Stan's Diner. But as soon as he pulled up outside and saw the place shrouded in darkness, he knew he was already too late.

"Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit!" His fist pounded the steering wheel with every word. He leaned forward and grabbed the radio mike in front of him.

"Sheriff, this is Leonard Crane. Do you read me?"

"Loud 'n clear, Agent Crane," the Sheriff responded a moment later.

"What's up?"

"I need you to look up an address for me."

# # #

Kade knelt on the floor of Trish's living room, stacking wood in the fireplace while Trish fussed about in the kitchen. Rustling up something to eat and drink, to use her turn of phrase.

He struck a match and cupped it in his hand as he brought the meagre flame to the kindling and scrunched up newspaper. The fire quickly grew and as the heat washed over him he realised just how tired he really was.

Trish walked in, a tray of food, a bottle of wine, and a couple of glasses balanced expertly in her hands. She placed the tray down on a coffee table then sat down on the couch.

“Now, promise me you won’t spit this meal up,” she said as she held her hands out to the fire. “I don’t think my pride could handle you rejecting my hospitality twice.”

The light of the fire kissed her face, her blonde hair tinged orange by the flames. Kade looked at her; away from the unforgiving fluorescent lights she was more than simply pretty, she was breathtaking.

“Well, what’re you waiting for?” she said. “That wine ain’t gonna pour itself.”

For the first time in what felt like an eternity Kade allowed himself to relax. He sat up, unstopped the bottle, and poured out two decent measures, handing one to Trish as he held the other aloft.

“To the unexpected.”

They clinked glasses. “The unexpected.”

Kade took a sip, it reminded him of freshly cut grass with a hint of American oak, but there was something else there too, a chemical taste that

didn't quite belong. He was about to say something when he noticed that Trish had put her glass down without drinking it.

His vision swam. "What have you done to me?"

# # #

The sheriff's truck tore along the mountain road.

The address he'd gotten from the sheriff was still a few miles away and he couldn't afford to lose another second getting there. The intelligence he'd received from Washington confirmed what his gut had already been telling him.

Trees flashed by on either side as the car hurtled along the winding mountain road. Leonard was glad that the predicted snow had so far managed to stay away. He didn't fancy the idea of trying to manoeuvre this lumbering vehicle on an icy road.

The turn-off came up quickly on the left. Tires screeched as he slammed on the brakes and turned the car sharply onto the dirt track. He turned the wheel left and right to regain control then planted his foot on the accelerator once more.

Driving on a dirt road like this during the day was risky, at night it was doubly so. The corners came up almost without warning, and Leonard was glad

the sheriff had the car fitted with a second set of driving lamps. He wouldn't be of much use to anyone if he crashed into a ditch on his way to the waitress's house.

He slowed the car to a crawl about half a mile from his destination, switched off all the lights and approached as quietly as he could.

It made sense that she would choose a place like this for her home. It was isolated, well outside of town, and miles away from any neighbours. Tucked in amongst the trees like this, it would be almost impossible to see from the air.

The location fit what he knew of her but the circumstances of her being here in the first place were off. Why would a *moro*i assume the role of a waitress in a small town diner? Her kind tended to prefer more luxurious settings. Also the timing of her arrival into town was unusual. It was too convenient, almost as though she knew someone would be coming through that particular gate.

# # #

Kade woke to find himself seated in the centre of a ten-by-ten foot room. His clothes had been removed, and his arms and legs were securely tied to a metal chair which was bolted to the floor.

He turned his head to take in his surroundings.



The room was empty. What looked like a reinforced steel door was built into the wall behind him. Try as he might he couldn't quite crane his neck far enough to see it properly. He strained against his restraints but it achieved nothing.

He was well and truly trapped.

The room was uncomfortably warm. He felt the sweat bead on his brow but how much of that was due to the heat and how much resulted from his growing anxiety he couldn't be sure. The only positive he could draw from his current predicament was that his mind was finally clear of Trish's influence.

Behind him, the door opened.

"Hello, Kade." It was Trish's voice, but it carried none of her usual folksy inflections. "I hope you're not too uncomfortable."

"What do you want with me?"

"Well well. This transition really must have knocked you around." She lightly caressed his shoulder, as she walked around to stand in front of him. Her eyes ran across his naked body and she leaned down, bringing her face to the crook of his neck.

“What do you want with me?” he said, her proximity causing him to stiffen.

She breathed in deeply, standing straight once more with her eyes closed.

“I don’t want anything. I’m just the delivery girl.”

He forced himself to look away. “What are you talking about?”

“You really don’t know?” She laughed, a musical sound that carried with it a familiar feeling of warmth. “I’ve spent four months in this freezing shithole waiting for you.” Trish leaned in again and cradled his neck with one hand, he could feel her trying to worm her way into his mind. “And now that I have you, I’m not sure I’m ready to give you up just yet.”

This time he fought against it, willing her influence away. Kade refused to be duped by this woman again. He wasn’t sure how he managed it but he pushed her out leaving his mind clear once more.

He met her gaze evenly. “I think I’ve had about enough of your hospitality.”

“Well, if you’re going to be like that.” Trish stood back up and clicked her fingers.

Something entered the room behind him. The sound of claws on the concrete floor registered a heartbeat before a familiar earthy scent filled his nose. His head snapped around and he saw one of *them* walk in. Its massive form seemed to fill the room as it padded around to sit beside her.

Trish reached down and idly scratched the fur behind the creature's ears, as if it were simply a dog that she kept as a pet. But the burning intelligence behind the creature's eyes reminded Kade that these things were more than mere animals.

"I know you managed to escape them earlier today, but somehow I think that this time you may not be so fortunate. The *varkul* don't like it when their prey eludes them."

Kade looked at the creature, this *varkul*. The name sounded familiar but for now the details eluded him, as has so much since he found himself here.

"I'm going to leave you two to get reacquainted." Trish patted the animal on the head and walked out of the room. From the doorway she said. "After a few hours in his company I'm sure you'll change your mind about how you'd like to spend your time."

# # #

Leonard parked the sheriff's truck a hundred yards down the road, and he approached the waitress's cabin on foot. Snow had finally started to fall and a chill breeze snapped at his cloak as he picked his way carefully through the trees south of the cabin.

The wind blew smoke from the cabin's fire down to him which acted as a path through the darkness. He didn't want to risk using a torch out here. If the *moroi* spotted him too soon it'd be all over.

As he got closer, the light that spilled from the windows made it easier for him and he soon managed to close to within a dozen paces of the front door. He surveyed the area. It was an idyllic scene really.

The warm glow from the cabin windows illuminated the snowflakes as they swirled in the breeze. The lightly covered ground lit in flickering orange arcs with the scent of pine heavy in the air.

If it weren't for the extremely dangerous killer inside this might be somewhere he could enjoy spending a weekend or two. So instead of admiring the ambiance he stood there, assessing possible points of entry, preparing lines of skirmish and evaluating contingencies.

The front door was directly ahead, with large windows on either side. The one to the right was the brighter of the two which suggested that it was closer to the fireplace and therefore, the living area.

The second story was dark. Most likely this was where the bedrooms would be found. *Moroi* tended to sleep through much of the day, so it was likely that part of the house was unoccupied. He might be able to climb onto the roof of the porch and get inside that way.

Around the side of the house was a set of basement doors. There was no guarantee that he'd be able to get inside the house from down there but it was an option. Though judging by the level of undergrowth covering them, they hadn't seen much use recently.

He took a deep breath. A solid plan was one thing but he knew from bitter experience that no plan, regardless of how good it might seem, will survive first contact with the enemy. And an enemy like this should never be taken lightly.

Ideally he'd wait for daylight to confront the *moroi*, but he no longer had that option. If he didn't do something right now he might as well kiss this collection goodbye.

## Chapter Five

Kade met the *varkul's* gaze as the massive dog-like creature eyed him. He knew these things, he was sure of it. That name awoke a memory in him, and his awareness grew with each passing breath.

*Varkul* were often used as guardians for other types of immortals. They were quick, strong, and possessed a cunning that bordered on intelligence. Not an opponent to be taken lightly, as a pack they were nigh on insuperable, but as individuals they could be beaten. He proved that himself earlier that night.

The creature began to growl, a low rumble that set Kade's heart racing. It reared up, placing its front paws on his arms, as it brought its long, teeth-filled, snout to his face. Kade suppressed a shudder. The *varkul's* fetid breath stank vaguely of rotted flesh. He forced himself to meet its gaze. The creature sought to unnerve him. He knew that Trish needed him alive, so he reasoned that the *varkul* wouldn't dare hurt him, would it?

Its lips curled back revealing more razor sharp teeth. The growl deepened as it reared up again. This time it brought a paw down to slash its claws across Kade's chest.

Kade screamed as pain swept over him. Blood blossomed from five deep cuts that ran from his left shoulder all the way to his right hip. The *varkul* stepped back and watched as he suffered. Waves of agony coursed through him, and his vision blurred before he blacked out.

He came to sometime later, the *varkul* watching him from the corner of the room. He looked down at his chest. It was covered in blood, but the pain was gone and his wounds were completely healed.

His eyes snapped back to the *varkul*. It moved toward him once again, slowly, deliberately, and Kade was sure that its canine mouth was curled into a smile.

*Oh god no.*

The creature reared up and slashed at him again.

# # #

Agent Crane approached the front door of the secluded cabin. He toyed with the idea of coming in through the basement doors but that approach would waste the one advantage he had. Right now the *moroi* had no idea what he knew about her.

His raised his fist and knocked firmly on the door, adjusting the holster under his jacket to conceal the tell-tale bump of his side-arm.

The door opened. A blast of warm air washed over him as Trish stood in the doorway, a welcoming expression on her face.

“Agent Crane,” she said, looking past him into the darkness. “What an unexpected surprise.”

“Good evening, ma’am,” he said, touching his hat as he did so. “I wonder if-”

She raised a hand, cutting him off. “It’s far too cold to have this conversation on my doorstep.” She stepped aside and motioned him inside. “Come in. There’s a fire, and I’ll fix you something hot while we talk.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

She took his arm as he stepped inside. “And no more of this ma’am business, please call me Trish.”

He removed his hat as she ushered him to a large open sitting area. A fire burned brightly in the fireplace, and the room was almost uncomfortably hot.

“May I take your coat?”



“Thank you.” He handed her his hat and shrugged his long woollen coat off, careful to keep his jacket from opening.

Trish smiled and moved to a hook by the front door. “Take a seat and I’ll fix us a drink. Are you a tea or coffee man?”

“Tea, thank you.” He sat down by the fire. “Black, no sugar.”

“Comin’ right up.”

*So far so good.* He leaned back on the sofa, and looked around the room. There was nothing unusual about the layout. A doorway led to the kitchen where Leonard could see Trish fussing about through a serving hole cut into the wall. Stairs to the upper level stood beside the front door, with another door opposite the kitchen, it was closed and decorated with a horseshoe. Pictures were fixed to the walls, depicting famous monuments from around the world, the Eiffel Tower, the Great Pyramid of Giza, and a large white building with a domed roof he didn’t recognise.

“You have a nice place here,” he said, speaking loud enough to reach the kitchen.

“Thanks. It suits me.”

“It’s quite isolated though. Don’t you sometimes feel anxious this far out of town?”

She entered the room carrying a pot of tea and two ceramic cups. “Not me, I like the solitude.”

He chuckled. “Yet you run a diner in town.”

Trish sat down opposite him, and started pouring the tea. “What can I say? A girl likes to have company as well. This way I can have both, but on my own terms.” She looked at him meaningfully while handing him a cup. “Now, Agent Crane, please tell me why you’re here?”

He could feel her fumbling about inside his mind. Like fingers trying to find something to grab hold of. Now that he knew what he was dealing with, Leonard was able to keep her from insinuating herself into his thoughts. It wouldn’t be long before she knew it too.

He lowered his cup without taking a sip, then reached beneath his jacket and drew his gun, pointing it at her. “I’m here because I believe you have something I want.”

Trish's eyes widened slightly, before her expression softened to one of wry amusement. "What are you doing? Do you plan to arrest me?" She laughed. "I'm afraid I can't allow that."

"I feel I must remind you that I'm the one holding the gun."

"My dear, Agent Crane." He could feel her trying to force her will upon him. So far, he could keep her out, but he would tire eventually. "You have no idea who you're dealing with."

He squeezed the trigger. "Oh, but I do."

# # #

The sound of gunfire roused him.

Once again, Kade opened his eyes to find his wounds completely healed. The memory of searing pain exploded in his mind, and he was unable to keep a moan from passing his lips. His tentative grip on sanity was rapidly being eroded by this cycle of pain, and he was almost too afraid to look up.

But the attack didn't come.

He knew the monster was still in the room, he could smell it. He raised his eyes, and saw that it wasn't looking at him.

Two sharp rapiers broke the silence.

The *varkul* snarled, and bounded through the door.

Kade guessed he wouldn't be alone for long, so he directed his attention to the blood soaked ropes restraining him. His left arm was still securely tied but the ropes on the right had been damaged. The *varkul's* claws must have cut into them while it ravaged his body. Kade strained with all his strength. The tightly woven hemp bit into his flesh, but the pain was nothing compared to what he'd endured so far. He could feel the rope start to give and a second later, his arm tore free.

Now, with one arm loose, he set to work on the other.

# # #

The bullet hit Trish in the chest, just below her right shoulder.

She was sent tumbling backward in the chair, tea spilling everywhere, to land roughly on her back. Leonard jumped to his feet and moved around so as to keep the gun trained on her. She lay on the ground, coughing at first, but that soon changed to a type of pained laughter.

"Well that was unexpected," she said, her breaths coming in ragged gasps.

"I should be more careful with my toasts."

Leonard stared down at her, his gun at the ready. "Where is he?"

Trish turned and looked at the wound in her chest. "I'm not healing."

There was a slight tremble in her voice. "What have you done to me?" She faced him again, a cold hatred in her eyes. "What have you done to me!?"

"Iridium bullets." He needed to be careful, even like this she was still dangerous. "Now, tell me where he is."

Trish roared, her fangs extended, and she leapt to her feet. Fortunately he was ready, and he fired twice more, once into each leg. She staggered back and collapsed against the wall, blood flowing freely from the wounds.

She breathed heavily, in obvious pain. "Who are you?"

Leonard took a step forward, and aimed his gun at the *moroi's* head. Trish snarled, but he could see that the fight had gone out of her. "I won't ask again."

Before she could respond, the horseshoe door splintered open, and a huge wolf-like creature burst into the room.

"Oh shit!" He raised his gun, and squeezed off a couple of shots, knocking it back. The creature shrugged off the wounds, and raised its snout to unleash a terrible howl.

A *varkul*! Iridium bullets wouldn't be so useful here.

Leonard dived into the kitchen, and slammed the door shut. The sound of Trish's laughter filled his ears, as he pushed the refrigerator over to barricade the door.

# # #

More shots could be heard, followed by the *varkul's* unearthly cry. Something was definitely going on up there, and now that Kade was finally free of the chair, he wasn't sure he wanted any part of it.

The door to his cell opened into a short corridor. Based on the construction, he figured he was below ground. At one end were stairs leading up to where the fight was taking place, while at the other stood another door. Reluctantly, he turned and moved toward the stairs. Fight or not, it was probably the best way out of here. If nothing else, he might be able to sneak free in the confusion.

At the top of the long flight of stairs was another corridor, this one obviously within Trish's cabin. The flickering light of a fire could be seen through a ruined door that opened into the lounge room, where he'd taken the drugged wine.

There'd been no shooting for a while, but whatever was going on wasn't over. He could hear the *varkul's* animal snarls as it pounded against something.

He padded to the door, and peered inside.

The lounge room was a mess. The furniture had been knocked aside and the wooden coffee table was in splinters at the centre of the room. He saw no sign of Trish, but noticed a trail of blood on the floor leading out the front door. Inexplicably, he found himself hoping that she was safe.

*What did that woman do to me?*

The *varkul* bashed against the kitchen door, its deadly claws tearing chunks from the wood as it sought desperately to get at whoever was trapped inside.

Just like back in the forest, Kade's hands balled into fists, and he could feel strength course through his body. This monster had caused him enough pain. It was time to finish things.

The creature stopped its attack on the door the moment he set foot in the room. It turned and leapt toward him, its jaws wide. Kade sprinted forward, ducked below the swiping claws and delivered a powerful blow at the *varkul's* chest.

He could feel its ribs breaking as it flew over him, and crashed to the ground in a crumpled heap. He spun around to face it. Even with part of its chest caved in, it wasn't finished yet.

This time Kade waited for the *varkul* to come to him. Blood mixed with its spittle and dripped from its slavering tongue as it drew near, with far less agility than before.

The *varkul* attacked with its claws, careful to keep its injured side away from him. The swipes were awkward and slow. Kade was easily able to bat them aside. It backed off, stumbling slightly, and let out a whimper that sounded like an injured dog.

Kade saw his opening, and darted forward.

Abruptly, the *varkul's* demeanour changed. Its back legs kicked out, sending Kade tumbling back. He tripped on the overturned couch and landed flat on his back by the fire. Before he could recover, it pounced. Jaws snapped at his throat. Kade managed to get an arm in front of him and the *varkul's* mouth closed on his wrist.

Razor sharp teeth pierced his flesh, and Kade to scream in pain. He'd underestimated his opponent, and now he would pay for it. With no other



option, he pulled the *varkul*'s head down, and wrapped his free arm around its neck. The monster's claws raked at his body, tearing strips of flesh from his legs and chest.

Kade tried to push the pain aside as he squeezed, trusting his body's incredible healing to save him once the *varkul* was dead. His vision narrowed, and could feel himself losing consciousness. With a final clench, he felt a snap at the base of the *varkul*'s skull before everything went dark.

## Chapter Six

Leonard looked on as the naked man fought the *varkul*.

Kade.

It was really him. Twenty years had passed since they'd last been together. Much had changed since those bloody days at the height of the war. Leonard was now a veteran agent, older, slower, but much wiser than the fresh faced rookie who'd first been introduced to Kade all those years ago, yet Kade hadn't aged a day.

He hated feeling so useless, but he knew he'd never stand a chance against the vicious creature. He simply wasn't equipped to face something like that. A *moroi* alone was bad enough but a *moroi* and a *varkul* meant that he had seriously misread the situation.

Kade wrapped his arms about the creature's neck, and squeezed while the trapped animal slashed at him with its claws. Leonard was stunned. The pain that man must be feeling was incredible.

The *varkul's* neck snapped with an audible pop and both combatants fell. It would now be a race to see which one of them healed first.

This was his chance.

Leonard climbed through the servery into the lounge room, and sprinted out the cabin door. He cursed when he saw that Trish's car was gone, but there wasn't anything he could do about that now. He had to reach the sheriff's truck.

He covered the distance in only a few minutes, wrenched open the door, and climbed into the driver's seat. The engine roared to life, wheel's throwing mud into the air, as he drove back toward the cabin.

He parked at the front door, retrieved a large woodsman's axe from the back of the car, and ran back inside, praying that he wasn't already too late.

The room was just as he left it; the *varkul*, lay unmoving, atop Kade's savaged body.

*Was he actually dead?* Leonard didn't have time to speculate and grabbed one of the monstrous creature's legs, dragging its massive bulk out the door. Once outside he raised the axe and delivered three powerful blows at the *varkul*'s neck. His bullets may not be able to kill the creature but even a *varkul* couldn't recover from a severed head.

His bloody work done, Leonard tossed the head into the forest, before returning to the house. He approached the fallen man, and placed two fingers on his neck.

His pulse was weak, but it was there.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Leonard fetched his coat from the hook where Trish had hung it. He wrapped it about the injured man, and gently lifted him to the couch.

Leonard was in for a long night.

There was no telling how long it would take him to recover, or how he might react when he did. Despite everything they'd once been through together he knew that Kade would remember none of it. The curse of the *aeimar*, blessed with so many gifts yet forced to live in perpetual ignorance.

Compared to what Kade had to go through, mortality sure had its benefits.

# # #

He awoke to pain.

Kade's mind flared back to consciousness amid a torrent of horrendous suffering. Searing lances of burning agony ran the length of his body, bringing

sparks to his vision. His head lolled to one side, and he started into the fireplace. The flickering licks of flame dancing over the wood conjured visions of Prometheus and his eternal struggle.

*Make it stop.*

He raised his arms, as if to ward off whatever nightmare torture lay before him, when he realised he was free. Awareness dawned. He looked around again, finally seeing where he was.

The room showed signs of a struggle. Its floor and walls were covered in blood, and a tall man stood before him; a gun levelled at his chest.

“Hello, Kade,” the man said.

He looked familiar. Ah yes, the F.B.I. agent he saw in Trish’s diner.

Trish!

The *varkul*!

Kade’s head whipped from side to side. His breath quickened as he searched for the woman, or her monstrous guardian.

He saw neither.

Kade closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. The last thing he remembered was being locked in an embrace with a *varkul*. Had he killed it?

The fact he was still alive suggested he must have, either that or the F.B.I. man had helped him. There was only one way to be sure.

“You know who I am?”

“Yes I do, Kade,” the man said. “But more importantly, do you?”

Kade swallowed, it was an excellent question. “Not really, but I’m getting pretty sick of being the only one who doesn’t.”

“I can see how that would be frustrating.” The F.B.I. man smiled, and holstered his gun. “I’m on your side, Kade. I’m trying to help you.”

He looked down. He was naked save for a long woollen coat. The thick weave was covered in blood, his blood, but he was thankful for the warmth it offered.

“Is this coat yours?”

The man nodded.

“Remind me to send you the dry cleaning bill.”

“Keep it. I’ll requisition another when we get back.”

“Look, no offense or anything, but I’m not going anywhere until I get some answers. Who are you? What the hell is going on? How was Trish able to control my feelings, and why the fuck is it 1963?”

“My name is Leonard Crane. I’m part of a top secret division inside the F.B.I. My mission here was to collect you, and bring you back to Washington.”

“Why? How did you know where to find me? How do you know my name?”

“I’ll get to that.” Leonard straightened one of the chairs and sat down.

“No doubt you are already aware that you possess remarkable healing abilities as well as incredible agility, and strength.”

Kade snorted. “After what I’ve been through, it’s a little hard to miss.”

“Well, those gifts are what make you so important, and so dangerous.”

“Dangerous? To who?”

“Well to everyone really, but specifically to other immortals.”

“What? Why?”

“You’ve been through a lot. Normally this kind of information would be shared under more relaxed circumstances. If you like we can continue this discussion in Washington.”

“I told, you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Fine, but if you start to feel overwhelmed let me know.”

He nodded. “Go on.”

“Are you familiar with the concept of Telluric Currents?”

“No.”

“Telluric Currents are an extremely low frequency electric current that moves throughout the earth. They are discrete currents that interact in a complex pattern as a result of natural phenomena, and unnatural events.”

“Okay.”

“Think of these currents as a series of lines drawn randomly on a map. Well special things happen at locations where these lines intersect. By monitoring these currents it is possible for us to pinpoint the moment of transition. Unfortunately we missed yours.”

“Transition? From where?”

“Not just where, Kade, also when?”

“Time travel?”

“Yes. I don’t know where you came from, whether it’s from the future or the past, all I know is that you’re here. I expect that you are suffering from memory loss.”

“That’s right.”



“It’s a perfectly normal result of the transition. It ensures that you cannot pollute the timeline with information that we shouldn’t have, and is exactly why there are normally people like me on hand to meet you.”

Kade wasn’t sure what to make of all this. “For the sake of argument, let’s say I believe you, and believe me it’s much easier for me if I do.”

“I assure, you-”

“Please, don’t.” Kade raised a hand, closing his eyes while he considered what to say next. “If information can’t travel from the future, how do you know to expect people like me? And why weren’t you there when I came through this time?”

“Honestly, we weren’t expecting you.” Agent Crane scratched the back of his neck. “The Telluric Currents normally begin to resonate in a specific frequency a couple of months before a transition. That way we know to be in place when the traveller arrives. Until today we had no idea that an intersection existed anywhere near here, but clearly someone did.”

*So he doesn’t know everything.* Somehow Kade found that oddly reassuring. “Then how did you find me?”

“We might not have known about the intersection, but a transition is impossible to miss. As soon as you came through we knew about it. I was sent here immediately, I’m just sorry I wasn’t able to get here sooner.”

“And Trish?”

“I can’t be certain, but it seems as though she was here specifically to find you. The timing of her arrival in Big Sky coincided with the beginning of the Telluric resonance, and clearly she was more than what she appeared.”

Kade shuddered, recalling the way she wormed herself into his mind. “It was like she could control my thoughts.”

Leonard nodded. “Trish is a *moroi*, a type of immortal, but not born as one. *Moroi* are humans who have been turned by a true immortal or *strigoi*. As such they are sometimes called mortal vampires in Eastern European folklore.

“They have the ability to impose their will on others. It is possible to resist their influence, but it takes discipline. Given your state of mind I expect you would have been powerless against her charms.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Unfortunately she escaped before I could learn anything useful.”

“She said something about sending me to someone else, but she never mentioned who,” Kade swallowed, “or what?”

Leonard tapped his chin, his eyes distant for a moment. “That makes sense. I’ve never heard of *moroi* and *varkul* working together. *Strigoi* don’t usually share one of their guardians with a lesser immortal.”

Kade look about the room again. “Where’s the one I was fighting? Did I kill it?”

“No, but you did incapacitate it enough so that I could take care of it. We won’t have to worry about it now.”

“And the others?”

“What do you mean?”

“There were four of them.”

“Four?” The man’s eyes widened. “Dear god. Where are they?”

Kade indicated the door behind him. “I expect they’re through there somewhere. There’s a staircase that leads to the basement back there.”

Leonard rose. “We can’t leave them. If they get out they’ll kill hundreds of innocent people.”

“How do we kill them?”

Agent Crane ejected the clip from his gun. “My bullets won’t work.

*Varkul* need silver, these will just make them angry.”

“Well don’t look at me. Fighting one of them was more than enough for me. I don’t want to go through that again.”

“Fire will work. We should burn them.”

Kade flinched. “Something about that just seems wrong.”

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking them innocent. Believe me they’re worse than rabid dogs, they must be put down.”

He was right, he understood that. Kade knew exactly how dangerous they could be. “So what should we do?”

## Chapter Seven

“Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

Leonard left the cabin, and ran to the sheriff’s truck. He opened the rear tailgate and rummaged around inside. Amid the coiled ropes, bundled canvases, and rattling chains, he found what he was looking for. He grabbed the jerry can, thankful that the sheriff kept it filled, and strode back inside.

Kade looked up when he entered the room, a grimace on his face when he saw what was in his hand. “I know we have to do this, but even so... it’s a horrible way to die.”

Agent Crane nodded. “I don’t disagree, but it’s all we have. Now, where did you say the basement was?”

Kade turned and looked back over his shoulder. “It’s through that door.” He got to his feet and stumbled slightly, the room spinning violently. He thrust out an arm to steady himself against the chair to keep from falling.

After several breaths, his balance returned and he was able to stand on his own. “Follow me. I’ll take you to them.”

Leonard shook his head. “No, I’ll go. You need to get yourself cleaned up, and see if you can find any clothes in one of the bedrooms.”

“You’re leaving me alone? Aren’t you worried I’ll run off?”

“Not likely. You can barely stand, I think I’ll be able to catch you if you do anything that stupid. Besides, I thought we understood one another.”

“Sure, we’ve had a pleasant chat. I’m grateful for your help, and the fact that you haven’t tried to kill me yet. But don’t make the mistake of assuming I trust you.”

“I’m not asking for your trust, Kade, at least not yet. What I need now is that you believe what I told you. There’ll be time enough for you to trust me when we get to Washington.”

“You also need me to come with you.”

Leonard nodded. “Yes, I need that too.”

The silence grew between them as the two men faced each other. Leonard understood what Kade had been through. Given the circumstances, his reluctance was entirely reasonable. It would be up to him to make the first move toward building trust between them.

“I expect there’s a bathroom upstairs. You should go and get cleaned up. Hopefully you’ll find some clothes as well. I’ll come get you once I’ve taken care of the *varkul*.”

# # #

The hot water felt good. Kade ducked his head under the steady stream and let the warmth penetrate his skin. Rust coloured water pooled at his feet as it washed the dried blood from his tired body.

If only all his problems could be so easily washed away.

Kade placed a hand on the wall and closed his eyes for a moment. His exhaustion was total, and the warmth seeping through his body made it difficult to resist the lure of sleep. The water began to sound like rain, and he felt himself drift away. His eyes flickered open.

*Why am I so tired?*

His limbs felt like lead, all the energy seemed to have left him. Kade staggered against the wall and slumped to the floor of the shower, lacking the strength to keep his eyes open.

He could almost feel the rain on his face as the blackness overtook him.

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# # #

Irena paused to study her reflection in a shop window on her way to the club. Oddly, she was surprised by the image of the woman staring back at her, and for a moment she wondered if she were seeing her reflection at all. Tall, confident, red lips, long hair, dark to the point of being almost black, and the eyes...

Irena stopped and stared closer at the window, angling her head to get the best reflection. Her eyes were like pieces of amber, bright, alive, she'd always felt her eyes were her best feature, and the lights of the city made them glow as if lit by an inner fire.

She drew her coat around her, and flicked up the collar to keep out the cold, holding her umbrella aloft as she continued on her way to the hotel. The rain meant the sidewalks were practically deserted, people preferring to stay indoors or go by car if they had to go anywhere.

Irena always chose to walk if she could, to put herself among her prey as she prowled the city for her next victim. The onset of the industrial age drove many of her kind into the shadows, forced them to strike deals with the humans. Such weakness was not for her.



Irena Valikova would never negotiate with her food.

She reached the end of West 67<sup>th</sup> Street and crossed Central Park West to enter the park itself. A woman alone in Central Park at night might risk robbery, or rape, or murder. Irena had nothing to fear from such petty criminals, but she increased her pace nonetheless. It wouldn't do to arrive at the Plaza Hotel in soiled clothes.

She walked past Tavern on the Green, its car park empty and the restaurant windows dark, all the happy diners having finished their meals hours ago. Irena had lived in New York a long time; she remembered when the now exclusive eatery once housed sheep. She chuckled at the thought. *I suppose some things never change.*

# # #

Leonard stood outside the bathroom. Light shone from behind the closed door, and he heard the sound of running water.

“How long does it take a man to have a shower?” Leonard muttered, as he knocked on the door. “Kade, we need to get out of here.”

Leonard could do with a shower himself, his hands smelled of petrol and his clothes stank of the foul acrid smoke. He'd found the three remaining *varkul*

caged below ground. The vicious creatures threw themselves against the bars as he poured fuel onto their heavily muscled bodies.

He fled as soon as he tossed the match. The sudden rush of flame as the fuel ignited sucked the air from the room, and his return to the surface was followed by agonised screams. He took no pleasure in what he'd done, even though he knew it was necessary.

“Kade!” He knocked again, louder this time. “We need to go.”

No response.

“Damn it! That bastard better not have run out on me.”

Leonard took a step back and kicked the door. The flimsy lock was no match for him and the door swung open to slam against the bathroom wall.

Leonard stepped inside and found Kade asleep on the floor of the shower.

It was the last thing he expected to find. The seasoned F.B.I. agent threw his head back and laughed. He shook his head, grabbed a towel, and reached in to turn off the water.

Kneeling down, Leonard patted Kade's face. “Kade, wake up.”

# # #

The Persian Room at The Plaza was busy.

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Just as Irena anticipated, the bad weather had caused many guests to abandon their plans and seek entertainment within the luxuriously appointed confines of their hotel instead.

She took a seat by the bar and ordered a drink from the attentive bar staff while she surveyed the room. A five piece band played subdued jazz in a corner of the room while the entire place was abuzz with conversation.

Irena sat and sipped her drink, she need not make any overtures; a woman like her was seldom left alone for long. As if on cue, the first of tonight's many suitors sidled up.

# # #

This was more than mere sleep.

Leonard tried several times to wake Kade, but nothing he did could bring him back from wherever his slumber had taken him. If he had entered the trance he could be out for hours. With no other choice, he lifted him out of the shower and carried him across to the bed.

*No sense in wasting any more time.*

Leonard opened the wardrobe, and rifled through several drawers until he found something suitable for Kade to wear.

Leonard wondered who the clothing belonged to as he dressed the *aeimar*. It was quite possible that they were here even before Trish moved into this cabin, more than likely the property of the previous owner. Leonard had no doubt, were he to look into it, that whoever owned the cabin before Trish arrived was killed in some tragic accident.

Yet another victim of whatever scheme placed her here to wait for Kade. There was definitely something at play here, but Leonard didn't know enough yet to piece it all together.

# # #

“Simply fascinating.” Irena hoped she managed to keep the boredom from her voice. “Why don't we take this conversation somewhere more... intimate?”

The man's eyes widened at her suggestion, he was handsome enough, and wealthy too if his words could be believed. She was sure he'd told her his name but she didn't bother to remember it. It didn't pay to become too familiar with the prey.

“An excellent idea, Madam, I believe I have just the place.”

“I thought you might.”

She smiled as she took his arm, allowing him to lead her up to his room.

# # #

Leonard leaned across to fasten the seatbelt over Kade's body. Once his unconscious passenger was secure, he turned the ignition and commenced the long, and windy, drive back into town.

The corpse of the final *varkul* burned brightly behind them, the flames quickly receding into the distance as they sped away. When he got back to town he'd arrange for a team to come and take proper care of Trish's cabin. He couldn't allow an unsuspecting civilian to stumble across the bodies. Even burned, the massive creatures would provoke unwanted curiosity.

# # #

The man stepped aside, allowing Irena to enter the room before him.

It wasn't the most exclusive room in the hotel, but it did have a view across Central Park. She walked over to the window to stare out across the trees while he fixed the pair of them a drink.

Irena was thirsty, but single malt whiskey was not what she craved just now. She idly stroked the fingers of her right hand, as she watched the man in

the reflection of the glass. With a glass in each hand he approached her, full of life, and brimming with the confidence of youth.

*Yes, he will do nicely.*

He drew to within a step of her when she turned, her hand flashed past his neck, fingers barely touching his flesh. He stopped, an expression of mild confusion on his handsome face, as the glasses dropped to the floor.

Irena smiled cruelly, her fangs extended, and she stepped forward to catch him before he too fell.

# # #

Kade's eyes snapped open, and he jerked forward, only to be brought short by the seatbelt across his chest. His eyes darted left and right, as he struggled to figure out where he was. The last thing he remembered was falling asleep in the shower.

“Welcome back,” Leonard said, as he drove the big truck along the twisting mountain roads. “Did you have an interesting dream?”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to town. I had no idea how long you'd be out and I didn't want to wait in the cabin. I figured I'd start heading back.”

Kade looked down, he was dressed, and apart from the seatbelt he didn't seem to be restrained in any way. He glanced at the door and saw that it was unlocked. He knew he'd have no trouble getting out of the car if he had to.

He hoped it wouldn't come to that, it felt good to be done running for now.

Kade turned to Leonard. "You said something about a dream?"

"I did. I expect you just had an extremely vivid dream."

He nodded. "I dreamt I was in New York City. I'd just hooked up with some guy, and when we got up to his room I killed him."

Leonard's lips curled into a wry smile. "Is that so?"

"I should point out that I was a woman in the dream."

"Did you have a name? In the dream I mean."

Kade thought for a moment. The details were fading quickly, but he was able to recall some information. "It was a Russian sounding name, Illena... no... Irena Valkov... something like that."

"Irena Valikova?"

"Yes, that's it. How could you know that?"

"Well that tells us why you're here."

*Just when things started to make some sense.* “What are you talking about?”

“I told you that *aeimar* exist to bring justice to immortals who fail to toe the line. Soon after one of your kind arrives, they fall into a trance where they are shown their target. You just had yours, and it seems like Irena Valikova is the one you’ve been sent here to deal with.”

Kade swallowed. If what he’d seen of Irena was true, then she was one cold hearted woman. “And what if I don’t choose to go along with this vision? Who am I to decide who should live and who should die?”

“You just told me you saw her kill an innocent man in a hotel room.”

“To feed. She killed him to feed. A person’s allowed to eat right? Besides we don’t know if the man was innocent.”

Leonard pursed his lips. “It’s possible for immortals to feed without killing, and believe it or not, there are more than enough humans willing to offer themselves to be used in this way.”

“So, I’m supposed to head over to New York and finish this Irena just because some vision told me that’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“In a nutshell, yes.”



“Well that’s just crap. Who’s to say these visions are even real? Who sends them anyway?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t. I have no idea where they come from.”

“Well that’s just great.”

They drove for the next several miles in silence.

As they entered the outskirts of town, Leonard pulled the car over to the side of the road and killed the engine. He reached down beside the driver’s seat and retrieved a set of handcuffs which he held before him.

“Okay, its proposition time.”

“I’m listening.”

“As far as the sheriff is concerned, I’ve been sent her to apprehend a federal prisoner.”

“Me.”

Leonard nodded. “So if you’re planning to come with me I need you to put these on.”

“And if I’ve decided I don’t want to go with you?”

“I certainly hope you haven’t decided that. But if you have then I’ll let you out now and wish you all the best.”

Kade’s eyes narrowed. “Just like that?”

“Just like that. As I said, I hope that I’ve shown you that I only have your best interests at heart but I won’t force you.” He snorted. “Who am I kidding? I couldn’t force you if I tried.”

*End of Chapter Seven*

**Want to help decide what happens next?**

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