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# HAMMERS

CASSANDRA  
KHAW

# ON BONE



# **HAMMERS ON BONE**

**CASSANDRA KHAW**



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

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*To all the monsters hiding in this world, I hope the children will skin  
you alive.*

*To the children in the world, let no one say you can't make your  
monsters bleed.*

## 1: MURDER, MY SWEET

“I want you to kill my stepdad.”

I kick my feet off my desk and lean forward, rucking my brow. “Say that again, kid?”

Usually, it’s dames trussed up in whalebone and lace that come slinking through my door. Or, as is more often the case these days, femmes fatales in Jimmy Choos and Armani knockoffs. The pipsqueak in my office is new, and I’m not sure I like his brand of new. He’s young, maybe a rawboned eleven, but he has the stare of someone three times his age and something twice as dangerous.

Not here to sell cookies, that much is obvious. I saw him take a firm, hard look at the door, take in the sign I’d chiseled on the frosted glass: JOHN PERSONS, P.I.

“I said”—he plants his piggy bank on my desk like a statement of intent —“I want you to kill my stepdad.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because he’s a monster.”

You learn things in this line of work. Like how to read heartbeats. Any gumshoe can tell when a darb’s lying, but it takes a special class of sharper to differentiate between two truths. Whatever the reality is, this kid believes the spiel he’s selling, marrow and soul. In his eyes, his secondary sad sack of an old man’s a right monster.

I let a smile pull at my mouth. “Kid. I don’t know what you’ve been hearing. But I’m a P.I. You want a life taker, you gotta go somewhere else.”

Right on cue, a whisper crackles in the back of my skull, like a radio transmission from the dead, shaky and persistent: *wait wait wait*.

The kid doesn’t even flinch. “You kill when you have to.”

I knot my arms over my chest. “When I have to. Not when a gink with a bag full of change tells me to. Big difference.”

A muscle in his cheek jumps. Brat doesn’t like it when someone tells him no. But to his credit, he doesn’t break form. He sucks in a breath, nice

and slow, before exhaling. Class act, this one. If I ever meet his folks, I'm going to have to tip a trilby to them.

"Well," he announces, cold as a crack-haired shyster on the courtroom floor. There are plenty of problems with the body I'm wearing, but we tend to see eye to eye on this brand of vernacular. "You have to."

"And why's that?"

"Because if you don't, my brother and I are going to die."

*Please.*

I sigh, feel the air worm out of my lungs. I could do with a cigarette right now, but it'd be impolite, not to mention stupid, to leave a client hanging about this dive. No telling if he's going to stay put, or if he's going to paw through places he don't belong. And I couldn't afford *that*.

So, I shake out a few folders instead, rearrange a stack of papers. Just to give my hands something to do. "Tell your mom to call child services. The bulls will have your old man dancing on air in no time."

"I can't." He shakes his head, curt-like. "He did something to my mommy. And he'll do something to the police, too. I know it. Please. You're the only one who can help."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you're a monster too."

Well. This got interesting. I crook a finger at him, beckon the midget closer. He doesn't hesitate, scoots right up to the edge of the desk and tilts his head forward like I'm some favorite uncle about to ruffle his hair. I take a whiff. Drink his scent like a mouthful of red.

*—black and animal bile, copper and cold springwater, herbs and life of every dimension, almost enough to hide the stink of cut-open entrails, of muscles split and tethered to unimaginable dreams, a composition of offal and spoor and predator breath—*

"This is some bad shit you've gotten mixed up with there."

"I know." He fixes his eyes to mine. You could carve Harlem sunsets with that look he's wearing. "Will you take the job?"

*Wehavetowehavetowehaveto.*

Persistent as bear traps, those two. I smile through my teeth and the pleas that won't stop pounding in my head. "Kid, I don't think I have a choice."

\* \* \*

Croydon's a funny place these days. I remember when it was harder, when it was chisellers and punks, knife-toting teenagers and families too poor to make it anywhere else in grand old London, when this body was just acres of hurt and heroin, waiting to stop breathing. Now Croydon's split down the middle, middle-class living digging its tentacles into the veins of the borough, spawning suits and skyscrapers and fast food joints every which way. In a few years, it'll just be another haunt for the butter-and-egg men. No room for the damned.

*Home*, sighs my ghost.

"No," I correct him, adjusting the folds of my collar with a careful little motion. "Not anymore."

I roll my shoulders, stretch to my full height, cartilage popping like a tommy gun. The cold feels good, real good, a switchblade chill cutting deep into the cancer of a thousand years' nap. Shading my eyes with a hand, I check the address the kid had chicken-scrawled on a receipt. Close enough to walk, and about a block down from this old Caribbean place I remember from the '90s.

I light my first cigarette of the decade. Inhale. Exhale. Let my lungs pickle in tar and tobacco before starting down the worn-down road. It doesn't take long before I get to my destination. The house is a dump. Crushed between council estates, it sits in a row of identical structures, a thin slant of property like a hophead drooping between highs.

"Anyone home?" I bang on the door.

The wood creaks open, revealing a scared-looking bird and the reek of stale booze. "Who are you?"

"School authorities."

She stiffens. "What do you want?"

Smoke leaks from between my teeth as I flash a grin, all shark. "I'm here about your son's attendance records. The school board's not happy."

"I'm sorry—"

I don't let her finish. Instead, I wedge a foot through the gap and shoulder the door open, knocking the latch free. The broad scuttles back, alarmed. I can see the cogs in her head wheeling as I swagger in: what's this



shamus doing dripping rain in her foyer? As she slots together an objection, I slice in between.

“So, what’s the deal here, sister? You making the runt work sweatshops or something?”

“Excuse me?” She’s staring. They always do. These days, it’s all bae and fleek, bootylicious selfies and cultural appropriation done on brand. That puts me in a weird linguistic space, with my chosen vocabulary. I mean, I could embrace the present, but I feel a responsibility to my meat’s absentee landlord.

“Your son.”

Her eyes glitter, dart away like pale blue fish.

“Well?” I press, smelling advantage, blood in brine.

“I wouldn’t do something like that to my special boy.”

“Yeah?” I champ at my cigarette, bouncing it from one corner of my mouth to the other. There’s a pervasive smell in the hallway. Not quite a stench, but something unpleasant. Like the remnants of a molly party, or old sex left to crust on skin. “What about his old man? He working the kid? That why your son isn’t showing up at school?”

The broad twitches, shoulders scissoring back, spine contracting. It’s a tiny motion, one of those blink-and-you-lose-it tells, but oh, do I catch it.

“My fiancé doesn’t involve our sons in hard labor.”

“Uh-huh.” I rap ash from my cigarette and grin like the devil come to dine on Georgia. “Mind if I look around?”

“I really don’t think—”

You gotta love the redcoats. Americans, they’re quick to tell you to make with the feet. But the Brits? It just ain’t in them to be rude. I take one last, long drag before I stub out my smoke in the aging carpet and start deeper into the house, the bird’s complaints trailing behind like a slither of organs.

The stink grows stronger: less human, more maritime malfeasance. A reek of salt and hard use, of drowned things rotten with new life. An old smell, a childhood smell. I walk my fingertips across the moldering wallpaper, black-blotched like some abused housewife. Under my touch, visions bloom.

Ah.

“Where’s the mister?”

“I’m sorry? I don’t see how any of this is—”

“—my business?” I interrupt, the house’s memories still greasing my palate. “You want to know how this is my business?”

“Yes, I—”

I spin on a heel and bear down on her, all six feet of me on five-feet-nothing of her. I breathe her scent in, eggy and slightly foul, a barely concealed aftertaste. “My business is determining if you’re solely responsible for the stories we’ve been hearing, or if your man is equally culpable. Now, you look like a smart broad. I’m sure you understand what I’m getting at here. If you want to take full responsibility for the shit that’s gone down, be my guest. But if you’d rather I give you a fair shake, you’ll tell me where your honey is so I can ask some questions.”

She flinches like I’d clip a dame of her size, mouth slumping under its own weight. “He’s out. He’s working at the brickworks.”

I glide my tongue along the back of my teeth, counting each stump before I start again. “Where?”

Silence. A lick of chapped, bloodless lips.

“Sister, here’s some free advice. Whatever mess you’re in, you should clean it up and get out.”

“Excuse me? I—”

I cock a bored stare. “You got a mug like a boxer. You want the same for your boys?”

Her fingers twitch to her face. I’m lying, of course. The thing wearing her sweetheart was careful. If there are teeth marks, they’re secreted beneath secondhand hems, pressed into spaces sacred to lovers. But guilt is a funny kind of magic.

I watch in silence as she gropes the cut of her jaw, the line of her nose, features spasming with every circuit, every new or imagined fault. By the time we make eye contact again, her gaze is frayed, wild with visions of things that don’t exist. I tilt my head.

“I think you should—” she declares at last.

I stab my tongue against the inside of a cheek and cluck in disapproval. “I shouldn’t do anything, sister. You, though, you need to give me the address of your man’s workplace.”

“Fine.”

The skirt punches a bony finger at the window, straight at the factory at the end of the road. It's an ugly thing. Most places in London, the businesses will try to blend in with the neighborhood, mix a little effort into the mortar, so to speak. But this was the brickworks, the smoke-clogged uterus of the English capital. It was never meant to be beautiful. And frankly, it ain't. The building in the distance, with its boneyard of chimneys, its cellblock windows, is like the corpse of a god that's been left to rot, picked-over ribs swarming with overall-wearing insects. "That one there?"

She nods.

It catches her off guard when I turn and show myself out. Almost, she calls out to me. I can hear it in the way her breath shortens and snags on the edge of a doubt, nervous, her voice a frayed little thread. But I don't look back, don't slow. Not even when I hear the shuffle of slippers on linoleum, a sound like *wait* and *please come back*. Just grab the door and yank it shut behind me, the rain painting my trenchcoat the classic, glimmering grays of London.

## 2: THIS SIDE OF THE LAW

I stroll into the factory with the post-lunch crowd. The boys, plump on bad lager and cheap Indian takeout, don't give me a second look. Not when I peacock through the front gate, brash as new brass, and certainly not when I trespass into employees-only territory. Good. I'd have felt bad for their molls if we busted the furniture together. This might be the twenty-first century, a time when dames can hustle as well as any testicle-swinging Joe, but London's no place for a one-income family.

Quietly, I cut through the complex, past rows of heavy machinery, down cramped corridors foul with rust and old sweat. The walk's longer than I would have liked, so I take it easy, all the while dreaming about a pair of wheels. Something discreet. London's not a city for muscle cars, not with its narrow streets and treacherous corners, its ant hive of interchangeable lives. Maybe a Tesla. Who knows?

As the factory workers clump around their stations, muscles and mouths straining with the effort of living out another twenty-four hours of urban misery, I find my way into a rat's nest of an office.

I scan the room. There's trash everywhere: documents staked to the old asbestos walls, mountains of cardboard boxes, all crisscrossed with arteries of takeout containers, newspapers, and half-empty beer bottles. At the heart of it, a slim little man sits swaying to Ella Fitzgerald.

"You the foreman?"

"Yeah." He turns in his seat. He has the drooping jowls of a bulldog, a broad forehead, a drunk's eyes, heavyset, yellow from a liver he's tortured since he was eleven. There's something clever to the cut of his mouth, though, like he's in on a cosmic joke and about to cash out big on the punch line. "Who's asking?"

I light a cigarette. "Me. I got some questions for you, Mr. Foreman."

"And I've got some questions for you, Mr. Me." *Heh. Heh. Heh. Heh.* He laughs like he's reading the words out of a textbook, staccato and stilted. The foreman raises his eyebrows as he subsides, as though demanding

accreditation for his humor. His accent is industrial, a Liverpool drawl.

“Who are you and who the fuck do you think you are barging into my office like this? You made an appointment with Tessa?”

Smoke tendrils from my grin. “Like you could afford a Money Penny.”

His eyes harden.

Before he can retort, I move, one hand braced against the thrust of a hip like an extra from an old gangster reel. The foreman doesn’t question the gesture, doesn’t challenge it. It’s clear that under that ugly mug, there’s a thumbtack brain—sharp, small, and specialized—and it recognizes a man who means business.

“What ya want?” His mouth peels into a scowl.

“Information.”

Fifteen feet, ten feet. Five. I almost lose my cool when I break into the man’s personal space. *It* was here, was in him, is *still* in him. Its scent clots hot in his every exhalation: febrile, fecund, dried plasma and mold.

“What kind of information?” he asks as he hooks an ankle over a knee. Under the bobbing orange light, his neck looks scabrous, scaled, the flesh a pebbled gray where it should have been pink.

“I’m looking for a guy. McKinsey.” The name flares in memory, the syllables disgorged by a kid too young for his eyes. “His fiancée said he works for you. Got some questions for him.”

“McKinsey? I know him. Good guy.” A prickle of defensiveness, a calcification of his lidded stare. “Works hard, drinks hard. A little too hard, sometimes. Maybe. But then again, which of us don’t? Either way, good man. What’s your beef with him?”

“Mm.” I breathe in, press the smoke against the roof of my mouth. “No beef. I’m looking to clarify a few things.”

“*What* things?” His throat flutters, expands.

“Things.”

In his agitation, his skin splits, spreads to frame a moist blue eye, cataracted and lethargically sullen. The foreman doesn’t notice and I do my best to call no attention to it.

“What. *Things*,” he gurgles, fists clenched, cheeks palpitating. Another eye opens in his neck, bigger than the first, more alert. It bulges against its restraints, ticking madly as more follow in a fusillade of wet noises.

“Things,” I repeat impatiently.

I'm too old to be intimidated, but not old enough to be inoculated against a sense of righteous offense. The thing in his neck is a blasphemy, a mutagenic outrage of flesh, an insult to man and beast and all of us that came crawling out of the ocean before. As I breathe in air syrupy with spores, it hits me: how many more in here are infected? The foreman can't be the only one. How many others are carrying it under their skin like a case of the clap? How many are changing under the surface as they shit, fuck, and backslap their way through the borough?

Disgust sours my mouth.

"McKinzzzey—" the foreman buzzes angrily. He begins heaving himself upright, slowly, dramatically, like a man twice his weight class.

I shove him back down. "Sit."

"McKinzzzey is a good employee-ee-e. Zzzo, you can fuck—"

"Sit down, tough guy."

Mouths begin to dilate under his jawline, smacking moistly, just lips and tongues.

"McKinzzzey—"

There's a humming in the air now. Too low to hear but not to feel, ants burrowing in muscle fibers. The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

"Last chance—"

The noise becomes a whisper, a hiss, a celebration, a roar, a black surf breaking on the glaciers of an old, decaying world. It sutures itself into syllables, strings of sounds that could almost be called words if you're feeling generous.

*Gela Vt' yah fhma'a*

"Shut—"

*G'ukhyoi y'okhyoi fhokhu*

"—the fuck up!"

I jam my cigarette into one of the eyes in his neck, feel membrane pop and aqueous humor drool between my fingers. I press harder and the foreman screams convulsively, a shriek that would have brought the factory running if it weren't for my hand over his mouth.

He thrashes in my grip, but I don't let go. It's only when the fight has gone out of him, when ululation thins to a whimpering moan, when I feel the cigarette connect with vertebrae, that I lean down to hiss: "You going to behave?"

He nods and gasps air through the hole in his neck.

“You going to stop pretending you’re some kind of hard-ass? You going to cooperate?”

He bobs his head again. The eyes at his neck foam with tears and blood.

“Good.” I pull away, still holding the sodden cigarette. “Now, tell me everything about McKinsey.”

The foreman stutters through his exposition, a beaten dog, hand closed over the weeping injury I’d left him with. Nothing he says surprises me. McKinsey was your typical working-class lug. Liked drinking with the lads, liked meat, football, and especially fresh skirts, the kind of girls barely on the right side of legal. Real Alpha Joe. Up till a few years ago, at least, when the London riots burned through the city.

He apparently started getting real revolutionary then. Head in the clouds. Started talking about transcending boundaries, being more than just meat perambulating through life. The boys thought it was hysterical at first, but then more and more people began paying attention to what he said. McKinsey went from mascot to blue-collar messiah, summoning his mates to a future electric with 4K televisions and upper-class eating.

“He ever talk about his kids?”

The foreman, voice and appearance mostly restored to normal, doesn’t quite flinch. “Sometimes.”

“What he say?”

“Typical shit. Loves them. Thinks they’re gorgeous. Says he’s lucky they’re not girls, or he’d have to share one day.” And he laughs, a *rat-ta-ta-ta* kind of noise this time around, like knuckles banging on a locked door.

“He ever said anything weird about them?”

“No.” Yes, says the cock of his head, his sideways stare, his halfway grin. The foreman drops his hand from his neck and begins swiping his fingers along his trousers. Already, the wound is closing.

I roll the options in my head. “Can you get him to come into the office?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Here, I see his eyes light up. Satisfaction laps at the twist of his scowl, even as he thins his gaze. “Because he just finished his shift.”

I'm not even surprised. "Next time you see him, tell him Mr. Persons is looking for him. If he knows what's good for him, he'll come calling at my door."

I leave the address to my office, scribbled on a blue square of cardboard. The foreman says nothing, just keeps his stare pointed forward, face mangled by hate, some of it his, some of it borrowed. I start toward the door, then hesitate at the threshold. Under my rage and my disgust, there's an urge to put this horror right. No one deserves this slow dissolution of muscle and self. I've seen his affliction. I know where it's going. I know how it ends.

"Hey. You."

"What?" The foreman's a lump of coal at his desk. Already, he's whipping out a bottle of cheap hooch. No glass. Just a half-emptied reservoir of liquid numbness.

"You really think McKinsey's a good guy?"

"Yeah."

"Even knowing what you do about the moron?"

"Listen, buddy." A cork is popped and the room floods with a cleaning-fluid aroma. He takes a loud swig. "Every man's got a little bad in him. If we spend all our time judging people for one wrong, we wouldn't have enough left over to get on with it. Besides, there are worse people out there."

"I see."

It's all I need to hear. I set my last cigarette between my teeth, light it up, and turn the corner. The foreman and his new pal, they deserve each other, could eat each other up for all I care. When the smoke settles, I'll come back and set fire to whatever's still writhing on the floor.

\* \* \*

I find my way into the old Caribbean joint. It's smaller than I remember. Half of it's been transformed into a bare-bones grocery, all essentials, no luxuries. What remains is fragrant with allspice and roast chicken, a heady chiaroscuro of flavors and memories, enough to make a dead man's mouth water.



“What can I get you?”

I look up through wet hair, still dusting my coat off, rain sluicing off my fingers. The server’s a pretty brown girl with a halo of dreadlocks and a Star Wars varsity jacket over her uniform, her smile precociously savvy. She—Sasha, declares the nameplate pinned to her breast—slants a look at me over a battered copy of *Dune*.

“Jerk chicken, steamed vegetables, rice and peas?”

“Sure.”

She struts into the kitchen, confident, cocky, humming a tune I almost recognize, leaving me alone in the empty restaurant. I slide into a booth and breathe out, the memory of the foreman’s debasement sitting heavy on my gut. I probably should have done something, should have slit his throat, quarantined the factory. Something. Anything.

“You want some soup while you wait, monsieur?”

“Sorry. What?”

I jolt. Somehow, the girl had managed to sneak up on me while I was contemplating my navel. Sasha wipes long pianist fingers on her apron as I gather myself, a smile hanging off one corner of her mouth. The body reacts to her proximity, not unpleasantly. An almost imperceptible quickening of the pulse, an increase in temperature. Who knew pretty dames could still give the old man a rise? “I asked if you wanted some soup.”

“No. Thank you. I—”

“It’s free.”

That brings me up short. “Pardon?”

“It’s free,” she repeats, a laugh gilding the rich, smooth contralto of her voice. “On the house. No extra charge. We had some left over from last night, and you look cold.”

“I—”

“Don’t worry.” Something jagged touches her eyes, but it stays for only a fraction of a breath before she smooths it under a practiced smile. “I’m not hitting on you. Don’t even swing that way.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Mm-hmm.” Her self-assurance untangles a laugh from my chest. It turns into a cough partway through, but it doesn’t matter. Sasha answers in kind, expression bright, like she knew from the start where it’d all end. “So, soup? Yes? No?”

“Yes.”

She nods, firm, a bull passing judgment. Having acquired consent, the girl leaves again. She’s not gone long. When she returns, her arms are laden with food. I try to stand up, try to take the tray from her, but she tuts me back into my seat.

The spread is divine, voluminous, a king’s ransom in meat and crisp, crackling skin, in sauce and spice and spring greens. The soup is the lightest offering, delicately sweetened, a composition of pumpkin and onions, roast marrow left to steep. As I devour my meal, the girl folds into a seat.

“You look like a man who hasn’t eaten in years.”

I flick a glance up, suckling my fingers clean. “You could say that.”

The answering smile is distracted, distant. I watch as she scrutinizes the bare wall opposite our table, one arm slouched over the back of her chair, the other flat on the table, fingers drumming an irregular beat. Then, without warning, her attention swings back and her smile broadens into mischief.

“What are you doing in Croydon, mister? You don’t sound like you’re from around here.”

“I’m here about a case.”

“A case? That’s exciting.” Her eyes gleam, feline, impish. “What kind of case?”

“The details, as they say in the business, are confidential. But I could use any help I can get. I need the dirt on a guy.” It’s barely been five minutes, but I’ve bulldozed through half the food already. Her question barely invites a pause. “A man named McKinsey. He lives about a block, two blocks from here. You might have seen him.”

“Don’t know the name. But I might know the face?”

I shake my head. “Haven’t had the pleasure of meeting the guy, so I can’t tell you what his mug looks like.”

“How do you not have a picture of him?”

“Long story, sister.” I put my cutlery down and steeple my fingers. “Anyway. McKinsey’s a family man, if that helps. Got a skirt that’s about five feet, real skinny. Blond. Blue eyes. At least one boy. About ten, maybe? Mediterranean-looking.”

Her expression alters. She recognizes the description. There’s no mistaking it. Not in the flash in her big, brown eyes, or the way the muscles

in her neck gather and tense, her jaw closing with an audible clack. When she finally speaks, it's with intense suspicion. "Yeah. I know him."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Nothing. He's bad business. That's all you need to know."

"Does he come in here regularly? Does he have friends? A favorite order—"

"I *don't* want to talk about him."

She breathes out, and I catch it then: the ghost of *its* scent, winnowed down into something fleeting, barely there, but still unmistakable, camphor and burnt pine wood, leavened with dried gore.

I make a leap. "Did he hurt you?"

And land on the money. Sasha's eyes grow round, glacial. "I think we're done talking, monsieur."

"He did, didn't he?"

"I don't—"

I snake a hand out and trap her wrist.

*—a simian jaw, cheeks too wide and face too ugly, a lizard stare, heavy, hanging with sins. He won't let her go, holds her elbow with a dog's death grip on its favorite bone.*

"What are you doing?" Her blood thumps against my skin, hummingbird shivers.

*She pushes him. He slaps her. Her head ricochets backward. Impact. A crack of pain blurs her vision to red. She looks up as he wrenches her forward. Up into eyes—there are so many of them, like constellations, like unclean galaxies—and more eyes, a nightmare of sclera and blue.*

"Get out of *my* head." The images break against Sasha's voice, the sound filled with an indisputable authority. Her memories contract to a pinpoint smear of light. I'm flung out even as she pitches back in her seat, half-rearing, a snake enraged, chair screeching. Sasha's eyes flare wide.

"Who the *fuck* do you think you are?"

"Someone who wants to help."

"I didn't ask for your help."

"You want him to do that again? To someone else?"

Sasha shudders like a frog someone had rigged up to electrodes, limbs spasming without direction. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

“Don’t fucking presume anything about me. You—” She swings her head, left, right, left, an animal prepared to charge. “God. You think you’re better than him? Than *them*? Just because you’re trying to help?”

“I’m not just trying to help. I told you. I’m on a—”

“Case.” She finishes for me. In her anger, her *t*’s disintegrate, her sentences accelerate, frenzied, halfway to local creole. “And that makes it better? Because you’re doing it for money?”

“I—”

“You want something, bruv? You ask. You ask me like I’m a person. When I say no, you fuck off. What you do to someone’s head and what you do to their meat, it isn’t much different, you hear? *You don’t take what you’re not given*. Get me?”

“Yes.”

Her rebuke knocks the wind from me. I remember when somebody else said that to me. *You don’t take what you’re not given*. I had laughed, then. But I’d asked. And he laid open every room of his mind, every chamber of his being, and it was better, better than anything else I’d experienced and any body I’d ever inhabited.

I scan Sasha’s features, distorted by rage. Briefly, I flirt with the idea of an explanation, of telling her that this transference of thought, this neural osmosis, is as intrinsic to my being as breathing is to hers, that it wasn’t an attack, just circumstance, that I’m better than this accidental violation, and this form is proof.

But it would have sounded like an excuse, because that’s exactly what it was. She was right. I shouldn’t have done that. So, I hold my tongue instead, watch her as she sits with the bridge of her nose crushed between fingertips.

After a long while, she breathes out sharp and slumps, arms tucked under her breasts.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” she says at last, slow, guarded.

“Them?”

“Those.” Sasha repeats, picking through the words like a minefield.

“Immortals. Dead Ones. Star-spawn. Elder Things. Great Old Ones.”

The last name dries my mouth. “I’m not an Old One. Not even close.”

Sasha holds my stare before she drops her chin in a surly nod. “Okay.”

“But you’re not completely wrong.”

Our eyes clinch. I can practically hear the question, lying subcutaneous beneath the silence, held in check by propriety. The scholastic longing in her gaze almost tempts me into exposition, penance for my misdemeanor. But I don't. Some stories, you keep in the deep.

"How . . . how did you know I was *different*?"

A shoulder ripples upward. "How do you know the sky's blue? It's like that. Like the knowledge that comes with breathing, with knowing when you're hungry, when you're cold. Exactly like that."

The words slip from her, one after another, and when they're gone, Sasha simply stops. A beat. And she breathes: "You really want to know about the guy?"

"If you're willing."

Her mouth crooks a rueful smile. "He isn't that special. Lots of people like him these days."

"What?"

Sasha drags a nervous eye over the restaurant before she speaks again, a finger scratching at her collarbone. "Been like that since the riots a few years ago. When I was little, I'd see them once every few years or so, tall and too thin. Always smelling like saltwater. Like my Nan. But since the riots? They've been everywhere, brother."

"De—" I catch myself. "The ones like your Nan?"

"Sometimes," she replies, too lost in memory to pounce on my slip. "Usually, they're a bunch of chavs. Loud, crazy-like. Their skin"—Sasha half-clenches a fist in the air, fingers twitching, features contorted, as though she were considering the elasticity of something repulsive—"always look *diseased*. Psoriasis, I want to say? One of those. I don't know. But yeah. Real ugly, you know?"

"Like McKinsey."

She makes a face. "Like McKinsey."

I push to my feet, palming the back of my neck, Sasha's memories a mouthful of bile, souring my tongue. "I—about earlier. I'm sorry."

"I want to say I forgive you. But I can't. When you were in my head, I was in yours. I know about the man you're wearing. I know what you are." She shutters an eye, her smile tense. "Sorry. I know you don't mean harm, so there's that."

The bell above the door chimes silver as the street disgorges a Chinese family—a mom in a pinstripe suit, a patriarch in tweed, two and a half kids, all solemn as a funeral—into the restaurant. Sasha turns, hand smoothing through her hair, a professional smile, nuclear in its brilliance, already reattached to her face. “Be with you in a second!”

She looks back at me. “You want to make it up to me? You don’t stop where the money ends. You find out where they’re all coming from and you take them out. You hear?”

Under the weight of her ferocity, I can only nod.

### 3: RAW DEAL

*We have to.*

“Why?” I demanded, when his cries were too loud to ignore.

*Because we are the only ones that can.*

\* \* \*

You know how they say you never forget how to ride a bike? Magic’s like that. Deeper, even. The knowledge of it inks itself on the inside of your bones, as does the practice, the methodology of execution. You can’t unlearn it any more than you can unlearn the symbiosis of ventricle and aorta.

I stroke the razor across my arm. Three deep welts: one for every god devoured, every world forgotten. Blood wells, bruise-green, runnelling off my skin and onto the city map, branching into a thousand smaller tributaries, a million cilia to puncture the strands of hair I’d pinched from Sasha and the foreman.

I breathe.

In my head, a ghost squirms and shivers.

A hissing noise froths and builds, builds and froths. The follicles thrash like something alive, even as the blood continues to creep, mapping itself to the blueprint of the city, hue altering, shading to orange.

“Oh, kid. What did you get yourself into?”

There were entire streets outlined in ochre, neighborhoods throbbing lymph-yellow. I fumble for the cigar in my drawer and ignite the bulbous tip with a flick of my fingers. As a rule, I don’t like spending power, but the body, the body wouldn’t let me rest until I did something. *Anything*, rattled the man that once lived in this skull, rags and bones and memory, but somehow still stubborn as capitalism.

So, I did my voodoo and he kept his part of the bargain, settling to uneasy dreams once more, even as the flesh frayed and stuttered. That's the other problem with power. It likes things its own way, and very often, that doesn't include maintaining the cohesion of genetic structure.

The flame shimmers blue and oily, oozing over my knuckles, before I dismiss it with another snap. The map's not done transforming yet. I breathe out smoke rings as it continues to change, darkening to pus, to abattoir colors teeming with rot and warning. I was wrong. There isn't just one kid to save. There's an entire city waiting to be pulled out of the fire.

I drum my fingers against the desk. I hate being wrong.

The blood begins to congeal, hardening into reams of rusty cornelian. A good man would have started planning for a counterassault, a one-person crusade against the encroaching dark. That man wouldn't be me. I do what I'm paid to do, and no one's cut me a check to save the Big Smoke.

Or the girl from the restaurant.

*Please.*

Another breath of too-expensive tobacco. I can feel her presence, saltwater and old libraries, glowing like a miniature sun. Her existence is a protest, a rebellion, a clarion demand to bend the world into a better place. People like her either ride the space elevator to the constellations or get cut down in dark alleyways.

As it stood, the second seemed more likely.

"Not my job," I tell the dark office, piled high with the accouterments of my profession, ashtrays and brown folders stacked to the ceiling.

*Please,* sighs my specter again.

Damn thing is never happy. I get as far as finishing the cigar before I'm calling on the old ways again, the power coming eager and exultant, a pup on its first hunt. And this time, it *sings*, pure as silver, as it travels my veins. Like it already knows there won't be a focus, won't be a totem, no physical thing to constrain its joyous kinesis.

"I'll decide once I know what we're facing," I tell the emptiness. The ghost shudders in acknowledgment.

The world skews, splits into fractals of possibility, an endless concerto of maybes and may-have-beens, every possible variation of the future laid out like a feast. I find the thread I'm looking for, and my vision detonates.



\* \* \*

“You.”

“Me.”

“What are you *doing* here?” Sasha glares at me from behind a metal door grill, her uniform swapped for an oversized T-shirt and pyjama pants that lap at the floor. Behind her, I can see a pair of kids walking plush animals across a green carpet and a television playing *Peppa Pig*.

“We need to talk.”

She slides a step back. “No.”

“This won’t take a minute.”

“I told you. I don’t—”

“It’s—” I slide my hand between the bars, pivot it palm up. “Please.”

“What do you want?”

“To help.”

Silence. She jerks her chin upward, a command to resume. Her hair has been gathered into a knot above her head, exposing the long stem of her throat. Similar to the foreman’s, it’s ridged with lesions, puckered like mouths.

“I know he—” I hesitate. Up till now, delicacy hasn’t really been a part of my job description. I feel like a bull in an antique store. “He left more than a psychological mark. He—”

Sasha thins her mouth into a gash and crosses her arms over her chest. Somewhere, a door slams open, disgorging hip-hop and drunken shouting, a pack of teenagers with long, lean faces and hungry looks. I glance sidelong and watch until they’re swallowed by the elevator.

“Look, sister. I’m not good with words. That’s not my forte, you know what I’m saying? My point . . . my point is he did something to you, and I can help fix some of that. You just need to trust me.”

Her lips ruck into a frown. “I—”

“Please.”

I don’t know if it’s my voice, or the way I stare at her with my heart held up bleeding, or even if it’s just a lapse in her anger. But she relents and takes my hand.

Like I'd said to her, I'm not one for a fine touch. I'm a man. I barrel through life, guns blazing, asking questions rarely. For her, though, I'll dig through my guts for the right approach. I close my grip over hers and reach *in*.

Sasha sighs, the tiniest exhalation of relief.

The thing inside her isn't as settled as the life festering in the foreman, a viscous intruder loosely conjoined with her lungs, her liver. Whatever the case, whether accident of heritage or stupid luck, it isn't hard to excise. Using nerves will-sharpened into scalpels, I flense it from membrane and organ, carefully pare it from nucleotide and sinusoid, cell by cell, atom by atom. Through it all, Sasha stands and shivers like a leaf in the gale.

When I'm done, we break contact, her infection migrated to a squirming in my throat.

"What *was* that?"

I withdraw my mitt and try not to cough out the phlegm of my labor, cramming both hands into my pockets. "What I promised to do."

Sasha parts her mouth and then closes it again, a nod replacing whatever question she had aborted. "Thank you."

"It's the least I could do." I nod, my voice watery from my efforts. "Nothing wrong with having a heart. No need to pretend machismo." She laughs, more freely than I've heard, fingers pressed to the space between her clavicles.

I wait, half expecting her to ask for more, to erase the memories of her encounter with McKinsey. To my slight surprise, she doesn't, only turns to fix a warm eye on the children in the apartment. When she speaks again, it's with a fresh, unvarnished joy.

"Thank you."

I nod again, gruff-like. Dames don't generally give me this kind of treatment. Terror or predatory interest, those are the usual suspects. But this happiness? New.

I could get used to it.

"You're welcome."

In the movies, this would be where the hero and the dame chew face. Sasha is no happy lady, and I don't remember the last time this body had dreamed of bare skin. So, before she can speak again, I walk away, a new poison in my system, the sounds of the council estate bouncing around me.

I light the cigarette.  
“Hope you like smoke, chump.”

\* \* \*

It screams when I spit it into the sink. In the harsh fluorescent glare, it resembles a living bezoar, hair and tissue material and gobbets of dusky phlegm. There are no limbs, no discernible features. Yet somehow it continues to wail and howl, the sound muffled by succulent layers of stolen fat and skin.

I nudge it with the end of a toothbrush. It twists in place, pseudopodia forming to attach to the plastic, but the weight of its body prevents it from actual motion.

“Ugly thing, ain’t ya? Just like your dad.”

I contemplate the squirming mass for a minute before I start mashing it into the drain, one flailing tumor at a time. Its agonized ululations sound strangely like a new beginning, like the birth of heroism.

## : INTERLUDE

I don't do it, of course. The skirt's problems are her own. I have too many of my own dilemmas, and a bounty on a stepdad to reap. Nice as it is, good karma don't pay the bills.

## 4: I WOULDN'T BE IN YOUR SHOES

“Hey, short round.”

The kid barrels from the gate and out of a cloud of similarly dressed peers. The schoolyard is a riot of parents and cars, school buses and teachers, a scattering of older siblings, and a few vagrants like me. One dame shoots me a frigid look as I exhale plumes of smoke, drifting serene over the heads of the children. I ignore her.

“My stepdad isn’t dead yet,” the kid snarls. His school uniform is rumpled, mud-limned; the tie sits undone like a hangman’s noose snipped off mid-use. “Why isn’t he dead yet?”

“Calm down. I’m working on it.”

“No!” The kid stomps his foot and then practically flies from the pavement, like he burnt his sole against the asphalt.

The temper tantrum seems to have surprised the kid. He scowls at the ground for a minute before he turns his eyes up at me, David in the shadow of his Goliath. There is no fear. The kid crosses his arms over his xylophone chest, squares his stance like a tired boxer. The fact I’ve got about three and a half feet on him doesn’t seem to worry him at all.

“Every minute—” He sucks in a breath, cheeks denting. “Every minute you waste, it’s going to cost me. You’re going to get my brother hurt. You \_\_\_”

And here, his bravado snaps. Tears prick at his eyes, a treacherous wetness that he wipes aside with the back of his hand.

“He’s going to hurt James and *it’s all your fault.*”

The words fly like kicks, hard and loose, ugly swings with no artistry at all, just raw emotion. I keep standing here, head cocked. One of the most effective tricks in a gumshoe’s playbook is the act of silence. Wait. Let the other guy pull the trigger first. It costs you nothing, and it gets you everything.

“You finished?” I ask, after the kid subsides into a panting quiet.

He glares.

I stoop to my knees, suck down one last breath of carcinogenic fumes, and flick my cigarette stub into the bushes. Smoke fizzes out of my nostrils and through my teeth as I clamp my paws on his shoulders. He stiffens, twitches. I can feel him strain against the impulse to run.

“First things first. I don’t like being insulted, kid. When I take a job, I see it through to the end. But I do it my way, you get me? Second, I’d advise you remember that you never paid for a deadline, just a death. Big thing in business. Always set your deadlines. So, you’ve got no sway here.”

The crowd eels around us, parents and children, teachers and older sisters, whispering vague concern but little else. The world’s too full of trouble to adopt those that don’t belong to you.

“Putting all that aside, I’m going to square with you. This is bigger than you think it is. I need a bit more time—”

“We don’t *have* time,” he whispers raggedly.

“What do you mean, kid?”

“He—” He breathes in his courage, a long and shuddering gulp. “He’s going to hurt James bad.”

“Who’s James?”

“My little brother.” The kid curls his voice around the proclamation like he’s trying to hold it safe, trying to shelter it from whatever nightmare gave him those old-man eyes.

“Okay. I—”

“I’ve got money.” He springs into motion, scrabbling at his pockets. The kid pulls out a few grubby notes, some gum, a half-melted truffle, a single pound coin that gleams bright like a mother’s hope. Without hesitating, he crams the offerings into my face. “You can have all of it.”

“Kid.” I nudge his hand away. “It’s not enough.”

“Please.”

“That’s not what I meant. I—” I pause. *I what*, exactly? I didn’t know yet. That might-have-been with Sasha nagged at me like a splinter.

“*Please.*”

“Fine. Wouldn’t be right to have a client die on my watch.”

The kid doesn’t flinch from the implication, brightens even, a fact that makes me glad I’d said what I said. I’m beginning to get an idea about what’s going on, and the knowledge doesn’t make me happy. I roll to my

feet, easy-like, and extend a hand to the kid. He stares at it for a long second, like he's reading my fortune, before he takes hold.

"Come on, let's get you home."

His grip spasms tighter. "No, we're going to get my brother."

\* \* \*

The kid keeps yapping as we stroll through South Norwood, an inventory of classroom drama, personal projects, and batteries. Everything but the man he wants dead. I have slightly better luck getting him to talk about his brother (four years old, likes plush sharks and pepperoni, gets too much attention) and his biological dad (works too much, sees him too little). His mom and stepdad? Nada.

We pick up his brother about two miles from his school, a sweet-faced boy with dirty-blond hair and a thing for hugs. He doesn't hesitate when I stretch out my arms to collect him, crashing into me like a Russian gangster's scarred-over fist. The boy, James, shrieks his joy when I scoop him into the air.

"So, what's yours?"

The kid looks up, expectant, his hand still caged in mine.

"Your name?" I prompt.

"Abel."

"Abel," I repeat, weighing the word on my tongue. "Abel. Good to meet you, Abel."

He replies with a curt nod.

We keep walking, him, his brother, and me, a dysfunctional crew if you ever saw one. Slowly, the road begins to lose its suburban charm, the park giving way to squalor and shops, all hunkered together like they're afraid of the morning frost. The pavement cracks, grows pockmarked with wadded food wrappers and empty beer bottles. Bars spring up along the windows like a crop of rusty ribs. A hard neighborhood. Not the worst I'd seen, but definitely no tourist town.

"Right here." Abel points down a turning.

I oblige, James still wedged against my chest, his head drooping. And—

*saltwater and silt and dead, drowned things, the too-sweet stink of meat rotting in clean muscle, old blood, cold dirt—*

“Abel?” A new voice.

I blink.

My vision adjusts. There’s a man in front of us, stocky, belligerent, face too wide, brow too simian. He hits me with an appraising stare.

“So you’re the stepdad.”

I feel the kid’s hand tighten around my palm.

*salt, slithering decay, the contractions of a leviathan’s ventricles, like the chanting of monks in the deep.*

“Who you?”

“A friend.”

“Friend’s not good enough, mate.” He rakes his gaze over my tall frame, his mouth pursing. “I need more information than that.”

I don’t quite manage to conceal the grin, or the surge of irritation. Ignoring everything else, McKinsey’s as abrasive as I’d imagined he would be. Even if he were perfectly human, I’d still have disliked him.

“A *friend*”—I punctuate the word with a growl—“who has spoken to your fiancée about certain important things. A friend who is concerned about the way you’re raising these children and—”

“You from the authorities then?” He pronounces the word as “au’hori’es,” with a sharp emphasis on the bit concerning those hardworking damsels of the evening.

“In a fashion.”

He looks me over again with those porcine eyes, no doubt tabulating his chances in a fight. “Look more like a pervert to me.”

“Funny you’d be the one to say that.”

He goes on the offensive immediately, flexes his shoulders wide, takes a step forward, chin tipped up in challenge. The smell is overwhelming. It crawls through my nose, my pores, my mouth, putrid and wet, like fish forgotten in the sun.

“What’d you say, muppet?”

“What do you think I said?”

Against my chest, James stirs, fingers digging into my coat. He doesn’t turn around. I cock a grin at the ass, and try not to think *of blood nearly*



*congealed, spilling droplet by droplet onto the limestone floor, singing counterpoint to a hymn I used to know like the beating of my pulse.*

The man changes tack. “Just what do you think you’re doing to my boys?”

“Taking them home.”

“Your home?” Under his jawline, eyelids palpitate like gills.

*Gela Vt’ yah fhma’a*

“I’ve got to hand it to you, bub.” I slide James back down to the ground and push the kids behind me. They cluster behind my legs, one for each limb. I straighten, and the man leans back. “I don’t know many guys who’d immediately project themselves on strangers.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” That lizard stare again, dumb and animal and vicious.

I bare my teeth. Under skin and sinew, something rouses itself, unknotting joint by joint by joint. *Shlock. Shlock. Shlock.* Under the surface, bones reknit and sharpen, become bladed with purpose. I shift my stance, trying to make room for new edges being nursed under the epidermis.

“What do *you* think I mean?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he drops to a crouch and reaches out big, work-coarsened hands.

“Abel, James. Come here.”

“No,” Abel growls.

“*Abel.*”

“I don’t want to go with you!”

“Come on, Abel. You don’t want to make your mummy worried, now, do you?”

“Mummy” proves to be the magic word. Both kids seize up, Abel practically digging his nails through my trousers. James emerges first, face ruddy with guilt. He stands limp as he lets the man gather him up like a lump of washing. Abel holds out for a few seconds longer, but he gives in at the end, making a strangled noise before he stomps forward, hands bunched into fists. I don’t stop them. There’s no bull in the world that’d stand with this pound-shop gumshoe if I got in between parent and kids. Not right now, at least. Not without evidence.

The man grins, victorious, smug as a cat with a mouthful of canary. Without a word, he turns to leave, a paw rested on Abel’s mess of curls. The

kid shoots me a fierce, wordless glare before he slouches down the walkway, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the cold and the susurrus of flesh reassembling, a hiss like the crash of the surf.

\* \* \*

The hardest part about being a P.I. is the stakeouts. Hours of motionless scrutiny broken up by mouthfuls of bilgewater coffee and stale fried dough, a stillness that eats at the mind until it gibbers for stimuli or sleep, whichever comes first.

Luckily for me, I don't really need either.

I tap my cigarette against the outside of the car, raining ash on the road. Something about the encounter with the stepdad felt *off*. To be fair, the whole case was a nightmare, but there was something about that meeting in particular, something about the interaction that kept *itching* at the back of my skull. I'd spent the entire night mapping it out, trying to exhume the logic in my own unease, but I couldn't work it out.

I'd briefly considered the possibility that the kid was setting me up. But those eyes wouldn't lie. He *hated* his stepfather, hated him like Hitler hated the face in the mirror. That much was clear. He wouldn't be working with the mook. There was no way.

So, what then?

I chew on the inside of my cheek. I can't abide mysteries. Give me something to punch any day of the week, something *clean*. An alcoholic lout who can't keep his mitts to himself, a cheating wife. Simple, human troubles, you know what I'm saying? I'd take those any time, any hour. This shit, though?

I flick my eyes to the glove compartment. Not for the first time, I consider giving the kid a refund. I'd gotten into the detective business to escape the deepwater blues, from the songs that squirm in your veins like worms. Sure, I'd go for an easy job, sometimes, ice a monster that had gotten too big for his bed. But this?

I take another drag from my cigarette. A few hours after lunchtime, the bird emerges, a tote on each elbow, blond hair squeezed into a scraggly bun. She doesn't wear any makeup, which should be a surprise, given the bruises

flowering along her jaw. But I'm not surprised. Her face is haggard, worn through. This isn't the first time he's laid into her like this.

I slip out of the car as she minces down the pavement, kitten heels clicking on the stone, and keep my distance until she makes the left toward their neighborhood Tesco. Then, I close in, quiet.

"Hey, toots."

She gives a startled, strangled scream. Jumps back about a foot, nearly colliding with a lamppost. "Are you following me?"

"No, I just happened to be in the area for some bubble and squeak."

"What—"

"We need to talk."

She retreats another step, eyes going round. I can see she's thinking about calling for help, terror melting on her tongue like ice. But we both know that no one's going to stop. Not for her.

"No." Her voice shakes.

"You keep saying no like you have a choice here. You don't." I glide forward, palms out, trying to look harmless while still making a point.

It doesn't work. The broad shudders and shrinks away, a little further, shrinking into herself. An old man hustles past us, but as expected, he doesn't step in. And why should he? Domestic altercations are a dime a dozen. The doll notices too, and I watch her throat work as she swallows, the skin gray and rough.

"I don't want to talk to you."

"Too bad." I glance down at my wrist, tap my watch. "We're going to talk. And since it's just about time for tea, we'll do it over something to eat."

\* \* \*

The café the bird picks isn't so much a place for light bites as it is a diner, complete with plastic furniture and a bored-looking waitress in a frilly apron. The miasma of burnt bacon clings tightly to the air.

"Wot can I get you?" she demands, in between chomping on an unlit cigarette.

"Full English for me and some filter coffee," I say.

Her attention flicks to the bird, who shakes her head and keeps her eyes low, hidden under her bangs. The waitress angles me a cold look before she shrugs and struts off.

“There’s one thing that I don’t understand,” I begin, once we’re alone again. “Why do you want to protect that man?”

“Who says that I do?”

“Your actions say you do, princess. Unless you’ve got a fetish for being knocked around, none of this makes sense to me.”

She doesn’t reply.

“I’ve talked to his boss and your sons. I—”

“I know.” Her hands spasm into white-knuckled fists.

“Yeah.” My eyes sweep over her jawline, already swollen into softness. “I can see that.”

The waitress returns, deposits my order on the table along with an unordered stack of pancakes, drizzled with caramel and banana slices, right in front of Abel’s mom. When I begin to protest, she twitches a lean shoulder, walks away without another word. Small kindnesses, I suppose. The bird doesn’t move.

“You’re going to get my boys hurt.”

“Staying with him is going to get them hurt.”

“You don’t understand.”

I sigh and cut into a stretch of sausage. The crisp skin bursts beneath my fork, grease oozing. “So, explain it to me again. Make me understand. Because I’m about two hash browns away from taking this out of your hands, you know what I’m saying?”

Her head jumps up. “No.”

The little mouse’s got some claws. Good.

“I know—I know what you’re thinking,” she begins, licking her mouth as she pulls the plate of pancakes into reach. The cutlery clatters in her grip. “I know. Trust me. I know. But it’s not that easy. I’ve been—I’ve been saving money, on the side. And it’s—”

The bird drinks a long, long gulp of air.

“It’s not easy. He gets in my head. Every time I get the nerve to tell him I’m leaving him, he—he talks me down. Makes me sit. He tells me that this is the best it’s ever going to get. And it’s true. I know it’s true. I don’t have a job. I don’t have a degree. This house, this life—where would I take the

kids? Every time I try to walk away, he tells me this. Over and over. He—he—” Utensils stammer from nerveless hands. I can hear a sob rustling in her voice, trying to slough off her calm, trying to rip it up.

Now, the diner’s listening too. A pool of quiet spreads from our table. I keep my attention on the bird. To her credit, she’s still hanging on to her composure, clutching it with a hanged man’s obstinance.

“I can’t leave. I want to, but I can’t leave. I have to think about the boys, you understand? I have to. I—”

I spoon baked beans onto a slice of buttered toast and let out a gusty sigh. “Parents?”

“No. Impossible.”

I take a bite of the bread. “Social services.”

“No, no, no.” Her voice dies to a whisper. The words rattle like dice in a cup, an echo, a half-memory. *No, no, no.* “They wouldn’t ever let me see my babies again. No, no. No, please—”

“Easy. I’m not taking them anywhere, lady.” I extend a hand across the table. She surprises me by latching on to my fingers and squeezing harder than you’d expect from a dame of her size.

The contact sends a shotgun-jolt of images, too brief to process, but also the sensation of *brittleness*, of papier-mâché and porcelain. Like eggshells. Whatever McKinsey had done to her, it was different from what he’d done to the other two. The infection in the foreman, in Sasha—that was organic, tumescent and alive. This tastes like anticipation, smooth and unyielding and richly salted.

I unknot my fingers from hers, slowly. “But staying isn’t going to help them either.”

“I know, I know.”

I smell him before I see him, before the chime of a bell announces his entrance. The *sickness* in him. In the confines of the diner, it seems bolder, thicker, *hungrier*. I look up just as his silhouette falls across our table.

“What are you doing with my wife?”

“Phillip—” The bird lets out a squeak, recoiling.

“McKinsey.” I turn and loop an arm around the back of my bench, mouth cocked into a smirk. “Was wondering when you’d show up.”

“You macking on my wife?” he says again, slamming fists on the table. The plates leap. A pancake flops backward off its perch, smearing the wood

below with syrup and fruit.

I cut myself some bacon. Bite. Chew. Chew. Swallow. Try to ignore the sweet tang of infected meat in the air. *Wife*, he said. Even though no legal department in the country would collaborate. Such a small thing, but it gets on my nerves, this unlawful ownership. Everything about the asshole gets on my nerves. The least that I can do in return is inconvenience him. “No offense, McKinsey, but I’m trying to eat here. The thought of being a worm so low he’d fuck someone else’s wife is going to make me hurl.”

He bristles instantaneously. “You saying my wife ain’t hot enough for you?”

To my surprise, his attention snaps to the bird, eyes full of a strange, fierce hate. Before anyone can react, he backhands her. The blow catches her unexpectedly. It sends her into the divider between booths, head bouncing off, a whimper puffing between her teeth. As she twitches upright, McKinsey raises his hand again.

This time I catch him.

“McKinsey, McKinsey, McKinsey.” I rise, teeth bared, as he launches into a soliloquy of curses. He pulls at my grip, but I don’t let him go, only increase the pressure. “We need to do something about your command of the language, *chump*. And that temper. How do you expect self-respecting gumshoes like me to tremble in your presence if all you do is repeat yourself and beat up women?”

I won’t lie. Testosterone can be a social lubricant, albeit the kind that leads two grown monsters to bump pectorals. I widen my snarl and broaden the set of my shoulders. McKinsey’s scent plucks at the tendons of my patience, already stretched taut. This close, all I want to do is

*rip tear bite cut*

*expose the artery, flay the vein*

*eat chew eat tear*

*devour muscle, gobble up viscera,*

*consume until there is nothing left, until meat subsumes the weight of millennia, the bone-beat longing for vengeance, the memory of—*

My nails dig into his skin, and then I breathe out. I’ve spent so long holding on to this form, so many years stubbornly *human*. If I lose control, it won’t be for this fat palooka. “If you want to take our problems outside, I’m more than happy to.”

McKinsey grins in return, giving another experimental tug, his skin writhing, like he has worms sandwiched between epidermis and subcutaneous fat. I don't let go. "Tough guy, are you? Sorry. But I don't deal with chavs."

"I'm a chav now, am I?"

"Guys—" The waitress's voice cuts into hearing.

"On a good day." McKinsey cocks his head, ignoring the skirt as she saunters up. "Right now, I think you look more like a wog."

"Guys. Seriously. Break it up. This ain't your mama's house, you know?"

The waitress, fearless, shoves herself between us. I feel a hand flatten against my sternum and push.

"Ah. Racial pejoratives. The last bastion of the desperate man." I concede the space and release McKinsey's wrist, let the waitress nudge me a step back, the urge to *damage, to injure, to eviscerate* still drumming the blues in my bones, syncopated to the thin shriek of rage from my host.

"I'm taking my *wife* home, and if I ever see you within ten feet of me, I'm gonna call the cops." He loops his fingers around her upper arm and drags her upright, the bird limply acquiescing.

"This really what you want?" I look to her, a wilting lily under her man's silhouette, even as the waitress folds her arms. A busboy has run up to exchange whispers with her, low and urgent, their eyes full of danger.

The bird doesn't reply. She strokes a lock of hair from her face as McKinsey hauls her into a stuttering march.

Almost unnoticed, the busboy glides away.

"A guy like this? This the kind of role model you want for your boys? What would their real father say?"

She flinches, but keeps her silence under an expressionless mask. McKinsey glowers at us both, daring her to speak, daring me to goad her forward. In the end, just as the busboy returns with a frown and the gravity of borrowed authority, she whispers:

"Nothing."

"Sir, we've spoken to the police. If you and your friends won't leave—"

"We're going," says McKinsey. "Remember, if I ever see your face again, there'll be hell to pay."

"I thought you said there'd just be cops."

The mook works his mouth like he's chewing gum, cheeks inflating, deflating. At last, he spits out, "Yeah."

I laugh in his face. "I'll be holding you to it."



## 5: BORN TO KILL

The street is getting dark, the pavement tiger-striped by halogen. It wears the fog like a dame's best scarf, slightly jaunty, with an edge of challenge. For hours not a soul, not a rat moved, but now shapes are emerging into the chill. A housewife and her brood. A drunk in a cheap overcoat, sleeves caked in yesterday's lunch. Gangbangers in oversized hoodies, cheeks addiction-gaunt, eyes feverish.

I wait, burn my way through the rest of my cigarettes, and open a fresh pack.

Halfway to seven, a bus unloads the kid onto the pavement. He skips the last step, pivots, extends a hand to his brother. Under the streetlight, his eye socket blooms indigo. I scowl.

From what I can tell, the bruise hasn't done much to dampen the kid's enthusiasm. He's laughing as he pulls at his brother, half-jogging, half-scampering between the other kids. Together, they navigate the sidewalk, Abel always careful to march them around every crack and every obstacle in their route.

They strut to their house, knock on the door, and it opens to their stepdad's silhouette and the wire-sliver of their mama's figure. Instantly, their postures deflate. The kid keeps between the man and his brother, chest puffed as the lug dips down to his knees. They exchange words like prizefighters, the kid's breath thinning with every round, until his chest shakes like a man having a seizure. When the man finally touches his head, Abel flinches but he doesn't back down, only snakes around the adults, dragging his brother along as he goes, always keeping his body wedged in between, always glaring.

That kid's got a lot of moxie.

I sip smoke and dig into an oil-soaked bag for my last festival. A street away, the man straightens, turns to spit something hard at the broad. She mouths an answer and he slaps her, a blow that smashes her head against the doorway, before he clomps back into the house. The chippie doesn't

follow. Not immediately. She lingers at the entryway, sinking to her knees, hands clenched around bony elbows, sad eyes searching the dark. Maybe for me, maybe for answers, maybe for nothing.

Whatever she's looking for, she doesn't find it. After a minute, she gets up and goes inside, locks herself in with her monsters.

\* \* \*

I catch glimpses of the family through a birdshit-encrusted window, the skirt vacuuming, the kids darting through with toys in their hands, a vision of milquetoast normal. The stepdad's the first to take roost in the living room, slouching into a leather recliner, beer can held like a scepter. He pops open the lid, chugs.

I salute him with a sip of my spit-warm coffee.

Asshole.

It takes about an hour, but eventually they come back to the living room, huddling around an old-fashioned CRT as *Downton Abbey* crackles to life.

The bird tries to fence the boys off with her body. She sits tits-out, back curved, a mouse playing at coquetry. The first time the man gestures at the boys, she moves to sit on his lap, one arm looping over his shoulders. He allows it for a while, hooking a grip around her waist, then squeezing her belly like it's something more risqué.

But his attention doesn't linger. They talk. The chippie evacuates, and he rises to pick up Abel and put him on his lap. He uses the boy's thighs as a tray for his Sainsbury, all the while holding the trembling bird's gaze. Like he's goading her to do something about it.

She doesn't.

\* \* \*

They finish eating. There's a short argument. The bird wants the kids out of the room, it seems, but the stepdad likes his lap ornament. To my surprise, it's the skirt who wins the squabble. I don't know what she promised him in exchange, but it was probably big. The mook lets Abel scuttle off and

slumps deeper into his chair. He flicks through television channels, looking for all the world like a bulldog with opposable thumbs, before eventually settling on a football match.

The kids don't return. Occasionally, I see them flickering past the doorway, eyes wide, faces haunted.

\* \* \*

Another hour passes. Two. A bull rolls up halfway in between to rap politely on my window. We talk. In not so many words, he expresses concern that I might be a neighborhood voyeur, a vengeful ex, a foreign talent looking to knock over a local family. Plenty of those around, he tells me, apologetic, meaningful. I shrug and flash my credentials. When you've been around as long as I have, you accumulate spare badges.

He leaves, richer by a cigarette. I go back to my vigil. Not too long after, the living room lights blink out, and the lamps in the two rooms upstairs blink on. The blinds hiding one window are tweaked aside. I see Abel framed against a messy room, the walls a galaxy of childish drawings and posters, the cupboards stacked with toys. His brother enters, and Abel turns to hustle his sibling up their bunk bed before returning to the window. Stares out with his old-man eyes.

Whatever is coming next, I realize, he wants me to see.

\* \* \*

Night comes. Real night. Not just the chronological byproduct of Earth pirouetting around the sun, but a blackness that shoves the lizard brain nose first into the dirt and hisses for caution.

Nothing moves. Even the alleys sit quiet like dogs in a court of wolves, hunched down, antsy. I glance up at the second floor, bare now of soft white bodies fucking, squirming like worms in the earth.

I crank the window down. The air is wet and cold as Yahweh's tit. In the distance, a woman howls her rage at someone who did her wrong. I hear the crack of flesh on flesh. A sob. But it's not my business.

Then, I see the kid's door open. I see something like a man stretched in the dark. A gleam of teeth, a glimmer of naked skin, pale as salt-scrubbed bone. It lurches toward the bunk bed.

No, anger wrenches at the body, pulls on instinct and neural pathways, a clamor of fury that supersedes all thought of reason.

Not on my watch.

Before I know it, I'm clambering out of the car and sprinting toward the door. This time, I don't knock. Instead, I flatten my palms against the walls. The house, it shivers like a joy girl with a millionaire john as it takes me in deep.

\* \* \*

I swim through the concrete, thought and fibrous muscle, no longer discrete, no longer trapped between vein and vertebrae, but protean and primordial, a sludge of atoms worming through molecules.

Images metastasize, oiling together like a watercolor painting gone to rot, as I crawl up, up—

*teeth and tongues and eyes, a thousand eyes, replicating without pattern, pustules of optic nerve dribbling into new maws, new sclera; invasive, furious, predatory, seeking to take take take take feast feast EAT—*

A gasp of stale, musty air. I tumble out, hit the carpet with a snap of calcium, heat blooming razored along my skin. I bite down on a curse, not wanting to alert the family to my intrusion, or worse, my indignity. Wincing, I sit up and study my environment, cataloging my aches under my breath.

It's quiet. There's a sound that sleeping houses make. They breathe, with brick lungs and ribs of wood, creaking and groaning, snapping in places. But *this* house is still and pregnant as a corpse.

*Pregnant?* The word surprises me, even as it arrives with the rest of the thought, but only for a second. Yes. That sounds exactly right. The air is aching, swollen, like a vast entity frozen in paroxysms of birth. I unroll onto my feet and take the stairs two at a time, soundless in this taut, breathless silence. Inside me, cartilage rejoins with cartilage, tendon with sinew. And my flesh, my flesh it sings.

\* \* \*

Nothing.

The room that Abel shares with his brother is empty. The beds are unmade, covers and quilts strung about like guts in a murder scene. It's clear that they were just here. Their warmth lingers in the atoms of the air. I can almost *feel* them, frenetic and kinetic, youth at its most volatile, a gilding of clean fire so unlike everything else that hangs in this house. But there's nothing in the room to tell where its occupants might have gone, or if something had happened to them.

I scowl and dig incisors through my thumb, splitting the meat. Blood drips, crystallizes, slithers along the hallway, branching outward, searching, hunting.

Nothing. Nothing at all.

My grimace deepens. Something is trying to play with me, and I don't like it. Out of habit, I settle fingers on my revolver, the metal cold and reassuring against my skin. I step out of the room and into the corridor, my back to the door. The walls seethe with my blood, a web of ink and rust, like overgrown vines, quaking for an answer the house will never release.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," I grumble, vicious. I know how monster movies work.

Nothing stirs. But I can smell it now, an illness permeating the air, sticky, sour, challenging. I lick my mouth, taste rot. Any regular mook would be suffocating on the fumes. Instead, the stink just makes me angry. So, I unbox myself a cigarette and ignite the tip, breathe out carcinogens by the lungful.

Carefully, I navigate the other rooms. The storage cubby is dank, dimly lit by a single flickering bulb, and crammed with old baby things and household supplies: eight-for-two toilet rolls, rubber gloves by the dozen, cheap shampoo, dusty cans of Spam. The bathroom is dense with mold, the plumbing corrugated from years of disuse, the patina of rust so thick it flakes like dandruff on the tiles. Someone threw up in here recently, but hadn't bothered to clean up. I don't look behind the shower curtains. As I exit, I snatch a look at myself in the cracked mirror and the sight stops me.

My face is older than I remember, the lines longer, more entrenched in coarse brown skin. Puckered flesh details a history in bullet wounds, knife scars, burns. Ugly but human. The eyes, though. I lean in. The sclera isn't too different, slightly bloodshot but otherwise unremarkable. The pupils, on the other hand, are goatlike, octopoid in an ocean of scorched amber.

"Hm." I palm a cheek. Not a great sign.

I turn and walk out. There isn't much I can do, except keep that epiphany in mind. I've done worse to this body. It'd hold. But I have to *want* it to hold. Which may be harder said than done, with my bones still humming, and my veins still irradiated from transformation.

I shudder delicately. No, there are expectations. Laws.

*A contract.*

Pushing my trepidation into a box in the back of my head, I make my way to the main bedroom. The door's unlatched and slightly ajar. From inside, I can hear the low drone of late-night British television programming. I step in. A body lies curled on the edge of a queen-sized bed, the mountain range of hip and shoulder outlined in florescent light. Blond hair snakes across a pillow in thick, wet clumps.

I move closer. The shape remains motionless on its side, an arm dangling over the edge.

Closer.

Without warning, it spasms, back thrusting upward, a motion so violent that it almost carries the figure right off the bed. But then, just as abruptly, all the fight gives out and it collapses, panting in shrill, shallow gasps.

I stroke the hair away from its head and find a harvest of eyes, only eyes, saline-drenched, strangely languid, secured in place by ropy membrane and yards of exposed nerve, blue-green and luminous. The bird's glazed stare is almost entirely buried beneath the alien growths. She doesn't notice my attention, her own regard trapped by a point in the ceiling, pupils thinned from anguish.

When she opens her mouth, I see more eyes, half-budded, blinking in the cavern of her throat.

"I told you to run." I sigh.

Her nightgown, oily with stains, quivers. Beneath the thin fabric, shapes move, quickening to the sound of my voice. I make no attempt to

investigate, only twitch the corner of her quilt over her limp, trembling form.

“It hurts.” The bird.

I look back. “Can’t help you.”

“It hurts.” She repeats, a whimper snagged between her teeth. She rolls over, and I hear things *squelch*.

“I told you to take the kids and run.”

“I can hear it in my veins.”

I pause.

“Gela Vt’ yah fhma’a,” she croaks, stupidly, like a child pretending worldliness. “G’ukhyoi y’okhyoi fhokhu.”

“Yes.” There wasn’t anything more I could say.

She stops, judders. “It hurts so, so much.”

“I know.”

“He told me—it was like a dream.” The story unspools in chunks and gasps, wet noises caked with pain. “He told me, he—this was supposed to be beautiful. Like being reborn. Like giving birth. Like creating life. But this is—”

“Wrong.” I finish.

“It hurts.”

The impulse to do something, to undo this error of existence, rouses, bright and hot as the passage of a bullet through bone. I stare at her, feeling the body’s sympathy, its longing to assist, to fix, to *help her, help her, we need to help her, help her*.

\* \* \*

The cry of the gun is loud as the death of stars.

## 6: THE RED HOUSE

The walls howl.

The keening is inhuman, played by a hundred damaged throats, birthed of larynxes unbound by terrestrial biology, an ululation that goes on and on and on.

Then, it tapers off, and I catch it, even as the walls tremble and thrash from the approach of something monstrous. A desperation, an animal pain, resonating in the fading percussions. McKinsey's still there and he is hurting over the death of his girl.

But that note of sapient agony isn't enough to convince me to roll over and bare my underbelly. I snarl as the floors quake, concrete and plaster spilling in a storm. I lurch out of the boys' room even as a pseudopod lashes free of the carpet, slamming into the spot I once occupied. I skid across the landing, extract my gun, fire.

*Bang.*

Warning shot. We both know it'll sting, but it won't do much more than that. Bullets don't kill creatures like us. But the tentacle, a strip of muscle adorned with bloodshot, bulging eyes, rears at impact. Blood geysers. The creature shrieks again.

*You killed her.*

*Youkilledheryoukilledheryoukilledher.*

Human anguish wraps itself about the screams, layers itself over the distorted rage, a hymn for the heartbroken, looping over and over, until it fades into a guttural wail, indistinguishable from everything else.

Another shot.

*Bang.*

More tentacles geyser from the floorboards. There is no art to their onslaught, only violence. They slap blindly at the air, at anywhere I've been, growing by the heartbeat, as though quantity can replace accuracy.

It's a surprisingly effective tactic.



Every time I blink, they've multiplied again, frothing and writhing, their fury resonating through the blood I've left on the walls. The house becomes indistinguishable from an intestinal tract, throbbing with polyps and wet tissue, with tendrils. They push me back, back, blocking off the stairwell and any hope of exit.

I'm panting now. I empty the last of my rounds into whatever is closest and chuck my gun away, the pointless fucking human machine. I'd underestimated the thing. McKinsey's stronger than I anticipated. Way stronger. Stronger than me if I stay like this. On cue, my bones crackle, eager, aching to participate in this primordial struggle. I feel epidermis begin to unravel.

*No, no, no, no.*

Not yet.

And then—

A single, unwavering note held in a voice of pure silver.

It is respite, it is clean water on a clear blue day, it is beauty, it is hope. And it is ice in my veins, it is fear, it is horror, it is something impure and strange and it calls to me, to McKinsey.

The tentacles still, riveted.

I'm far less entranced. My eyes snake to a string dangling from what appears to be the attic door. One hard yank later and the ladder slides forward. I rush up the rungs. Bad idea, probably, but like they say: when you've hit rock bottom, there's no way to go but up.

\* \* \*

I blink.

The attic is enormous, its darkness cold. Moonlight crawls corpse-gray through a single skylight, illuminating wood and cardboard boxes stuffed with someone else's memories. Here, at least, the air is clean. I fumble for a cigarette and sigh as I take my first breath, not quite relaxing, but relishing the lull.

Below, that unknown voice continues to sing, beautiful and deadly as a draught of liquid mercury.

"Daddy?"

I jerk at the noise.

How hadn't I noticed? A small figure hauls itself from behind a tower of precariously stacked containers, its face chalky with terror as it waddles into the moonlight. James. He's dressed to endure the attic, a fact that elicits a twinge of cold surprise. *Someone prepared him for this.*

Wariness tightens my scowl. "James?"

The boy scrubs at his eyes with the heels of his palms and smiles, slightly sad-like. In the reflected glow of everyone's favorite satellite, a chicken scrawl of hastily drawn runes, barely language, barely coherent. A child's pantomime of adult literature.

"Abel said Daddy was coming."

Ice struts down the highway of my spine. "Say that again, kid?"

"Abel said he was calling for Daddy."

*Abel said he was calling for Daddy.* The words reverberate like a warning. I had known that something was up. I'd known it from the start: that someone was playing me for a fool. But the memory of the kid's eyes, large and full of hate, the sheer organic quality of his presence. It was him, wasn't it? It was Abel all along. But how did it all fit together?

"Hello again, Mr. Persons."

I spin about.

Abel is standing about five feet away, arms crossed behind his back. I can see a hammer ticking in his grip, wagging like a puppy's tail, perfectly ordinary, perfectly unmagical. Just like Abel. Just another kid, a rawboned eleven, with deep-set eyes and a mop of dark hair, skin sallow, face untouched by broken capillaries.

"I should have known you were up to something."

He shakes his head slowly. "You got me all wrong, detective."

"Did I?"

"I'm not trying to hurt you, Mr. Persons. I really, really am not. I definitely want our stepdad dead."

"And that's the reason you lured me here? You hoping he's allergic to gumshoes? Hoping he'd choke on my hat?"

"No."

I exhale smoke rings. "What's your game, kid?"

He doesn't get the chance to answer. No longer bound by whatever magic sits in Abel's voice, McKinsey comes seeping through the attic door,

slow as molasses, then rising, a bank of meat and bones and eyes, eyes, eyes.

Slowly, it resolves into something shaped like McKinsey, naked save for the threads of fabric still caught between compressed fat. It gurgles once.

There are so many, many eyes on the thing. They fill his mouth, unhinge his jaw, distend his cheeks with their bulk. I can see rips in the skin, oozing plasma.

“Tekeli-li.”

“Hello to you too, ugly.”

Beside me, Abel fastens a double-handed grip on his hammer.

The creature’s head rocks back further than it should, tilting, tilting until I hear McKinsey let out a moan of pure anguish.

“Tekke-ke—” it burbles again.

I slide in front of Abel. “Yeah.”

“T-t-tekeli. Tekeli.” A rustle of motion, the kids vanish like cats into the shadows.

Briefly, I think about stepping around the thing, letting McKinsey have a go at the two. I don’t like being double-crossed, especially not by children.

But a job’s a job.

“Heard you the first time, you fat palooka.”

Amputated from the idea of human, it writhes and undulates inside its meat suit, testing the elasticity of mammalian epidermis. Judging from the way the flesh rips, it’s used to a better class of accommodations. The man gargles in pain. The thing hisses. I see *his* eyes rolling back, helpless. But I’d be damned if I give two fucks about a chump like him.

“T-t-t-t—”

“Fuck you too.”

It lunges.

Not at me. At Abel.

The body dives to intercept before I can get up to speed as to what’s going on. I squirm around and grapple it to the ground, But it’s too late. *Crack*. Bone gives, and Abel wails his rage as he skitters back.

We dance, the thing and I, shedding structure with every pivot, every turn. Human anatomy surrenders to the pragmatism of combat. Muscles

unbraid, sinews lengthen, even as veins become garrote and bones blade. In minutes, we're viscera commanded by will, flayed tissue, tendon, and teeth. Through it all, the thing keeps its human head, like a tumor in the writhing heart, McKinsey's eyes bulging with terror.

And I am alive as I haven't been for decades, no longer restricted by the grammar of human flesh but free, finally.

*Free.*

Oh, I know it'll come and bite me in the ass later, but it is hard not to exult in the moment. Even as the body fails, even as it sags under the things I make it do, molecules destabilizing as proteins tear apart under the pressure, I rejoice in the motion. Distantly, I hear a voice pounding with warning, that if I keep this up, if I keep going, there will be nothing but slop by the time we are done.

But I am ripping into McKinsey.

I am swallowing. He tastes rancid, sublime, steeped in pain. I am fashioning bones into more mouths, into more teeth, and *bite, chew, swallow, devour.*

I am *alive.*

The thing that was, is McKinsey screams and reciprocates, but I have the advantage of experience. If the thing is rage, I am a small blade in the correct place, the perfect time.

My being swims with the pleasure of the feast.

*More.*

My maws close over meat and bile.

Then, something in the corner of my eye moves unexpectedly, and I make the mistake of dropping my guard. The thing doesn't. It strikes. I feel hooks saw through my lungs, a thousand perforations, spreading the tissue, stretching it until there is pain and only pain, as I gasp my way between one breath and the next. I crash into a wall.

The thing howls and howls, loud as eternities.

"Shit." I pull at myself, try to find purchase. Anything. Something. But there's no room, no—

"James! Now!"

A net explodes, thumbtacks and sharp wire. Then the kid follows, leaping through the air, hammer held up high. He lands. Brings the iron down on his stepdad's skull.

*Crack.*  
Brain dribbles.  
*Crack.*  
The thing screams.  
*Crack.*

\* \* \*

“Kid.”

We stand in silence for a while. Just above eye level, his brother stirs and peeps over the edge of an alcove, round little face bright as a candle flame.

“Yeah?” the kid says at last.

I look down. The thing that was their stepfather is meat now, pulped lymph and dangling muscle, a low moaning as it tries to reassemble, tendons slurping along the walls. I bring a heel down on a lump of liver, grind it against the wood floor. There are so many questions growing in me, but I don’t voice any of them. Instead, I say: “Like I was saying, I don’t think you were playing it straight with me.”

The kid has the gall to look embarrassed. He kicks his feet, like he was caught skipping classes. “No . . .”

“Uh-huh.” I mop my brow, then slide a cigarette from its case. “I suppose you figured I wouldn’t take the case if you told me you wanted me to be bait.”

“Yeah.”

I spit teeth on the floor. Despite everything, it’s hard not to smile. “You’ve got a lot of guts, kid.”

He says nothing, stares at the mess on the floor. Blood oozes black and claret around my feet.

“So, here’s my question: why me?”

“Because they needed the gift of a Dead One’s blood.”

My pulse speeds up.

“Dead One.” I repeat. *Dead One*. I had heard that term before. I hadn’t thought to wonder then, towed under by the tide of violent memories. But now? I make a mental note to check in on a certain waitress.

Abel nods. "Yes."

"I was meant to be a sacrifice."

His eyes flicker, darting sidelong. James inches up to us and settles against his brother's lean frame, fingers digging into the older boy's coat.

"Not . . . like that."

He pauses, cocks his head to one side, before diving into exposition.

"There had to be blood. Not death."

"Why?"

"Because they said so." Abel spits out a cracked tooth, his face already swelling, impacted cheekbone already bruising.

"And in exchange?"

"They'll keep us safe."

"How?"

He sighs, a strangely adult sound. "I made a bargain."

"With what?"

The kid doesn't answer. Not exactly. Instead, he extends his tongue, reveals a country of sigils delicately etched onto the red muscle. I don't recognize the language, but their greasy luminance is familiar, a memory of lightless water and the life beneath.

"I made a bargain," Abel repeats, stiff, tongue sliding back into place, jaw tense.

I bob my head slowly. Not all of us wear our demons on our sleeves.

"Fair enough."

He nods. And we stand there, just for a while, in the quiet, soaking in Croydon's muffled struggles, their stepdad's remains still warbling in delicate agony.

I should tell them about their mom. But pettiness, or maybe the body's sense of compassion, a spongy ache nesting in my sternum, keeps my trap shut.

"Anyway," I declare, lighting a smoke as I turn to walk away. "I'll be back in five minutes, in case anyone wants to try some funny business."

Neither of the boys move. It's not until I've clicked the door shut that I hear tiny feet scrabbling over wood, hear the steady rhythm of hammers on bone.

*Crack.*

*Crack.*

*Crack.*

\* \* \*

I don't remember who said it, but there's an author out there who once wrote that we don't need to kill our children's monsters. Instead, what we need to do is show them that they *can* be killed.

Or, in some cases, stand by as they do the killing themselves.

I never went back to the house. They took care of loose ends themselves. Before I could stub out the cigarette on the stoop, the kids began howling, screaming about how a bad man had come and put their daddy on ice, screaming about their ma, who was sleeping in her halo of red. In less than an hour, buttons and newshawks were swarming the street, lighting up the sky like it was Bonfire Night.

They called the kids heroes, heroes for being brave enough to watch their stepdad die, heroes for surviving their mother.

I stayed for a spell, indistinguishable from the neighbors who poured out of their houses to gawk at the spectacle. The boys didn't ID me, much to my surprise. I thought Abel would have said something when his eyes washed over my face. But he only frowned and looked away. James was catatonic from the shock. Poor kid; sometimes life cuts you a bad deal.

As for me, I took the scenic route home. Partly because there's nothing like a slow drive after a hard case, with pit stops for a bottle of Jack and a bellyful of jerk. Partly because a stolen car's something to be relished.

And also partly because my hands won't stop shaking like they're palsied, the muscles raw and red under tissue-paper skin. My body was more battered than I had initially thought, reduced to palpitating nerve endings and ribbons of meat, a worn-down husk of scars. But it'd heal. Rest.

I just needed to rest.

## : EPILOGUE

“So, you want to tell me which part of what you said was true?”

Sasha raises her head, a feline grin curling into place. “I remember you.”

“I bet you do.”

The restaurant is empty when I walk in, the tables cleared out, the floors swept, the chairs neatly stacked away. Sasha props herself against a counter, hands braced behind her. She cocks a hip like a challenge. “We’re closed, y’know?”

I glance outside the glass door. Even the neon sign has been switched off. The only lighting we have is the strobing of passing cars, and the orange bleed-out of the street lamps. “Not here for food.”

She smiles like she knew it already. But then again, we both did. It’s clear as day why I’m here, dripping blood and someone else’s gore, shaking like a Parkinson’s patient. “You going to answer my question?”

Sasha hops up on the counter and daintily crosses her legs, elegant and infuriating. Gone is her varsity jacket and the crinkly uniform, replaced by tank top and jeans and toned flesh, the national costume of any young adult. But it’s not her skin that catches my eye, it’s what on it.

Tattoos. Archaic symbols of fecund power, inscriptions of soil and blood and birth. Wrist up and neck down, every part of her is infused with those intricate patterns, a flood of frantic, furious spirals.

*Shub-Niggurath’s marks.*

The signs cut in Abel’s tongue finally made sense.

I feel the air gush out of my lungs.

Fucking hell.

Sasha lets loose a grin. “What question is that?”

“How much of what I saw is true?”

“Enough.” She shrugs and taps the side of her nose, the universal sign for secret.



“What about the thing you said about the riots? And the epidemic of altered chavs?”

“True, and also true.”

“And they’re all McKinsey’s fault then?”

Sasha cocks her head, a birdlike motion, somehow more distressing for its delicacy. “Not exactly.”

I hobble closer, careful to keep enough room between us to prevent her from getting a jump to me. What gets to me is the fact that there’s nothing to read. As far as my senses are concerned, Sasha’s human, powerless, fragile.

As far as *I’m* concerned, she’s clearly not.

“Not exactly how?”

She bisects her mouth with a raised index finger, and smiles and smiles, while saying nothing at all. I take the hint. Sasha isn’t going to spill.

I bite down on the urge to curse, not wanting to give her or her mistress the pleasure of seeing me squirm. Inhale. Exhale. Baby steps. My ghost shrivels further into itself.

“Back to more important business. Riddle me this: why would a dame like you let a mook like McKinsey knock you around? Unless you didn’t and were, in fact, manufacturing memories for the benefit of little old me.”

Her smile brightens.

“Funny you should say that.”

I spit black blood on the floor and grimace. “Come on, Sasha. Play it straight with me.”

“No.”

Dames.

“Do I have to bribe you with flowers? Is that what it’d take? Because I will go out and pick you some daisies, if I have to. I—”

Sasha decants from her perch, easy as a summer day, all long limbs and that sly, steady smile. “It’s not that simple, John.”

“I never told you my name.”

“We both know that doesn’t matter.”

She got me there.

I take another stab. “If you’re one of old Shubby’s cultists, why’d you need me? My kind never had anything to do with her or any of her siblings.”

Sasha's eyes grow abstract even as the skin on the back of my forearms pimples and the hairs rise, like someone is running electromagnetic waves over me. She sighs and blinks out of her fugue, about thirty seconds later. "That answer is above your pay grade."

"Try me."

"Come on, John. You know you're out of your depth here."

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale.

I shrug. "Can't blame a man for trying."

She smiles the detached, reverent grin of the high or the religious, just teeth and folded-back lips, and continues her slide toward me. "No. But you understand why you're not getting answers, right?"

"Right." I pop a cigarette from the box, and make a big show of igniting the tip. NO SMOKING signs glare at me from around the restaurant, but given the circumstances, I'm not feeling particularly rule-abiding. Besides, Sasha isn't kicking up a fuss.

Her mouth twitches. She stops, inches from touching, close enough that my field of vision is her, only her. In the near darkness, her face is a cipher. And much, much older than I thought she was.

"You are a fascinating creature, do you know that?"

"I've been told I have my charms."

"You are the last of your kind on this planet."

"What about it?" I exhale tobacco and defiance into her face.

"A coward."

The truth stings less than I thought it would. I shrug and tip my skull, enumerating my options. "I'd like to think it's more of a case of knowing what I want."

"And what do you want, Mr. Persons?"

Sasha—the body strains to think of her as "the dame," "the skirt," or any of the other metaphors familiar to noir, but nothing fits the understated gravity of her person—plants a slim hand on my chest. The presence of the All-Mother permeates through the contact, sex-sweat, black woods, cold mountains, and grave soil.

And curiosity.

I feel a trill of ice barrel through my nervous system. This is a new and unwelcome development. It's one thing to mouth off at a cultist; it's another

to have Shub-Niggurath's personal attention.

"I want what the body wants: to live."

"But your people are doing exactly that ninety-seven million years into the future."

"Yeah, well. I don't like bugs."

"What an ironic thing for you to say."

"You know me, Sasha." I gingerly lace my fingers with hers, and then push her hand away. She doesn't resist, but she doesn't let go either, tightening her grip. "I'm full of clever words."

"Indeed."

And then *She* speaks.

Shub-Niggurath doesn't bother taking over Sasha's mouth. Too mundane, I guess. Instead, she circulates the words through the young woman's cells, a chorus of fifty billion transmitted through the exchange of air and the throb of Sasha's pulse, the sloughing of epidermal layers. It isn't so much a sound as it is a blunt force.

*The truth.*

I shiver. You don't say no to dames of that caliber. I close my eyes and try not to think about the All-Mother, black as pitch and bigger than worlds, Her Many Eyes blinking like headlamps between the tree line.

Watching me.

Listening.

Waiting.

"Because I like this place. Because this body's a dead man walking. Because I can't imagine existing in a world of endless darkness, dirt, and Yithian academics. Do you know how boring it gets? The pursuit of knowledge ain't all it's cracked up to—" The words become a desperate babble, a twenty-syllable pileup on the highway of truth. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't have been able to stop the deluge. "So much talking. Like you would not believe, sister. Endless hypotheses. No matter how much we discuss a subject, no Yith ever seems capable of—"

*Cease.*

I shut up.

"Life is cyclic," Sasha intones, backing away, her voice swaying with the cadence of revelation. "With every death comes a thousand new

beginnings, and with every fresh start comes the demise of something old. You know this.

*"Should know this, at least."* Sasha purses her lips. "But it's clear that you're, how we say, a bit mawkish. Sentimental."

The body. She meant the body and its broken mind, curled up in the cup of my skull. I bristle but I don't say anything. For one, I can't make heads or tails of her taunting, whether she's angling to get a rise or just Shub-crazy. None of what she's saying connects. They're facts, pieces of the truth. Without order or context, they might as well be a mad saint's gibbering, or the vestiges of a dead man's compassion.

And two, Shub-Niggurath hadn't greenlit vocal expression yet.

"You can talk."

*There we go.*

"What exactly are you doing with the kid? Contrary to the biblical name, Abel doesn't look like the religious type. Sure, he's kind of young—"

Sasha cracks an amused grin. A shimmer of memory pulsates through her skin: men and women draped in fresh skins, still beaded with a patina of blood; a living fire, alive with the voice of the All-Mother, a thunder of bacchanal affection. "Something that will be good for him. I can promise you that."

The vision wrenches at my insides like a hook. The body isn't happy with this development, and neither am I. But what can we do but nod mutely? The silence doesn't last, though. Foolhardy courage, or maybe it takes me a moment to gather my thoughts and my courage. "And his brother?"

"If he obeys Abel, certainly."

"Too bad about their mom, eh?"

"Casualties happen." Sasha dips her head and I am almost, almost fooled into believing she cares.

Still, there's rarely anything else to say once a skirt drops a bombshell like that. "Fine. In that case, I'll be going then. I've got a piggy bank to redeem."

Sasha dips into a fluid, mocking curtsy as she spins on her heel and hops away, like a little bird stretched out tall, fingers slipping from mine. Her laughter rings out, sweet and knowing. "One last thing before you go, Mr. Persons."

I am almost at the door when she speaks, rain already speckling my face. Outside, the world is cold and black, an abyss of bad decisions, stirred up by the encroaching rain. “And what’s that?”

“If you know what’s good for you, don’t come back to London.”

I freeze. That was a threat if I ever heard one. Not direct from Shub-Niggurath’s mouth, sure, but definitely a significant threat, given that Sasha appears authorized to carry her warnings. I rake my eyes over her carefree, enigmatic expression, full of playful, darting shadows.

Fuck. This.

A wet, wheezing laugh jumpstarts in my throat, before cresting into a full-fledged guffaw. It whoops upward, full of hysteria, even as I bend over double from the effort. After all this, after the betrayal and the double-crossing, the machinations. After all this madness, do they still expect me to bow?

The sound keeps boiling through the silent restaurant, Sasha watching quietly on, before it finally trickles into a wobbling halt. I straighten and meet Sasha’s gaze, wiping the tears from my eyes, even as she tilts her head slow.

I flick the cigarette at her like a last word.

“Don’t count on it.”

Her laughter, hyena-shrill and strange, stalks my long walk back home.

\* \* \*

I stand in the bathroom of my office and stare into the mirror, thumbs threaded through belt loops like a gunslinger at high noon. The bruised, torn-up visage in the mirror regards me solemnly in return, its mouth pulled into a line.

“We did good,” I announce to the emptiness.

My ghost doesn’t reply.

Abel’s piggy bank sits on the sink between my toothbrush cup and hand lotion, its dead-eyed grin and dead black eyes pregnant with judgment. The kid’s word was good. Better than many grown men. He’d come to my office the very next day, holding the damn porcelain boar in one hand and James

in the other. Without saying a word, he placed it down on my desk. No fuss, no muss. A clean transaction.

I'd expected him to ask about their mother. To yell at me, to hit me, to do or say something. The coroners would have found the bullet lodged in her brain. But he didn't. Only stared at me with those huge, old-man eyes for what felt like an eternity before they left, hand in hand, grave as marriage, silent as ghosts.

"We did good," I repeat, but again, the body doesn't answer.

Then, a knocking strikes up on the front door, a confident *rat-ta-ta-ta*, like the music of hammers on bone.

## Acknowledgments

When my editor asked if I wanted to do an acknowledgments page, I said yes, most definitely. (At least, that's what memory supplies. The truth was probably less definitive and more, "I think so? Maybe? Let me get back to you?") Cliché as it sounds, there are a ton of people I'd like to say thank you to, though.

To C. C. Finlay, who still hasn't accepted a story I've written: thank you for saying no to the first version of this. You told me that this tale needed room to breathe. You're right. It needed about 11,000 more words.

To Carl and Lee: thank you for taking a chance on me. Thank you for loving this as much as I did. Especially Carl. For squelching all the rough edges. And for all the comments in the margins.

To the real-life inspiration for John Persons: thank you for giving my character his looks, his tenacity, and his willingness to go up against anything. The evil bits of Persons, though? That's not you. That's just my imagination, I swear. Honest.

To the boys at the heart of this story: I'm sorry for everything that has happened to you. The world is a dark place, and it tears at me that you had to walk through its shadows at such an age. But there are people who love you and there are people who will do anything to you. And if they are not there, I hope you remember that there are no monsters that will not bleed. This life belongs to you. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

## About the Author

**CASSANDRA KHAW** writes a *lot*. Sometimes, she writes press releases and excited emails for Singaporean micropublisher Ysbryd Games. Sometimes, she writes for technology and video-game outlets such as *Eurogamer*, *Ars Technica*, *The Verge*, and *Engadget*. Mostly, though, she writes about the intersection between nightmares and truth, drawing inspiration from Southeast Asian mythology and stories from people she has met. She occasionally spends time in a Muay Thai gym punching people and pads.

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